

GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH
THE SECRET DOCTRINE

A STUDY COURSE
BY
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THIRD EDITION

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Preface

This course is merely one approach to getting acquainted with *The Secret Doctrine*—based on the Bowen notes, which purportedly record Blavatsky’s own advice. It borrows freely, however, from the wisdom and practice of many others. Not all of those debts can be acknowledged, but the persons listed below contributed directly in various ways to the making of this course, especially by offering suggestions or by critiquing an earlier version. Whatever is valuable in this work derives from these persons and from the works listed in appendix 1. None of them, however, are responsible for the errors or misinterpretations that mar all products of the world of samsara.

Those who kindly assisted include Adele S. Algeo, who helps in all ways with everything I do; Matthew J. Beagen; Ted G. Davy; Alan Donant; Sarah Belle Dougherty; Geoffrey A. Farthing; Grace F. Knoche and her colleagues at the headquarters of the Theosophical Society at Pasadena, California; Doss McDavid; Joy Mills; Gladney Oakley; I. Manuel Oderberg; Michael Revere, out of conversations with whom

the idea for such a work originally sprang; Emily Sellon; Hugh Shearman, who gave assistance in an attempt to track down the origin of the Bowen notes; Murray Stentiford, who helped with the proofing; and John P. Van Mater, who sent me from the library of the Theosophical Society with international headquarters at Pasadena, a photographic copy of the Bowen notes as they were originally published.

Parts of this course have previously been published in *The Theosophist* (October 1988), 20–7, and in *Report of Proceedings: Secret Doctrine Centenary, October 29–30, 1988* (Pasadena, CA: Theosophical Society, 1989), 59–65.

Students of *The Secret Doctrine* differ considerably in their attitude toward the book and its study. The attitude adopted here—namely, that it is a remarkable and indeed a marvelous book, but that it is not free from error or in any sense a “sacred” text—is not universally held. But I believe that it is in the spirit of the Ageless Wisdom and *The Secret Doctrine* that we should respect each other’s views, without necessarily sharing them.

J. A.

A Word to the Student

This course consists of 12 chapters and 4 appendices whose aim is to help you get acquainted with one of the most remarkable books in the world—H. P. Blavatsky’s master work, *The Secret Doctrine*. These chapters assume no prior knowledge of the book and thus are intended as an introduction for beginning students. However, I hope that more advanced students may also find something of interest here.

Chapter 1 deals with the sort of book *The Secret Doctrine* is. Chapters 2 and 3 introduce the front matter and organizational structure of the book—aspects of any work that readers are likely to skip but that may (and in the case of *The Secret Doctrine* do) provide useful clues to its subject matter. Chapters 4 and 5 are historical, concerned with the process by which the book was written and its subsequent publication in several versions. Chapters 6–10 elaborate a method of studying *The Secret Doctrine* purportedly recommended by H. P. Blavatsky herself. Chapters 11 and 12 treat alternative methods and reasons for studying the book.

This course does not aim to tell you what is in *The Secret Doctrine*, but rather to suggest ways of finding that out for yourself. Inevitably, the author’s own views will come through in some places. They are only one student’s interpretation and will not be useful for everyone. Use what is helpful. Ignore what is not.

Each reader approaches every book in a unique way. Great books, like *The Secret Doctrine*, can be usefully approached in many ways, for they have no single “correct” interpretation. Indeed, the greater the book, the richer the range of meanings we can discover in it and the more varied the ways we can come to those meanings. The purpose of this course is to help you to discover some of the rich meanings in that greatest of all Theosophical books—*The Secret Doctrine*.

To do this course you need this booklet and a copy of *The Secret Doctrine*, of which there are several editions that are all basically the same, although they vary greatly in format and pagination, and somewhat in content. The major editions are described in chapter 5; for purposes of study, any of those can be used. References to *The Secret Doctrine*, however, are to the pagination of the original first edition, which has been preserved in most recent editions. If you are using one of the “Adyar” editions in 6 volumes, you will find in appendix 2 a list of equivalent pages for the passages referred to in this course. If you are getting a copy of Blavatsky’s book to use in this study and you have a choice, I recommend the boxed edition published by the Theosophical Publishing House (Wheaton) for reasons explained in chapter 5.

The “Suggestions for Study” scattered throughout this course are intended as a basis for further exploration and thinking. Some of them refer to dictionaries or other books that cast light on *The Secret Doctrine*. Follow the suggestions that seem helpful or interesting to you, and skip those that do not. When a “Suggestion” is in the middle of a chapter, however, it is best to do it at the point where it occurs, before going on with the chapter, because such suggestions are often intended to prepare you for what follows. Some of the “Suggestions” require the use of a dictionary. A “college” dictionary such as *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* will be best for this purpose. A few “Suggestions” refer to other books. For them, consult your local public library or the Henry S. Olcott Memorial Library at the national center of the Society in Wheaton, Illinois.

Many readers find *The Secret Doctrine* to be a “difficult” book. Several things account for the difficulty those readers encounter:

First, the book’s vision of the universe and of the role humanity has to play in the cosmic process is both sweeping and profound. The knowledge of its author ranged over a vast number of subjects. The book is, indeed, breathtaking in its scope.

Second, because the book was written more than a century ago, much of its discussion of science, religion, and philosophy is now dated. Yet the basic issues it treats are perennial, and the scientific, religious, and philosophical prin-

ciples it addresses are as vital today as they were more than a hundred years ago.

Third, ideas (many of which seem revolutionary, exotic, or fantastic even) are thrown out for the reader’s consideration often without a full explanation. The reader has to recognize the seminal ideas, discriminate the kernel of value in them from the chaff of details with which they are encrusted, and grasp the implications they have for the way we see ourselves and the world we live in.

Fourth, the organization of subjects in the book is often haphazard and the style of explication alternately elliptical and repetitive. Readers have to sort out the pattern of the argument and make connections for themselves.

This course will provide basic help with all these problems, but readers will need to work much out for themselves. *The Secret Doctrine* is not an orderly book; yet it is a book about the order of the cosmos so overwhelming in its vision and implications that generations of readers have found it repays whatever efforts of study they have put into it. If those who do this course become students of *The Secret Doctrine* and discover its wisdom for themselves, the purpose of the course will have been amply fulfilled.

The author will be pleased to receive corrections of errors or suggestions for improvement in this work. They can be sent to him at the Theosophical Society in America, P. O. Box 270, Wheaton, IL 60189-0270.

John Algeo

CHAPTER 1

Introduction:

The Secret Doctrine as a Book of Discovery

The Secret Doctrine is the major work of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, a remarkable Russian woman who was chiefly responsible for introducing Western readers to certain ideas that have been called the “Ancient Wisdom,” “Esoteric Tradition,” or “Secret Doctrine.” In 1875 Blavatsky, assisted by a number of other persons (chiefly Henry Steel Olcott) founded the Theosophical Society in order to make that wisdom better known in the West and to put it into practice through a fellowship of students and investigators. Her published writings fill more than twenty large volumes, of which the most important are the two volumes of *The Secret Doctrine*.

The Secret Doctrine is remarkable for the sweep of its vision and the daring of what it affirms. Its subject is nothing less than the origin and essential nature of the universe and of humanity. Yet it is not a coherent treatment of those matters. To read *The Secret Doctrine*, we must first understand the purpose of the book. Some books are for entertainment, some for instruction, and some for inspiration. Although, to be sure, *The Secret Doctrine* has entertainment, instruction, and inspiration in it, none of those are its primary purpose.

H. P. Blavatsky wrote entertaining books—for example, her accounts of her travels in India published originally in Russian journals

and translated under the title *From the Caves and Jungles of Hindostan*. But anyone who comes to *The Secret Doctrine* for entertainment is likely to be bored.

HPB wrote instructional books—for example, *The Key to Theosophy*, which was, and still is, a readable and practical introduction to Theosophical thought and practice. But anyone who comes to *The Secret Doctrine* for instruction is likely to be confused. Many Theosophists have thought of *The Secret Doctrine* as an instructive work, but to approach her magnum opus as a coherent textbook is the wrong approach.

HPB wrote inspirational books—for example, *The Voice of the Silence*, perhaps the deepest and richest guide we have to the spiritual life. But anyone who comes to *The Secret Doctrine* for inspiration is likely to be dismayed by the mass of uninspiring detail in it.

Certainly, there are entertaining moments in *The Secret Doctrine*, and long passages of instruction, and flashes of inspiration. But HPB’s big book serves another end, which we might call “discovery.” The purpose of *The Secret Doctrine* is not to make us happy by entertaining us, or knowledgeable by instructing us, or sensitive by inspiring us. Its purpose is to help us discover Truth.

Toward the end of her life, Blavatsky gathered about her a group of personal students,

to whom she gave instruction. According to P. G. B. Bowen, his father, Robert Bowen, was one of those and took notes on what HPB said about studying *The Secret Doctrine*. Those notes state that we should not suppose that the book contains all and only the truth, or even that we can find Truth in it: “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.” *The Secret Doctrine* is important, not for the thoughts it contains, but for how we can use it to learn to think for ourselves. It is not a book of entertainment, instruction, or inspiration. It is a book of discovery.

While *The Secret Doctrine* is the basic source book of modern Theosophy and deserves respect for its great learning and deep insights, we must never make the mistake of treating it as a “sacred book”—an infallible or final authority on Theosophy. The very composition of the book—including the process of its writing, the organization of its contents, and even the substance of its thought—is such as to make its treatment as an authoritative text inappropriate. But before we consider the way *The Secret Doctrine* was written or the great ideas it contains, we look at the physical book in chapters 2 and 3 to survey the thing we are talking about.

SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDY:

1.1. Read the following passages (a to d). In each of them primarily entertaining, instructive, or inspirational? Do any combine those qualities?

a. [Blavatsky is describing her ride on an elephant named *Peri*. In reading the passage,

keep in mind that HPB was a sizable woman:] Every step of *Peri* made acrobats of us, forcing us to perform most unexpected stunts. When she put her right foot forward, we dived forward; when it was her left foot, we fell back like so many sheaves of grain, all the while being tossed from one side to the other. This experience, especially under a scorching sun, soon became akin to a feverish delirium—something between seasickness and a nightmare. To crown our pleasure, when we began to ascend a tortuous, stony little path along the rim of a deep ravine, our *Peri* stumbled. This sudden shock caused me to lose my balance altogether. I was sitting on the hind part of the elephant’s back, in the place of *honor*, and began to roll down, unable to stop; no doubt, in a moment I would have found myself at the bottom of the ravine, with some unseemly damage to myself, had it not been for the astounding instinct and understanding of the clever animal. She put a halt to my fall from her “slope,” literally catching me in flight on her *tail*. Probably having felt that I was falling, she skillfully twisted her tail around my body, stopped short, and began to kneel down. But my natural weight proved too much for the thin tail of this kind animal. While *Peri* did not drop me, she hurriedly laid me down and moaned plaintively, probably thinking she had nearly lost her tail as a result of her generosity. This was apparently the opinion of the *mahout* who jumped off her head, hurried to my rescue, and proceeded to examine the allegedly “damaged” tail of his animal. . . .

At first, the *mahout* coldbloodedly examined the tail and, to make sure, pulled it several times; he was about to return to his usual place, but upon hearing me unguardedly express my commiseration with regard to *Peri*’s tail, he suddenly and most unexpectedly changed his tactics. He threw himself flat on the ground and rolled about uttering horrible groans.

Sobbing loudly, he started to mumble and lament as if over a corpse, trying to convince everybody that “Maam-Saab” had torn off his *Peri*’s tail, that *Peri* was forever disgraced, and that her husband, the proud *Airâvata*, direct descendant of Indra’s own favorite elephant, having witnessed her shame, would now renounce his spouse, who would have nothing left but to die. . . .

Thus yelled the *mahout*, paying no attention to the remonstrances of our companions. In vain we tried to persuade him that the “proud *Airâvata*” did not show the slightest disposition to be so cruel to his spouse, the kindly *Chamchalâi Peri*, against whose flank, even at this critical moment, he was quietly rubbing his trunk, and that *Peri*’s tail was undamaged and in place. All this was of no avail! At long last, our friend Nârâyana, a man of unusual strength, lost his patience and had recourse to rather original means. With one hand he threw down a silver rupee, and with the other he seized the puny figure of the *mahout* by his *dhôti*, and, lifting him, hurled him after the coin, head first. Without giving a thought to his bleeding nose, the *mahout* jumped at the rupee with the greediness of a wild beast springing upon its prey. He prostrated himself in the dust before us repeatedly, with endless “salaams,” in token of gratitude; and without the slightest transition, expressed an equally mad joy, where but a moment ago was abject sorrow. To terminate the spectacle, and to show that the tail was really whole, thanks to the “prayers of the saab,” he hung himself on it, like the bell-ringer on the rope of his bell, till he was torn away from it and made to regain his seat. (*Caves and Jungles*, 122–4)

b. It is held as a truth among Theosophists that the interdependence of Humanity is the cause of what is called Distributive Karma, and it is this law which affords the solution to

the great question of collective suffering and its relief. It is an occult law, moreover, that no man can rise superior to his individual failings, without lifting, be it ever so little, the whole body of which he is an integral part. In the same way, no one can sin, nor suffer the effects of sin, alone. In reality, there is no such thing as “Separateness”; and the nearest approach to that selfish state, which the laws of life permit, is in the intent or motive. (*Key*, 203)

c. ’Tis well, Srâvaka [“listener,” student]. Prepare thyself, for thou wilt have to travel on alone. The Teacher can but point the way. The Path is one for all, the means to reach the goal must vary with the Pilgrims. (*Voice*, 45)

d. Behold, the mellow light that floods the Eastern sky. In signs of praise both heaven and earth unite. And from the four-fold manifested Powers a chant of love ariseth, both from the flaming Fire and flowing Water, and from sweet-smelling Earth and rushing Wind.

Hark! . . . from the deep unfathomable vortex of that golden light in which the Victor bathes, ALL NATURE’S wordless voice in thousand tones ariseth to proclaim:

JOY UNTO YE, O MEN OF MYALBA [Earth].

A PILGRIM HATH RETURNED BACK “FROM THE OTHER SHORE.”

A NEW ARHAN [SAVIOR] IS BORN. . . .

Peace to all beings. (*Voice*, 71–2)

1.2. *The Secret Doctrine* might be called a “heuristic” book. The word *heuristic* comes ultimately from a Greek verb meaning “to discover.” Look up that word in a good dictionary. What are some things in everyday life that are heuristic—that is, whose value is to help you find something out or make a discovery?

