

THE PATTERN AND THE LAW

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I have been invited to write on ‘*The Secret Doctrine*’ and the contribution made by its author to world thought. As this involves an approach illustrated by personal experience rather than the usual objectivity of scholarship, I have chosen as material the twin doctrines which most appealed to me when I read the two volumes of the first edition. These interrelated themes are what I call the purpose or meaning of life, and the living and intelligent law which pervades and controls the smallest part of it. These are but two doctrines from the great store of such to be found in these volumes, yet the whole work is but an outline-drawing of the Tree of Wisdom of which all religions, large and small, are but the branches and the leaves.

How vast indeed is the “accumulated wisdom of the ages” which H. P. Blavatsky gave to the world, being as much as might be told! As she herself wrote, it would be for the twentieth century [*and beyond*] to prove the claims it sets out, and she claimed no more authority for them than is inherent in the system itself, and the intuition of the student who finds it to be true.

None of The Secret Doctrine is to be viewed as revelation, either revealed by HPB or by the Masters who taught her all she knew. This body of teaching is indeed the “accumulated wisdom of the ages,” tested and verified by generations of those who have mastered it. All these truths have been checked and re-experienced, in principle and in detail, by the independent research of hundreds of self-perfected men. These Masters of the Wisdom form what HPB called a guardian wall about humanity, and they, its servants, teach such men and groups of men, as the centuries go by, those portions which they may be trusted to use in the service of humanity. We have much of the teaching in the very words of two of them, in The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett, from which we glean not only an outline of the Wisdom but the life which must be led to gain it and the sacrifice of self which this entails. For them the wisdom is the law. For them wisdom and

compassion are one, to know and to teach, to experience and to apply.

What did they teach, through their chosen instrument H. P. Blavatsky? That the universe is totally a manifestation, projection, expression or, in Eastern imagery, a breathing out of That which can never be known to human faculty nor fully described. In the Proem to The Secret Doctrine the author called it “Beness,” for Being is its child. For lack of better words she wrote of “an Omnipresent, Eternal, Boundless and Immutable Principle, on which all speculation is impossible since it transcends the power of human conception and could only be dwarfed by any human expression or similitude.” Yet if we may not know it as Beness, we know it as that which it becomes, the One, the penultimate but not the ultimate goal of spiritual aspiration. As a Zen master put it, “When all is reduced to the One to what is the One reduced?” The Theosophist would answer: “the Absolute”; the Hindu, “That”; the Christian mystic, in the words of Eckhart, “Gottheit, ‘Godness’ beyond God”; and the Buddhist metaphysician-mystic, “Sunyata, the Void.” Only then comes the first shadow of two-ness, when the “non-duality” (Not Two, Not One) of Zen Buddhism descends to be Two. It follows, of profound importance, that even “absolute, abstract space,” pure subjectivity, and “absolute abstract Motion,” the primordial opposites, are illusion, and when That breathes in, the universe it once breathed out will cease to be.

For one young reader this was a light blazing in the darkness, deep satisfaction for the questing mind and food for a heart that yearned, it knew not why, to serve the Masters of the Wisdom in their service of mankind. It refused – I look back with amusement at my fierce announcement – to begin a new life without at least some understanding of what it was all about. Why make a living, have a family, be successful among men, grow old and die unless the whole round of tedious activity made sense? When I learned that this was a part, however small, in a process of infinite becoming whose end and conscious purpose was a return to That from which, with all the universe, it came, I had my answer in The Secret Doctrine, and was and am content.

For if all in manifestation is One then humanity is one, and I did not need the Stanzas of Dzyan to tell me how and why. And the smallest form of life, whether seen or unseen, of the size of an atom or a solar system, is equally and all of it alive – all me, all other-me, all no-me in its own unique, supernal purposes.

But One is static, and I saw why Two was needed. For “God” as Absolute could not know himself as “God” unless he ceased to be God, the All. To be consciously whole he had to be less than whole. Two-ness was the

visible witness to the One and the proof of it; and the tension of twoness, with all the hell of suffering which its very existence entails, is essential if the One is to begin to move consciously on the journey back to its essential non-duality.

But two is literally inconceivable; no man can conceive just two. There must be relationship, and Fohat, the aspect of the one Life-Principle which applies, as it were, life to form, is an ancient name for the third of that Trinity which is the basis of manifestation.

For me much followed from these premises. There is tension in the universe; there must therefore be tension in me. The god in the animal has its noble desires and the will to ascend; the animal prefers its animality. But here was good and evil for me to understand and the mutual need of both. That there is absolute truth unattainable as yet, and relative truth to be known here and now was also apparent; and that the universe in its unborn essence alone is Real, and that all that we know by the senses and the thinking mind, samsara, is maya, illusion.

But all this, though to me a living reality of vision, was still remote, a plan or pattern dimly perceived but not yet usable. It needed the second affirmation in the Proem of The Secret Doctrine to set the vast machinery in motion, to turn a blackboard design into dynamic use. This is “the absolute universality of the law of periodicity, of flux and reflux, ebb and flow” or, in Buddhist terms the alternation of the opposites, which move in an infinite, that is, unmeasurable round of cycles large and small, from the breathing out and in of That to the “birth, growth, decay and death” of an amoeba. Even as my own life moved in a daily and yearly rhythm within the larger cycle of youth, maturity, and decay, so empires rose and fell, worlds were made and unmade, the unmeasured units of astronomical science moved in their own brain-staggering round of evolution and involution, “world without end.”

But I was still unsatisfied. I still felt negative. I was a unit, albeit an essential part of the whole, to which things happened in the course of a process I could dimly perceive but in no way influence. I needed some other truth, some fresh proposition which the intellect would seize from the grasp of intuition and make its own. I found it in the Hindu-Buddhist doctrine, re-proclaimed by HPB at its own supernal level, of karma, the living, intelligent, all-pervading law of justice absolute.

Karma is a truth of many meanings. The word means action, in the sense of action/reaction as equal and opposite, and was already old in the Buddha's time. In the Bridhadaranyaka Upanishad it is spoken of as a mighty secret which only the initiated might safely know. But the Buddha, as with much more of the ancient wisdom, made it available to all mankind as the law of moral responsibility, involving retribution for evil deeds and merit for good. In the Pali Canon the whole process by which the one life-force uses a succession of forms is described as karma in action; and the “self,” which to the Theosophists is the unreal not-self, has been called by Pali scholars “a discrete continuum of karmic impulse.”

Christmas Humphreys, ‘Toby’, wrote various works on Mahayana Buddhism and Theosophy. In the early 20th century he was the best-known British convert to Buddhism, founding what became the London Buddhist Society (in 1924); which was a leading influence on the growth of the Buddhist tradition in Britain. His ‘day job’ was as a barrister and later a famous judge at the Old Bailey. Of his autobiographical work, ‘Both Sides of the Circle’, he said that it:

“contains more truth than I can explain, even to myself... there are two sides to everything, even a circle, for the universe is built upon duality. Yet every pair of opposites is more than the two sides of a coin. It is, and never ceases to be the One from which both came. This Oneness is the Centre which, abiding nowhere, is each point of its circumference. Here is mystery, in a world of intuitive awareness to which, one day, knowingly, we shall arrive”.

Abridged from The American Theosophist, Special Spring Issue 1969. Reprinted in the Theosophical Magazine ‘Esoterica’ as a small tribute to Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, in commemoration of the 125th anniversary of her death on 8th May 1891. (‘Esoterica’ Summer Edition 2016, Vol 7. No 2.).