

APPROACHING THE SECRET DOCTRINE

Its Teachings and Practical Application

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PREFACE

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (HPB) was a pioneer of the esoteric renaissance that took place at the end of the nineteenth century, and her two-volume work, *The Secret Doctrine* (SD), is regarded by many as her masterpiece. Since its publication in 1888, the SD has not only inspired generations of Theosophists around the world, but its influence has reached painters, musicians, writers, scientists, leaders of various esoteric movements, and many others. In fact, an important number of dominant themes in the New Age movement can be traced back to this text.

Despite its broad influence, students who set out to peruse this work often encounter seemingly insurmountable obstacles. They find themselves overwhelmed by a multiplicity of technical terms from a range of languages that include Sanskrit, Greek, Tibetan, Chinese, and Hebrew, among others. They also frequently struggle to grasp the highly metaphysical ideas presented, while endeavoring not to get lost in the wealth of references to a variety of world religions, philosophies, sciences, and mythologies, both ancient and modern. The apparent lack of order or organization in presenting these subjects does little to help those who are trying to get a clear picture of its contents. And those who persevere and succeed in getting through its pages, are often baffled by the remoteness of its teachings, especially in the case of the first volume, *Cosmogogenesis*, which explores the origin and evolution of the cosmos.

Approaching The Secret Doctrine (ASD) was written to address these issues and other difficulties commonly encountered by students. Focusing on the first volume of the SD, which is the most abstract and metaphysical of the two, this book has three main goals: (i) to explore how the SD may be studied in ways that are not limited to providing conceptual learning, but that also

help students to awaken their spiritual intuition; *(ii)* to examine the main teachings of the first volume of the SD and present them in a concise and systematic way; and *(iii)* to show how these teachings, even the most remote and metaphysical, can become a foundation for spiritual practice in daily life.

To accomplish these goals, the present book offers not only the result of the author's study and contemplation of the subject, but also quotes and excerpts from the SD itself, organized in a purposeful and methodical manner. Since excerpts from the SD are often densely packed with information, they are supplemented by commentaries to help clarify their meaning and to further elaborate on the main ideas. Some readers may wonder about the need for including these excerpts, which are often difficult to understand. Why not simply present an elucidation of Blavatsky's ideas? There are several reasons for this. One is that the main portions of the SD have a depth that is not easily fathomed in its entirety. Reflecting on the original text can allow for new insights not covered in the author's commentaries. Another important reason is that to be able to eventually undertake the study of the SD on their own, students must get familiar with Blavatsky's style of writing.

Because of the introductory nature of ASD, all foreign terms present in the excerpts have been translated based on the definitions that Blavatsky uses in her writings.* However, the original terms are provided in parentheses alongside the translation to help students familiarize themselves with the technical expressions.† It is recommended not to skip over the parenthesized terms while reading so that they can be easily learned through repeated exposure. Some of the quotes have been edited, mainly by deleting Blavatsky's frequent interpolations, which often obscure her main point. These omissions have not been marked with ellipses “...” in order to keep the text more readable. References to the original quotes are provided, and students are encouraged to refer to them for further study.

The selection of material presented in this book is based on the advice that Blavatsky gave to her pupils about how to study the SD. In conversations

* Exceptions to this are the terms “Logos” and “Fohat,” which are left in their original form.

† Diacritics have been omitted since they can be confusing for those not familiar with them.

reported by Robert Bowen, she states that the first step was to master the main concepts in the “Proem” and the “Summing Up” sections of the first volume of *Cosmogogenesis*. The selection of teachings in the second part of ASD is built upon this foundation, with the addition of an introductory exploration of the stanzas of Dzyan.

Some discussion on the use of capitalization is necessary. The SD was produced during the Victorian era when capitalization of terms was very common. In Theosophical writings, the convention was that when a word was capitalized it referred to the higher, universal, or spiritual aspects of the term, as opposed to their lower or material manifestations. Thus, “Wisdom” would indicate a spiritual principle, while “wisdom” would be used for its more mundane meaning. This writing style has fallen into disuse in modern literature. In this book, capitalization has been avoided when it is clear that the text refers to a higher principle, but it is retained otherwise. Thus, for example, the phrase “absolute reality” is not capitalized because it is evident that it does not mean the mundane reality, but the word “Reality,” would be capitalized when referring to its absolute aspect. The same goes for terms like “universal life” or “Life,” “spiritual intuition” or “Intuition,” “higher triad” or “Triad,” and so on.

