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“Merry Christmas Everyone”

Coordinators report

Welcome everyone to our third and last publication for 2015. The Christmas and New Year Season is almost upon us. I would like to take this opportunity to thank our treasurer Carolyn Harrod and our secretary Travis James, for their contribution to our great cause. Thank you also to our web-master Geoffrey Harrod and to Donald Fern for his auditing our national accounts. Sincere thanks to our nine groups, to their respective leaders and to all the hands that gave their time giving so generously to our Theosophical Order of Service. To all of you and your families I wish you a blessed Christmas and a Happy New Year.

A reminder to you all of our 2016 National Conference which will be held in Perth 16-23 Jan. This is indeed a very special occasion. Apart from the opportunity to renew old friendships, this year the International President of both the Theosophical Society and the Theosophical Order of Service Mr Tim Boyd will be present as the keynote speaker. I look forward to seeing and connecting with you all again.

Jean – National Coordinator.

Report on the TOS National Fundraiser Tour to the Kingdom of Cambodia – Oct. 2015 Contributed by Dr Olga Gostin, Adelaide TOS.

Twenty-one of us, including three from overseas, responded to the unique opportunity to travel to Cambodia – our brief was to visit and engage with several self-help projects supported by Sunshine Coast TOS members, but also to expose us to the challenge of survival and reconstruction of a country that had seen some of the worst abuses of international and civil war in the twentieth century.

Our itinerary ended with the injunction “Please bring an open mind, a wide open heart and awareness that we can all make a difference”

Our first visit was to the **Cambodian Land Mine Museum**, an hour or so out of town by the ubiquitous tuk-tuk mode of transport: a motorbike-driven mini-carriage seating four passengers. If the Museum was a somewhat brusque exposure to the realities of Cambodian life, it was nevertheless a brilliant introduction to situating the former French colony as an unwitting pawn in the Vietnam War, enduring saturation US bombing and systemic planting of land mines along its borders with Vietnam. What was most striking from the point of view of our interest in bringing about change through service was the passion and dedication of our guide, a former US military man who had sold up his house in California to settle permanently in Siem Reap and become interpreter-guide at this museum and raise funds towards de-mining the area.

At the Land Mine Museum



In a strange twist of fate the founder of the museum in 1997 and expert specialist in de-mining was one Aki Ra, a Cambodian kidnapped at the age of ten, and forced to be a child-soldier during the 1980s serving under the Khmer Rouge, then the occupying Vietnamese army and finally the Cambodian Liberation Army. Emerging from this hellish life, Aki Ra decided to dedicate the remainder of his days "to make my country safe for my people" by de-mining, among hundreds of thousands others, the very mines that he had been forced to deploy as a child, and training the next generation in this skill. Some statistics stuck - : it costs \$3 to make a mine and \$1000 to locate and defuse it.

Here as in most of the NGOs we visited there is a constant need for dedicated and longer-term volunteers to meet the rising tide of tourism and to contribute to the unquenchable desire of Cambodians to learn English and join the wider world community.

Our wise tour organisers offered mental respite for the following two days when we used up two of our three-day Angkor passes to visit the spectacular temples at **Angkor Thom and Ta Prohm**. Yet even here there was profound food for thought as our travel notes aptly stated regarding Ta Prohm: "the tentacle-like tree roots are slowly strangulating the surviving stones, man first conquering nature to create, nature later conquering man to destroy". Amidst the unrelenting march of nature, umpteen vendors were soliciting our custom while a group of men with multiple handicaps: blind, amputees, disfigured, wheelchair-bound were playing music and selling their records.



Angkor Thom, Bayon Complex

The shadow of distant and recent history permeates Cambodia and nowhere more so than in Phnom Penh's infamous Tuol Sleng **Genocide Museum or S21** where the secret police interrogated, tortured and finally sent over 20,000 inmates to the nearby Killing Fields at Choeng Ek. We visited both sites at the tail end of our journey, aware that over 300 more mass massacre sites have been discovered dispersed in the countryside, accounting for the loss of over 2 million people or a quarter of Cambodia's population in those troubled last decades of the twentieth century.

