

The Secret Doctrine: Original Genesis and the Wisdom Tradition

The Secret Doctrine is recognized by all as H. P. Blavatsky's greatest and most influential work. At the same time, it is generally regarded as a most difficult book to read; so much so that only a small minority of Theosophists have ever read it. What makes it so great, and yet so difficult; and why did Blavatsky write such a book?

The Secret Doctrine was published in 1888, thirteen years after the founding of the Theosophical Society in 1875, and three years before Blavatsky's death in 1891. The world at that time, despite the unprecedented material progress of western civilization, was spiritually in trouble. Religion and science were at odds, because the former taught blind belief, while the latter rejected anything it could not prove physically. And neither could provide sufficient guidance to stop humans from killing their neighbors. The situation was summed up by the Maha-Chohan, considered the greatest of the Tibetan teachers behind the Theosophical movement, in these words: "Between degrading superstition and still more degrading brutal materialism the white dove of truth has hardly room where to rest her weary unwelcome foot."¹ It was in this setting that H. P. Blavatsky entered the scene.

Blavatsky's first task was to show that neither religion nor science had the truth. This she did in her first major work, *Isis Unveiled*, published in 1877. Here she showed how the original truths revealed by the great religious founders had over the centuries been one by one choked out by the weeds of theological dogma. The lifeless systems of beliefs which had now replaced the original truths could not provide the sustenance needed by humanity, who then turned to that dazzling newcomer, science.

But science, said Blavatsky, however impressive, could not provide what humanity needed either, because it was confined to physical reality only, with no concern for morality or virtue. It was quite oblivious to the higher realities which alone give dignity and purpose to human life.

Blavatsky in *Isis Unveiled* not only showed that neither religion nor science had the truth, she also showed that somewhere it could yet be found. This caused much excitement. She brought out for the first time to the modern world the fact of the existence of an ancient and once universal but now hidden body of truths which she called the Wisdom Religion. She said that this once universal Wisdom Religion was the source from which all the world's religions sprang; but over time, as separativism and materialism progressed, each came to believe that its piece was the only truth. Traditions found all around the world speak of this as leaving the Golden Age and entering the Iron Age or Dark Age. Blavatsky marshalled an impressive mass of evidence from ancient writers across the globe, swelling the two large volumes of *Isis Unveiled*, to show the former existence of a Wisdom Tradition. The higher truths universally recognized by the ancients had disappeared from religion, and were beyond the ken of science; but humanity once had them. Such was the message of *Isis Unveiled*.

Isis Unveiled thus prepared the ground for the restoration of many truths from the Wisdom Tradition, that for long ages were lost to the world. Although some of these had already been brought out in *Isis Unveiled*, the bulk of them were yet to come. Further, *Isis Unveiled* was something of an experiment, and was not received as well as may have been expected. This was because, as stated by the Mahatma K.H., a book like this emanating from a woman, and also one who many believed to be a Spiritualist, "could never hope for a serious hearing."² Thus it fell to a respectable English newspaper editor, A. P. Sinnett, to attempt the first account of teachings from the Wisdom Tradition which would be taken seriously.

Sinnett was a polished writer, while Blavatsky barely knew English when she wrote *Isis Unveiled*, so that she regarded it as her most poorly written book.³ Sinnett had begun a correspon-

dence with Blavatsky's teachers, the Mahatmas K.H. and M., in 1880.⁴ His first book, *The Occult World*, published in 1881, showed the probability of the existence of human individuals who had perfected their spiritual development. These the Theosophists called Mahatmas. But it was his second book, *Esoteric Buddhism*, published in 1883, that contained the first systematic account of those truths from the Wisdom Tradition now allowed by these Mahatmas to come out. Based on the material in their letters, he constructed a coherent approximation of their system. These teachings, known to the modern world as Theosophy, provided such satisfying answers to the great problems of life that even critics were impressed. A critical newspaper article of the time had to call them "marvelous, even in this day of scientific research," going on to say: "*Esoteric Buddhism* itself is enough to set the intellectual world in commotion. It is the most philosophical method of explaining life, death and eternity yet made known, even whether we like it or not."⁵ Yet it set only a small part of the intellectual world in commotion, and that only for a time. Thus even this effort proved to be not enough. So, back to the drawing board, or in this case, the writing table. Now Blavatsky resuscitated a project begun already in 1879,⁶ which was to become her greatest work, *The Secret Doctrine*.