1.3. Thomas S. Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* has proposed that what scientists discover is restricted by what they think they

already know, which he calls a *paradigm* and defines as “the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community” (175). He has also questioned whether science is moving toward some absolute truth, or is merely answering those questions that its preconceptions or paradigms allow it to ask:

We may, to be more precise, have to relinquish the notion, explicit or implicit, that changes of paradigm carry scientists and those who learn from them closer and closer to the truth. . . . Does it really help to imagine that there is some one full, objective, true account of nature and that the proper measure of scientific achievement is the extent to which it brings us closer to that ultimate goal? (170–1)

Compare this statement by Kuhn with that cited on page 2 above: “Come to the S.D. . . . without any hope of getting the final Truth of existence from it.” How are the two statements alike? Put their ideas in your own words.

1.4. It is important to distinguish the book, *The Secret Doctrine*, from the basic ideas it expresses. Those ideas are also called the “Secret Doctrine” and so may be confused with the

particular expression of them in this book. They are called by other names, too: Ancient Wisdom, Esoteric Tradition, Eternal Teaching (in Sanskrit, *Sanātana Dharma*), and Perennial Philosophy. What do those names suggest about the thing they all refer to? Do you know other names used for a “secret” teaching found in all ages over the whole world?

1.5. Open a volume of *The Secret Doctrine* at any page at random and choose a short passage—a sentence or paragraph. Read this passage and think about it for five or ten minutes. Then write down your reaction to it on a piece of paper, and put that paper into an envelope, with the location of the passage written on the outside of the envelope. Put the envelope where you can find it later.

1.6. Read *Purpose beyond Reason* by Hugh Shearman, and summarize what he says about the purpose of Blavatsky’s work.

1.7. In Sylvia Cranston’s *HPB: The Extraordinary Life and Influence of Helena Blavatsky*, read part 6, chapter 8 “The Secret Doctrine” (pp. 349–60), and part 7, chapter 3 “Science and *The Secret Doctrine*” (pp. 430–62) and summarize what she says about the book and its influence.

We are all fellow-students, more or less advanced; but no one belonging to the Theosophical Society ought to count himself as more than, at best, a pupil-teacher—one who has no right to dogmatize. (Blavatsky, *Collected Writings* 9:242–3)

CHAPTER 2

An Overview of the Book:

Title Page

When starting to study *The Secret Doctrine*, you may be puzzled about where to begin. When Lewis Carroll's White Rabbit, having been asked to read a document, asked where he should begin, he was told:

“Begin at the beginning,” the King said very gravely, “and go on till you come to the end: then stop.”

That is the policy we will follow—at least to get started. We will begin at the beginning. For *The Secret Doctrine*, that means the title page.

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

2.1. Turn to the title page and read all of it. What kinds of information on it seem to you to be most important?

TITLE

There is more information on the title page than you might suppose at first glance—beginning with the title itself at the top of the page. “The Secret Doctrine” is a paradox. A paradox is something that seems to be contradictory but is really profoundly true. It has been said that the opposite of a little truth is a falsehood, but the opposite of a great truth is another great truth. It has also been said that a paradox is a truth standing on its head to get attention. The fact that the title of *The Secret Doctrine*

is paradoxical is important to the purpose of the book.

SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDY:

2.2. Think of some examples of paradoxes in life.

2.3. How is the title “The Secret Doctrine” paradoxical? What do the words *secret* and *doctrine* mean?

SUBTITLE

Subtitles often expand upon the subject of a work, only hinted at in the main title. *The Secret Doctrine* has a subtitle: “The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy.” The word *synthesis*, Greek in origin, has two parts: *syn*, meaning “together,” and *thesis*, derived from a verb meaning “to put.” When we say that a book has a thesis we mean that it has an idea it is “putting” before the reader. So *synthesis* means “putting together.” The subtitle says that the book is integrating ideas from science, religion, and philosophy.

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

2.4. What is the second object of the Theosophical Society, and how is the subtitle related to it? In the second object, the word “comparative” is sometimes thought to go only with the

word “religion.” How might the subtitle of *The Secret Doctrine* suggest that the word “comparative” in the second object goes with all three nouns following it?

AUTHOR

Immediately after the subtitle, we are told the name of the book’s author: H. P. Blavatsky. That seems clear enough. If we ask who wrote *The Secret Doctrine*, the answer is “Blavatsky.” In fact, however, the correct answer to that question depends on what we mean by the verb “wrote.” Blavatsky certainly composed the book and is its chief author, but some others were also involved in the book’s production. We return to this question in chapter 4 on “The Writing of *The Secret Doctrine*.”

Blavatsky is identified on the title page as the author also of *Isis Unveiled*. *Isis* is mentioned probably because it was Blavatsky’s other large book, and many potential readers of *The Secret Doctrine* were already familiar with it. But there may also be another reason: when Blavatsky began to write what eventually became *The Secret Doctrine*, she intended merely to revise *Isis Unveiled*.

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

2.5. Turn to the preface on page vii and read the second paragraph. Why does HPB say she decided to write a new book rather than revise *Isis*? How much of *Isis* does she say was retained in *The Secret Doctrine*?

MOTTO

Next, the title page of *The Secret Doctrine* gives us a hint about the book’s purpose. In the very middle of that page is the motto of the Theosophical Society, which was borrowed from the family motto of the Maharajah of Benares. It is printed in the devanagari (pronounced day-

vuh-NAH-guh-ry) characters with which Sanskrit is written and in an English translation: “There is no religion higher than truth.”

The familiar English translation used as the motto of the Theosophical Society is not fully adequate to the meaning of the Sanskrit original, which may be translated literally and verbatim as “Than-Truth there-is-not higher dharma.” *Dharma* refers to religion, duty, law, inner reality, teaching, or doctrine. “Doctrine” is one of the meanings of the word *dharmā*, perhaps the most relevant one for this book. “There is no higher doctrine than Truth,” not even a Secret Doctrine.

The purpose of H. P. Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine* is not to teach a doctrine that was once kept secret and which she for the first time revealed. Rather the book leads its reader to discover a Truth that is beyond all doctrines—an ultimate Truth that is secret only because it cannot be put into words since it is too great for ordinary language. No one has ever been sworn not to reveal this Truth; no one needs to be so sworn because, although ultimate Truth can be discovered, it cannot be revealed. And that makes it the most secret of all doctrines.

SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDY:

2.6. How does *The Secret Doctrine* end? Turn to volume 2, page 798. What are the last words on that page? What do you conclude from what you find on the title page and on the last page of the book? Like the uroboros—the serpent with its tail in its mouth—Blavatsky’s great work ends where it began: “There is no higher doctrine than Truth.” In that way we are warned against mistaking what is in this book—grand as its contents are—for the final Truth.

2.7. The major book of Chinese mysticism, the Tao Teh Ching, begins thus (in the translation of Henry Wei): “The Tao that can be

stated is not the Eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the Eternal Name.” *Tao* is in many ways a Chinese equivalent of the Sanskrit *dharmā*. Why did the author of the Tao Teh Ching put this statement first in the book? What similarity is there between it and the motto of the Theosophical Society?

VOLUME TITLE

The title pages of the two volumes of *The Secret Doctrine* are alike, except that each volume has its own separate volume title, printed just under the motto. Those volume titles are “Cosmogeneration” and “Anthropogenesis,” words formed from Greek elements. *Genesis* means “beginning, origin” as in the name of the first book of the Torah, or Jewish Bible. In Hebrew that book is called *B’reshit*, which means literally “in the beginning” and comes from the first word of the first chapter of the Bible.

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

2.8. Look up Genesis 1.1—what is the wording of the opening verse? How does the gospel of St. John begin? Are you familiar with any other creation stories from mythology? Why do you suppose stories of the beginnings of things are so popular all over the world?

The Secret Doctrine is a symbolical story of the beginnings of things in the universe and in human life. It is a creation myth for modern times. It is a guidebook to the cosmos and human life. It does not treat the specific details of the physical world—that is a subject for physics, chemistry, and biology. Nor does it deal with the particulars of human life—they are for anthropology and history. Rather, *The Secret Doctrine* treats the ultimate origins, purposes, and connections of the cosmos and humanity.

The form *cosmo-* comes from a Greek word for the universe: *cosmos*. The basic meanings of that word are “order” and “beauty.” The Greeks associated the orderly and the beautiful as two aspects of the same thing; they thought that the universe had both those aspects.

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

2.9. What is the connection of the word *cosmetic* with the word *cosmos*? Look up the words in a large dictionary.

The form *anthropo-* comes from the Greek word for a human being.

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

2.10. What are some other English words that include the form *anthropo-*? Again, consult a dictionary.

Thus the two volumes of *The Secret Doctrine* treat the origin of the orderly and beautiful universe and the origin of human beings. The universe and the human being are often paired to compare or contrast them. The universe is then sometimes called the “macrocosm” and the human being a “microcosm.”

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

2.11. A short form of *cosmos* is *-cosm*. What do *macro-* and *micro-* mean? Find other English words beginning with those forms in a dictionary.

PUBLICATION

The last thing on the title page is the publication information. Three places are listed. *The Secret Doctrine* was published simultaneously in London and New York. Madras is also listed since it is the international headquarters of the

Theosophical Society, where its magazine *The Theosophist* is published.

The back of the title page has, as is customary, a copyright notice. This notice differs, depending on whether the copy in question was part of the London or New York issues, for the book was copyrighted in both countries.

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

2.12. Comment on the following statements in relation to the motto of the Society:

a. The members of the Theosophical Society at large are free to profess whatever religion or philosophy they like, or none if they so prefer, provided they are in sympathy with, and ready to carry out one or more of the three objects of the Association. The Society is a philanthropic and scientific body for the propagation of the idea of brotherhood on *practical* instead of *theoretical* lines. . . . every member must . . . help, if he can, in the carrying out of at least one of the objects of the programme. Otherwise he has no reason for becoming a “Fellow.” . . . These may, or may not, become Theosophists *de facto*. Members they are, by virtue of their having joined the Society; but the latter cannot make a Theosophist of one who has no sense for the

divine fitness of things, or of him who understands Theosophy in his own—if the expression may be used—*sectarian* and egotistic way “Theosophist is, who Theosophy does.” (Blavatsky, *Key*, 19–20)

b. Theosophy is in principle the spiritual as well as the physical science of that Truth [which is One and universal], the very essence of deistic and philosophical research. Visible representative of universal Truth—as all religions and philosophies are contained therein, and as each one of them contains in its turn a portion of that Truth—the Society could be no more sectarian, or have more preference, or partiality, than an anthropological or a geographical society. (Blavatsky, *Collected Writings* 11:124)

c. Theosophy, we say, is not *a* Religion. . . . “Theosophy *is* Religion,” itself. A Religion in the true and only correct sense, is a bond uniting men together—not a particular set of dogmas and beliefs. Now Religion, *per se*, in its widest meaning is that which binds not only *all* MEN, but also *all* BEINGS and all *things* in the entire Universe into one grand whole. This is our theosophical definition of religion. (Blavatsky, *Collected Writings* 10:161)

Esoteric philosophy teaches that everything lives and is conscious, but not that all life and consciousness are similar to those of human or even animal being. (*Secret Doctrine* 1:49)

CHAPTER 3

An Overview of the Book: Dedication, Preface, Contents, and Epigraphs

DEDICATION

The leaf after the title page in both volumes contains HPB's dedication. She dedicated each of her important books to some group, and the dedications are worth considering and comparing. Each one says something about the readership she envisioned for its book, and their progression follows a pattern. Here they are:

Isis Unveiled (1877): The Author Dedicates these Volumes to the Theosophical Society, which was founded at New York, A.D. 1875, to Study the Subjects on which they Treat.

The Secret Doctrine (1888): This Work I Dedicate to all True Theosophists, in every Country, and of every Race, for they called it forth, and for them it was recorded.

The Key to Theosophy (1889): Dedicated by "H.P.B." to all her Pupils, that They may Learn and Teach in their turn.

The Voice of the Silence (1889): Dedicated to the Few.

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

3.1. Pick out the key words identifying the persons to whom each book was dedicated. What

pattern or progression appears in HPB's choice of those so identified?

PREFACE

Following the dedication in volume 1 is a two-page preface to the whole work (1:vii–viii). This preface gives a variety of useful background information about the writing of *The Secret Doctrine*, and it states the purpose and aims of the book.

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

3.2. Read the last paragraph beginning at the bottom of the first page of the preface. Why is HPB not a revealer of new mystic lore? Pay particular attention to the sentence beginning "What is now attempted . . ." How does that sentence echo the subtitle of the work?

The second to last paragraph of the preface ("The aim of this work . . .") states five aims, but they fall into three groups. The first two ("to show . . . and to assign") are concerned with order in the cosmos and in human life and therefore can be considered to deal with philosophy, which seeks purpose and meaning in existence. The next two ("to rescue . . . and to uncover") are concerned with the basis and unity of all religions. The last ("finally, to show") is

concerned with things that modern science has not discovered.

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

3.3. Paraphrase the statement of aims in your own words. Then compare it also with the subtitle of the book.

The preface ends with a Latin motto: *De minimis non curat lex*, which may be translated as “The law does not bother with trifles.” This motto may have more than one meaning. The Latin word *lex* “law” is a partial equivalent of the Sanskrit word *dharma*, which also means “doctrine,” as we have seen.

SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDY:

3.4. Compare the Latin motto with the last paragraph of the preface. What seems to be HPB’s reason for ending with the motto?

3.5. What would the Latin motto mean if translated as “The Doctrine does not bother with trifles”? Can you suggest any ways in which the Secret Doctrine does not focus on trifles?

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Following the preface in volume 1 and the dedication in volume 2 are the tables of contents of the respective volumes (1:ix–xvi; 2:vii–xiv). The two volumes treat quite different subjects—the cosmos and the human being—so naturally their tables of contents are also quite different in what they list. However, the outline or general pattern of the contents is very similar for the two volumes.

Volume 1 has an introduction (called “Introductory”), which really serves for the whole

work. Then each volume has a particular introduction (called the “Proem” in volume 1 and “Preliminary Notes” in volume 2).

Thereafter each volume has three parts. The first part includes some stanzas from an ancient work called the Book of Dzyan, together with commentary on and explanation of those stanzas. The stanzas in volume 1 concern the evolution of the cosmos; and those in volume 2, the evolution of humanity. The stanzas are the heart of *The Secret Doctrine*. In a sense, everything else in the book is commentary on them.