It is also necessary to address the subject of gender-neutral language. This has become important in today’s communications but was of no consequence in Blavatsky’s time. As can be seen in her writing, she used masculine terms to include both genders, as was the general rule. Gendered language has been avoided whenever possible. The term “man,” however, requires a special explanation. The English word is derived from the Sanskrit root *man*, which is used to denote a “thinking being,” regardless of gender or race. In Theosophical literature, the word “man” is frequently used in this technical way, referring to any being in the cosmos that has the ability to think. In order to remind the reader that the word “Man” is used in this specific sense, it will be capitalized.

Another term that requires a special mention is “principle.” Although this word is commonly used to refer to a moral rule or belief, or a fundamental truth or proposition, the reader should keep in mind that in Theosophical literature

it is frequently used with the meaning of “a primary source,” indicating the seven basic constituents of the cosmos and human beings.

In the pages of this present book, students will find different styles of presentation and various types of content intended to address the diverse needs encountered when approaching the SD. Some chapters contain the author’s insights, others are entirely based on Blavatsky’s words, and some present a combination of both. Blavatsky’s voice is identified with a bold font to distinguish between the two. There are introductory sections and easy-going conversations suitable for the beginner, along with more technical essays that may be interesting even for the experienced student. A compilation of quotes is offered for further study and reflection, as well as meditations and practical exercises for daily life. Whenever needed, chapters begin with an explanatory note orienting students to the type of content they will encounter.

To provide an overview of the scope of study to be undertaken, below is a brief description of each chapter within the three parts of this book.

The opening section “Introducing *The Secret Doctrine*” explores Blavatsky’s goals in writing the SD, the structure of the text, as well as how its teachings were obtained.

Part I examines the nature of the SD, its aims and how to study it.

Chapter 1 is an exploration of the wide-ranging fields of thought that the SD covers, in an endeavor to provide a holistic worldview.

Chapter 2 brings Blavatsky’s own words to the reader regarding the nature of the SD. These are taken from selected fragments of the “Preface” and “Introductory” sections in the first volume. To improve the clarity and continuity of the arguments, these statements are presented in a question-and-answer format.

Chapter 3 offers Blavatsky’s thoughts about science and the SD through selected fragments taken from the sections “Summing Up” and “Reasons for These Addenda.” Again, this section is in a question-and-answer format.

Chapter 4 presents an abridgment of the notes taken by Robert Bowen, one of Blavatsky’s students, on her suggestions as to how the SD should be studied.

Chapter 5 elaborates on some of the concepts presented in the previous chapter, exploring the study of the SD as a practice of the “yoga of wisdom” (*jnana yoga*).

Chapter 6 examines four basic ideas which, according to Blavatsky, should be kept in mind while studying the SD.

Chapter 7 closes the first part of the book by offering some practical tips for the study of the SD.

Part II explores the main teachings found in the first volume of the SD, *Cosmogogenesis*.

Chapter 8 presents Blavatsky’s words from selected fragments of the “Summing Up” section, which deal with the subject of God and Creation. These statements are presented in a question-and-answer format.

Chapter 9 continues the exploration, in the same format as the above chapter, with selected fragments from “Summing Up,” this time dealing with the subject of celestial beings (*dhyani-chohans*).

Chapter 10 offers selected excerpts from the “Proem” of the first volume, outlining systematically the different stages of manifestation of the cosmos and the symbols associated with each of them.

Chapters 11, 12, and 13 present excerpts from the three fundamental propositions found in the “Proem,” along with comments elaborating the main concepts given there.

Chapters 14, 15, and 16 offer a thorough compilation of quotes taken from Blavatsky’s writings, adding more detailed information on the teachings presented in the three fundamental propositions.

Chapter 17 begins an exploration of the stanzas of Dzyan based on Blavatsky’s description of them. Here again, they are in a question-and-answer format, with comments added to elaborate on her statements.

Chapters 18, 19, and 20 present an overview of the seven stanzas. It includes (a) the titles, subtitles, and headings found in the SD; (b) Blavatsky’s brief outline of each stanza; (c) a paraphrase of the stanzas with their technical terms translated, along with a few words of clarification; and (d) a synopsis of each stanza, surveying its main concepts.

Chapter 21 closes the second part of this book by presenting the seven stanzas of the first volume of the SD in their original form.

Part III explores how these teachings may be used in daily life and in the practice of meditation.

Chapter 22 examines a special method of study by which metaphysical teachings can be interpreted from a psychological perspective in order to make them applicable to meditation and our daily lives.

Chapters 23 and 24 present examples of how to approach the three fundamental propositions and the stanzas of Dzyan from this psychological perspective so that they may be used as aids in spiritual practice.

Chapter 25 explores some of the ethical principles derived from the teachings found in the SD.

Chapters 26 and 27 present a series of guided meditations on the absolute reality, the Logos and its manifestation.

Chapter 28 closes the book by offering a series of exercises geared to help students live life from the worldview proposed in the SD.