

Madame Blavatsky on How to Study Theosophy

By Robert Bowen

Foreword

These notes of teachings given by Madame Blavatsky towards the close of her life have already appeared in print at various times in a number of journals. They were made by Robert Bowen, an elderly naval man who joined Madame Blavatsky's circle and questioned her persistently about what attitude a student ought to take towards *The Secret Doctrine*. He made careful notes of the answers she gave him and subsequently read them over to her to make sure that he had not mistaken her meaning. The notes were later brought to light by Bowen's son, the late Captain P. G. B. Bowen, who was at the time a member of the Theosophical Society in Dublin, and they were first printed in the January - March, 1932, issue of *Theosophy in Ireland*, just over forty years after they were written. Painstaking enquiries which have since been made in Dublin have failed to bring to light any other similar material from the same source.

Much of the value of the Bowen notes lies in the fact that they contain principles which can be applied not only to the study of *The Secret Doctrine* but to all theosophical studies. Repeatedly they assert that any descriptive Theosophy is not to be taken as a necessarily correct picture of the universe. It is rather a secondary pattern which is brought into being in the course of an experience of a Truth which is beyond words, beyond description and beyond relative values. Such a Theosophy is intended not to portray Truth but to lead towards it.

It will be seen that, by these standards, the value and authority of any descriptive Theosophy are not necessarily to be judged according to whether that Theosophy agrees accurately with scientific facts or principles or with the descriptive Theosophy propounded by some other person. The value of any exposition of Theosophy must lie in the depth of experience to which it can lead the student who is strong enough and daring enough to pass beyond its form or pattern to its occult or hidden reality.

Another piece of advice repeated through the notes is that, for its fuller understanding, any theosophical teaching ought to be brought into a universal setting. As an aid to this, Madame Blavatsky strongly recommended that the student should try to gain a deep appreciation of the three fundamental propositions which are to be found in the Proem of *The Secret Doctrine*. These propositions are reprinted in this booklet, after the notes, for convenience of reference and study.

H.S.

The Secret Doctrine and Its Study

H.P.B. was specially interesting upon the matter of *The Secret Doctrine* during the past week. I had better try to sort it all out and get it safely down on paper while it is fresh in my mind. As she said herself, it may be useful to someone thirty or forty years hence.

First of all then, *The Secret Doctrine* is only quite a small fragment of the Esoteric Doctrine known to the higher members of the Occult Brotherhoods. It contains, she says, just as much as can be received by the World during this coming century. This raised a question—which she explained in the following way:

‘The World’ means Man living in the Personal Nature. This ‘World’ will find in the two volumes of the *S.D.* all its utmost comprehension can grasp, but no more. But this was not to say that the Disciple who is not living in ‘The World’ cannot find any more in the book than the ‘World’ finds. Every form, no matter how crude, contains the image of its ‘creator’ concealed within it. So likewise does an author’s work, no matter how obscure, contain the concealed image of the author’s knowledge. From this saying I take it that the *S.D.* must contain all that H.P.B. knows herself, and a great deal more than that, seeing that much of it comes from men whose knowledge is immensely wider than hers. Furthermore, she implies unmistakably that another may well find knowledge in it which she does not possess herself. It is a stimulating thought to consider that it is possible that I myself may find in H.P.B.’s words knowledge of which she herself is unconscious. She dwelt on this idea a good deal. X said afterwards: ‘H.P.B. must be losing her grip,’ meaning, I suppose, confidence in her own knowledge. But Y and Z and myself also, see her meaning better, I think. She is telling us without a doubt not to anchor ourselves to her as the final authority, nor to anyone else, but to depend altogether upon our own widening perceptions.

[Later note on above: I was right. I put it to her direct and she nodded and smiled. It is worth something to get her approving smile! — (Sgd.) Robert Bowen.]

At last we have managed to get H.P.B. to put us right on the matter of the study of the *S.D.* Let me get it down while it is all fresh in mind.