The second part of each volume deals with symbolism from the religions and mythologies of the world relating to the subjects of the stanzas of the volume. The third part treats scientific ideas about the subjects of the stanzas. Those ideas are, of course, from the science of the nineteenth century and therefore are often now out of date, but Blavatsky’s discussion of them is still relevant because what she says in contrast to nineteenth-century science is the Ancient Wisdom, which is as valid today as it was thousands of years ago.

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

3.6. The word *Dzyan* is from the Sanskrit *dhya-na* “thinking, meditation,” which is also the source of Chinese *ch’an* and Japanese *zen*, the names of a form of Buddhism that seeks intuitive understanding through meditation, especially on paradoxes. What does the origin of the word *Dzyan* suggest about the purpose of the stanzas on which *The Secret Doctrine* is based and about how the stanzas should be used?

Here is an outline of the major parts of the two volumes:

TABLE OF CONTENTS OF EACH VOLUME

I	II
Introductory (xvii–xlvi)	
Proem (1–24)	Preliminary Notes (1–12)
Part I: Cosmic Evolution: 7 stanzas (27–34) Commentaries (35–268) Summing Up (269–99)	Part I: Anthropogenesis: 12 stanzas (15–21) Commentaries (22–436) Conclusion (437–46)
Part II: The Evolution of Symbolism in Its Approximate Order (301–473)	Part II: The Archaic Symbolism of the World Religions (447–641)
Part III: Science and the Secret Doctrine Contrasted (475–676)	Part III: Science and the Secret Doctrine Contrasted (643–798)

EPIGRAPHS

In each volume, HPB has placed some quotations as epigraphs that set the volume’s tone:

First and second epigraphs. On page 1:26, there are extracts from two poems, the first from a Vedic hymn of creation, followed by one from a poem by the eighteenth-century poet John Gay, titled “A Thought on Eternity.”

SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDY:

3.7. Describe in your own words what these two poems say. Then read through the seven stanzas of “Cosmic Evolution” that immediately follow (1:27–34) to get an impression of them without trying to understand them in any detail. Compare the contents and mood of the poems to those of the stanzas.

3.8. The Vedic hymn of creation (Rigveda, book 10, 119) has seven stanzas in its original form. The nineteenth-century translation cited in *The Secret Doctrine* omits stanzas 4 and 5 (paragraph numbers have been added here in square brackets). The following modern prose paraphrase was made for this course and includes the omitted stanzas. This hymn has been called a statement of skepticism. How does its “skepticism” accord with what the Bowen notes

say about seeking Truth? What parts of the poem fit what you know of present-day scientific notions of cosmology and Theosophical cosmology?

[1] Then [before the beginning of the universe] there was neither being nor nonbeing. There was no atmosphere, nor any sky beyond it. What was covered? And what protected? Was there water, deep beyond fathoming?

[2] There was no death then, nor was there anything undying. There was nothing to divide day and night [and thus there was no time]. That One [the primal substance, the source of everything], without breath, breathed by its own nature. Other than it, there was nothing at all.

[3] There was darkness. Hidden in darkness, this All was indiscriminate chaos. All that existed then was void and formless. From the force of ardent heat [tapas] a seed was formed. It was manifested through the ardent heat [tapas].

[4] Thus in the beginning there was desire [kama, eros]—desire, the primal germ of mind. Wise ones who searched with their hearts have discovered that being springs from nonbeing.

[5] The dividing line extended across [separating the primal unity into the dualities, such as spirit and matter]. What was above it then, and what was below it? There were progenitors, builders, mighty forces, freely acting here, by energy from above.

[6] Who really knows and who can explain how the world began and where it came from? The gods are later than the world's birth. So who knows from where it first sprang into being?

[7] He from whom this creation came into being, whether he formed it all or did not, the seer and governor of this world in highest heaven—he certainly knows. Or perhaps not.

Third epigraph. At the beginning of the sections on “Science and the Secret Doctrine Contrasted” in each volume (1:475 and 2:643), the same quatrain appears.

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

3.9. Compare what the quatrain says with the end of the Vedic hymn of creation. How are they similar? How is this quatrain appropriate for discussions of science?

Fourth epigraph. On page 2:xv, there is a one-sentence quotation from the Gospel of St. John.

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

3.10. Who is the speaker of the sentence in the gospel, and who is referred to by the word “his”? Why do you think HPB included this quotation?

Fifth epigraph. On page 2:xvi, there is a quotation from *Isis Unveiled* about evolution.

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

3.11. According to this quotation, does the concept of evolution in *The Secret Doctrine* differ from that of modern science?

Sixth epigraph. The quotation on page 2:14 is from the great epic poem of Finland, the *Kalevala*.

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

3.12. The *Kalevala* quotation relates to the twelve stanzas of Anthropogenesis. List some of the mythic images in the quotation. Do you know of similar images in other myths or poems?

Seventh and eighth epigraphs. At the beginning of the section on “The Archaic Symbolism of the World-Religions” (2:447), there are two quotations, one from a Kabbalistic book and one from a Christian Church Father.

SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDY:

3.13. Compare the two quotations. Put what they say in your own words. Skim the section they introduce (2:449–641) to see what subjects HPB covers in it. How are these quotations appropriate to the section?

3.14. Consider the following passage in the light of everything you have looked at in this chapter. What does this passage suggest *The Secret Doctrine* and Theosophy are about?

Now as to the *Dharma*: we have already stated how high we hold Buddhist ethics. Theosophy, however, has to do with something else than just rules of conduct. It achieves the miracle of uniting pre-Buddhist ethics with pre-Vedic metaphysics, and pre-Hermetic science. Theosophical development calls upon all the principles of man, upon his intellectual as well as his spiritual faculties, and the last two objects of our programme have more importance than [a certain orientalist] seems to grant them. (Blavatsky, *Collected Writings* 10:123)

CHAPTER 4

The Writing of *The Secret Doctrine*

The arrangement of *The Secret Doctrine* as we have it is a neat and orderly scheme of presentation, but it was not made by H. P. Blavatsky. All persons of genius have gaps in their abilities, frequently rather surprising ones. Blavatsky was a genius in matters of esoteric knowledge, but she had no ability to organize information or present it coherently, clearly, and logically. Countess Wachtmeister in her *Reminiscences* comments on this gap:

HPB herself was constitutionally, and by the innate turn of her mind, unfitted for the task of orderly and patient exposition of her teachings. (30)

And the Countess quotes a letter HPB wrote about this aspect of her own personality:

I have *never* taught anyone but in my own usual way. . . . If I had to be inflicted [with] the punishment by giving regular instructions in a professor-like way for *one* hour, let alone two in a day, I would rather run away to the North Pole or die any day, severing my connection with Theosophy entirely. I am incapable of it, as everyone *ought to know* who knows me. (31)

HPB's incapacity to explain matters in a "professor-like" way is clearly illustrated by *Isis Unveiled*, a work that follows no clear plan in its organization, but wanders from one

subject to another. The subjects are all fascinating, but the book is disorganized. Henry S. Olcott, who assisted her in producing *Isis*, reported, "She worked on no fixed plan, but ideas came streaming through her mind like a perennial spring which is ever overflowing its brim. . . . Higgledy-piggledy it came, in a ceaseless rivulet, each paragraph complete in itself and capable of being excised without harm to its predecessor or successor" (*Old Diary Leaves* 1:204). According to one (perhaps apocryphal) story, HPB wrote the manuscript pages of *Isis* and tossed them on the floor as she finished, leaving the task of picking them up and trying to arrange them in some sensible pattern to her colleague, Olcott.

Blavatsky had intended to begin *The Secret Doctrine* with a series of biographies of famous esoteric teachers through history. What came after those biographies in the original manuscript we will probably never know, for it was rearranged by an uncle and nephew pair, Bertram and Archibald Keightley, who had invited HPB to London, where they could help her finish the book. HPB gave them the manuscript to read and improve. What happened then is best told in the words of Bertram Keightley:

HPB placed the whole of the manuscript completed at that point in the hands of Dr. Keightley and myself, instructing us to read,

punctuate, correct the English, alter, and generally treat it as if it were our own—which we naturally did *not* do, having far too high an opinion of her knowledge to take any liberties with so important a work.

But we both read the entire mass of the manuscript—a pile over three feet high—most carefully correcting the English and punctuation where absolutely indispensable, and then, after prolonged consultation, faced the author in her den—in my case with sore trembling, I remember—with the solemn opinion that the whole of the matter must be rearranged on some definite plan, since as it stood the book was another *Isis Unveiled*, only far worse, so far as absence of plan and consecutiveness were concerned.

After some talk, HPB told us to go to Tophet and do what we liked. She had had more than enough of the blessed thing, had given it over to us, washed her hands of it entirely, and we might get out of it as best we could.

We retired and consulted. Finally, we laid before her a plan, suggested by the character of the matter itself, *viz.*, to make the work consist of four volumes, each divided into three parts: (1) the Stanzas and Commentaries thereon; (2) Symbolism; (3) Science. Further, instead of making the first volume to consist, as she had intended, of the history of some great occultists, we advised her to follow the natural order of exposition, and begin with the Evolution of Cosmos, to pass from that to the Evolution of Man, then to deal with the historical part in a third volume treating of the lives of some Great Occultists; and finally, to speak of Practical Occultism in a fourth volume, should she ever be able to write it.

This plan we laid before HPB, and it was duly sanctioned by her.

The next step was to read the manuscript through again and make a general rearrangement of the matter pertaining to the subjects coming under the heading of Cosmogony and Anthropology, which were to form the first two volumes of the work.

When this had been completed, and HPB duly consulted, and her approval of what had been done obtained, the whole of the manuscript so arranged was typed by professional hands, then reread, corrected, compared with the original manuscript, and all Greek, Hebrew, and Sanskrit quotations inserted by us. It then appeared that the whole of the Commentary on the Stanzas did not amount to more than some twenty pages of the present work, as HPB had not stuck closely to her text in writing. So we seriously interviewed her, and suggested that she should write a proper commentary, as in her opening words she had promised her reader to do. Her reply was characteristic, “What on earth am I to say? What *do* you want to know? Why it’s all as plain as the nose on your face!!!” . . .

The solution was this: Each sloka of the Stanzas was written (or cut out from the type-copy) and pasted at the head of a sheet of paper, and then on a loose sheet pinned thereto were written all the questions we could find time to devise upon that sloka. In this task Mr. Richard Harte helped us very considerably, a large proportion of the questions posed being of his devising. HPB struck out large numbers of them, made us write fuller explanations, or our own ideas—such as they were—of what her readers expected her to say, wrote more herself, incorporated the little she had already written on that particular sloka, and so the work was done. (Keightley, *Reminiscences* 78–80)

If we ask who wrote *The Secret Doctrine*, we will get several different answers, depending on what we mean by “wrote.” H. P. Blavatsky was certainly the author of the book, in the sense that it contains her ideas put down on paper by her. But others also contributed to the basic ideas of the volume and in that way were co-authors with her. The plan for the work came from the Master Morya, who also wrote that he and Kuthumi had dictated parts of it to HPB. And Bertram Keightley’s account of his

and others' contribution to its editing makes it clear that he, his nephew, and some other persons were responsible for the format and organization of the published volumes and for some of its contents—particularly the commentary on the stanzas. *The Secret Doctrine* is therefore a work of composite authorship.

SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDY:

4.1. Compare the organization of the contents of *The Secret Doctrine* proposed by the Keightleys with that in the table of contents in the published work. How similar are they?

4.2. What implication might the way *The Secret Doctrine* was edited have for our attitude to-

ward the authority of the book, and especially for a view of it as a “sacred book”?

4.3. Read some other accounts of the writing of *The Secret Doctrine*, for example, some from the titles listed under “Background and biography” in appendix 1 (such as those by Neff, Wachtmeister, and Zirkoff). Summarize what those accounts have to say about how the book was written.

4.4. Read Olcott's account of the writing of *Isis Unveiled* in *Old Diary Leaves* 1:204–19 (chapter 13), and compare it with what you have read about the writing of *The Secret Doctrine*.

It was only the reaching of Nirvana while still living in the body and on this earth that was due to [the Buddha's] having been in previous births high on the “Path of Dzyan” (knowledge, wisdom). Mental or intellectual gifts and abstract knowledge follow an Initiate in his new birth, but he has to acquire phenomenal powers anew. (Blavatsky, *Collected Writings* 14:400)

CHAPTER 5

Editions of *The Secret Doctrine*

The publication history of *The Secret Doctrine* after its initial appearance on 20 October 1888 is worth knowing something about because there are a number of editions of the work differing from one another in minor or, in some cases, in major ways.

FIRST EDITION

The first edition of *The Secret Doctrine* consisted initially of 500 copies and was sold out before the day of actual publication.

Almost immediately a second printing of the book was arranged to satisfy the demand for it. This second printing was called a “second edition” at the time, but was really only a reissue of the first edition. Properly speaking, a book has a new edition only when significant changes have been made in the text or its type has been reset. When a book is reissued from the existing type with at most minor changes, the issue is called a new printing or impression. Thus, what was called the “second edition” of *The Secret Doctrine* was actually the second printing of the first edition.

THIRD EDITION

When revisions were finally made in the book, they were published as the “third edition” since the name “second edition” had been used for

the reprinting mentioned above. The third edition, published in 1893, was revised by Annie Besant, who corrected some obvious printer’s mistakes in the original edition and made a large number of other minor changes in the interest of correct English, consistency, and stylistic felicity. The index of the original edition was very imperfect, so two years later, in 1895, an index volume was added.

In volume 1, Blavatsky had promised a third volume and projected a fourth. That promise was repeated at the end of volume 2.

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

5.1. What does HPB say about the third and fourth volumes of *The Secret Doctrine* at the end of the first paragraph of the preface (1:vii) and at the end of the work (2:798)?

HPB’s statement about future volumes seems to have been the product of hyperbolic optimism. There was a goodly amount of material left over from volume 1 as she had originally conceived it, and she had some other ideas about what she wanted to include in later volumes, but relatively little of the latter seems to have been actually written down.

Annie Besant combined the material left over from the original volume 1 with some instructions Blavatsky had written for members

of the Esoteric Section, founded near the end of her lifetime, and that material was published in 1897 as the “third volume” of HPB’s work. The “third volume” undoubtedly contains some material—such as that on the lives of famous occultists—which HPB intended for the third volume.

