

The Secret Doctrine and Its Study

The Secret Doctrine, first published in 1888, is the most important work of H. P. Blavatsky, whose writings are the basis of modern Theosophy. The book sets forth in rich detail a vision of the nature of life, of the origin and emanation of the universe, and of the evolution and goal of human existence. It also surveys the treatment of those topics by ancient religions and contemporary science.

The title of the book, however, may be misunderstood: the work is by no means concerned with some deliberately hidden dogmas. Rather, the word “doctrine” in the title means a teaching or theory, a way of looking at the world. Theosophy is nondogmatic and nondoctrinaire; it offers a view of the world, but it teaches that we should accept only as much of that view as appeals to our reason and satisfies our sense of what is appropriate. “Secret” refers to what is not generally known, yet is available to anyone who makes the effort to discover it—an “open secret.”

The first of the book’s two volumes is called *Cosmogogenesis* and concerns how a universe comes to be; the second is called *Anthropogenesis* and deals with the origins of humanity. Each volume consists of passages from some ancient poetical writings, the Stanzas of Dzyan, with commentaries on them. They are followed by a comparison of symbols from legends, myths, and scriptures and a discussion of some related scientific ideas.

A study of *The Secret Doctrine* is the way to a deeper Theosophical understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Until we contemplate that universal wisdom upon which *The Secret Doctrine* is based, we are like children playing with puzzle pieces, without seeing the magnificent pattern they form when they are rightly put together. *The Secret Doctrine* and Theosophy make coherent and holistic sense out of our varied experiences in life.

As a search for universal wisdom is undertaken, certain questions arise quite naturally concerning the study of *The Secret Doctrine*. Where do we begin and how do we proceed? There are as many approaches to the wisdom as there are students, but a path that has proved useful and exciting to one student may be so also for others.

Plato said that he was not wise, *sophos*, but a lover of wisdom, *philo-sophos*. That is true also of true students of *The Secret Doctrine*. Its pages are not the end of understanding, but markers along the channels leading to the ocean of universal truth, which reaches to the distant horizons of wisdom. Before we become master mariners, however, we must learn some principles of navigation.

How, then, do we study? Just to read a book is not to study it. One may read through a great many books, Theosophical or otherwise, and still know very little. To study is to come to grips with the author's thought. It is to permit the ideas in the work to enter unobstructedly into one's own mind, heart, and intuition, so that their truth meets the truth of one's own inner being. To study is to align the truth being studied with the truth inside ourselves, using every faculty of our being in this process of harmonization.

This concept of study is the basis of the following suggestions for approaching *The Secret Doctrine* (or the *SD*, as it is often called). The end of our studies is not that we can parrot, "HPB said . . ." or "The *SD* says. . ." Rather, the end, which is paradoxically the beginning, is that we engage ourselves wholly and without reservation in the creative encounter with truth that alone can carry us into that realm where transcendental wisdom is perceived.

In a work by the Countess Constance Wachtmeister and others, *Reminiscences of H. P. Blavatsky and "The Secret Doctrine,"* Bertram Keightley states:

When studied thoroughly but not treated as a revelation, when understood and assimilated but not made a text for dogma, HPB's *Secret Doctrine* will be found of incalculable value, and will furnish suggestions, clues, and threads of guidance for the study of nature and humanity, such as no other existing work can supply.

What, then is *The Secret Doctrine*? This must be our first question if we are to find in the book those "suggestions, clues, and threads of guidance" that will aid us in our quest for truth. HPB herself indicated that the written pages contain only a small fragment of the esoteric doctrine known to the most advanced members of our species. It contains, as she pointed out, "all that can be given out to the world in this century," and she adds concerning the "Secret Archaic Doctrine" that "it will be centuries before much more is given out." Yet we must also remember that HPB warned us that her work contains many "blinds," or statements that cannot be taken as literal or complete, so it often conceals as much as it reveals.

