

MADAME BLAVATSKY AND THEOSOPHY

By Daniel Ross Chandler

Born in 1831 at Ekaterinoslav, Ukraine, into a noble family, Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky was a remarkable woman, becoming co-founder of the Theosophical Society and a prolific writer, espousing an eclectic esotericism. She was a world-traveling clairvoyant who studied and comprehended the ageless mysteries. In her efforts, she became associated with Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, who was deeply interested in the laws governing communication with spirits and demonstrating with mathematical certainty the immortality of the soul.

The New York attorney who assisted the unconventional noblewoman was convinced that spiritual phenomena are not supernatural miracles, but material manifestations governed by natural laws. These Theosophical “chums” proposed a paradigm change from spiritualism to Theosophy, a shift from mediums manipulating spirits of the deceased to adepts conjuring elementary spirits. These pioneers who launched the Theosophical Society melded into a contemporary formulation an ancient wisdom that would resolve the nineteenth-century philosophical confusion and moral chaos that engulfed the Western world, drifting dangerously towards war. While the Colonel was the administrator who organized the growing Theosophical movement, Madame Blavatsky remained the charismatic teacher and sparkling personality.

HPB, as her students called her, exerted a considerable influence upon Western thought, endured unjust public derision and slander, and remained an undaunted and, outspoken critic who denounced hypocrisy and prejudice. From her earliest childhood in Russia, she attracted attention with her psychic powers, although she was not interested primarily in attracting public interest, but in discovering the laws and principles that made these phenomena possible. She became a serious student probing metaphysics and traveled extensively, seeking esoteric knowledge concealed in Eastern sources. This was an extraordinary endeavor for a nineteenth-century woman. During the 1870s, she returned to the USA for a second time, when she met Colonel Olcott, with whom she established the Theosophical Society in New York City in 1875. In 1878 she became the first Russian woman to become an American citizen.

On 25 May 1880, Madame Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott became the first Americans who formally accepted Buddhism. They knelt before a gigantic statue honoring the Buddha in Ceylon, where they took *Pansil* by reciting the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts professed by Theravāda Buddhists. When they embraced Buddhism, they were not converting, but simply observing the form of one particular

religion as an expression of the inner divine wisdom that is Theosophy. In 1882 they established the international headquarters of the Theosophical Society in Adyar, at that time south of Madras (now Chennai).

Blavatsky as a Writer

Through extensive writing, Madame Blavatsky shared with readers her tremendous knowledge. She probed the world's philosophies and religions, Eastern culture, symbology, esoteric literature, psychic phenomena and metaphysics. From her came an unceasing stream of newspaper reports, magazine articles and commentaries. Her first major book, *Isis Unveiled*, created a sensation when the two volumes were published in New York in 1877. The first edition of one thousand copies was exhausted in two days, and three printings appeared during the first seven months. Ambitiously confronting the mysteries that engaged ancient and modern science and theology, volume one addressed the alleged infallibility attributed to science while the second analyzed the infallibility assigned to religion. Enormously comprehensive, she moved from the ancient Greek philosophy on matter and force professed by Pythagoras and Plato to the Kabbalistic teachings espoused by particular Jewish rabbis who presented a mystical interpretation of their scriptures. Blavatsky investigated the interpretation given to the mythological stories contained in several scriptures, discussed magic, scrutinized ancient Egyptian literature, discussed classic philosophies and compared the world religions. She sought recognition for the Hermetic philosophy, the ancient universal Wisdom-Religion.

The Secret Doctrine

In 1885, HPB left India and traveled to Europe, where she completed her magnum opus, *The Secret Doctrine*. It appeared in two volumes in 1888: "Cosmogenesis," an exploration of the origin and development of the universe; and "Anthropogenesis," an investigation of humanity's origin and development. She explained that she was not reporting a revelation; her purpose was to present numerous fragments scattered throughout thousands of volumes containing the scriptures cherished among Asian and pre-Christian religious adherents. She advocated no doctrines or dogmas; she asked the readers simply to study these statements from a perspective provided by common experience and rational reflection.

The Secret Doctrine describes human and universal evolution and pictures the seen and unseen worlds of manifestation in which life exists in innumerable forms. It contends that, through comparing the cosmologies embraced among the ancient people, contemporary seekers can discover what is actually universal. The treatise provides assistance for unraveling human history. Blavatsky removed a veil containing allegory and symbols from the scriptures and mythologies, disclosing an

inner truth. She explained to the eager intellect, the intense intuition, and the highly cultivated spiritual perception, her answers to scientific and religious questions.

The Voice of the Silence

A small meditation manual published in 1889, *The Voice of the Silence* contains spiritual teachings and practical advice useful as instruction. Beautifully written and deeply moving, Blavatsky's translation renders meaningful to contemporary readers her explanation and commentary concerning the principles and precepts that are presented to a seeker pursuing enlightenment. With her sharp spiritual sensitivity, she carefully transposed the original poetic imagery, recreating the ancient verses into flowing English literature. This booklet admonishes the reader to respond with spiritual sensitivity to every cry of pain, like a lotus opening to drink the morning sun. Inspiring compassion, she advised readers not to let the fierce sun dry even one tear of pain before they themselves have wiped it from the sufferer's eye. From the renunciation of the self, we can learn the lesson of final liberation.

Other Writings

After *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine* were published, Madame Blavatsky responded to readers' questions about the human constitution, the spiritual and psychological dimensions, the mysteries surrounding periodic rebirths, the difference between fate and destiny, and the problems posed by free will and the Law of Karma. Her responses appeared in a question-and-answer format as *The Key to Theosophy*. In *Practical Occultism* she discusses the esoteric theosophy concealed in religion and Nature, clarifies the difference between theoretical and practical occultism, described Jesus as man and Christ, and envisions the successive messianic ages. During weekly meetings conducted at the Blavatsky Lodge in London, she answered her students' questions about cosmic genesis, universal mind, the inner human nature, the relationship between consciousness and substance, religious symbolism, and the evolution of worlds and humans. Her attempts to clarify such explorations of *The Stanzas of Dzyan* had been published as *The Secret Doctrine*.

From these and many other writings, Madame Blavatsky secured an enduring place in history for her extensive metaphysical knowledge, expressed through an immense body of literature that for more than a century has attracted spiritual seekers around the world.