The “third volume” material was kept in editions of *The Secret Doctrine* for some while, but is not currently printed as part of *The Secret Doctrine*. It was published as a separate volume called *The Esoteric Writings of H. P. Blavatsky*, and all of it can be found, chronologically arranged, in her *Collected Writings*. There is disagreement among Theosophical scholars about how much of this material is properly the third volume of *The Secret Doctrine*. However, some of it certainly is (Caldwell, “The Myth of the ‘Missing’ Third Volume of The Secret Doctrine”). Although none of that material is now printed as part of *The Secret Doctrine*, all of it is well worth the student’s attention.

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

5.2. Examine the “third volume” material in an edition of *The Secret Doctrine* that contains it or in one of the other forms referred to above. Characterize the sort of subject covered in this material.

ADYAR EDITION

A fourth edition, called the “Adyar Edition,” was published in 1938 in six volumes. The original first and second volumes were each divided into two because of their large size, thus making four. The “third” volume became the fifth, and an index was added as a sixth volume. This edition was reprinted at various times and places. Two reprints in America were called the “fifth Olcott Edition” (1946) and the “sixth Olcott Edition” (1952).

A fifth, revised version of the Adyar Edition, with some additional editorial material, such as a concordance of the first, third, and fifth editions, was published in 1962. A sixth Adyar Edition appeared in 1971.

REPRINTS FOR STUDENTS

Meanwhile, there have been several reprints of the original edition, some with the correction of obvious typographical errors and consistent transcriptions for foreign, especially Sanskrit, words and some as facsimile editions faithfully reproducing the first edition. Notable among these are the following:

A facsimile of the original 1888 edition with the two volumes bound in one was published by the Theosophy Company of Los Angeles, California, first in 1925 and at various times thereafter. Because of its fidelity to the original and its handy one-volume format, this is a convenient version to use if a portable edition is needed. Its very thin paper, however, is inclined to tear, and the size of the physical volume strains its binding.

A facsimile of the original 1888 edition preserving the two-volume format was published on good quality paper and well bound by the Theosophical University Press in Pasadena, California, in 1977 and reissued to commemorate the book’s centennial in 1988. Because it photographically reproduces the original edition of the book and because of the excellent physical quality of the work, this is an excellent edition to own and consult. All quotations in this course are from this edition. The Point Loma tradition, of which the Pasadena Theosophical University Press is a contemporary representative, published a number of earlier editions of the work as well. They are not facsimile editions, but introduce various, often helpful, editorial additions or revisions. They

appeared in 1909, 1917, 1925, and 1947. There were also verbatim, but reset, editions in 1952 and later.

A revised edition by Boris de Zirkoff in three volumes was published by the Theosophical Publishing House at Adyar, Madras, India, in 1978–9. The first two volumes correspond to the original two volumes of the work, and preserve the original pagination; the third volume consists primarily of an index and a bibliography. The most notable feature of this edition is its invaluable editorial material: a historical introduction, notes, and an extensive index. As in a number of earlier editions, however, many changes were made in the text. These changes (described by de Zirkoff in his foreword, 1:[77–8]) are most notably a modern regularized transliteration of Sanskrit words, a consistent spelling of names and technical terms, the revision of quotations to agree with originals, the alteration of some words and punctuation thought to clarify meaning, and the correction of obvious typographical errors. Most of the changes are helpful in providing better and more consistent references. However, in making such revisions, mistakes are inevitable, and because the editorial changes were made silently (that is, a reader cannot tell where the text has been changed), students cannot know when they are reading a text that is close to H. P. Blavatsky herself and when they are reading an altered version. Nevertheless, this is the best edition for most uses because of its excellent

editorial features. A boxed paperback reprint of the de Zirkoff edition, with errors corrected, was published in 1993 as a Quest Theosophical Heritage Classic. Because of its convenience of use and its helpful editorial material, this is the best edition for most students.

Finally, for those accustomed to computers, there is an excellent CD-Rom, *Theosophical Classics*, prepared by Vic Hao Chin in the Philippines, which includes *The Secret Doctrine*, all other works of H. P. Blavatsky, and various additional Theosophical texts. It comes with a helpful search engine that allows very fast searches of the full body of material for words or phrases. For research, this version has no equal. Every serious student should have it.

SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDY:

Do the next three suggestions if you have access to more than one edition of *The Secret Doctrine*. Otherwise, pass on to the next chapter.

5.3. Compare two editions or versions of *The Secret Doctrine* for their physical appearance and format.

5.4. Does either edition have any additional explanatory material at the beginning or end of the work (such as added prefaces, introductions, essays, indexes, bibliography, etc.)?

5.5. Choose a short passage, a paragraph or a page, and compare the versions of it in the two editions. Note any differences you find.

A commencement has been made to fell and uproot the deadly upas trees of superstition, prejudice, and conceited ignorance, so that these two volumes should form for the student a fitting prelude (*Secret Doctrine* 2:797–8)

CHAPTER 6

How to Study *The Secret Doctrine*

The way *The Secret Doctrine* was written makes it clear that the student should not approach the work as a coherent textbook of Theosophy or as an infallible or even consistent treatment of its subjects. How then can the student begin to study this most basic of all Theosophical books? We can consider the approach from two standpoints—rationale and technique, the why and the how of studying the book. How to study *The Secret Doctrine* is considered in this and the next five chapters (6–11). Why we should study it is considered in chapter 12.

First, technique: What is the best way to go about studying *The Secret Doctrine*? The answer to that question depends partly on the student, because different techniques work best for different persons. However, a method that has been long in use is that described in a work called “The Bowen Notes.” P. G. B. Bowen recorded that his father, Commander Robert Bowen, a retired naval officer, took notes on instructions that H. P. Blavatsky gave about how to study the book. Those notes were published about forty years after Blavatsky’s death in a magazine called *Theosophy in Ireland*. They have been frequently reprinted in a variety of formats and are in appendix 3 of this course.

The Bowen notes tell us that “reading the S.D. page by page as one reads any other book”—for example, a textbook—“will only end

in confusion.” The notes also give suggestions on how to go about studying the work. They advise the student to hold fast to four basic ideas:

1. the fundamental unity of all existence with two aspects: consciousness and substance;
2. the vitality of all matter;
3. the microcosmic correspondence of human nature to the great cosmos because of our oneness with it; and
4. the hermetic order of the universe as a Divine Economy, which is simultaneously a hierarchy of power and a network of equality.

The Bowen notes also advise us first to get a firm grasp on four crucial passages: in volume 1, the three Fundamental Propositions in the “Proem” (1:13–20) and the six numbered items that recapitulate in the “Summing Up” (1:272–8); in volume 2, the “Preliminary Notes” (2:1–12) and the “Conclusion” (2:437–46). In addition to those four crucial passages, there are a number of others that represent overviews (introductions or conclusions), that identify themselves as being central teachings of the Wisdom Tradition, or that neatly encapsulate basic ideas. Chapter 11 includes a list of such passages, which will repay attentive study as an entree to the ideas of *The Secret Doctrine*.

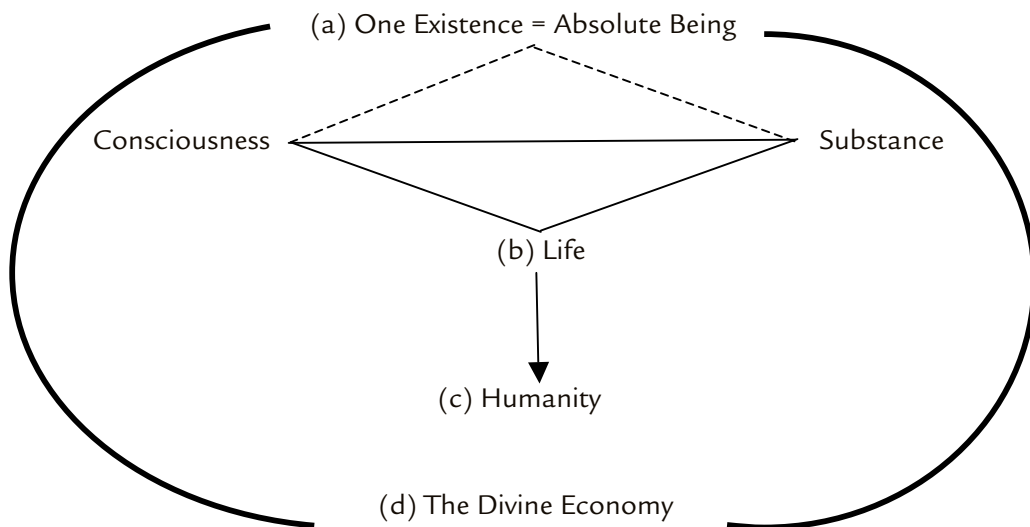
A good way to begin studying *The Secret Doctrine* is thus to understand certain key ideas expressed in key passages. The goal is intuitive insight.

SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDY:

- 6.1. Read the Bowen notes in appendix 3. They report three sessions. What are the main subjects in each of the sessions? Put them into your own words.
- 6.2. What examples of foresight are in the notes?
- 6.3. In what way do readers of a book serve in some measure as the authors of what they read? Do two people find the same thing in any book? If you read a book twice, will it be the same book both times? Explain your answers.
- 6.4. Can you suggest several kinds of books that are not meant to be read from the first

page through the last? Does the way *The Secret Doctrine* was written (see ch. 4) suggest it was or was not meant to be read sequentially?

- 6.5. What is the distinction between Truth and truths? What is the difference in kind between these two truths: “Columbus crossed the Atlantic in 1492” and “ $E = mc^2$ ”? Are there truths that cannot be put into words? What sort of truth might they be?
- 6.6. The Four Basic Ideas might be related to each other by a diagram as shown at the bottom of this page. Reread the Four Basic Ideas and relate them to this diagram, or make a diagram of your own to relate the Ideas to each other.
- 6.7. Look up *jñāna* (*yoga*) in a dictionary or encyclopedia and relate what you find there to what the Bowen notes say about it.



CHAPTER 7

The Three Fundamental Propositions

It is well to begin study of *The Secret Doctrine* with the three Fundamental Propositions in the Proem (1:13–20). So that is the place to start looking at the text.

INEFFABLE WHOLENESS

The first Fundamental Proposition is that ultimate reality is unknown and unknowable but that, in so far as we can have any conception of it, it is a whole. There is only one reality at the basis of all things. As we look about us, however, what we see is not unity, but diversity. There seems to be not one reality but many different things in the world. And so the first Fundamental Proposition also considers how underlying unity is related to observed diversity. It relates the one to the many by a series of emanations.

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

7.1. Read the first Fundamental Proposition (1:14–6) and pick out what seem to you to be the most important words and phrases in it. Make a list of those key expressions.

The relationship of the one to the many can be symbolized as in the diagram on the next page, which presents schematically the ideas of the first Fundamental Proposition. Because those ideas are complex, however, they can also be symbolized in other ways.

SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDY:

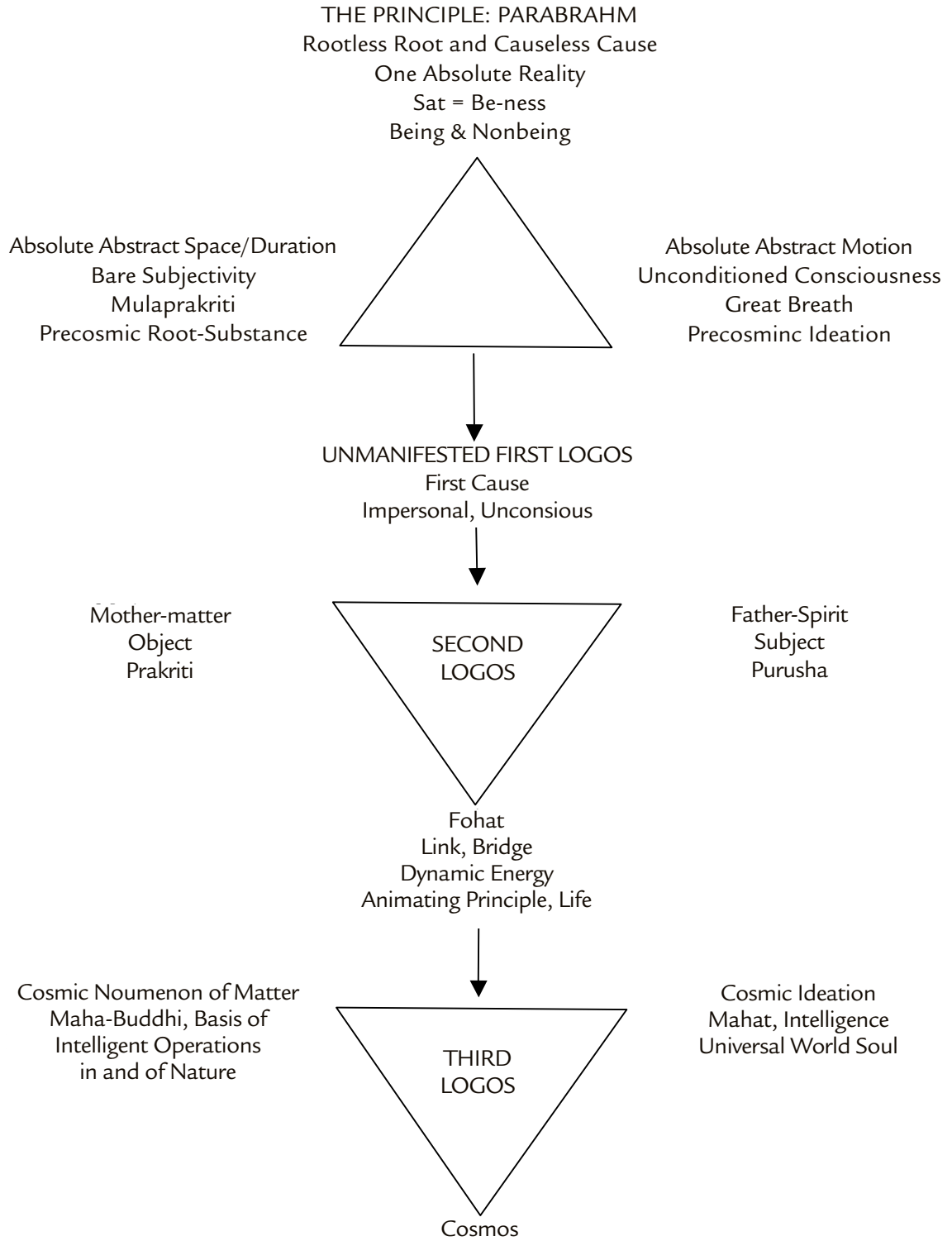
7.2. Reread the first Fundamental Proposition (1:14–6), comparing the diagram with it. Identify the points of the text to which the diagram corresponds. Do you think the diagram might be changed in any way? If so, make the changes and compare them with the text of the Proposition again.