HPB was reported to have given some advice about how to study *The Secret Doctrine* (reprinted in *Getting Acquainted with "The Secret Doctrine"*). We are not sure where that report came from, but the advice is worth paying attention to:

Reading the S.D. page by page as one reads any other book . . . will only end us in confusion. The first thing to do, even if it takes years, is to get some grasp of the "Three Fundamental Principles" given in the Proem.... If one imagines that one is going to get a satisfactory picture of the constitution of the Universe from the S.D. one will get only confusion from its study. It is not meant to give any such final verdict on existence, but to *lead towards the Truth*.

. . . Come to the S.D. . . . without any hope of getting the final Truth of existence from it, or with any idea other than seeing how far it may lead *towards* the Truth. See in study a means of exercising and developing the mind never touched by other studies.

We may conceive of *The Secret Doctrine*, then, as a basic reference work which we can approach again and again. To know and appreciate it fully, however, we need to know something about the way it was written. *Letters from the Masters of the Wisdom*, Second Series, edited by C. Jinarajadasa, includes four letters received by Dr. W. M. Hübbe-Schleiden, an early member of the Society in Germany. One of these letters, dated 1885, contains this important clue for our study:

It is for his own satisfaction [that is, Dr. HübbeSchleiden's] that the undersigned is happy to assure him that *The Secret Doctrine* when ready will be the triple production of M.:, Upasika and the Doctor's most humble servant.

K.H.

"M" and "KH" are two Adepts who were instrumental in founding the Theosophical Society. "Upasika," meaning female disciple, is a name used for HPB. Jinarajadasa comments on this letter that it refers to the first version of *The Secret Doctrine*, the original manuscript of which is at Adyar in India. The work as finally published was expanded to several times the size of the original draft with the assistance of various of HPB's students in London. Many people had a hand in producing the book.

It has been said that *The Secret Doctrine* should be read with the will, and indeed one does find that it cannot be read with the ordinary mind. To say that it should be read by the "will," does not mean, however, that we should read it with bursting blood vessels. Rather it means that the light of the inner spirit (or "atma") should be allowed to shine upon our understanding. Our preparation must be such that our knowledge is illuminated from within.

Toward this end, our study of *The Secret Doctrine* might be accompanied by meditation and contemplation of a little book called *The Voice of the Silence*, which HPB herself recommended as a correlative study to *The Secret Doctrine*. Only with such preparation can one enter inwardly into the depths of the Wisdom. The mind is not set aside, but instead becomes a pure reflecting mirror for the higher Self to perceive the universals of Reality.

There are four things students may discover as they pursue their studies. First, *The Secret Doctrine* indicates that by comparing the cosmogonies of the ancients, we can discover what is truly universal in them. Second, the book gives a clue to unraveling the genuine history of humankind. Third, it lifts the veil of allegory and

symbol from the myths and scriptures of antiquity to reveal the beauty of truth. Finally, *The Secret Doctrine* presents to the eager intellect, to the intuition, and to the developed spiritual perception, the scientific secrets of the universe.

To explore this fourfold vision, we may follow the method suggested by HPB herself. First, a thorough acquaintance with the Three Fundamental Propositions (1:13–20) is necessary. Quite simply stated, these reveal to us the mysteries of *Be-ness, Becoming, and Being*.

The Secret Doctrine establishes three fundamental propositions:

(a) An Omnipresent, Eternal, Boundless, and Immutable PRINCIPLE on which all speculation is impossible, since it transcends the power of human conception and could only be dwarfed by any human expression or similitude. . . . But once that we pass in thought from this (to us) Absolute Negation, duality supervenes in the contrast of Spirit (or consciousness) and Matter, Subject and Object.

(b) The Eternity of the Universe *in toto* as a boundless plane, periodically “the playground of numberless Universes incessantly manifesting and disappearing.” . . . This second assertion of the Secret Doctrine is the absolute universality of that law of periodicity, of flux and reflux, ebb and flow, which physical science has observed and recorded in all departments of nature.

(c) The fundamental identity of all Souls with the Universal Over-Soul, the latter being itself an aspect of the Unknown Root; and the obligatory pilgrimage for every Soul—a spark of the former—through the Cycle of Incarnation (or “Necessity”) in accordance with Cyclic and Karmic law, during the whole term.

