

# Preparing for Inclusive Social Action

## SES Board of Directors

---

As spiritually-focused people, much of our study and meditation is focused on advancing the common good in a context where others share, or at least do not oppose, that objective. When we or others we know behave in a harmful manner – whether through negative thoughts or critical words or demeaning deeds – it is usually through thoughtlessness and a lack of focused attention. We may understand intellectually that harm can come from treating ourselves or others in a depersonalizing manner while still having reflexive habits of harm that we have not yet modified in keeping with our spiritual beliefs. That harmful behavior does not have to be explicit bigotry. It can also be expressed more subtly and less noticeably as paternalism or stereotyping or objectification or dismissiveness.<sup>1</sup>

For those (including ourselves) who have not yet developed positive harmlessness into an active practice, there are exercises that can be helpful in replacing harmful actions with harmless actions.<sup>2</sup> The person or group generating unintended harm can generally be stopped through reason, education, and the modeling of alternatives. Those engaged in study of the Ageless Wisdom will be aware of the line in the Mantra of the New Group of World Servers that charges us to “fulfill [our] part in the One Work through self-forgetfulness, harmlessness, and right speech.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Preparing Ourselves to Take Appropriate Action**

In this White Paper, we are concerned with how we behave when harm is intended, when there is purposeful divisive rhetoric or intentional physical or emotional damage. To respond in a way that does not either exacerbate or excuse the harm being done requires a carefully cultivated self-discipline and mindfulness. Our actions must be grounded in compassion, not vengeance, if we are to be successful. So a first practice to develop is compassion, consciously feeling it and expressing it in small ways throughout the day until it becomes our first response in any setting. “Compassionate understanding works out into practical expression [so that] activities are no longer in-going and self-centred but are out-going and inspired by an unselfish heartfelt desire to serve and aid.”<sup>4</sup>

This focus on the circumstances of others can help us overcome or at least diminish some habits that interfere with a compassionate response. One habit is that of responding to new or unfamiliar situations with fear (“one of the most usual of the manifestations of astral energy”<sup>5</sup>) rather than curiosity. Fear is restrictive and debilitating, and it can lead us, at best, to refuse to engage responsibly and, at worst, to lash out as a way to protect ourselves. Neither extreme is helpful.

Another habit that the Tibetan has reminded us about repeatedly is the corrosive effect of criticism. While we may delude ourselves that we are being helpful when we are critical of another, unless that person has asked for feedback we are actually setting ourselves apart as “better than” and fueling separatism. Limiting harm effectively requires a compassionate intervention to preserve and strengthen our connectedness as part of the One Life. Our focus needs to be on engendering the common good, affirming the practical reality of Article 1 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”<sup>6</sup>

An important component of preparation is developing balance between self-reflection and self-forgetfulness. Self-forgetfulness is being focused “outward” on our connection with all living beings as part of the One Soul. It is being aware that we exist and have capacities, but are busy with service, giving no thought to self-interest or reward or self-gratification. At the same time, we need to build in routines like the Evening Review where we examine our intentions and actions so that we can learn how best to contain and

ultimately end harmful action. As part of that daily review, we can practice asking ourselves questions like what type of response is most appropriate and with what degree of force. Oiling a squeaky door hinge can be more effective in stopping the irritating squeak than destroying the entire door.

### **Strengthening Our Identification with Those Being Harmed**

We are moved into action more resolutely if we identify or recognize our unity with others. If the other is portrayed as a distant collective, separated from us, then people seem desensitized to the harm being experienced. While public media reports on global events should help us feel closer, often the effect is that of raising (instead of lowering) people's sensory threshold – especially if the focus is unremittingly on violence being perpetrated.