The Secret Doctrine is based on stanzas which Blavatsky translated from a secret "Book of Dzyan." These stanzas cover the genesis of the cosmos and the genesis of humanity. This is the core of the book. *The Secret Doctrine* also includes extensive material on symbolism, saying that this was the language universally used by the ancients, and that therefore all ancient writings must be understood in this light, and not taken literally. Finally, *The Secret Doctrine* includes much material on science, continuing to show, as she did earlier, that there exist occult forces in nature which remain unrecognized by science. Thus *The Secret Doctrine* does not treat, except incidentally, the general system which has come to be known as Theosophy, including karma, reincarnation, the seven principles of a human being, the seven planes of the cosmos, the after-death states, etc., as was outlined earlier in *Esoteric Buddhism*, and would be treated later in

Blavatsky's *The Key to Theosophy*. Why is this? Why the genesis subject matter and not the more familiar Theosophical teachings in the greatest Theosophical work?

The Secret Doctrine is referred to by Blavatsky as "this first instalment of the esoteric doctrines."⁷ For the first time we have material translated directly from an original source book of the Wisdom Tradition. *Isis Unveiled* had made known the existence of the Wisdom Tradition, but in comparison with her new book, had unveiled practically nothing of it. *Esoteric Buddhism* was based on the more or less fragmentary information received in letters from the Mahatmas, so it did not give the actual esoteric system as such.⁸ Here, for the first time, we have the real thing, at least the first instalment of it. Knowing this, we are now in a position to understand the reason for the genesis subject matter.

In explaining what is in *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky says: "Nor could the vast catalogue of the Archaic Sciences be attempted in the present volumes, before we have disposed of such tremendous problems as Cosmic and Planetary Evolution, and the gradual development of the mysterious Humanities and races that preceded our 'Adamic' Humanity."⁹ This is only logical, taking first things first; but I believe that there is more to it than appears on the surface. Blavatsky's teachers were faced with the same problem the Dalai Lama now faces in bringing out hitherto secret material. A good example of this is the *Kālacakra Tantra*. The Tibetan Buddhist Tantras, or Books of Kiu-te, were traditionally kept secret. However, the first chapter of the *Kālacakra Tantra* is on cosmology, including cosmogony or genesis. Because of its subject matter, this is the only chapter which could be openly discussed. Thus books based on this chapter and its subject matter circulated openly in Tibet, while material from the remaining four chapters was restricted. This, I believe, is the true reason for the choice of genesis as the subject matter of the stanzas translated in *The Secret Doctrine*. It was the only choice possible for the first instalment of the esoteric doctrines to be brought out directly from hitherto secret original sources.

Nonetheless, it was a quite an excellent choice. The genesis teachings of *The Secret Doctrine*, covering the origin and

development of the cosmos, and the origin and development of humanity, are unparalleled by any other such teachings found anywhere. No system is more comprehensive and self-consistent than that of *The Secret Doctrine*. No, nothing else even comes close. The greatest genesis accounts of the world are feeble in comparison. As put by the Gnostic scholar, G. R. S. Mead, in 1904, “The Stanzas set forth a cosmogenesis and anthropogenesis which, in their sweep and detail, leave far behind any existing record of such things from the past.” He further says that, “I advisedly call these passages, enshrined in her works, marvellous literary creations, not from the point of view of an enthusiast who knows nothing of Oriental literature, or the great cosmogonical systems of the past, or the Theosophy of the World Faiths, but as the mature judgment of one who has been for some twenty years studying just such subjects.”¹⁰ I can echo these words precisely, and can now add to the list of such subjects studied, the many Sanskrit works which have become available in the nearly one hundred years since he wrote this.