Reading the *S.D.* page by page as one reads any other book (she says) will only end in confusion. The first thing to do, even if it takes years, is to get some grasp of the ‘Three Fundamental Principles,’ given in *Proem*. Follow that up by study of the *Recapitulation* — the numbered items in the *Summing Up* to Vol. I (Part I). Then take the *Preliminary Notes* (Vol. II) and the *Conclusion* (Vol. II).

H.P.B. seems pretty definite about the importance of the teaching (in the *Conclusion*) relating to the times of ‘coming’ of the Races and Sub-Races.¹ She put it more plainly than usual that there is really no such thing as a future ‘coming’ of races. ‘There is neither COMING nor PASSING, but eternal BECOMING,’ she says. The Fourth Root Race is still alive. So are the Third and Second and First — that is, their manifestations on our present plane of substance are present. I know what she means, I think, but it is beyond me to get it down in words. So likewise the Sixth Sub-Race is here, and the Sixth Root Race, and the Seventh, and even people of the coming ROUNDS. After all that’s understandable. Disciples and Brothers and Adepts can’t be people of the every day Fifth Sub-Race, for the race is a state of evolution.

But she leaves no question but that, as far as humanity at large goes, we are hundreds of years (in time and space) from even the Sixth Sub-Race. I thought H.P.B. showed a peculiar anxiety in her insistence on this point. She hinted at ‘dangers and delusions’ coming through ideas that the New Race had dawned definitely on the World. According to her the duration of a Sub-Race for humanity at large coincides with that of the Sidereal Year (the circle of the earth’s axis — about 25,000 years). That puts the new race a long way off.

We have had a remarkable session on the study of the *S.D.* during the past three weeks. I must sort out my notes and get the results safely down before I lose them.

She talked a good deal more about the ‘FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE’. She says: 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. She repeated this latter expression many times.

It is worse than useless going to those whom we imagine to be advanced students (she said) and asking them to give us an ‘interpretation’ of the *S.D.* They cannot do it. If they try, all they give are cut and dried exoteric renderings which do not remotely resemble the TRUTH. To accept such interpretation means anchoring ourselves to fixed ideas, whereas TRUTH lies beyond any ideas we can formulate or express. Exoteric interpretations are all very well, and she does not condemn them so long as they are taken as pointers for beginners, and are not accepted by them as anything more. Many persons who are in, or who will in the future be in the T. S. are of course potentially incapable of any advance beyond the range of a common exoteric conception. But there are, and will be others, and for them she sets out the following and true way of approach to the *S.D.*

Come to the *S.D.* (she says) 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. Observe the following rules:

No matter what one may study in the *S.D.* let the mind hold fast, as the basis of its ideation, to the following ideas:

¹ See *Footnote on Races and Sub-Races* at the end of this paper.

(a) THE FUNDAMENTAL UNITY OF ALL EXISTENCE. This unity is a thing altogether different from the common notion of unity — as when we say that a nation or an army is united; or that this planet is united to that by lines of magnetic force or the like. The teaching is not that. It is that existence is ONE THING, not any collection of things linked together. Fundamentally there is ONE BEING. The BEING has two aspects, positive and negative. The positive is Spirit, or CONSCIOUSNESS. The negative is SUBSTANCE, the subject of consciousness. This Being is the Absolute in its primary manifestation. Being absolute there is nothing outside it. It is ALL-BEING. It is indivisible, else it would not be absolute. If a portion could be separated, that remaining could not be absolute, because there would at once arise the question of COMPARISON between it and the separated part. Comparison is incompatible with any idea of absoluteness. Therefore it is clear that this fundamental ONE EXISTENCE, or Absolute Being, must be the REALITY in every form there is.

I said that though this was clear to me I did not think that many in the Lodges would grasp it. ‘Theosophy,’ she said, ‘is for those who can think, or for those who can drive themselves to think, not mental sluggards.’ H.P.B. has grown very mild of late. ‘Dumskulls’ used to be her name for the average student.

The Atom, the Man, the God (she says) are each separately, as well as all collectively, Absolute Being in their last analysis, that is their REAL INDIVIDUALITY. It is this idea which must be held always in the background of the mind to form the basis for every conception that arises from study of the *S.D.* The moment one lets it go (and it is most easy to do so when engaged in any of the many intricate aspects of the Esoteric Philosophy), the idea of SEPARATION supervenes, and the study loses its value.