As per the School's webpage *The Lens of Service* (<http://www.esotericstudies.net/lens-of-service.html>), it is as important to reach out to an ever-widening circle of people. William Butler Yeats wrote, "There are no strangers here; only friends you have not yet met." The Tibetan has commented, in relation to our traditional direction of focus, "Your service at present is vertical and concerns those who are with you upon the upward way – your group, your personal friends, and yourself.... Your service should become horizontal and **expandingly inclusive**."<sup>7</sup> Quoting from the School's *The Lens of Service* webpage: "We need to develop the same kind of gradated awareness of the inclusiveness of our horizontal relationships, beyond our immediate esoteric circles. We need a schematic, similar to that of the human constitution, to allow us to monitor and evaluate our 'horizontal' expanding inclusivity or 'reach' as well as the qualities that are critical for right relations. The following are suggested circles of expansion for our horizontal "reach" that we can monitor:

1. Our "in group" – those that we relate to as whole, multifaceted beings, as persons in their own right, relatively free of stereotypic assumptions
2. Neutral strangers – those about whom we make neutral to positive assumptions
3. Offending acquaintances – those we know and dislike, fear or even hate
4. Offending strangers – those we fear and dislike without knowing them
5. Nonhuman persons<sup>8</sup> – those nonhumans deserving of respect that we currently tend to objectify"

Ultimately our aim should be to recognize each person and each group being violently targeted as "family," as part of our most intimate connections. If we can practice labeling each group that we hear or read about as our relatives, as persons we care deeply about, we will avoid the indifference to harm being committed that could lead us to being culpable through "willful blindness."

### **Expanding Our Repertoire of Actions**

Just as we need to prepare attitudinally to stand against harm, so too do we need to rehearse possible actions that we might take until they become reflexive. New behaviors do not usually emerge automatically. They are developed through practice, as with any skill. With regard to acts of kindness and generosity, we can get ideas of what we might do by watching programs like CNN Heroes, or reading about the ways that people act to better the lives of others, or noticing individuals in our daily lives who make a positive difference.

In a similar way, we can study what types of actions do limit harm without fueling divisiveness. We can learn to differentiate between actions that may feel good (and self-righteous) but only exacerbate the harm being done and those that constructively draw a line and say "no further." A single type of action is not necessarily appropriate for all situations. To be effective in stopping violence, we need to cultivate a repertoire of responses so that we are prepared for all eventualities.

In our third White Paper, *Implementing Inclusive Social Action*, we will discuss how to put this preparation into action.

*To learn more about the School for Esoteric Studies' series of White Papers or the School's other activities, go to [www.esotericstudies.net](http://www.esotericstudies.net). For permission to reprint this paper (with attribution), please contact the School at [info@esotericstudies.net](mailto:info@esotericstudies.net).*

---

<sup>1</sup> See a more detailed discussion of these forms of depersonalization in Dorothy I. Riddle, *Moving Beyond Duality* (Indianapolis: iUniverse, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> See a discussion of methods to strengthen the practice of harmlessness in Dorothy I. Riddle, *Positive Harmlessness in Practice* (Indianapolis: Author House, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Alice A. Bailey, *A Treatise on White Magic* (New York: Lucis Publishing, 1934), 261.

<sup>4</sup> Alice A. Bailey, *The Light of the Soul* (New York: Lucis Publishing, 1927), 287.

<sup>5</sup> *op.cit.*, *Treatise on White Magic*, 297.

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Documents/UDHR\\_Translations/eng.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Documents/UDHR_Translations/eng.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Alice A. Bailey, *Discipleship in the New Age, Vol.1* (New York: Lucis Publishing, 1944), 568; **emphasis added**.

<sup>8</sup> In everyday language, the term “person” has been used to refer to a human – i.e., a being that has certain capacities or attributes such as reason, morality, consciousness or self-consciousness, and connections within a social kinship group. Legally the term “person” refers more broadly to any entity recognized by the law as separate and independent, with legal rights and existence (which includes corporations, partnerships, associations, labor organizations, legal representatives, etc.). In order to emphasize that certain living nonhuman beings (e.g., whales, dolphins, elephants, etc.) share with humans the attributes of reason, morality, consciousness, and social connections and thus should be entitled to the legal rights accorded to “persons” to control their own lives, the term “nonhuman person” is increasingly being used. See organizations such as the Nonhuman Rights Project for more details. *Moving Beyond Duality* contains a summary of “personhood” research in its Appendix B.