It was enlightening to hear the young Cambodians in charge of the **Free to Shine Charity**, initiated by an Australian in 2013 and supported in part by the Sunshine Coast TOS. At Shine Central in Siem Reap they briefed us on the ideology of this NGO: to offer education to vulnerable girls and support their families in rural villages that are the target of sex traffickers. This was no fly-by-night charity but focussed action where a 16-strong team of "blue-shirted" Shine workers visit their 500 households each month to monitor the progress and needs of their families. We learnt about their mode of operation, their aspiration to double their outreach to 1000 girls, to expand their mobile library to 5000 books, to supply water purifiers to every household they contact and to provide general education on the methods employed by sex traffickers. To date Shine has built eight houses for the most destitute. **Our group contributed generously to the water-purifying project –see photo next column.**



Another equally enlightening NGO was the **Green Gecko Project**, (GGP) also started by an Australian woman. Interestingly, the founder of GGP in 2005 had just quit a NGO that had dubious credentials when she came across a band of street kids that had dysfunctional homes and lived on the streets to eke out a living, exposed to sexual abuse, drug trafficking, and theft. Working in consultation with the families of the children, GGP started not as an orphanage but as a safe haven for the 36 kids (now grown to 106, including younger siblings of the original cohort) where they might attend school and lead a normal life while GGP worked in tandem with their families to provide them with rental relief, support in medical needs and educational aspirations. Today GGP model of self-help with the kids doing their own laundry, tending their tiny paddy-rice field, orchard and garden, all the while attending school.

Our final engagement with Sunshine Coast TOS supported projects was **Jimmy's Village School and a remote Cambodian Village**. The school is the solo endeavour of a 28-year old tuk-tuk driver by day and volunteer English teacher by night, where the front room of his mother's house in downtown Siem Reap serves as classroom, open to the street. We attended only a single session, and there is no doubting the sincerity, goodwill and generosity of this young man whose dream is to build a school on his mother's premises – expanding to larger international school sometime in the future. Banners at the school reflected the support of other Australians. TOS Sunshine Coast hopes to help crystallize Jimmy's dreams by supporting a building fund for his school. **Under – sign on Jimmy's tuk tuk (taxi)**



From our contact with Jimmy we were able to visit a remote Cambodian village. Life here was a step back into a time long gone in the West. Many of the village parents work in Thailand and grandparents are left to raise the children. The village did have a pump for water, but no clean drinking water, which contributed greatly to their many health problems. TOS Sunshine Coast was able to donate many water filters from a last minute generous donation. Our group supplied new and used clothing, medications, schoolbooks and pencils, sporting equipment and treats for the many children. Approximately one hundred people live in the surrounding area which is classified as a village. There were many mouths to feed (including condensed milk on baguettes – considered a delicacy amongst the village children) Each child received gifts of pencils and schoolbooks.

A personal thank you to Olga Gostin the creator of this article



Water filters being transported by ox-cart



Two highlights remain: our visit to the majestic Angkor Wat, and the inspirational evening spent listening to Beatocello Richner at Kantha Bopha Hospital in Siem Reap. The former was like treading on hallowed ground that we had all internalised within our minds and hearts from decades of reading and seeing reports on this fabled monument built over 37 years in the middle of the 12th century when the Khmer empire was at its political and territorial peak. To see it before us, to cross the causeway across the famous moat that provided water to the Khmer capital, to have some of the longest continuous friezes explained to us, was like the progressive lifting of a veil. The wonder of being here, and being made welcome as pilgrims was all the

more telling given that Angkor Wat had originally been dedicated to the Hindu god Vishnu. Later the Khmer adopted Buddhism and the temple underwent certain modifications, notably the displacement of statues of Vishnu and the erection of giant carvings of The Buddha.

Angkor Wat at Sunrise – As Above So Below



Buddhism was officially adopted as the national religion in the 16th century. Yet the friezes representing events from the Hindu sacred books, the Mahabharata and Ramayana had not been defaced and delighted us with their freshness and detail. It was a most edifying reality given the blatant destruction of ancient architectural treasures in the Middle East in recent times.

