

## H.P. BLAVATSKY AND HER LEGACY

Looking back as far as we can into what Shakespeare called “the dark backward and abysm of time,” we can, if we have discerning eyes and minds, catch glimmers and glimpses of the work of the Brotherhood of sages and adepts. The Illuminati have worked constantly, selflessly, quietly, secretly, often behind the scenes of history, always for the benefit of humanity. The eternal Wisdom-Religion has always been available for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, and the dauntless courage to seek the truth. In turn, those who have been fortunate enough to glimpse these truths have often tried to convey them to others through whatever means they found appropriate. And so, while, as H.P.B. tells us, the deepest truths are passed on from generation to generation of the sacred Brotherhood of adepts by glyphs and symbols, less enlightened men and women have expressed them through stories, myths, legends, literature, the cadences of poetry, the interplay of light and color and shape and form of painting, music and the measured movements of dance. Even the formal structures of the harmonious ratios of mathematics have sometimes been used to convey hidden truths. And so, when we want to look for the ripples of effects that follow upon the periodical influx of the light of wisdom given through a messenger who holds up “the beacon light of truth,” as H.P.B. called it, we have to look at a very wide array of aspects of life and areas of knowledge to trace the effects. As Mr. Judge wrote, wherever thought struggles to be free the working of the Movement may be discerned. And when we think how many such movements, large and small, of human minds to free themselves from tyranny—whether it be of a political dictator, social tyranny, or the tyranny and dictatorship that tries to determine what human beings shall be allowed to and not be allowed to think and speak about—whenever such tyrannies have been present, there have always been those movements which have tried to break free from them, because these tyrannies of the mind are, of course, the most insidious, but also the most dangerous kinds that can be imposed upon the human race.

Now, in the beautiful biography of H.P. Blavatsky, which has been so lovingly and painstakingly put together by Sylvia Cranston, there are included at the end of the book several areas of thought in which the influence of H.P.B.’s exposition of Theosophy can be clearly seen. Ms. Cranston also mentions specific thinkers, writers, and well-known individuals who came deeply under the spell of H.P.B.’s writings. So I think there is no need for me to go into these in detail. I’m going to deal with a variety of slightly wider areas—and perhaps attitudes of minds, methodologies, ways of looking at life—that H.P.B. seems to have, and her teachings of Theosophy—which is of course the ancient *Sanatana Dharma*, the eternal Wisdom-Religion—have had on us. But it is important to mention again that H.P.B. could arguably be called the mother of the New Age movement. True, some of these children of the New Age, and grandchildren, have gone wildly astray. Some have trivialised and sensationalised profound ideas so foolishly that they have brought disbelief, criticism, and even ridicule upon them. One need only look at absurd and fantastic reincarnation claims about past lives by individuals. One can only hear with incredulity and amusement at events like the one I heard of several years ago on TV news, which talked about something which had happened in Los Angeles which was called “the reincarnation barbeque.” The invitation motto of this was “Come as you were.” You found people dressed as all kinds of characters, mingling with each other and talking with each other. They didn’t show very much but I did wonder what would happen when half a dozen

Cleopatras came together, or a dozen Caesars and so on, because it does seem among this sort of glib interpretation of reincarnation everyone seems to be someone rich and famous. Hardly anyone, of people who talk a lot in this superficial sense of reincarnation, says, “You know, I was just a poor peasant, tilling my little bit of land and nothing exciting ever happened to me, and nobody knew about my existence except my family and a few friends.” They all have to be historically great figures. And in the last scene, which again brought out for me the humour of the whole event, they showed a woman who was dressed up in ancient Chinese robes and a crown and so on, who said she was the reincarnation of Kwan-Yin, the Chinese goddess of mercy. She was talking to a young man who was dressed in twentieth century casual clothes, who said he was the reincarnation of the actor James Dean. I just thought it would have been fascinating to know what Kwan-Yin and James Dean were animatedly talking about. But, alas, that I certainly will never know.