7.3. Reread the Vedic hymn of creation (1:26 and pp. 11–2 above) and compare it with the first Fundamental Proposition and the diagram. Are there points of correspondence?

7.4. If you are familiar with the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, compare it with the diagram. The Tree also relates the one to the many by a series of emanations.

ETERNAL CYCLICITY

The second Fundamental Proposition is that the universe as a whole—that is, as a general process—has an eternal order. It has no beginning and no end. However, particular universes, such as the one in which we now exist, are temporary manifestations that start and stop or, as the language of contemporary cosmology puts it, that expand and contract. There are innumerable particular universes in the universal process; they come and go according to a cyclical pattern of development.



THE ONE AND THE MANY: THE FIRST FUNDAMENTAL PROPOSITION

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

7.5. Read the second Fundamental Proposition (1:16–7) and pick out what seem to you to be the most important words and phrases in it. Make a list of those key expressions.

History can be viewed as either linear or cyclical, as in the diagram below. A linear view sees history as beginning at an identifiable point in the past and proceeding in a straight line to a culminating point in the future. A cyclical view sees time as repeating the same or similar events in circular patterns.

The Western view of history, whether sacred or secular, has been linear. The biblical view of history sees the world as beginning with an act of creation by God and then proceeding through the age of the patriarchs to that of the prophets, reaching a central point with the incarnation of Christ and then continuing through the age of the Church to a final apocalyptic conclusion when time will end. Similarly, the secular view of history is the growth of civilization with a quick glance at the cultures of the Nile and Mesopotamian valleys and then settling down in earnest with the Greek city states, followed by the Roman empire, the so-called Middle Ages, then the Renaissance and growth of modern nations, the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution, finally culminating in our own society.

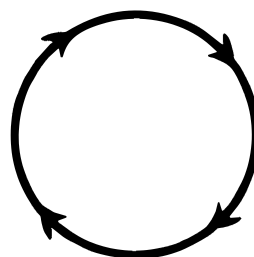
past  future

LINEAR HISTORY

Both of the Western views of history—sacred and secular—are very limited. They ignore most of the peoples and cultures of the world to concentrate on a small selection of societies and events, which they naively and arrogantly regard as “world” history. Both views assume that all of history—at least all that counts—has labored to bring forth our contemporary society. Both views are ethnocentric. Any history that tries to look at the whole of humanity on this planet rather than limiting itself to the particular tradition of the person writing the history cannot be linear. Human history and cultures are too complex to fit into a simple linear pattern.

Cyclical views of history are of several kinds, including the circular and spiral patterns. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche proposed a kind of circular pattern. He said that, since the universe has in it a finite (even though very large) number of basic particles and since there is a finite (although even larger) number of possible arrangements of those particles, it must happen in the course of infinite time that the same particles eventually repeat the same arrangements they have had before. When that happens, the universe is reproduced exactly in every detail as it was at some prior time. Nietzsche called this view of history Eternal Return or Eternal Recurrence.

A Russian philosopher, P. D. Ouspensky, who was influenced by Nietzsche, as well as by



CYCLICAL HISTORY

his fellow Russians, Gurdjieff and Blavatsky, wrote a novel based on the theme of Eternal Return. It is called *The Strange Life of Ivan Osokin*. In it a young man who has made a mess of his life, always making the wrong decision when faced with a choice, decides to commit suicide but is dissuaded by a mysterious old man who offers to let him live his life over, if he really wants to do so. Ivan accepts, but as he repeats his life, he also repeats all of the same mistakes, even though he knows what their consequence will be.

A purely circular view of history—that everything repeats itself exactly, that we can never correct our mistakes, that civilizations are destined to rise and fall according to an invariable pattern—is a depressing prospect. But in fact there is no more evidence for it than there is for purely linear history. The Theosophical view implicit in the second Fundamental Proposition is different from either of those and synthesizes them.

The Theosophical view is that all history is cyclical. It moves on a spiral pattern, making circles but also moving forward along a line, so that patterns but not particulars are repeated, as in the diagram below.

History repeats itself in general ways, but it is also purposefully moving toward a goal. Indeed, all things that exist in cyclical patterns—and that includes everything—repeat

their experiences with variation, and thereby they progress.

SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDY:

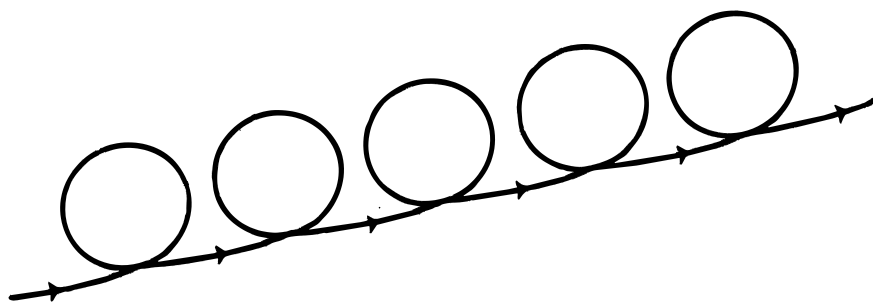
7.6. The cyclic pattern of the universe is part of a general principle of periodicity that exists in all things. Make a list of cycles that appear in nature and in human life.

7.7. If it is available, read chapter 8, “The Origin and Fate of the Universe” (115–41), in Stephen Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time*. Hawking is a theoretical physicist with no sympathy for the mystical. Nevertheless, his view of how the universe works has remarkable parallels with that in *The Secret Doctrine*. What parallels do you find?

7.8. If it is available, look at Arnold J. Toynbee’s *Study of History* and describe the cyclical pattern he finds in the development of human societies.

PURPOSE AND PERSONAL EVOLUTION

The third Fundamental Proposition holds that all souls, that is, individual living beings, are really identical with the Universal Oversoul of the universe (the Third Logos) and therefore also with the ultimate Ground of Being, the Unknown Root of all. In effect, the third Proposition says that we—you and I and all other beings in the world—are of the same substance as the ultimate reality of all things.



SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

7.9. Read the third Fundamental Proposition (1:17–20) and pick out what seem to you to be the most important words and phrases in it. Make a list of those key expressions.

The third Proposition also says that every being in the universe is engaged on a “pilgrimage” through the cyclical process of history spoken of in the second Proposition. We proceed on this pilgrimage by continually reincarnating according to the law of karma. The life force passes through all the kingdoms of nature—all possible forms of existence—individualizing itself in the process. That individuality, which it is the purpose of the world process to develop, is never lost but, once evolved, continues through the ages.

The process by which individual living entities evolve is called the “pivotal doctrine” of the teaching. We make progress through personal effort and merit, through self-reliance. In the Hindu tradition, there are said to be three paths leading to Oneness: the ways of karma, bhakti, and jñāna—that is, of action, devotion, and knowledge. In the Christian tradition, similarly, there are three paths to salvation: by works, faith or grace, and knowledge, although salvation by knowledge generally disappeared from Christianity after the persecution of the Gnostics. HPB emphasizes all three ways in different places, but here she emphasizes the importance of personal action and works for evolutionary progress.

SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDY:

7.10. Look up the word *evolve* in a large dictionary. It comes from Latin. What do the two parts of the word, *e-* and *-volve*, mean in Latin? How does the original meaning of the word relate to the third Fundamental Proposition?

7.11. State the “pivotal doctrine” in your own words. Why is it pivotal?

SUMMARY

The three Fundamental Propositions can be summarized by the keywords “wholeness,” “order,” and “purpose.” They deal with, respectively, the One (the Absolute), the many (the universe that periodically manifests from the One), and the relationship between the One and the many (which is the evolutionary journey of individual beings as they find their way back from the manifold complexity of the universe to the wholeness of the Absolute). The three Fundamental Propositions are like a Japanese flower arrangement, which has three main lines in its pattern: a vertical that represents heaven, a horizontal that represents earth, and an oblique that represents humanity between them. Heaven, earth, and humankind; or the Absolute, the universe, and evolving life—these are triplicities that echo throughout *The Secret Doctrine*.

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

7.12. The German philosopher Hegel talked about thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. If you are not familiar with those terms, look them up in a dictionary, or look up Hegel in an encyclopedia. How do those three concepts relate to the three Fundamental Propositions?

The following statement of “The Theosophical World View” is a contemporary effort at formulating the fundamental principles of *The Secret Doctrine* and relating them to our personal lives:

THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY, while reserving for each member full freedom to interpret those teachings known as

Theosophy, is dedicated to preserving and realizing the ageless wisdom, which embodies both a world view and a vision of human self-transformation.

This tradition is founded upon certain fundamental propositions:

1. The universe and all that exists within it are one interrelated and interdependent whole.

2. Every existent being—from atom to galaxy—is rooted in the same universal, life-creating Reality. This Reality is all pervasive, but it can never be summed up in its parts, since it transcends all its expressions. It reveals itself in the purposeful, ordered, and meaningful processes of nature as well as in the deepest recesses of the mind and spirit.

3. Recognition of the unique value of every living being expresses itself in reverence for life, compassion for all, sympathy with the need of all individuals to find truth for themselves, and respect for all religious traditions. The ways in which these ideals become realities in individual life are both the privileged choice and the responsible act of every human being.

Central to the concerns of Theosophy is the desire to promote understanding and brotherhood among people of all races, nationalities, philosophies, and religions. Therefore, all people, whatever their race, creed, sex, caste, or color, are invited to participate equally in the life and work of the Society. The Theosophical Society imposes no dogmas, but points toward the source of unity beyond all differences. Devotion to truth, love for all living beings, and

commitment to a life of active altruism are the marks of the true Theosophist.

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

7.13. Though phrased in contemporary idiom and emphasizing contemporary concerns, the “World View” statement of fundamental principles echoes that in *The Secret Doctrine*. Compare the two statements and describe how they are similar and in what ways they differ.

Another, older statement of basic ideas is from Mabel Collins’s *Idyll of the White Lotus*. Known as “The Three Truths of the White Lotus,” those ideas can be stated in contemporary language as follows:

There are Three Truths which are absolute, and cannot be lost, but yet may remain silent for lack of speech.

[1] The human soul is immortal, and its future is the future of a thing whose growth and splendor has no limit.

[2] The principle which gives life dwells in us, and around us, is undying and eternally beneficent, is not heard, or seen, or smelt, but is perceived by the one who desires perception.

[3] We are each our own absolute law-giver, the dispenser of glory or gloom to ourselves; the decreer of our life, our reward, our punishment.

These truths, which are as great as is life itself, are as simple as the simplest human mind. Feed the hungry with them.

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

7.14. In what points do “The Three Truths of the White Lotus” agree with or augment the three Fundamental Propositions?

CHAPTER 8

The Recapitulation of Volume 1

At the end of the commentaries on the seven stanzas of Cosmogogenesis, HPB recapitulates in six points the subjects she has been expounding (1:272–8). Those points can be further summarized in the following key phrases:

Point 1. “The Secret Doctrine is the accumulated Wisdom of the Ages.”

Point 2. “The fundamental Law . . . is the One homogeneous divine SUBSTANCE-PRINCIPLE, the one radical cause.”

Point 3. “The Universe is the periodical manifestation of this unknown Absolute Essence.”

Point 4. “The Universe is called, with everything in it, *MAYA*, because all is temporary therein.”

Point 5. “Everything in the Universe, throughout all its kingdoms, is *CONSCIOUS*.”

Point 6. “The Universe is worked and *guided* from *within outwards*.”

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

8.1. Read the six points in full. What other key phrases or words do you find in them? Relate these six points to what HPB said in the preface about “what is contained in this work.” Relate them also to the three Fundamental Proposi-

tions. Compare them with the four basic ideas mentioned in the Bowen notes (page 21 above and pages 53–7 below). Which does HPB seem to be emphasizing most? Make a list of them.

The sixth of the recapitulating points is the fullest. In it HPB touches upon a variety of matters relating to the inner government of the world. Those matters include subjects like the following:

- correspondences
- hierarchies
- Dhyān Chohans as agents of karmic and cosmic law, varying infinitely in degrees of consciousness and intelligence; incipient or perfected human beings, devoid of feeling of personality and human emotions, the incipient ones having not yet developed egoism, the perfected ones being less subject to *maya*, for “Individuality is the characteristic of their respective hierarchies, not of their units”
- no anthropomorphic God
- human nature as a composite—a compound of the essence of all the celestial hierarchies
- the ability of humans, in this life, to come to full knowledge of the nonseparateness of the higher Self from the one absolute *SELF*

- conscious builders and unconscious elementals
- the necessity that intelligence be acquired personally and individually
- evolution as a progressive march towards a higher life and as therefore good, purposive, and teleological, following a design or Plan
- pain, suffering, and cruelty as our experience of the immutable laws working to the grand end
- elementals (semi-intelligent beings) and High Planetary Spirits (Dhyan Chohans) as, in their aggregate, the manifested Verbum (Word) of the unmanifested Logos, that is, the mind of the universe and its immutable Law

SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDY:

8.2. Locate the foregoing subjects in HPB’s discussion of the sixth point (1:274–8). Choose any one of them and paraphrase what HPB says about it.

8.3. State in your own words the ideas in the following passages:

a. “Man can neither propitiate nor command the *Devas*,” it is said. But, by paralyzing his lower personality, and arriving thereby at the full knowledge of the *non-separateness* of his higher SELF from the One absolute SELF, man can, even during his terrestrial life, become as “One of Us.” Thus it is, by eating of the fruit of

knowledge which dispels ignorance, that man becomes like one of the Elohim or the Dhyanis; and once on *their* plane the Spirit of Solidarity and perfect Harmony, which reigns in every Hierarchy, must extend over him and protect him in every particular. (*Secret Doctrine* 1:276)

b. The whole order of nature evinces a progressive march towards a *higher life*. There is design in the action of the seemingly blindest forces. The whole process of evolution with its endless adaptations is a proof of this. The immutable laws that weed out the weak and feeble species, to make room for the strong, and which ensure the “survival of the fittest,” though so cruel in their immediate action—all are working toward the grand end. The very *fact* that adaptations *do* occur, that the fittest *do* survive in the struggle for existence, shows that what is called “unconscious Nature” is in reality an aggregate of forces manipulated by semi-intelligent beings (Elementals) guided by High Planetary Spirits, (Dhyan Chohans), whose collective aggregate forms the manifested *verbum* of the unmanifested LOGOS, and constitutes at one and the same time the MIND of the Universe and its immutable LAW. (*Secret Doctrine* 1:277–8)

c. Thus the reason given for dividing humanity into *superior* and *inferior* races falls to the ground and becomes a fallacy. (*Secret Doctrine* 2:425)

Preliminary Notes to Volume 2

At the beginning of volume 2, HPB has an introductory section (2:1–12), on the first page of which she states “three new propositions” about the evolution of humanity:

New proposition 1. “the simultaneous evolution of seven human groups on seven different portions of the globe,”

New proposition 2. “the birth of the *astral*, before the *physical* body: the former being a model for the latter,”

New proposition 3. “that man, in this Round, preceded every mammalian—the anthropoids included—in the animal kingdom.”