(b) The second idea to hold fast to is that THERE IS NO DEAD MATTER. Every last atom is alive. It cannot be otherwise since every atom is itself fundamentally Absolute Being. Therefore there is no such thing as ‘spaces’ of Ether, or Akasha, or call it what you like, in which angels and elementals disport themselves like trout in water. That’s a common idea. The true idea shows every atom of substance no matter of what plane to be in itself a LIFE.

(c) The third basic idea to be held is that Man is the MICROCOSM. As he is so, then all the Hierarchies of the Heavens exist within him. But in truth there is neither Macrocosm nor Microcosm but ONE EXISTENCE. Great and small are such only as viewed by a limited consciousness.

(d) Fourth and last basic idea to be held is that expressed in the Great Hermetic Axiom. It really sums up and synthesizes all the others.

As is the Inner, so is the Outer; as is the Great so, is the Small; as it is above, so it is below: there is but ONE LIFE AND LAW; and he that worketh it is ONE. Nothing is Inner, nothing is Outer; nothing is GREAT, nothing is Small; nothing is High, nothing is Low, in the Divine Economy.

No matter what one takes as study in the *S.D.* one must correlate it with those basic ideas.

I suggest that this is a kind of mental exercise which must be exceedingly fatiguing. H.P.B. smiled and nodded. One must not be a fool (she said) and drive oneself into the madhouse by attempting too much at first. The brain is the instrument of waking consciousness and every conscious mental picture formed means change and destruction of the atoms of the brain. Ordinary intellectual activity moves on well beaten paths in the brain, and does not compel sudden adjustments and destructions in its substance. But this new kind of mental effort calls for something very different — the carving out of ‘new brain paths’, the ranking in different order of the little brain lives. If forced injudiciously it may do serious physical harm to the brain.

This mode of thinking (she says) is what the Indians call Jñāna Yoga. As one progresses in Jñāna Yoga, one finds conceptions arising which, though one is conscious of them, one cannot express nor yet formulate into any sort of mental picture. As time goes on these conceptions will form into mental pictures. This is a time to be on guard and refuse to be deluded with the idea that the new found and wonderful picture must represent reality. It does not. As one works on, one finds the once admired picture growing dull and unsatisfying, and finally fading out or being thrown away. This is another danger point, because for the moment one is left in a void without any conception to support one, and one may be tempted to revive the cast-off picture for want of a better to cling to. The true student will, however, work on unconcerned, and presently further formless gleams come, which again in time give rise to a larger and more beautiful picture than the last. But the learner will now know that no picture will ever represent the TRUTH. This last splendid picture will grow dull and fade like the others. And so the process goes on, until at last the mind and its pictures are transcended and the learner enters and dwells in the World of NO FORM, but of which all forms are narrowed reflections.

The True Student of *The Secret Doctrine* is a Jñāna Yogi, and this Path of Yoga is the True Path for the Western student. It is to provide him with sign posts on that Path that *The Secret Doctrine* has been written.

[Later note: I have read over this rendering of her teaching to H.P.B. asking if I have got her aright. She called me a silly Dumskull to imagine anything can ever be put into words aright. But she smiled and nodded as well, and said I had really got it better than anyone else ever did, and better than she could do it herself.]

I wonder why *I* am getting all this. It should be passed to the world, but I am too old ever to do it. I feel such a child to H.P.B., yet I am twenty years older than her in actual years.

She has changed much since I met her two years ago. It is marvellous how she holds up in the face of dire illness. If one knew nothing and believed nothing, H.P.B. would convince one that she is something away and beyond body and brain. I feel, especially during these last meetings since she has become so helpless bodily, that we are getting teachings from another and higher sphere. We seem to feel and KNOW what she says rather than hear it with our bodily ears. X said much the same thing last night.