The evening spent listening the Swiss founder of **Kantha Bopha hospitals** in Cambodia was the epitome of practical service and dedication to others needs. In the face of opposition of the WHO and others that required Dr. Beat Richner to charge patients for attending his children's hospitals in exchange for monetary grants, the tenacious, idealistic and fearless doctor opened not one but five hospitals, offering free hospitalisation and building up a team of 2500 Cambodian staff. 85% of the US\$47 million needed to run the hospitals is raised by private donations driven by a team overseas, but also by the surgeon's weekly 'free' cello concerts at Kantha Bopha at Siem Reap. Exhausted and frustrated by fighting the establishment which he denounced in no uncertain terms, Beatocello ended his performance with the quiet observation: **"it is only the spirit of forgiveness that enables one to persevere; if there is no forgiveness, it is impossible to deliver service for others"**. **Therein lies the greatest lessons that we can take home as we return to Australia, to our treatment of refugees, of minority groups, of the First Australians.**

Footnote from escort Jean Carroll

The abovementioned tour was an exceptional event. Every single person in the group contributed generously to the various charities and to the overall success of the tour. Above all else was the generosity of spirit which participants expressed to each other. Soul wisdom abounded. We were indeed blessed. TOS National raised \$675 for future projects from this venture.

Report from national groups

Mornington Peninsula – Alice Oppen

At our Sunday monthly TS meetings, during our 11 am meetings, I read aloud sections of interest, and inspiring articles from the Australian/International TOS Newsletters, which I receive by email, plus other TOS State Newsletters with accounts of their original, interesting activities. Perth still leads the field with their intriguing contents, beautifully presented.

We collect donations for TOS at our TS meetings. Totals of these collections came to \$230.75. These donations will be used for TOS international projects in the coming year. **Creative Art** and **Mandala Healing Workshops** conducted by **Georgina Fode** are held monthly on a Saturday afternoon at our local Mornington library and open to the general public as well as TS members. The latter donations totalled \$980.00

Total payments for TOS projects for the current year were \$1,180.00

Our committee decided that donations be divided into two, with half going to the **Theosophical Golden Link College** in the Philippines, and the other half to the **Olcott Memorial School** in Adyar, India. The former was via the **Kern Foundation** in the U.S.A who pledges to double any donations received. A further \$200 was given in conjunction with \$400 from the Melbourne TOS, for the **Golden Link College** and presented in person to visiting international speaker, **Vic Hao Chin Jr.** (a founder of this College) at the Melbourne TS Centre following his inspiring talk/power point presentation on **Wellbeing and Happiness** and the value of self-awareness as an aid to achieving this.

Your contacts;-

National coordinator: Jean Carroll
tos.australia@gmail.com

National Secretary: Travis James
tajames@ozemail.com.au

National Treasurer: Carolyn Harrod
cdharrod@gmail.com – please send donations to Carolyn at 26 Lytham Street, Indooroopilly Qld 4068

Web addresses;-:

<http://australia.theoservice.org>

<http://international.theoservice.org>

Facebook: www.facebook.com/tos.oz

Selfless Service in the Wisdom Tradition

An infinity to give – Jean Carroll

Altruism is paramount throughout the Ancient Wisdom Tradition which was brought to the west by the Theosophical Society (TS). The world's great philosophies and religions are based on this tradition of absolute love, compassion and selfless service to mankind, these being the means to eliminate human suffering and to promote international brotherhood.

One of the founders of the TS Madame Blavatsky espoused that our society is not here to produce future adepts but is here to lessen the suffering of mankind. Buddhism has a similar theme. The teachings of the Christ is to love one another, and this love at it's deepest level is an act of service. The principle in the Gita is action without desire for results. We can see that altruism or selfless action is an integral part of the abovementioned traditions.

All life is action. Action is in our thoughts, in our emotions, in the way we react, all expressed in how we live our lives. Unselfish service is an illustration of altruistic action and sourced from an inner creator. Our founder of the Theosophical Order of Service (TOS) Annie Besant was a prime example of living a life based on altruistic action. Mrs Besant started the TOS to make TS practical and to assist in the transformation of the individual.

A former president of the TS Mr.N.Sri Ram encouraged us to begin action/service in a small way, and when we do this we are able to do more and more. He proposed by showing affection to those around us we will find that there is more affection to give. There being an affinity in each of us to give, and by making the current flow we make the current stronger.



Queensland TOS members at this year's School of the Wisdom at Adyar. Christine Gwynne, Elizabeth Gajewska, Louise Bogdanovic and Joanna Teazis.