These new propositions seem simple and straightforward, but in fact they require careful study and interpretation. Here only a few notes are made on each to suggest some ways of thinking about them.

1. The central subject of volume 2 is the origin and development of humanity on our earth. That great evolutionary drama is played out on seven sets (the “continents”) in seven acts (the “root races”) by seven troupes of actors (human groups). In fact, the seven human groups who are the actors in the evolutionary drama, although alluded to in various places in *The Secret Doctrine*, are not described anywhere in great detail. Instead, volume 2 is mainly con-

cerned with the stages of evolution in space (the “continents”) and in time (the “root races”).

Humanity, according to *The Secret Doctrine*, although one in its ultimate nature and origin, exists in seven distinct types or “groups,” with different beginnings and different characters. These seven groups are said to have been procreated in seven different locations (or zones). Thereafter, they may be thought of as evolving side by side through the ages, through the various races on the various continents. They are symbolically related to the seven planets, and correspondences exist between the seven human groups, races, continents, principles, senses, colors, natural forces, cosmic planes, states of consciousness, spiritual beings, and so on. This complex series of sevenfold correspondences across the universe is sometimes said to result from the white light of the absolute being diffracted into Seven Rays.

Because of the correspondences, the original seven human groups can be related to the “races,” but should be distinguished from them. Whereas the seven groups are types of souls, the “races” are (as the Bowen notes say) states of evolution. The term “root race” used in *The Secret Doctrine* for the major states of human evolution is misleading, especially so if we associate it with any of the several uses of the term *race* that have been common in the

twentieth century. The so-called “root races” in *The Secret Doctrine* are vast groupings of humanity that are stages in intellectual and spiritual as well as physical evolution. They must not be confused with the ordinary use of *race* for superficially different body types of the human species. Indeed, the “Fifth Root Race,” which *The Secret Doctrine* says is that of our time, may be basically *Homo sapiens*, the species of all humanity now living.

Because the terms “race” and particularly “root race” are used in *The Secret Doctrine*, they are used here. But their meaning in HPB’s book is very different from most of their uses in our contemporary English. One of HPB’s teachers (*Mahatma Letters*, p. 175) suggested “stock” as an alternative term, and that might be better today, being free of the misleading implications that have accumulated around “race.” The language of *The Secret Doctrine* is more than a century old, and language (like everything else in this world) changes constantly. In our day, it is certainly preferable to talk about seven human stocks, with such derivative terms as root stock, substock, family stock, branch stock, and so on.

The seven zones where humanity began are part of a wider concept of sevenfold evolutionary geography that is not limited to the development of human beings. Blavatsky also says that there are seven such areas associated with the evolution of other kingdoms:

Limiting the teaching strictly to this, our earth, it may be shown that, as the ethereal forms of the first Men are first projected on seven zones by seven Dhyan-Chohanics centres of Force, so there are centres of creative power for every ROOT or parent species of the host of forms of vegetable and animal life. (2:732)

It is the “ethereal forms,” not the dense physical forms, that are “projected” on the seven zones or areas, so the latter may themselves therefore be subtle in nature. We should not think of these zones as similar to physical locations on the earth today.

2. What is called the “astral body” is also termed the “linga sharira” or, in some later writings, the “etheric body.” It is sometimes referred to as the “double” or “model body” because it provides the pattern according to which physical forms develop. Its function is therefore analogous to that of the genetic code within each cell. Since it is a model or pattern for the dense physical form, it obviously must come into existence before the latter.

The second new proposition implies that, in the Theosophical view, evolution is not merely a matter of physical mutations and the success of their response to the challenges of the physical environment. Instead, Theosophy proposes that physical evolution is a response to interior or subtler forces that purposefully affect the direction of change in physical forms to make them more adequate expressions of consciousness.

3. The notion that human beings came before every other mammal in our “round” (or vast period of evolution) seems quite fantastic in the light of what we know from biology and evolution. Yet there is in fact no contradiction between this proposition and the facts of science. To appreciate the lack of contradiction, we must understand the assumptions underlying this proposition and distinguish between the facts and the assumptions of science.

The basis of this proposition has already appeared in the second new proposition above. That is, evolution is not a purely physical phenomenon, but rather goes on primarily on the “inner planes” and only manifests itself physically in response to the pressures of subtle

forces. The proposition means that human beings, who developed in the course of earlier schemes of evolution, began their evolution in our “round” on the “inner planes” before other mammals did, not that dense physical humanity appeared on Earth before other mammals.

It is a fact of science that there is physical evidence for the existence of small, primitive mammals long before there is physical evidence for the existence of any human-like beings. But *The Secret Doctrine* vigorously contests the common, and usually unstated, assumptions of science that there is no existence apart from the dense physical plane and that human beings did not exist in any sense until they appeared in physical form. The third new proposition suggests that evolution proceeds on many planes, including much subtler forms of matter than we are consciously aware of, and stretches over much longer periods of time than we have any direct physical evidence for.

The three new propositions lay out a view of human evolution which is grander and subtler than that of science. The latter concerns itself exclusively with variations in physical forms and with the mechanisms by which such variations come to be and survive. *The Secret Doctrine* views evolution as originating on the inner or higher planes and as manifesting later on our outer or lower physical world. It maintains that our humanity began its evolution (on the inner planes) before other mammals did and that sevenfold humanity has a sevenfold evolution associated with seven land configurations.

Following the statement of the three new propositions is a digressive discussion of myths and legends about the seven groups of human beings who are evolving on Earth (2:2–5). Then comes a discussion of the land areas on which the “races” evolve, specifically the first five such areas (or “continents”), to which the following names are given (2:6–9):

- Land of group 1. The Imperishable Sacred Land
- Land of group 2. The Hyperborean Land
- Land of group 3. Lemuria
- Land of group 4. Atlantis
- Land of group 5. America and Europe

These names are handy labels and should not be interpreted literally as denoting the places associated with some of the names in myths and legends. Even the term *continent* must be used carefully. It does not denote just a single large mass of land beside other similar masses existing at the same time. It seems to refer instead to the configuration of land masses at any one time on the surface of our globe. With the term *continent*, as well as with the term *race*, we must be careful not to impose our associations on *The Secret Doctrine*.

The “Preliminary Notes” conclude with a discussion of the chronology of the history of our planet, comparing esoteric and scientific ideas on the subject. Several noteworthy bits of esoteric chronology are given:

- The major human group that came before our own (the so-called Fourth Root Race) had an evolution stretching over 4,000,000 to 5,000,000 years.
- The last part of the land mass specifically associated with that group (Atlantis) disappeared or changed about 850,000 years ago.
- Our present human group, the so-called Fifth Root Race, has been in existence for approximately 1,000,000 years.

SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDY:

9.1. Sets of seven are extremely common. Make a list of as many things as you can think of that come in seven varieties.

9.2. Look up the term *race* in a large dictionary or look up *races (of mankind)* in an encyclopedia.

What various meanings does the word have? In what various ways have people thought of the concept of race? On what do the concepts of race seem to be mainly based—physical features, cultural identity, or spiritual traits? How do such concepts differ from the Theosophical concept of a root race?

9.3. What evidence is there for the existence of subtle bodies or forms of existence? What is *Kirlian photography*? Look up the term in a large dictionary or encyclopedia.

9.4. What is *continental drift*? Look up the term in an encyclopedia and summarize what is said

about it. How are the concepts of continental drift and of continent homelands for the root races similar?

9.5. Look up *evolution* in an encyclopedia and summarize what is said about it. What questions about evolution are scientists debating? How does Darwinian, or neo-Darwinian, evolution differ from the Theosophical concept of evolution?

9.6. Beginning with the three time periods given in the “Preliminary Notes” (mentioned above), compile a chronology of the universe and humanity according to *The Secret Doctrine*.

It is easy to become a Theosophist. Any person of average intellectual capacities, and a leaning toward the meta-physical; of pure, unselfish life, who finds more joy in helping his neighbour than in receiving help himself; one who is ever ready to sacrifice his own pleasures for the sake of other people; and who loves Truth, Goodness and Wisdom for their own sake, not for the benefit they may confer—is a Theosophist. (Blavatsky, *Collected Writings* 9:155).

CHAPTER 10

Conclusion to Volume 2

In the “Conclusion” at the end of part 1 of volume 2 (2:437–46), HPB says:

It is only in the XXth century that portions, if not the whole, of the present work will be vindicated. (2:442)

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

10.1. What concepts of *The Secret Doctrine*—either general or specific were “vindicated” in the twentieth century?

HPB also summarizes the contents of the second volume in two sentences:

Enough was said to show that evolution in general, events, mankind, and everything else in Nature proceed in cycles. We have spoken of seven Races, five of which have nearly completed their earthly career, and have claimed that every Root-Race, with its sub-races and innumerable family divisions and tribes, was entirely distinct from its preceding and succeeding race. (2:443)

Two things might be noticed about this summary. First, it consists of a generalization and a specific application. The introductory sentence is a generalization about cycles that is applicable to many things in nature. The next sentence is a specific application, speaking of the seven “root races” and their subdivisions

(seven “subraces,” each consisting of seven “family races” or “branch races,” each in turn with many tribes or offshoots).

The second thing to note about the summary is that the root races are thought of as succeeding one another in time and as being “entirely distinct” from one another. HPB often exaggerates what she says in order to make a point and so expresses herself in ways that seem contradictory. On the next two pages she makes it clear that the races mix with one another and overlap:

. . . we find the last of the Atlanteans, still mixed up with the Aryan [Fifth Root Race], 11,000 years ago. (2:444)

The Fifth will overlap the Sixth Race for many hundreds of millenniums . . . just as the Fourth overlapped our Aryan race, and the Third had overlapped the Atlanteans. (2:445)

In the Bowen notes (page 54, paragraph 7), it is suggested that all the root races exist simultaneously. There are three ways of looking at the races: as the races have different evolutionary purposes, they are “entirely distinct” from one another; as they exist in time, they overlap; as each represents “a state of evolution,” they are all simultaneous because beings are at different states of progress and all of us

have within ourselves the fruits of the past and the seeds of the future.

On pages 444–6, HPB remarks on America as the home of the coming Sixth Subrace and on the development of the Seventh Subrace and the Sixth Root Race. These remarks begin in the third new paragraph of page 444 with the words “Now, Occult philosophy teaches . . .” and end at the middle of page 446.

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

10.2. What role does HPB envision for America in the future evolution of our species?

Throughout this conclusion (and elsewhere in *The Secret Doctrine*) HPB gives a few dates to help us appreciate the vastness of the time periods involved in the evolution of humanity.

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

10.3. Add these dates to the chronology of significant ones mentioned at the end of the last chapter, and include others as you come across them. Be sure, however, to distinguish between the dates HPB says are from the esoteric tradition and those she merely cites from other writers. What is the significance of these two dates mentioned in this conclusion: (a) 11,000 years ago, and (b) 25,000 years from now?

There are several indications at the end of the conclusion that HPB looked forward to an increasing spirituality in the future of humanity. On the last page of the conclusion (2:446), she says:

. . . the present Race is on its ascending arc; and the Sixth will be rapidly growing out of its bonds of matter, and even of flesh.

Thus it is the mankind of the New world . . . America . . . whose mission and Karma it is to sow the seeds for a forthcoming, grander, and far more glorious Race than any of those we know of at present. The Cycles of Matter will be succeeded by Cycles of Spirituality and a fully developed mind. On the law of parallel history and races, the majority of the future mankind will be composed of glorious Adepts. Humanity is the child of cyclic Destiny and not one of its Units can escape its unconscious mission, or get rid of the burden of its co-operative work with nature.

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

10.4. We are often concerned with the problems and troubles we see around us, but are there any signs that HPB’s bright vision of the future has begun to be realized?

CHAPTER 11

Other Approaches to *The Secret Doctrine*

There are as many ways to get acquainted with *The Secret Doctrine* as there are readers of the book. Here we look briefly at a few others. Experiment with these, or other, approaches to find which suits you best.

MORE KEY PASSAGES

The approach we have been considering to get acquainted with *The Secret Doctrine* is that recommended in the Bowen notes: namely to start with certain key passages that summarize or encapsulate basic ideas of the book. In addition to the four passages identified in those notes for first study, which we have been examining (1:13–20; 1:272–8; 2:1–12; 2:437–46), there are other passages that are useful entrees to the study of her work.

A few among many possible such passages are identified here by title or first and last words, by volume and page numbers, and by the number of lines in the passage in parentheses when the passage is short:

“Introductory.” 1:xvii–xlvii

“Proem.” 1:1–24 [includes the three Fundamental Propositions]

“The Secret Doctrine . . . its successor.” 1:43 (7 lines)

“The radical unity . . . in Occult Science.” 1:120 (5 lines)

“For the benefit . . . of it here.” 1:158–60 (60 lines)

“It now becomes plain . . . he now is.” 1:181 (24 lines)

“It comes to this . . . elements now known.” 1:224–5 (24 lines)

“Science teaches . . . attention elsewhere.” 1:260–1 (37 lines)

“Whatever may be . . . of it here.” 1:279–83 [5 proven facts]

“Recapitulation.” 1:269–99 [includes 6 summing-up items and 5 proven facts cited above]

“The latter teaches . . . foolish head.” 1:287–8 (19 lines)

“Summary of the Mutual Position.” 1:668–76

“Modern science . . . distinctive forms.” 2:[xvi] (20 lines)

“Analogy is the guiding . . . final mysteries.” 2:153 (3 lines)

“Let the reader . . . Sidereal Year.” 2:434–5 (55 lines)

“Now, Occult philosophy . . . ABSOLUTE IS.” 2:444–6 (103 lines)

“And here we must . . . of Occultism?” 2:640 (20 lines)

“All these difficulties . . . new Root Race.” 2:697 (12 lines)

“And now to conclude . . . HIGHER THAN TRUTH.” 2:794–8

SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDY:

11.1. Study one or more of these passages and summarize the ideas in them, relating them to the parts of *The Secret Doctrine* you have already read.

