

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky



At a time when spiritualism was the subject of widespread discussion in America, a group of serious-minded men and women came together in the apartments of H.P. Blavatsky in New York to share a common interest not only in the topic of the day but in a wide variety of intriguing subjects. These, according to the records of the meetings, ranged from mediumship and magical phenomena to contemporary scientific discoveries, curiosities of nature and the beliefs and practices of ancient civilisation. At one of these meetings, the question was asked: "Would it not be a good thing to form a Society for this kind of study?" The date was September 7th 1875.

In the course of the next few weeks, the formal organisation of the society proceeded with the election of officers, recording of minutes, passing of resolutions, and so on, until on the 17th

November the President-elect – Col. Olcott, delivered his Inaugural Address and the Theosophical Society was thus fully constituted. This date has ever since been celebrated as the date of the Society's formation. Of the persons present at the preliminary meetings, those who remained to firmly establish the Theosophical Society included Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (President), Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (Recording Secretary) and William Quan Judge.

Over the last hundred years, the modern theosophical movement has divided into several separate organisations, each of which seeks to fulfil the Society's objectives in its own way and with its own emphasis. *"Theosophy, on earth, is like the white ray of the spectrum, and like every religion is only one of the seven prismatic colours. Ignoring all the others, and cursing them as false, every special coloured ray claims not only priority, but to be that white ray itself, and anathematises even its own tints from light to dark, as heresies. Yet, as the sun of truth rises higher and higher on the horizon of man's perception, and each coloured ray gradually fades out until it is finally reabsorbed in its turn, humanity will at last be cursed no longer with artificial polarizations, but will find itself bathing in the pure colourless sunlight of eternal truth. And this will be Theosophia."* (Key to Theosophy).

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky was a remarkable woman who has made a great impact on the thought of the Western world. In her own day, she was controversial because of her remarkable abilities of extrasensory perception, her forthright and outspoken nature, and her fearless attacks on hypocrisy and bigotry. Even today, she continues to be the centre of curiosity and attention as the precursor of "new" ideas. Her great metaphysical knowledge is embodied in her literary work, which has directly or indirectly influenced

inquiring minds all over the world. She was born at Ekaterinoslav in Russia at midnight between 30 and 31 July 1831. Her father, Colonel Peter Hahn, came of a noble family originally of Mecklenburg, Germany, which had settled in Russia for some 300 years. Her mother's family, also of noble lineage, traced its origins to a ninth century ancestor. She was a talented pianist, and as a young girl, played in London with Clara Schumann and Arabelle Goddard. In 1848, when she was seventeen, she married General Blavatsky, a very elderly man, from whom she soon separated.

From earliest childhood she attracted attention with her ability to produce psychic phenomena at will and her clairvoyant faculty was such that, even as a child, she was consulted by the nobility about their private affairs and by the police regarding crimes committed. Yet she was not interested in such powers for their own sake, but for the principles and laws of nature that govern them. She became a student of metaphysical lore and travelled to many lands, in search of hidden knowledge. These were extraordinary travels for a lone woman in the nineteenth century. During 1848 and 1849, she studied magic in Egypt with an aged Copt and joined 'The Druses of Lebanon,' a secret society. She was present with Garibaldi at the battle of Mentana in 1849 and 'was picked out of a ditch for dead with her left arm broken in two places, musket balls embedded in right shoulder and leg, and a stiletto wound in the heart.'

When walking with her father in London in 1851, she saw a tall and stately Rajput whom she recognised as a Protector known in her visions from childhood. He spoke to her of a future work she was to do under His direction after preparation in the East. In 1852-54 she attempted to enter Tibet, but was not successful until 1867-70. During the intervening period, she made contact with spiritualism, learned to 'bring under her control her marvellous power to produce phenomena at will,' and engaged in 'several commercial enterprises' (a trade in high class woods, and as head of an artificial flower factory, etc.). In Tibet, she learned, we are told, to manipulate occult forces. In Cairo in 1871 she made an unsuccessful attempt to found a spiritual society upon the basis of phenomena. Then as 'Madame Laura,' she gave concert tours in Italy and Russia. In 1873 she lived with her brother in Paris, painting and writing (in addition to her other accomplishments she was a fine artist and a very clever caricaturist).