So, it is true that New Age philosophy can sometimes be simply a vague collection, sometimes trivial, of often distorted ideas haphazardly put together without any coherence, perhaps really intended only to satisfy the shallow and emotional fantasies of individuals. Yet the power and strength of these ancient ideas are such that they can survive this trivialisation. The genuine kernel of truth in these ideas can quicken dormant intuitions in a true seeker’s mind, can strike a chord that arouses some dim soul memories from lives in the past. As students of theosophy we are all aware that ideas put into the intellectual air, so to speak, by the power of a pure and strong mind of any age can have effects and influences as deeply and widely as ideas directly conveyed through the written and spoken word. The important thing after all is that these ideas be dynamically imprinted into the higher astral of the earth so that receptive minds may have access to them. And this is what H.P.B. did, just as by crisscrossing the world in her travels it is said she laid down lines of magnetic force. All great spiritual teachers have done this, sowing living seeds which continue to produce harvests for centuries to come long after the teachers are gone, some of them even forgotten.

One of the most crucial, dynamic and life-changing ideas H.P.B. revived was the idea of reincarnation, and with it the revival of what is called its twin doctrine, the law of karma. Now here again, the doctrine of karma—like the doctrine of reincarnation—is often very glibly understood, misunderstood, very shallowly understood. Nevertheless, people at some level are realising that whatever they do—and not just what they do, but what they think, and what they feel will have an effect; somehow that they have to be careful, not just of their external actions but of the inner actions or workings of their consciousness. I think the fact that there are some who do pick up this idea, with the idea of karma, is an extremely important point to remember. And let us face it—without H.P.B. in the nineteenth century—it is unlikely that this idea would have spread so far and wide. But it has now spread so much, that it is really for many young people part of their common parlance, part of their common vocabulary. I had a student once who was writing about Hinduism, and she said that one of the most important ideas in Hinduism was this law of ethical causation, which she described correctly. And she said, “What the Hindus believe seems to be very much like what we Americans call karma.” Afterwards I asked her to come up to me and I had a very difficult time convincing her that karma was not in its origin an American word, concept or term. She was very sceptical. I am not sure I completely convinced her. But what I am saying is that at least these ideas have been put into the air, and that is important, because we know that the idea of karma brings with it inevitably the idea of responsibility. And the idea of reincarnation brings with it the idea of hope. There is always hope. All right, I’ve made mistakes in this life, but if I realise that, there is always time for me to

go in a different direction.

So let us look not so much at specific concepts (because as I said these ideas of karma and reincarnation and the effects they have had are described at the end of Sylvia Cranston's book on H.P. Blavatsky), but let us look at some other specific concepts or whole ways of looking at the entire picture. Let us look at some general attitudes and approaches, points of view, and areas of study.

First of all let us look at H.P.B.'s insistence on the synthesis of philosophy, religion, and science. Earlier in Europe one saw the unhealthy hold that dogmatic institutional religion had on philosophy. Indeed, philosophy was called "the handmaiden of theology." Philosophers were not allowed to come to conclusions by reason that would contradict the dogmas of theology that also had a very strong, tight hold on science. A little bit was said about this, and about the freeing of the mind at the time of the renaissance. With the philosopher Descartes in the seventeenth century, philosophy began to separate itself from religion, and so too did science—which was known as "natural philosophy." This is very interesting. It is also interesting that to this day, at the University of Oxford, the professor of physics is known as the Professor of Natural Philosophy, not the professor of physics. So we see that ancient connection still remains in some sense.

As we know, by the nineteenth century religion and science were at each other's throats, irreconcilable enemies with contrary ideologies. The ordinary person was caught between the Scylla and Charybdis of religious dogma on the one hand, and scientific materialism on the other. It seemed as if you had to choose between one or the other. As for philosophy it was beginning, certainly by the end of the nineteenth century, to overemphasise its indifference to religion and spirituality, an indifference culminating in the completely anti-religious, anti-spiritual, anti-metaphysical theories of the logical positivists in the 1930's and 1940's (which fortunately had a very short life). More recently religion and science, and science and philosophy, have been making tentative gestures of reconciliation. But H.P.B. suggested such reconciliation and even synthesis in *Isis Unveiled* in 1876. Right at the beginning she says—and she talks about it in *Isis Unveiled* and in *The Secret Doctrine*—that Theosophy is the synthesis of philosophy, science and religion. Well this suggestion has certainly borne fruit a hundred years later.

