

The Eyes to See: Working on *The Secret Doctrine* Index

by Jim Belderis

It was extremely frustrating. Everyone I worked with was a student of *The Secret Doctrine* -- but I found it too confusing to read. How could a beginning student make sense out of so many different ideas? Religious teachings, philosophical concepts, scientific theories -- there were thousands of them scattered over 1,500 pages. Trying to understand each of them separately was difficult enough, but finding out what they all had to do with each other seemed an impossible task.

But then I came upon an extraordinary article, a reprint of "The 'Secret Doctrine' and Its Study" by Robert Bowen, one of H. P. Blavatsky's students in London. (Published in *Sunrise*, August/September 1985; also included in *An Invitation to The Secret Doctrine*, Theosophical University Press, Pasadena, 1988.) In it he recalls how HPB advised her students not to read *The Secret Doctrine* page by page. Instead she selected important sections that one needed to study first, especially the "Three Fundamental Principles" in the Proem. Then she indicated that it does not matter so much what is studied in the *SD* as long as the mind holds fast to four basic ideas:

- 1) Existence is fundamentally One Being.
- 2) Everything that exists is alive.
- 3) The great cosmic workings of nature all operate within us.
- 4) The operation of every level of existence, high or low, has its reflection in every other level of life.

These four guidelines transformed my confusion into a new world of understanding. Every teaching presented in *The Secret Doctrine* is describing some aspect of One Living Being. Every aspect can be interpreted in different ways, but all of them can be traced back to the same fundamental principles. And to gain deeper insight into these great cosmic teachings, we need to have a sense that they are working within us.

All of this suggested a special way of studying *The Secret Doctrine*: whatever concept engages us, its real value lies in our effort to trace it back to the most basic principles -- and to ourselves. Of course the ideal aid to such a study would be an *SD* index that would especially lend itself to connecting its subjects to fundamental ideas. Fortunately, there were others who had already thought along these lines, for such an index was actually being prepared. And in an ironical twist of fate, this student -- who had found *The Secret Doctrine* too confusing to read -- was called on to read the *SD* several hours a day to verify what the compiler was indexing.

The compiler was John P. Van Mater, head librarian of the Theosophical University Library (1971-1995). He had begun this work in 1979, and it became

his major occupation for almost two decades. He started by making his own index. Then he consulted an unpublished index compiled by Dr. Gertude W. van Pelt, an extensive index prepared by Boris de Zirkoff, and another compiled by the United Lodge of Theosophists. What sustained him through all those years was a continued fascination with *The Secret Doctrine* itself. Its teachings had become such a universal source of inspiration that he believed their relevance could be seen in every aspect of life "by those who have eyes to see it." And in his own way, he was trying to make an index that would help future students "see" the universality of the ancient wisdom.

Assisting him in this effort was a staff of typesetters, proofreaders, and editors. More than 40,000 entries were checked several times over -- to verify volume and page numbers, which follow the *SD's* original 1888 edition, and to match up major subject entries with thousands of cross-references. The work has also involved identifying foreign terms by language, and most of these now appear with a one- or two-word definition, along with their modern transliterations and their spellings from the original edition. And to complete the project, an Appendix was compiled in which translations and references are given for foreign phrases.

The result of all this work has now been published. As a comprehensive index, it is designed to provide ready access to the *SD's* voluminous subject matter, a vast quantity of material from many cultures and disciplines. But how does it lend itself to HPB's guidelines for studying *The Secret Doctrine*? How does it help to make the perennial philosophy so relevant that we are given "the eyes to see"? It does so by being an index of fundamental ideas as well as subjects. Moreover, it has an abundance of cross-references connecting teachings from different religions, philosophical concepts, and scientific theories. But most importantly, it continually refers us to the most essential principles of being -- including our own.