HPB refers to an ancient Fraternity of Adepts or 'Brothers', which exists as a perennial source for the preserving and recording of the events and facts of the history of religions and philosophical evolution in the world. The Theosophical Movement is declared to be Their inspiration, and HPB claimed only to be their "agent-messenger" and their student. Whilst in Paris she received peremptory 'orders' from 'the Brothers' to go to New York to await instructions. She landed on 7 July 1873, without personal funds, having exchanged her first-class passage to steerage class (the cheapest), in order to buy a steerage class ticket for a poor woman with children who had been swindled. Although she had in her trunk 23,000 francs entrusted to her by her Master, she earned her living by working for a maker of cravats. Still acting under orders, she finally took the money to the town of Buffalo and gave it to an unknown man, just in time to prevent him from committing suicide! An unsuccessful business venture in a Long Island Farm, used up the 1,000 rouble legacy she had received on the death of her father.

In 1874 she was ‘ordered’ to go to the Eddy homestead in Chittenden, which was the scene of various occult phenomena being investigated by Colonel H.S. Olcott. There they worked together and founded, with William Quan Judge and others, The Theosophical Society. ‘Isis Unveiled’, her magnificent attack upon the materialism of religion and science, was published in 1877. She sent the first proceeds together with money received for her various articles, published by Russian newspapers and journals, to the Red Cross in Russia to help her compatriots wounded in the Russo-Turkish war. On 8 July 1878, she became an American citizen; the first Russian woman to do so. Later that year, acting ‘under orders,’ she and Olcott sailed for India; they landed in Bombay in February 1879. In 1880 the two founders toured Sri Lanka on behalf of Buddhism, themselves becoming Buddhists on 19 May 1881. In 1882 they established the headquarters of the Theosophical Society at Adyar, near Madras. This remains the international headquarters for the Society, which is now established in over fifty countries around the world.

She made various tours of India between her arrival in 1879 and her visit to Europe in 1884, and in the absence of the Founders, came the one-sided report of the Society for Psychical Research (S.P.R.), in an attempt to show her up as an impostor. Since then, the S.P.R. has retracted the allegations against her. Despite the intervention of her Guru to restore her health, she deteriorated and was unable to remain at Adyar for more than a short visit later that year. In Wurzburg she worked at ‘The Secret Doctrine’, whose real authors, according to Countess Wachtmeister, were the Adepts. As with *Isis Unveiled*, the Adepts collected the material and passed it before the inner gaze of H.P.B. In 1887 at Ostend, H.P.B. fell very ill but made another strange recovery explaining that she had ‘elected’ to work for a few more years in her suffering body. By invitation, she moved to London which then became the centre of the Theosophical work in Europe. In this she was assisted by occasional visits of the President-Founder (Colonel Olcott).

In 1888 the first two volumes of her magnum opus, *The Secret Doctrine*, were published. Much of the knowledge in this book and her other writings was derived from Eastern teachers, with whom she came in touch early in life. In response to the many questions from inquirers, she issued ‘The Key to Theosophy’, and for those seeking to practice theosophy’s altruistic ideals, ‘The Voice of the Silence’, aphorisms embodying the heart of Mahayana Buddhist teaching.

She died on 8 May 1891 in London. Her ashes were divided between New York, India, and London, and some are interred under her statue in Adyar. In her will she requested that each year, on the anniversary of her death, her friends should assemble and read from *The Light of Asia* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. By Colonel Olcott’s wish, this anniversary came to be known as ‘White Lotus Day.’

Colonel Olcott summed up the secret of H.P.B.’s remarkable power in producing swift changes in the lives of those about her as due to:

Her amazing occult knowledge and phenomena-working powers, together with her relation to the hidden Masters.

Her sparkling talents, especially as a conversationalist with her social accomplishments, wide travels, and extraordinary adventures, her insight into problems of philology, racial origins, fundamental bases of religions, and keys to old mysteries and symbols.

Unflinching self-consecration to the Great Ones irradiated the life of H.P.B. and she will ever be known as the 'Light-Bringer' of the nineteenth Century.