

The "Secret Doctrine" and Its Study

by P.G.B. Bowen

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 ([1](#))

"H.P.B." was especially 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.

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: --

"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.

(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.

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.

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. Follow that up

by study of the Recapitulation -- the numbered items in the Summing Up to Vol. I. (Part 1.). Then take the Preliminary Notes (Vol. II.) and the Conclusion (Vol. II.).

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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:

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

(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.

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.

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.

(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.

(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.

(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.

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.

No matter what one takes as study in the S.D. one must correlate it with those basic ideas.

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.

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.

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.

(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 imagine 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).

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.

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.

(Sgd.) Robert Bowen, Cmdr. R.N.
19th April, 1891.

FOOTNOTE:

1. Reprinted from *Theosophy in Ireland* (II: 1), January-March, 1932.