Such are the basic conceptions on which the Secret Doctrine rests.

The first proposition affirms that an ineffable wholeness underlies all the diversity we experience. The second states that the universe is ordered according to a cyclical principle of constant change. The third holds that every living being is engaged in a great pilgrimage through reincarnation and karma, whose purpose is to reunite each being with the ultimate Ground of Being. Their keywords are *wholeness, order, and purpose*.

Blavatsky suggested that we “follow that up by study of the Recapitulation” —the numbered items in the “Summing Up” at the end of the first part (1:272–8). Here we find six outstanding ideas presented to us, which are necessary for our understanding of the entire *Secret Doctrine*:

1. “The Secret Doctrine is the accumulated Wisdom of the Ages . . . an uninterrupted record” which has come down to us, traced in allegory and symbol, couched in myth and legend, perceptible always by those who desire perception.

2. The fundamental law of the esoteric philosophy is the unity of all things:
“‘Substance’ on the plane of the manifested Universe . . . a ‘Principle’ in the beginningless and endless, abstract, visible and invisible Space.”
3. “The Universe is the periodical manifestation” of the underlying Substance-Principle, unfolding rhythmically and cyclically.
4. “The Universe is called, with everything in it, *Maya*, because all is temporary therein.” This concept introduces us to one of the great mysteries of esoteric philosophy, the ephemeral nature of all existence, known as the doctrine of maya, often misunderstood. For maya is not so much illusion, as we ordinarily understand that word, but rather the measured pace of manifestation. The root of the word is *ma*, which means “to measure.” The out-turned energies of the Creative Logos (Word or Reason of the universe) result in a measured order within the confines of time and space. In the highest sense, maya is the creative aspect of Reality. It is not an illusion, but is the producer of all illusory forms, illusory because they are changing and transitory. As HPB points out, “the Universe is real enough to the conscious beings in it” (1:274).
5. “Everything in the Universe, throughout all its kingdoms, is *conscious*.” The fuller development of the consciousness in everything is the purpose of manifestation.
6. “The Universe is worked and guided, from *within outwards*.” No goal is imposed upon us from outside. We and the whole universe are evolving to realize a goal that is inside us.

Pondering the universals thus set forth for us, we can move freely through the volumes, seeing the great plan work out in cosmogenesis and anthropogenesis, exploring the correspondences that emerge from the depths of meaning in the universal symbols of creation reflected in the life and heart of humanity. Pursuing our studies by tracing out the algebraic formula of creation given in the Stanzas of Dzyan, we find ourselves, as the Rig Veda puts it, “gazing into eternity ere the foundations of the world were laid.”

In our study, we come at last to the ultimate and sublime truth: the Cosmic Logos, which is the Creative Energy of our Solar System, and the Self in each of us, which is the Inner Ruler Immortal, are ONE. This realization is the goal of yoga. This is the cosmic religious experience. This is the supreme vision of the mystic.

As we remember this truth, a deeper awareness of our unity, not only with all manifested life but with the very source of that life, becomes the abiding principle by which we act. We then discover that the creative pattern of both the universe

and humanity resides within the very fiber of our being. It is our challenge to express this truth in our lives and to reveal it in our thoughts, words, and deeds.

The “doctrine” or worldview is then our own, “secret” not so much because it is hidden, but because its very inwardness is inexpressible. The throbbing heartbeat of the Ultimately Real is matched perfectly within ourselves, and we, the microcosm, mirror the cosmic creative scheme.

A Japanese sage, half a world away in space and centuries removed in time, said: “Do not try to do what your predecessors did; rather seek what they sought.” To study *The Secret Doctrine* in its fullness, to enter creatively into the encounter with immortal wisdom, is to come to HPB’s work with open heart and mind, seeking what has been sought by the wise ones through the ages, following the injunction given by HPB herself: “Follow not me, nor my Path, but the Path I show, which leads to the Masters.”

For Further Study

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