What is considered to be the oldest genesis account found in the East is the brief so-called “Creation Hymn” of the *Rig Veda*.¹¹ Similar accounts are found in the Upanishads, based on the Vedas.¹² A more detailed account is found in the next most authoritative source, the *Laws of Manu*.¹³ Much more elaborate accounts are then found in the various Puranas,¹⁴ which have remained the basis of most cosmogonic ideas found in Hindu India until modern times. All of these were available in translation both during the time of Blavatsky and the time of Mead. But the important Buddhist cosmological sources had not yet been published, nor had the Jaina sources.

The authoritative Jaina compendium, *Tattvārthādhigama Sūtra*, whose third chapter is on cosmology, was first published in Sanskrit from 1903 to 1905, in German in 1906, and in English in 1920.¹⁵ Further details could be found in Kundakunda’s *Pañcāstikāyasāra*, or “The Building of the Cosmos,” published in Prakrit, Sanskrit, and English in 1920.¹⁶ The Buddhist sources proved to be more difficult, because the original Buddhist tradition in India had been lost. Recognizing the importance of Vasubandhu’s fundamental source work, the *Abhidharmakośa*,

the leading Buddhist scholars of Europe jointly agreed on a plan to translate it from its Chinese and Tibetan versions. This task was finally accomplished by the great Belgian scholar, Louis de La Vallée Poussin, who published a French translation in six volumes from 1923 to 1931.¹⁷ Its Sanskrit original was not discovered until Rahula Sankrityayana's trips to Tibet in search of Sanskrit manuscripts in the 1930s, and was then published in 1947, with its Sanskrit auto-commentary following in 1967.¹⁸ Much more recently, the Kālacakra texts have become available, providing an alternative cosmology to the traditional Buddhist cosmology described in chapter three of the *Abhidharmakośa*. I have edited in Sanskrit and translated into English some of this new material for a paper comparing it with the "Book of Dzyan," presented at the first *Secret Doctrine* Symposium in 1984.¹⁹

All this material is indeed interesting, but like the previous Hindu texts, none of these Jaina or Buddhist texts proved to contain anything close to the comprehensiveness of the cosmogonic account in *The Secret Doctrine*. For example, the *Abhidharmakośa* speaks of the four modes of birth, following the words of the Buddha, as the sweat-born, the egg-born, the womb-born, and the parentless, just as *The Secret Doctrine* does.²⁰ But the detailed accounts of the earlier humanities in which these modes of birth took place, found in *The Secret Doctrine*, are absent in the now existing teachings of Buddhism. Thus Vasubandhu in his auto-commentary, and Yaśomitra in his sub-commentary, had to scramble to find explanations for these strange ideas. Since the Buddha had spoken of them, they must be true, and now needed to be explained. So the commentators came up with examples from mythology, of stories of individual humans that could be considered to have been egg-born and sweat-born; e.g., Śaila and Upaśaila were born from the eggs of a crane, and Āmrapāli was born from the stem of a banana tree.²¹ For the parentless, however, they gave the example of the humanity of the first age, or kalpa, in agreement with *The Secret Doctrine*.²² Here a fragment of the Wisdom Tradition was apparently preserved.

Thus while the general outlines of genesis have been preserved in existing works, and even some details as in the case

of the Buddha's references to the four modes of birth, the commentaries which once existed and which alone can provide the true explanations, says Blavatsky, are no longer to be found: "An immense, incalculable number of MSS., and even printed works *known to have existed, are now to be found no more.* They have disappeared without leaving the slightest trace behind them. Were they works of no importance they might, in the natural course of time, have been left to perish, and their very names would have been obliterated from human memory. But it is not so; for, as now ascertained, most of them contained the true keys to works still extant, and *entirely incomprehensible,* for the greater portion of their readers, *without those additional volumes of Commentaries and explanations.*"²³