Some have objected that what H.P.B. was suggesting was a rather artificial and unacceptable patchwork of the three areas of knowledge. But that was not what H.P.B. was doing. What she was proposing was a much more profound change of view, change of attitude toward these areas of knowledge as a whole. She was suggesting a 'paradigm shift' (as we sometimes call it) so that we could get back to the primordial world-view of the ancient sages—Buddha, Shankara, Plato, and so on—for whom these three areas were not totally different ways of looking at life, but simply aspects of a holistic view. In other words, they were all part of a whole, not three separate things which then had somehow to be brought together. I think to recognise this is extremely important. Because, as I said, what she was suggesting was going back to a way of looking at things, of a world view, of a conceptual framework which is very different from the kind of way we have of thinking, where we cut up everything into small pieces—and then we don't know how to put them together again. She was suggesting, as the poet says, we ought to be able to "see life steadily and see it whole," and then of course to see there are different aspects and so on. She was emphasising what has been recognised: that the universe is many-leveled, many dimensional. It has a beautiful complexity to it; and yet it is a universe. It is one system, not totally separate systems. In other words, it is not as if religion is looking at one thing, and

science is looking at another, and the two are separate and “never the twain shall meet.” So as far as H.P.B. was concerned, bringing back the wisdom of the ancients means not only reiterating the specific truths about man and the universe that the ancients had taught, but also recovering a whole different world-view, an ancient perspective on life that is rich, profound, and above all, life-transforming. It is not a mere collection of intellectually held theories and concepts, but a way of understanding truth so that it becomes a part of one’s own being. It means practice must flow naturally and smoothly from knowledge. *Theoria* and *praxis*, theory and practice, cannot be separated. To know something is to make it a living truth in one’s life, to act upon it with ease and skill. Levels of knowledge are levels of being. To know more is to be a more integrated being at the spiritual level. It means that ethics, moral principles, are acted upon not because they are seen as rules external to oneself, imposed by an outside authority, but are looked upon and become internalised, seen as the most natural way for the soul to express itself. It means that one has realised that to be truly spiritually free, one exercises one’s free will as not the freedom to do whatever one wants, but also as the freedom to resist selfish desires, and the freedom to abstain from what is inharmonious and separative. We tend to see freedom as being able to have this and have that, but it is also the freedom to realise that what we want is unimportant, and therefore it loses its hold upon us. So the freedom to abstain—that is also a very important thing.

Spinoza, the great 17th Century philosopher had a profound insight when he said, “Freedom is the recognition of necessity.” This was, of course, the view of all the great ancient sages and teachers—Buddha, Lao Tzu, Confucius, Socrates and Plato, Shankara, Spinoza—and the great mystics of every religious tradition. But by the nineteenth century there was no one whose teachings so clearly involved and implied this teaching of the true freedom of the will—meaning the freedom from the bondage of the passions—as the teaching of H.P.B. and Theosophy. No one else had expressed it so clearly and forcefully.