11.2. Compare the four Bowen key passages, the additional passages listed above, and the four basic ideas in the Bowen notes (pages 55–6 below). What concepts appear in more than one passage? From these passages, make your own list of important concepts in *The Secret Doctrine*.

USING THE INDEX

In addition to mastering the ideas in significant passages like those cited above, there are other techniques for studying *The Secret Doctrine* that have proved useful. One of them uses the index as a tool for approaching the book. This technique was used by two of HPB's students (*Theosophical Gleanings*, 1) and commended by her ("Mistaken Notions," 334). The two students describe their reason for approaching the book through an index:

In reading the "Secret Doctrine" the student is apt to be confused, even dazed, by the range of erudition, the wealth of illustrations, the abundance of digressions, the number of literary allusions. Devas and Daimons, Dhyani Buddhas and Kumaras, Yugas and cycles, satyrs and fakirs, alchemists and adepts, Manus and Monads, whirl around him in dazzling phantasmagoria, and he rises from hours of effort, his only distinct acquirement a headache. We have found the most fruitful system of study is to fix on some one thing, to follow it through all its windings with dogged persistency, steadily hunting it down through the two volumes, disregarding all alluring byways and seductive glades, until there lies before us that one thing in its completeness, with

every touch given to it from beginning to end, clear, definite, comprehensible.

To follow that advice, select a topic and look up all instances of it and of closely related terms in the index, then consult all the references, and copy down key passages in them onto 4-by-6-inch slips of paper. Then sort the slips into groups of similar ideas; compare, study, and analyze them for what they tell about the topic. Finally, synthesize the information in the passages, and write a summary of what *The Secret Doctrine* has to say on that topic.

The index approach is a variant of key passages. In using the index, one is locating one's own key passages for a particular subject. Some of the passages located through the index will be trivial for the subject being studied and must be put aside. Part of the value of using the index is to develop discrimination about what are key passages and what not.

Another value in using the index is to become sensitive to synonyms and related terms for the concept you are investigating. For example, if you are interested in *maya*, many of the passages on that subject identified by the index will equate it with "illusion," so you also need to look up the latter word in the index. Other related ideas, such as "impermanence," will also appear in the *maya* passages; you may want to see what the index reveals about them as well. Do not hesitate to branch out from the primary subject to related ones.

It is also important to use a good index in studying *The Secret Doctrine* in this way. Some of the editions have short and sketchy indexes. Others have long and full ones. An excellent and detailed index is that in the third volume of the de Zirkoff edition of 1978–9 (paperback reprint 1993). Another extensive analytical index was published as a separate volume, *Index to "The Secret Doctrine"*, by the Theosophy

Company of Los Angeles in 1939. Either of those indexes can be used with any edition of the work that preserves the original pagination. Otherwise, a concordance must be used, such as that in the fifth Adyar Edition (6:vii–li), or in the de Zirkoff edition (3:401–8).

However, by far the easiest way to locate uses of a term or phrase in *The Secret Doctrine* is with the electronic version of the book on the *Theosophical Classics* CD. The search feature looks up the passages for you, and in addition, if you wish, it will also give you passages with the term or phrase from other major Theosophical works. An electronic text may not be the best way to read a book—for reading many people find that a paper copy is more satisfactory. But to search the text quickly, easily, and thoroughly, the electronic version is clearly the most useful.

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

11.3. Choose any subject you would like to investigate and follow the procedures suggested above to find out what *The Secret Doctrine* has to say about it. (If several persons work together as a team, they can divide up the task of checking references from the index and summarizing them before comparing their findings in a group discussion.)

RESPONDING TO THE STANZAS

We may also approach *The Secret Doctrine* through the central part of it—the stanzas on which the whole book is based. There are several ways in which such an approach can be made.

One approach is to go to the pages of each volume on which the stanzas are printed without commentary (1:27–34; 2:15–21). Read one of the stanzas in its entirety. Do not worry about the precise meaning of the stanza or any of its words, but note the effect of the stanza

as a whole. Write down what seems to be the theme of the stanza.

Then reread the stanza to identify what seem to be key words, and think about their implications. How do they contribute to the overall effect of the stanza? Does thinking about the key words alter in any way what you took to be the effect of that stanza as a whole?

Reread the stanza again in the light of what you have done so far, and decide what it seems to be saying.

Next, go to the commentaries on the slokas of that stanza and read them, comparing what they say with your independent interpretation.

Then you might have recourse to the index method of studying the book described above. Look up in the index the key words you identified in the stanza, and find the references to them elsewhere in *The Secret Doctrine*. The way a word is used in one context often sheds light on what it means in other places.

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

11.4. Choose one of the stanzas and follow the preceding suggestions. Write a brief description of what you discover.

You may also find it useful to compare different versions of the stanzas. The text of the stanzas as printed continuously without commentary (1:27–34, 2:15–21) differs in minor ways from that with the commentaries (1:35–265, 2:22–351). Both those versions differ more extensively from an earlier version (that of the “Würzburg manuscript”) reprinted in the de Zirkoff edition (3:514–20). These varying versions throw light on one another.

If you are familiar with the outline of the stanzas, you can pick any stanza at random to treat in this way. But if you are not well familiar with the story they tell, it will be much easier

to start with the first stanza of volume 1 and proceed in order.

A similar but original and fruitful approach has been described by Beverley Noia in *An Intuitive Approach to the Seven Stanzas of Dzyan*. Her method of studying *The Secret Doctrine* concentrates on the implications of the stanzas for individual readers and their lives. Since all levels of being are connected by analogical correspondences, such a personal approach is both valid and meaningful for many readers.

Whatever techniques we use to study *The Secret Doctrine*, it will not do to treat it like an ordinary textbook. That way, as the Bowen notes say, lies confusion.

One of the marvelous things about the book, according to the Bowen notes, is that readers can find in it things that Blavatsky did not explicitly put into it. That is certainly correct, and HPB says as much in *The Secret Doctrine*: “Since, however, as confessed before, this work *withholds far more than it gives out*, the student is invited to use his own intuitions” (1:278). HPB herself invites us to approach *The Secret Doctrine* intuitively.

READING STRAIGHT THROUGH

After you have approached *The Secret Doctrine* in several of the preceding ways, you may want to follow the King’s advice to the White Rabbit and read from the beginning to the end. If so, some of the works listed under “Commentaries, summaries, and interpretations” in appendix 1 will be helpful, especially those by Ashish, Barborka, Prem, Warcup, and Wood. Remember, however, the warning about not reading *The Secret Doctrine* “page by page as one reads any other book,” and also keep in mind that the White Rabbit lived in a Wonderland where everything was backward.

SUGGESTION FOR STUDY:

11.5. To get an overview of the Cosmogogenesis stanzas, read Blavatsky’s summary of them as a formula for all evolution (1:20–2). Then read the stanzas themselves (1:27–34). Don’t worry if much is unclear—just get a feeling for the stanzas. List what seem to you to be the most significant points.

But it is quite another matter to put oneself upon the path which leads to the knowledge of what is good to do, as to the right discrimination of good from evil; a path which also leads a man to that power through which he can do the good he desires, often without even apparently lifting a finger. (Blavatsky, *Collected Writings* 9:155)

CHAPTER 12

Why We Study *The Secret Doctrine*

In addition to knowing how to study *The Secret Doctrine*, we also need to know why we do so. Indeed, the rationale for studying is far more important than mere techniques. However we choose to do so, what should be our reason for studying *The Secret Doctrine*? The Bowen notes say that study of *The Secret Doctrine* is a form of jñāna yoga:

The True Student of The Secret Doctrine is a Jnana 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.

Writing in her magazine *Lucifer*, Blavatsky responded to the complaint of one Theosophical student that *The Secret Doctrine* is too difficult and incomplete. She replied that

a work which compares several dozens of philosophies and over half-a-dozen of world-religions, a work which has to unveil the roots with the greatest precautions, as it can only *hint* at the secret blossoms here and there—cannot be comprehended at a first reading, nor even after several, unless the reader elaborates for himself a system for it. (“Mistaken Notions,” 334)

Readers should not expect to find a system ready-made in *The Secret Doctrine*, but instead must elaborate for themselves a system out of

it. The process of jñāna yoga is to try to understand the workings of the cosmos and one’s own place in it. To do this, one constructs theories or “mental pictures.” The word *theory* comes from a Greek root that means “to look or to view,” and so a theory is a way of viewing things—a mental picture. The danger is always that one will mistake the picture for the reality that it represents, that one will become so enthralled by the elegance and consistency and accuracy of the picture that one stops paying attention to the reality altogether and gazes at the picture of it instead.

Fortunately we are discouraged from losing ourselves in our theories by the fact that they are always flawed. As we contemplate our mental pictures, we discover inaccuracies in them, inadequacies and errors. That discovery evokes one of two contrasting responses.

Those who are True Believers say the inaccuracies do not exist, or are not important, and continue to contemplate their mental pictures long after the flaws are obvious. But those who are genuine students will tolerate a certain number of flaws for a while, but as the flaws accumulate, genuine students will decide that the mental picture they have constructed has to be superseded. And they will construct a new, larger, and better picture that corrects the flaws of the old one.

In time, of course, flaws appear in the new picture too, and it has likewise to be superseded. And so it goes, with mental picture succeeding mental picture, each correcting the flaws of its predecessor, but introducing flaws of its own. That, as Thomas Kuhn has shown, is also the way science evolves, substituting theory for theory in a process he called the “structure of scientific revolutions.” And that is the way the esoteric student, following the path of jñāna yoga progresses as well.

If jñāna yogis are successfully following that path, however, they do not just go on substituting one flawed picture for another indefinitely. Instead, eventually they come to the realization that “no picture will ever represent the TRUTH.” The process of substituting one picture, one theory, for another 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 purpose of the picture of the cosmos and of humanity that we find in *The Secret Doctrine* is to lead us to realize that no such picture can ever be adequate to the Truth that it represents. The purpose of *The Secret Doctrine* is to help us to realize that *The Secret Doctrine* is inadequate—indeed, that all theories, all mental pictures, of the origin and structure and operation of the universe are inadequate. Jñāna yoga uses the mind to lead us beyond the mind. We study *The Secret Doctrine* in order to go beyond *The Secret Doctrine*.

The Secret Doctrine is the first word of modern Theosophy, but it is not the last—and it was not intended to be so. It is a marvelous book, not because it entertains or instructs or inspires us, but because it helps us to discover that it is a flawed book, that all books are flawed, that Truth is not to be found in books, but in ourselves.

Truth is not in charts and tables and lists, not in chains and rounds and races. Truth is in the recognition that no book, no formulation, no statement can ever adequately represent the way reality is. Truth is in the recognition that there is no higher doctrine than Truth. That is Theosophy. That is the Secret Doctrine.

SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDY:

12.1. Consider any one of the usual views of the world. What about it fails to satisfy and so drives us to seek for a larger view?

12.2. HPB gave her students some guidance on how to expand the mind in the process of jñāna yoga. Published from student notes under the title “Diagram of Meditation,” it begins: “First conceive of UNITY by Expansion in Space and Infinite in Time.” How does that direction for meditation agree with *The Secret Doctrine*? Meditate on the sentence: think of yourself here and now, and then imagine the vastness of the cosmos in space and time, stretching in every direction without end. Describe your impressions.

12.3. Read what HPB had to say about “Mistaken Notions on *The Secret Doctrine*” (appendix 4) and summarize in your own words the main points she makes in that article. Outline the article, paragraph by paragraph, summarizing its contents.

12.4. To comprehend *The Secret Doctrine* we must elaborate for ourselves a system out of it. From what you know of the book at this point, elaborate for yourself such a system. Represent what you understand the book to be saying in words, or a chart, or a picture, or movement, or any medium you are comfortable with. But remember: the system you elaborate represents your understanding, not the TRUTH. And if it is living, it will change.

12.5. Manuel Oderberg (in a personal letter) has used several metaphors to describe the process of getting acquainted with *The Secret Doctrine*. Consider these metaphors and their implications:

a. In reading *The Secret Doctrine*, we have an “inner dialog” with the book. A dialog involves two people talking together. When you read the book, it talks to you, but you must also reply. Choose a passage from *The Secret Doctrine*; read it; answer it—that is, treat the passage as part of a conversation and talk back. Ask questions about what the book says; agree with it and provide details or examples from your own experience; or disagree with it and express your own view of the subject.

b. Ideas in *The Secret Doctrine* are sometimes temporarily hidden, like an astronomical occultation. It is a book that offers new information each time you read it because you have changed in the meantime. A passage that, on one reading, is obscure or ordinary, on another reading will be clear and extraordinary. Retrieve the envelope you put aside when following suggestion 1.5 in chapter 1. Reread the same passage afresh; again write down your reaction. Then open the envelope and compare your two reactions. Are there any differences? Can you explain why the passage meant the same or different things to you?

c. Our response to *The Secret Doctrine* is like a child born as a result of our relationship with the book. A child inherits something from each parent; so our response to any book is due partly to the book and partly to us. Read a passage from *The Secret Doctrine* and write down your response to it. Then carefully compare what you have written with the original text. See whether you can identify the parts of your

response that come from the book and the parts that you yourself contributed.

d. The ideas of *The Secret Doctrine* are like a nest of Chinese boxes. Each idea has implicit in it other ideas. Pick any idea that is important in the book and suggest one or more other ideas that it implies or suggests. For example, start with one of these ideas:

Akasha	Logos	Oneness
Consciousness	Mahatmas	Parabrahm
Cycles	Manifestation	Pralaya
Evolution	Maya	Shakti
Fohat	Monad	Wisdom
Incarnation	Mulaprakriti	Yoga
Karma	Occultism	Zodiac

12.6. What do the following passages imply about why and how we study *The Secret Doctrine*?

a. Knowledge comes in visions, first in dreams and then in pictures presented to the inner eye during meditation. Thus have I been taught the whole system of evolution, the laws of being and all else that I know—the mysteries of life and death, the workings of karma. Not a word was spoken to me of all this in the ordinary way, except, perhaps, by way of confirmation of what was thus given me—nothing taught me in writing. And knowledge so obtained is so clear, so convincing, so indelible in the impression it makes upon the mind, that all other sources of information, all other methods of teaching with which we are familiar dwindle into insignificance in comparison with this. (Blavatsky, *Collected Writings* 13:285)

b. “What is Truth?” asked Pilate of one who, if the claims of the Christian Church are even approximately correct, must have known it. But He kept silent. . . . Dogmatism in churches, dogmatism in science, dogmatism everywhere. The possible truths, hazily perceived in the world of abstraction, like those inferred from

observation and experiment in the world of matter, are forced upon the profane multitude, too busy to think for themselves, under the form of *Divine revelation* and *Scientific authority*. But the same question stands open from the days of Socrates and Pilate down to our own age of wholesale negation: is there such a thing as *absolute truth* in the hands of any one party or man? Reason answers, "there cannot be." There is no room for absolute truth upon any subject whatsoever, in a world as finite and conditioned as man is himself. But there are relative

truths, and we have to make the best we can of them. (Blavatsky, *Collected Writings* 9:30-1)

c. Esoteric philosophy reconciles all religions, strips every one of its outward, human garments, and shows the root of each to be identical with that of every other great religion. (*Secret Doctrine* 1: xx)

d. The Secret Doctrine teaches the progressive development of everything, worlds as well as atoms; and this stupendous development has neither conceivable beginning nor imaginable end. (*Secret Doctrine* 1: 43)

The whole essence of truth *cannot be transmitted from mouth to ear*. Nor can any pen describe it, not even that of the recording Angel, unless man finds the answer in the sanctuary of his own heart, in the innermost depths of his divine intuitions. (*Secret Doctrine* 2:516)

APPENDIX 1

For Further Reading and Study

EDITIONS RECOMMENDED FOR STUDY:

Theosophical Classics. Ed. Vicente Hao Chin, Jr. Including *The Secret Doctrine*, *Isis Unveiled*, *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, *The Key to Theosophy*, *The Voice of the Silence*, *The Theosophical Glossary*, *Transactions of the Blavatsky Lodge*, *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, *Letters from the Masters of the Wisdom*, *Esoteric Buddhism*, and *Light on the Path*. CD-Rom electronic book edition. Manila, Philippines, and Wheaton, Illinois: Theosophical Publishing House, 2003. 84 MB.