But these works are not lost, and the esoteric schools which Blavatsky's teachers are associated with claim to have them all.²⁴ It is from these works that Blavatsky restored to humanity nothing less than the original, full and uncut version of genesis. The point of all this was to let the world know that somewhere the true answers to the great problems of life exist. Because as stated by the Maha-Chohan, from the 1881 letter quoted earlier,²⁵

To be *true*, religion and philosophy must offer the solution of every problem. That the world is in such a bad condition morally is a conclusive evidence that none of its religions and philosophies, those of the *civilised* races less than any other, have ever possessed the *truth*. The right and logical explanations on the subject of the problems of the great dual principles—right and wrong, good and evil, liberty and despotism, pain and pleasure, egotism and altruism—are as impossible to them now as they were 1881 years ago. They are as far from the solution as they ever were but,—

To these there *must* be somewhere a consistent solution, and if our doctrines will show their competence to offer it, then the world will be the first one to confess *that must* be the true philosophy, the true religion, the true light, which gives *truth* and nothing but the *truth*.

Blavatsky in *The Secret Doctrine* brought out to the world the original teachings on genesis from the Wisdom Tradition, offering a consistent solution to the great problems of cosmic and planetary evolution. Now the world could see for itself the competence of these doctrines to provide the truth. Yet the world has *not* confessed that this must be the truth. No, in more than a century, the world has not even given them a hearing.

This was not entirely unanticipated. Blavatsky wrote in the “Introductory” to *The Secret Doctrine* that, “Agreeably with the rules of critical scholarship, the Orientalist has to reject *a priori* whatever evidence he cannot fully verify for himself. . . . Therefore, the rejection of these teachings may be expected, and must be accepted beforehand. No one styling himself a ‘scholar,’ in whatever department of exact science, will be permitted to regard these teachings seriously.”²⁶ This has reference to “the most serious objection to the correctness and reliability of the whole work,”²⁷ namely, the fact that no one has seen the “Book of Dzyan” from which the Stanzas in *The Secret Doctrine* were translated. The proof which would be provided by an original manuscript of one of its Sanskrit, Tibetan, or Chinese versions²⁸ was not possible in 1888. This is made quite clear in the first sentence of the first Mahatma letter, written in 1880: “Precisely because the test of the London newspaper would close the mouths of the skeptics—it is unthinkable.”²⁹ But Blavatsky goes on to say about the teachings of *The Secret Doctrine* in the “Introductory” just quoted, “They will be derided and rejected *a priori* in this century; but only in this one. For in the twentieth century of our era scholars will begin to recognize that the *Secret Doctrine* has neither been invented nor exaggerated, but, on the contrary, simply outlined; and finally, that its teachings antedate the Vedas.”³⁰

Thus I believe that the influence of Blavatsky’s greatest work, *The Secret Doctrine*, though written more than a hundred years ago, has barely begun to be felt; and that only when an original manuscript of the “Book of Dzyan” is brought out, which may now be possible, will it take its proper place in the world. Then only will Blavatsky’s efforts in laying the foundation for the re-establishment in the world of the truths of the

Wisdom Tradition be vindicated. Blavatsky would undoubtedly care little for any personal vindication, but for the vindication of the teachings of *The Secret Doctrine*, which she believed were of the utmost benefit to humanity, she would certainly care greatly.

Notes

1. *Combined Chronology*, by Margaret Conger, Pasadena: Theosophical University Press, 1973, p. 44; *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, compiled by A. T. Barker, arranged in chronological sequence by Vicente Hao Chin, Jr., Quezon City, Metro Manila, Philippines: Theosophical Publishing House, 1993, p. 478.

2. *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, 2nd ed., London: Rider & Co., 1926, p. 50; 3rd ed., revised by Christmas Humphreys and Elsie Benjamin, Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1962, p. 50; chronological ed., 1993, p. 67.

3. See: "My Books," in *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, vol. XIII, Wheaton, Illinois: Theosophical Publishing House, 1982, pp. 191-202; especially pp. 191-92: "Of all the books I have put my name to, this particular one is, in literary arrangement, the worst and most confused."

4. This correspondence was published as *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, first edition in 1923, and subsequent editions as given in notes 1 and 2 above. The original letters are now held in the British Museum.