(Sgd.) Robert Bowen,
CMDR, R.N.
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The Three Fundamental Propositions from the Proem of *The Secret Doctrine*

I. An Omnipresent, Eternal, Boundless and Immutable PRINCIPLE, on which all speculation is impossible, since it transcends the power of human conception and can only be dwarfed by any human expression or similitude. It is beyond the range and reach of thought — in the words of the *Māndūkya*, ‘unthinkable and unspeakable’.

To render these ideas clearer to the general reader, let him set out with the postulate that there is one Absolute Reality which antecedes all manifested, conditioned Being. This Infinite and Eternal Cause — dimly formulated in the ‘Unconscious’ and ‘Unknowable’ of current European philosophy — is the Rootless Root of ‘all that was, is, or ever shall be.’ It is of course devoid of all attributes and is essentially without any relation to manifested, finite Being. It is ‘Be-ness’ rather than Being, Sat in Sanskrit, and is beyond all thought or speculation.

This Be-ness is symbolized in *The Secret Doctrine* under two aspects. On the one hand, absolute Abstract Space, representing bare subjectivity, the one thing which no human mind can either exclude from any conception, or conceive of by itself; on the other, absolute Abstract Motion representing Unconditioned Consciousness. Even our Western thinkers have shown that consciousness is inconceivable to us apart from change, and motion best symbolizes change, its essential characteristic. This latter aspect of the One Reality is also symbolized by the term the Great Breath, a symbol sufficiently graphic to need no further elucidation. Thus, then, the first fundamental axiom of *The Secret Doctrine* is this metaphysical One Absolute BE-NESS — symbolized by finite intelligence as the theological Trinity.

II. The eternity of the Universe *in toto*² as a boundless plane; periodically ‘the playground of numberless Universes incessantly manifesting and disappearing,’ called the ‘Manifesting Stars,’ and the ‘Sparks of Eternity.’ *The Eternity of the Pilgrim is like a wink of the Eye of Self-Existence,*’ as the *Book of Dzyan* puts it. *The appearance and disappearance of Worlds is like a regular tidal ebb of flux and reflux.*’

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. An alternation such as that of Day and Night, Life and Death, Sleeping and Waking, is a fact so common, so perfectly universal and without exception, that it is easy to comprehend that in it we see one of the absolutely fundamental Laws of the Universe.

² *in toto* - as a whole; totally; entirely; completely in all; overall.

III. 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 Cycles of Incarnation, or Necessity, in accordance with Cyclic and Karmic Law, during the whole term. In other words, no purely spiritual Buddhi (Divine Soul) can have an independent conscious existence before the spark which issued from the pure Essence of the Universal Sixth Principle—or the OVER-SOUL — has (a) passed through every elemental form of the phenomenal world of that Manvantara, and (b) acquired individuality, first by natural impulse, and then by self-induced and self-devised efforts, checked by its Karma, thus ascending through all the degrees of intelligence, from the lowest to the highest Manas, from mineral and plant, up to the holiest Archangel (Dhyāni-Buddha). The pivotal doctrine of the Esoteric Philosophy admits no privileges or special gifts in man, save those won by his own Ego through personal effort and merit throughout a long series of metempsychoses and reincarnations.

Footnote on Races and Sub-Races

In Theosophical literature, the term root race has a specialized meaning. In this context, the word race connotes something quite distinct from the standard dictionary definition. The popular definition of race involves minor physical and cultural variations within the human species. In Theosophical literature, however, it refers to something altogether different. Specifically, the term root race or race refers to major developmental phases that occur over time within human consciousness. The first root race is said to be that stage at which the most basic level of perception was developed. During the second stage, the ability for active expression was evolved. This was followed by the third stage characterized by the development of emotion. In the fourth root race, the analytical powers of the mind begin to appear. We are now said to be in the fifth root race—the evolutionary phase in which the mind develops its synthesizing powers. These stages, which are successive, are great evolutionary changes spanning eons of time. All of humanity is said to pass through each of the successive root races—with each individual soul incarnating many times at every stage of development.

This footnote was based on the following sources:

The Peopling of the Earth by Geoffrey Barborka

Theosophy: An Introductory Study Course by John Algeo

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