The Secret Doctrine. 3 vols. Ed. Boris de Zirkoff in Collected Writings series. Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1978–9. Pp. [2], 84, xlvi, 696 + xxiv, 817 + vii, 520. Quest Theosophical Heritage Classics edition, 1993. Boxed paperback.

The Secret Doctrine. 2 vols. Photographic facsimile of the 1888 edition. Pasadena, CA: Theosophical Univ. Press, 1988. Pp. xlvii, 676 + xvi, 798, [2], xxxi.

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APPENDIX 2

Pagination Concordance For Key Passages

PASSAGE	ORIGINAL PAGINATION	ADYAR EDITION
Preface	1: vii–viii	1: 7–9
Table of Contents	1: ix–xvi	1: 37–40, 2: 5–12
Introductory	1: xvii–xlvi	1: 41–67
Proem	1: 1–24	1: 69–88
3 Fundamental Propositions	1: 13–20	1: 79–85
epigraphs	1: 26	1: 90
Seven Stanzas	1: 27–34	1: 91–9
Commentaries	1: 35–268	1: 101–311
“The Secret Doctrine teaches”	1: 43	1: 115
“The radical unity”	1: 120	1: 179
“For the benefit”	1: 158–60	1: 213–4
“It now becomes plain”	1: 181	1: 233
“It comes to this”	1: 224–5	1: 271–2
“Science teaches”	1: 260–1	1: 304–5
Summing Up	1: 269–99	1: 313–39
Six numbered items	1: 272–8	1: 316–21
“Whatever may be” (5 facts)	1: 279–83	1: 322–5
“The latter teaches”	1: 287–8	1: 328–9
Symbolism	1: 301–473	2: 15–195
Science	1: 475–676	2: 197–401
epigraph	1: 475	2: 198
Summary of the Mutual Position	1: 668–76	2: 393–401
Table of Contents	2: vii–xiv	3: 5–12, 4: 5–12
epigraphs	2: xv–xvi	3: 13–4
Preliminary Notes	2: 1–12	3: 15–24
epigraph	2: 14	3: 26
Twelve Stanzas	2: 15–21	3: 27–33
Commentaries	2: 22–436	3: 35–434
“Analogy is the guiding”	2: 153	3: 161
“Let the reader”	2: 434–5	3: 431–3
Conclusion	2: 437–46	3: 434–44

GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH *THE SECRET DOCTRINE*

PASSAGE	ORIGINAL PAGINATION	ADYAR EDITION
“Now, Occult philosophy”	2: 444–6	3: 442–4
Symbolism	2: 447–641	4: 13–212
epigraph	2: 447	4: 14
“And here we must”	2: 640	4: 211
Science	2: 643–798	4: 213–366
epigraph	2: 643	4: 214
“All these difficulties”	2: 697	4: 267
“And now to conclude”	2: 794–8	4: 361–6
last page	2: 798	4: 366

The Bowen Notes

“THE SECRET DOCTRINE” AND ITS STUDY

Being extracts from the notes of personal teachings given by H.P.B. to private pupils during the years 1888 to 1891, included in a large MSS volume left to me by my father, who was one of the pupils.

P. G. B. Bowen

[First printed in *Theosophy in Ireland*, January–March 1932, pp. 2–7; and reprinted here from a copy of that publication kindly made available by John P. Van Mater, Librarian of the Theosophical Library Center in Altadena, California. Obvious typographical errors in spelling and punctuation have been corrected. In square brackets, the paragraphs have been numbered and comments have been added as study aids for this course.

The origin and the authority of these notes are unclear. Efforts to document Commander Robert Bowen’s status as a private student of HPB’s have been unsuccessful. Nor has it been possible to trace his whereabouts during the relatively brief period when he might have had such contact with her. Also some Theosophical scholars believe that the style of the remarks attributed to HPB in the notes is inconsistent with her usual writing. Whatever the origin of the Bowen notes, however, they have provided an approach to the study of *The Secret Doctrine*

that many have found helpful, and that is the best kind of authority.]

[First Session: The authority of *The Secret Doctrine*]

[1. Background of the notes.] “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. [The notes were made in 1891, and published in 1932, just over 40 years later.]

[2. The book and the teaching.] 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:—

[3. A book that contains more than its author knows, calling for self-reliance by the reader.] “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 is 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 ——— and ——— 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.

[4. Confirmation.] (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.

[Second session: Method for studying *The Secret Doctrine*]

[5. Introduction.] 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.

[6. Four key passages.] Reading the S.D. page by page as one reads any other book (she says) 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 [1:13–20]. Follow that up by study of the RECAPITULATION—the numbered items in the SUMMING UP to Vol. I. (Part I.) [1:272–8]. Then take the PRELIMINARY NOTES (Vol. II.) [2:1–12] and the CONCLUSION (Vol. II.) [2:437–46].

[7. The Races succeed one another and yet are all simultaneously existent.] 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. 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 everyday Fifth Sub-Race, for the race is a state of evolution.

[8. Dangers and delusions about the Races.] 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. [In the century after these notes were taken, shortly after they were published, Hitler rose to power in Germany and the Nazi theorists perverted

ideas about race to support their concept of a “super race.” Perhaps it was a foreboding of that event that caused HPB’s “peculiar anxiety” on the subject.]

[Third session: Fundamentals]

[9. Introduction.] 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 result safely down before I lose them.

[10. The Doctrine is process, not product.] She talked a good deal 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.

[11. Exoteric and esoteric interpretations of *The Secret Doctrine*.] 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.

[12. Truth is a pathless land.] 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:

[13. Four basic ideas.] 1. 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.

[14. Unity with dual aspects.] (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. This 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.

[15. Theosophy is for those who can think.] 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.

[16. We are the Unity.] 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.

[17. All matter is alive; consciousness and substance are interlinked.] (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 the common idea. The true idea shows every atom of substance no matter of what plane to be in itself a LIFE.

[18. The Whole is present in every part.] (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.

[19. The Great Hermetic Axiom as synthesis.] (d) Fourth and last basic idea to be held is that expressed in the Great Hermetic Axiom. It really sums up and synthesises all the others.

[20. The Axiom: The order of the cosmos is simultaneously a hierarchy of power and a network of equality.] 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.

[21. These four ideas correlate everything.] No matter what one takes as study in the S.D. one must correlate it with those basic ideas.

[22. Thinking changes the brain.] I suggested that this is a kind of mental exercise which must be excessively 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.

[23. Jñāna yoga as a process of enlarging the mind, using mental constructs to transcend the mind.] This mode of thinking (she says) is what the Indians call Jnana Yoga. As one progresses in Jnana 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.

[24. Secret Doctrine study as jñāna yoga—the true path for Westerners.] The True Student of The Secret Doctrine is a Jnana 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.

[25. The inadequacy of words to Truth.] (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 imag-

ine anything can ever be put in 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.)

[Conclusion]

[26. The duty of the student.] 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.

[27. Knowing beyond words.] 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.

19th April, 1891.

(Sgd.), ROBERT BOWEN,
Cmdr. R.N.

Mistaken Notions on *The Secret Doctrine*

[Comments published under “Correspondence” in *Lucifer* 6 (June 1890): 333–5; paragraph numbers have been added in square brackets.]

[1.] Ever since the publication of the *Secret Doctrine* Students of Theosophy (outside the inner ring of Occult Sciences) have complained that the teachings contained in the work do not satisfy them. One, mentioning the lengthy and rabid abuse of it by an old, though really insignificant, if brutal, enemy, takes me to task for leaving a door open to such criticism by taking too little into account modern science and modern thought (!); another complains that my explanations are not complete; thus, he says:—

[2.] “For the last ten years, I have been a close reader of theosophical literature. I have read and re-read the *Secret Doctrine* and collated passages, and nothing is more disheartening than to find some of the best explanations on Occult points, just as they begin to grow a little lucid, marred by a reference to some exoteric philosophy or religion, which breaks up the train of reasoning and leaves the explanation unfinished. . . . We can understand parts, but we cannot get a succinct idea, particularly of the teachings as to Parabrahm (the Absolute) the 1st and 2nd Logos, Spirit, Matter, Fohat, etc., etc.”

[3.] This is the direct and natural result of the very mistaken notion that the work I have called the “Secret Doctrine” had ever been intended by me to dovetail with modern Science,

or to explain “occult points”. I was and still am more concerned with *facts* than with scientific hypotheses. My chief and only object was to bring into prominence that the basic and fundamental principles of every exoteric religion and philosophy, old or new, were from first to last but the echoes of the primeval “Wisdom Religion”. I sought to show that the TREE OF KNOWLEDGE, like Truth itself, was *One*; and that, however differing in form and color, the foliage of the twigs, the trunk and its main branches were still those of the same old Tree, in the shadow of which had developed and grown the (now) esoteric religious philosophy of the races that preceded our present mankind on earth.

[4.] This object, I believe I have carried out as far as it could be carried, in the first two volumes of the *Secret Doctrine*. It was not the occult philosophy of the esoteric teachings that I undertook to explain to the world at large, for then the qualification of “Secret” would have become like the *secret* of “Polichinelle” shouted in the manner of a stage *a parte*; but simply to give *that which could be given out*, and to parallel it with the beliefs and dogmas of the past and present nations, thus showing the original source of the latter and how disfigured they had become. If my work is, at this day of materialistic assumptions and universal iconoclasm, too premature for the masses of the profane—so much the worse for those masses. But it was not too premature for the earnest

students of theosophy—except those, perhaps, who had hoped that a treatise on such intricate correspondences as exist between the religions and philosophies of the almost forgotten Past, and those of the modern day, could be as simple as a shilling “shocker” from a railway stall. Even one system of philosophy at a time, whether that of Kant or of Herbert Spencer, of Spinoza or of Hartmann, requires more than a study of several years. Does it not therefore, stand to reason that a work which compares several dozens of philosophies and over half-a-dozen of world-religions, a work which has to unveil the roots with the greatest precautions, as it can only *hint* at the secret blossoms here and there—cannot be comprehended at a first reading, nor even after several, unless the reader elaborates for himself a system for it? That this can be done and *is* done is shown by the “Two Students of the E.S.” They are now synthesizing the “Secret Doctrine”, and they do it in the most lucid and comprehensive way, in this magazine. No more than any one else have they understood that work immediately after reading it. But they went to work in dead earnest. They indexed it for themselves, classifying the contents in two portions—the *exoteric* and the *esoteric*; and having achieved this preliminary labor, they now present the former portion to the readers at large, while storing the latter for their own practical instruction and benefit. Why should not every earnest theosophist do the same?

[5.] There are several ways of acquiring knowledge: (a) by accepting blindly the dicta of the church or modern science; (b) by rejecting both and starting to find the truth for oneself. The first method is easy and leads to social respectability and the praise of men; the other is difficult and requires more than ordinary devotion to truth, a disregard for direct personal benefits and an unwavering perseverance. Thus it was in the days of old and so it is now, except perhaps, that such devotion to truth has been more rare in our own day than it was of yore.

Indeed, the modern Eastern student’s unwillingness to think for himself is now as great as Western exactions and criticism of other people’s thoughts.

[6.] He demands and expects that his “Path” shall be engineered with all the selfish craft of modern comfort, macadamized, laid out with swift railways and telegraphs, and even telescopes, through which he may, while sitting at his ease, survey the works of other people; and while criticising them, look out for the easiest, in order to play at the Occultist and Amateur Student of Theosophy. The real “Path” to esoteric knowledge is very different. Its entrance is overgrown with the brambles of neglect, the travesties of truth during long ages block the way, and it is obscured by the proud contempt of self-sufficiency and with every verity distorted out of all focus. To push over the threshold alone, demands an incessant, often unrequited labor of years, and once on the other side of the entrance, the weary pilgrim has to toil up on foot, for the narrow way leads to forbidding mountain heights, unmeasured and unknown, save to those who have reached the cloud-capped summit before. Thus must he mount, step by step, having to conquer every inch of ground before him by his own exertions; moving onward, guided by strange landmarks the nature of which he can ascertain only by deciphering the weather-beaten, half-defaced inscriptions as he treads along, for woe to him, if, instead of studying them, he sits by coolly pronouncing them “indecipherable”. The “Doctrine of the Eye” is *maya*; that of the “Heart” alone, can make of him an elect.

[7.] Is it to be wondered that so few reach the goal, that so many are called, but so few are chosen? Is not the reason for this explained in three lines on page 27 of the “Voice of the Silence”? These say that while “The first repeat in pride ‘Behold, *I know*’, the last, they who in humbleness have garnered, low confess, ‘thus have I heard’”; and hence, become the only “chosen”.

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