5. From: "Our Theosophists," *The Daily Examiner*, San Francisco, July 1, 1888, quoted in *The Dawning of the Theosophical Movement*, by Michael Gomes, Wheaton, Illinois: Theosophical Publishing House, 1987, p. 150.

6. See: Boris de Zirkoff's "Historical Introduction: How 'The Secret Doctrine' Was Written," in the *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings* edition of *The Secret Doctrine*, Adyar, Madras, Theosophical Publishing House, 1978, pp. [1-2], where he quotes Col. H. S. Olcott's *Old Diary Leaves*, series II, p. 90, on this.

7. *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. I, p. xxxvii.

8. Indeed, the Mahatma K.H., writing in 1884, refers to "the real

vital errors in *Esoteric Buddhism*,” and goes on to say that, “The *Secret Doctrine* will explain many things, set to right more than one perplexed student.” See: *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, 2nd ed., p. 357; 3rd ed., p. 351; chron. ed., p. 428. Two sections of *The Secret Doctrine* are in fact devoted to correcting these early Theosophical misconceptions. See: *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. I, pp. 152-191.

9. *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. I, p. xlii.

10. “Concerning H.P.B. (Stray Thoughts on Theosophy),” by G. R. S. Mead, *Adyar Pamphlets*, no. 111, Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1920, p. 16; reprinted from *The Theosophical Review*, vol. XXXIV, April 1904, pp. 130-144.

11. *Rig Veda* 10.129. Most of this hymn in Max Müller’s translation is given on p. 26 of vol. I of *The Secret Doctrine*, facing the opening of the seven stanzas on cosmic evolution translated from the Book of Dzyan. A few other hymns from the *Rig Veda* can also be considered cosmogonic, including the well-known “Hymn to the Cosmic Person,” 10.90, and hymns 10.72, 10.81, 10.82, and 10.121.

12. See, for example, the *Aitareya Upanishad*, which begins: “The self, verily, was (all) this, one only, in the beginning.” (S. Radhakrishnan translation.) Blavatsky had referred to this in an early draft of the three fundamental propositions of *The Secret Doctrine*, in a sentence not found in the published book, regarding the first proposition: “In the *Aitareya Upanishad* this Principle is referred to as the SELF, the only one—as just shown.” See the facsimile reproduction of this page in Boris de Zirkoff’s “Historical Introduction,” cited in note 6 above, p. [36].

13. The *Laws of Manu*, a book of law, provides a genesis account in its first chapter. Compare *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. I, p. 333, regarding this chapter: “But there is, directly following these verses, something more important for us, as it corroborates entirely our esoteric teachings. From verse 14 to 36, evolution is given in the order described in the Esoteric philosophy. This cannot be easily gainsaid.”

14. Among the eighteen major purāṇas, the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* is often thought to be the most representative of the traditional fivefold subject matter of a purāṇa, including genesis. H. H. Wilson’s translation of the *Vishṇu Purāṇa*, which also includes extensive annotations from the other purāṇas, was much quoted by Blavatsky in *The Secret Doctrine*.

15. Sanskrit edition: *Tattvārthādhigama* by *Umāsvāti*, ed. Mody Keshavlal Premchand, Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1903-1905, Bibliotheca Indica 159; German translation: “Eine Jaina-Dogmatik. Umāsvāti’s Tattvārthādhigama Sūtra,” trans. Hermann Jacobi, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morganländischen Gesellschaft*, vol. 60, 1906, pp. 287-325, 512-551; English translation: *Tattvarthadhigama Sutra (A Treatise on the Essential Principles of Jainism)*, trans. J. L. Jaini, Arrah: Central Jaina Publishing House, 1920, Bibliotheca Jainica, Sacred Books of the Jainas 2. Two more English translations have since been published in India, and now one in the West: *That Which Is—Tattvārtha Sūtra*, trans. Nathmal Tatia, San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994.