She was in fact, of course, repeating what the ancients had said. There is a place in the *Kathopanishad* of Hinduism where it says, “When the knots of the heart are loosed”—and the knots are, of course, all the selfish desires we have—“when the knots of the heart are loosed, then the mortal becomes immortal.” In turn this means that H.P.B. was resuscitating the ancient Buddhist, Vedantic, Platonic doctrine, that wrong-doing or evil is ultimately rooted in ignorance, *avidya*, a deep-rooted ignorance of our true spiritual nature. The doctrine mainly adopted by Western religions, especially Christianity, was that wrong-doing or evil lies in the essentially sinful nature of man, a teaching which therefore stands in direct contradiction to the ancient wisdom teaching. The doctrine that H.P.B. revived is an extremely crucial tool, spiritually and psychologically, in enabling us to recognise the inalienable freedom, the essential, innate, indestructible purity of our innermost Self. This alone, that is, the restoration of the dignity of the human being, the complete worth of the human being, gives us the hope and the power of taking our destiny in our own hands without relying on the grace of an unpredictable outside saviour. It is also a weapon to help us combat the enervating and self-destructive deterministic and behavioristic theories that assault us today from every field of knowledge—sociology, psychology, the natural sciences, religion, etc. The ancient concept of knowledge is radically different, H.P.B. pointed out, from our modern conception of knowledge. Not only is knowledge in the spiritual sense something that has its origin in the innermost recesses of the human soul, rather than the outer world of sense experience, but for that very reason is accessible only to the supra-rational faculty of intuition, not to the brain-mind. Plato remarked that all true knowledge is recollection, the recollection of what the soul once knew and has forgotten.

The highest knowledge is synthesising, not analytic. Although rational analysis certainly has its place in the total scheme of human knowledge, it follows that education must be—as its etymology implies—that which is brought out from within the individual, not something placed by others into the mind which is considered to be like an empty box. This age-old traditional concept of education had long been forgotten when H.P.B. appeared on the scene. But her teachings certainly sowed the seeds of educational reforms, which have very slowly in some places begun to grow. Some who have developed these ideas have acknowledged their debt to H.P.B. and Theosophy, others have not. But the important point is that the seeds have germinated even if the sower is not always recognised or acknowledged and remembered. That is what it is about, as H.P.B. pointed out, that these ideas should go forth and be taken up and used; not that a particular person be remembered—“Oh, it was so-and-so who taught this.” Theosophy is the ancient, *collective* wisdom of all the great sages.

And yet the wisdom of H.P.B.’s teaching lay in the fact that while emphasising the intuitive and the synthetic, she also said, as I mentioned, that the use of the deductive method is allowed for. The use of rational, analytic and deductive reasoning is allowed for in its appropriate context, but it is not the highest kind of knowledge. So it is not as if she was being dogmatic and saying, “Forget ordinary reasoning and logic” and so on. For instance, H.P.B. insists, as did the Buddha, Plato and Shankara, that while the highest realms of knowledge are obtainable solely by the use of spiritual intuition, the use of the faculty of reason in its pure sense is absolutely essential on the path of the spiritual quest. This is unlike some sects, for instance even today, which claim that one can make a sudden leap from the realm of the chaotic emotions without passing through reason, and land somehow in the realm of the spirit. Pointing to the fact that in all areas, nature proceeds gradually, step by step, Theosophy recommends the same gradual progress in the spiritual life. To ignore this warning, we are told, is to risk self-destruction, or at least madness. This is a piece of advice, this is a way of looking at the spiritual life, which as we all know, is very relevant to what is going on today, and what is being taught in the name of spiritual philosophy.

Another piece of advice H.P.B.’s teachings as a whole gives us is the suggestion that we follow the doctrine of the golden mean, maintain a sense of proportion and balance between all extremes; especially that we take to the middle way between a foolish unquestioning incredulity, and copying, caviling, cynical skepticism. Following the path of Shankara, and of course Plato and others as well, we are encouraged to engage in what Shankara calls *manana*, or a calm, pure reflection on any teachings we are given. We are encouraged to keep a healthy attitude of Socratic questioning. Only by intense reflection, by raising the mind to higher and higher levels of abstract and personal questioning, and attempting to arrive at the greater and greater universal truths can we reach the rarified realms of true *jnana* or spiritual knowledge. In other words she is saying, she quotes in fact in *Isis Unveiled*, with great approval, the words of the Buddha when he said to his disciples, “Don’t just take for granted the truths that I’ve given you, even if they have been taught to you by a great teacher, even if they have been taught to you by the scriptures, by sacred books, by some other kind of teacher, even if everybody else believes them. Wherever you have heard these truths from, think about them for yourself. Don’t just lap them up foolishly and without thought. You have to make them your own by thinking about them.” This theosophical teaching or intellectual attitude involves two things: the acceptance of the phenomenal world as being at least relatively real, not completely illusory (which in the end is philosophically untenable) and also, it involves the admission of Shankara’s doctrine of superimposition and the idea of sublimation—that is, the capacity of questioning a truth, to

recognise it, perhaps, as a partial truth, enabling us to rise to higher and higher levels of truth which are more universal and more inclusive, the way in science it often happens. Einstein did not just say that Newton's theory was all wrong. He said it was a partial theory. And so he went on to express what is known as his General Theory, which included Newton's. Now scientists are saying we have to go even beyond that to a more inclusive, more universal theory. So, unless we leave our minds open to the possibility that we haven't reached the highest truth, we will become stagnant. We will not grow in our knowledge and therefore we will not grow as human individuals. This was also a very important point that H.P.B. made.

The fundamental basis of these doctrines is the recognition of the Buddhist and Advaita Vedanta distinction between absolute and relative truth. H.P.B. also countered the false interpretation of Vedanta and Hinduism in general by making the very important philosophical distinction between subjective and objective idealism. Furthermore, and this is very important again to different areas of today's knowledge, I think it is deeply significant that Gandhi was greatly influenced by Theosophy. Indeed he might not have come to appreciate the profound significance of the *Gita* and the teachings of the Buddha, had it not been for a chance encounter on a train in England with two English theosophists, who urged him to acquaint himself with his own rich spiritual heritage. Gandhi went on to place the entire complex theory of non-violence on the crucial distinction between absolute and relative truth, and the vital and indissoluble connection between ends and means. Today in a world where actions are being constantly justified by saying that the end justifies the means, this teaching is of vital importance. This is something that H.P.B. in all her ethical writings emphasised. It is not widely known that once, when Gandhi was asked how he would define or describe God, he replied that he himself found this an impossible task, but that the best definition of God he had ever come across was that given by H.P. Blavatsky in *The Key to Theosophy*. Surely, a teacher and a teaching, that so deeply affected the life and thought of a figure so central to the moral, political and social life of the twentieth century as Gandhi, can indeed be said to be a view that left an indelible mark on human history, a priceless legacy to the human race.

As for the revival of Buddhism, we know how much Theosophy did to make the Western world aware of its depth and its power apart, of course, from Col. Olcott's work in Sri Lanka. It may not be so well known in America that the general public interest in Buddhism in the twentieth century arose in England long before it did in this country. It was the result not so much of Buddhist academics and scholars, but the work of the great jurist who was the Queen's Counsel, and later a judge, Christmas Humphreys, who readily acknowledges he owes his interest in Buddhism, and his knowledge of it, to having studied Theosophy, and especially H.P.B.'s writings *The Secret Doctrine* and *The Voice of the Silence*, which deeply touched and moved him. The latter book, incidentally, *The Voice of the Silence*, has sometimes been dismissed by academics, and not accepted as genuine. But one of the most eminent Buddhist scholars of the twentieth century, Edward Conze, believed that it was completely genuine because he respected Theosophy.

In the last part of the twentieth century, Edward Said, the great scholar, made a frontal attack on the kind of intellectual virus that was spreading in western scholarship. Some had been uncomfortable with this attack, but no one had produced a powerful recent criticism of it. He called it "orientalism," the tendency by western scholars to disregard and even heap scorn on any interpretation by native scholars of their own sacred and philosophical texts. "Oh, Hindus? They don't know about their own texts! It's we western scholars who know of it. The Muslims? They don't know about it. The Chinese? No, no, no, they don't understand Lao Tzu and