16. *The Building of the Cosmos, or Pañchāstikāyasāra (the Five Cosmic Constituents)*, ed. and trans. A. Chakravartinayanar, Arrah: Central Jaina Publishing House, 1920, Bibliotheca Jainica, Sacred Books of the Jainas 3.

17. *L’Abhidharmakośa de Vasubandhu*, trans. Louis de la Vallée Poussin, 6 vols., Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1923-1931, Société Belge d’Études Orientales. Poussin’s French translation has now been translated into English by Leo M. Pruden as *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*, 4 vols., Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1988-1990. Poussin had previously published separately its third chapter, on cosmology, in his *Bouddhisme: Études et Matériaux—Cosmologie*, 1919.

18. The *Abhidharmakośa* was first edited in Sanskrit by V. V. Gokhale, and published in *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, new series, vol. 22, 1946, pp. 73-102, with an emendation in vol. 23, 1947, p. 12. Its auto-commentary, or *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*, was edited in Sanskrit by P. Pradhan, Patna: K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute, 1967, Tibetan Sanskrit Works Series 8, with a second revised edition in 1975.

19. “New Light on the Book of Dzyan,” by David Reigle, in *Symposium on H. P. Blavatsky’s Secret Doctrine: Proceedings*, San Diego: Wizards Bookshelf, 1984, pp. 54-67. [See above, pp. 25-41.] Since then a book surveying the Abhidharma and the Kālacakra cosmologies, and also the Mahāyāna cosmology of the *Flower Ornament Scripture (Avataṃsaka Sūtra)* and other sūtras, as well as the Dzog-chen cosmology, has been published: *Myriad Worlds: Buddhist Cosmology in Abhidharma, Kālacakra, and Dzog-chen*, by Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö

Tayé, Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1995. The Mahāyāna cosmology had earlier been described, drawing on the *Mahā-prajñāpāramitā Śāstra*, the *Lotus Sūtra (Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra)*, and the Pure Land or *Sukhāvātī-vyūha Sūtra*, in comparison with the Abhidharma cosmology, in *Buddhist Cosmology*, by Randy Kloetzli, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983. The Mahāyāna cosmology has again been described, from the *Flower Garland Sūtra (Avataṃsaka Sūtra)* and the *Sukhāvātī-vyūha Sūtra*, in comparison with the Abhidharma cosmology, in *Buddhist Cosmology*, by Akira Sadakata, Tokyo: Kōsei Publishing Co., 1997.

20. *Abhidharmakośa* and *bhāṣyam*, 3.8-9.

21. *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam* and *vyākhyā* on 3.9.

22. *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam* 3.9: “upapādukāḥ punaḥ prāthama-kalpikāḥ.”

23. *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. I, p. xxv. Similarly, half of the contents of the Upanishads are said by Blavatsky to have been eliminated, so that, “They CONTAIN *the beginning and the end of all human knowledge, but they have now ceased to REVEAL it*, since the day of Buddha.”—*The Secret Doctrine*, vol. I, p. 270.

- 24. “The members of several esoteric schools—the seat of which is beyond the Himālayas, and whose ramifications may be found in China, Japan, India, Tibet, and even in Syria, besides South America—claim to have in their possession the *sum total* of sacred and philosophical works in MSS. and type: . . .” *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. I, p. xxiii.

25. *Combined Chronology*, p. 47; *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, chron. ed., p. 480.

26. *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. I, p. xxxvii.

27. *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. I, p. xxii.

28. Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese glosses on the Book of Dzyan are referred to in *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. I, p. 23, and in a letter by Blavatsky, quoted in Boris de Zirkoff’s “Historical Introduction,” p. [29].

29. *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, all eds., p. 1. This has reference to a test proposed by Sinnett, to produce one day’s edition of the London *Times* in Simla, India, on the same day it came out in London. London and Simla were at least a month apart by communication other than telegraph in 1880. This would prove that the

phenomena produced by Blavatsky were genuine, and therefore that her Mahatma teachers really did have secret knowledge. The letter goes on to explain why such a proof was unthinkable.

30. *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. I, p. xxxvii.

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