Confucius—we understand it. Their understanding is based on all kinds of superstition and so on.” But H.P.B. had kept pressing the idea that the West must take into account the interpretations, the commentaries, the translations and the views of the native scholars of whatever religion one was studying. True, some of them might be superstitious and foolish, but nevertheless, they did have a whole tradition, a core tradition of wisdom coming down from ancient times, which was not accessible to Western scholars. I think this was extremely important. One remembers her comment, her exclamation, “Oh, ye Max Müllers and Monier Williamses, what have ye done with our philosophy?” It was she who really made a great contribution, therefore, to the philosophy of religion, which only in the twentieth century has begun to take its place in the field of academic philosophy. Comparative religion, and the study of myths and so on, had been done to some extent. James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* had come out, but, again, it simply did not understand the myths, and considered them to be just foolish fairy tales. Another one wrote of the Vedas, “They are the meaningless ruins of a primitive people.” They don’t have any meaning, why bother about studying them? Yet H.P.B. put into the intellectual air this idea that they have to be taken seriously, that there are profound truths in them. Myths are not fairy tales. They contain the deepest truths discovered by the human race—truths that are so deep, so profound, and sometimes so sacred, that they cannot be expressed in literal language, but have to be expressed through stories and myths. These myths are the ones that, in any culture and in any society, pass down the values from generation to generation, and pass down these truths. It was she who compared them and made a point of looking into their depths to see their innermost meaning, and pointed out that they had many different meanings, that we needed many keys to understand these ancient myths.

In the twentieth century you have scholars like Mircea Eliade, and of course Joseph Campbell, but that would probably not have been possible if H.P.B. had not done all the preliminary work in the early times. Similarly (I don’t want to go into it, because I don’t know the field of science) to me it has always been telling that H.P.B. (much to the amusement and scorn of the scientists of her time) said that it might sound logically contradictory, but, light could be explained both as a wave and as a particle. So you could have a wave theory and a particle theory, and both were true. Of course she was laughed at. What do we have now? Quantum physics and quantum mechanics telling us exactly the same thing. The great scientist Niels Bohr says a physicist just chooses the theory he feels like choosing. It might be the wave theory, it might be the particle theory. We’ve also observed what certainly is implicit in the theosophical teaching, that the phenomena of nature—particles for instance—are not totally separate from, but are influenced by, the observer. The object is being influenced and behaving according to the subject. When a scientist looks at a particle, it may change its behaviour. So, again, the sharp distinction which was drawn between the subject and the object—that there were two different kinds of world, the world of the mind and the world of physical things—was being broken down. Many scientists today are beginning to think that you have to make allowance for the presence of consciousness in the universe; it is not a separate thing totally from matter, but you cannot reduce all mental phenomena to material events. So, again, in science, where still people say, “Oh well, that’s a fact. Science is a fact.” Well, unfortunately, scientists themselves have understood that their theories are not as final and definite as they would like to believe—they are highly probable truths. They have also realised that many of the theories, many of the models of science, are not literal explanations. Their literal explanations (*i.e.*, certain physical phenomena, especially in quantum mechanics and quantum physics) are simply not possible. Bohr once said, if you think the models of quantum physics are literal pictures or reflections of

reality—you haven't understood quantum physics. They are more like poetic metaphors than literal explanations or descriptions. Now here again what you are really saying is myth and poetic language can sometimes express truths that cannot be expressed in literal language. Was that not what H.P.B. and all the great sages have been saying?

I'm sure many of you have lots of other ways and areas in which you can trace the effect of H.P.B.'s thoughts. But, as I said, she put certain ideas out in the air, and they enable us to understand life better. They enable us to cope with life better. They enable us to understand ourselves and the universe, and the connection between ourselves and the universe far, far better than we otherwise would. And it gives life a meaning. It gives life a richness and a worth that perhaps otherwise it wouldn't have if we didn't understand the truths of Theosophy. It also points out that, of course, the spiritual life is difficult. No great teacher has ever said it was easy. This is another lesson that we need to learn in today's world where so many so-called gurus are saying, "Oh yes, just do this and instant nirvana"—like instant coffee and instant mashed potatoes. Why not? Whereas H.P.B. said, as all the great teachers have said, it is a very rough path, but it is worth taking because of what lies at the end. The freedom, the joy that lies at the end of it—that freedom and joy which then enables you to serve and help your fellow human beings far better. Perhaps I'll close with a quotation from Spinoza, one of my favorite philosophers, "All things noble are as difficult as they are rare."

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