

Blavatsky and Buddhism

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Chapter One

Investigating H.P. Blavatsky

Overview

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891) has been a highly controversial—not to say inflammatory—figure in Western scholarship and culture ever since she first launched the Theosophical Movement in New York City, 1875. Claiming that she was instructed by certain “Mahatmas,” allegedly Indo-Tibetan sages, to bring Eastern wisdom to the West, H.P. Blavatsky (or HPB) wrote voluminously and traveled extensively, taking Buddhist vows (*pansil*) in Sri Lanka and claiming initiation in Tibet. Meanwhile she worked feverishly to set up a publishing and teaching network around the globe for the spread of Theosophy, which she also referred to as the “Wisdom Tradition.”

Blavatsky’s contribution to a Western understanding of Eastern thought is ambiguous, and public opinion of her is polarized. Those who notice Blavatsky’s work at all either admire it or despise it; few observers take a middle ground. How is one to understand the confusion, devotion and loathing surrounding HPB? This paper begins by reviewing various superficial views of Blavatsky in order to highlight the special problems

confronting the researcher. Then, a methodology is laid out by which HPB's publications may be studied in relation to those of her contemporaries. In this way, a more thorough understanding of her motives and methods will emerge, sharply distinguishing her from Western scholars, missionaries, and colonialists. Finally, by carefully comparing Blavatsky's Buddhistic teachings and assertions to primary sources (*sûtras*, *tantras* and commentaries), HPB's unique and troublesome contribution to Buddhist studies can be ascertained.

The Need for Such a Study

Because Blavatsky is so widely maligned among academics, and so widely dismissed as a shallow fraud who merits no further attention, one feels in the first place the need to justify a study of her life and work. Madame Blavatsky's influence on 19th and 20th century culture, East and West, may be measured in part by the long list of her ardent followers and students. These include, to name a few, Mohandas Gandhi,¹ Jawaharlal Nehru, S. Radhakrishnan (President of India), C. Jinarajadasa (Sanskritist), Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein,² Dharmapala Anagarika (Sri Lankan

¹ Gandhi joined the Theosophical Society in London at the Blavatsky Lodge, March 26, 1891. (Pyarelal Nair, *Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 1: *The Early Years*. Ahmedabad: Navajian Publishing House, 1965, p. 259. Theosophists gave Mahatma Gandhi his first copy of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which was to become so important in his later life.

² Quoted in Sylvia Cranston, *HPB: The Extraordinary Life and Influence of Helena Blavatsky*. New York, Putnam, 1993, p. xx fn 11 and 12. Apparently Einstein's niece visited the Theosophical World Headquarters in Adyar, Madras. "She had to see the place because her uncle always had a copy of Madama Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine* on his desk. The same event is reported by Iverson Harris, *The Journal of San Diego History*, San Diego Historical Society, (Summer 1974) p. 16.

Buddhist reformer), George Russell (or AE), William James, E.M. Forster, William Butler Yeats, L. Frank Baum, Christmas Humphreys (Buddhologist), Edward Conze, Nicholas Flammarion (French astronomer), Sir William Crookes (chemist and physicist), Piet Mondrian, Maurice Maeterlinck (playwright), Wassily Kandinsky, Gustav Mahler, Annie Besant (founder of the Indian National Congress), Rudolf Steiner (founder of Waldorf schools and new agricultural methods) and Krishnamurti (philosopher). A recent volume contains over fifty paeans to Blavatsky from lesser known persons.³

Yet HPB's detractors are also many, even those who one might assume would be supportive of her paranormal proclivities. Investigated by Richard Hodgson for the Society for Psychical Research in 1885, Blavatsky was declared at the end of his 200 page report nothing more than a clever fraud:

For our part we regard her neither as the mouthpiece of hidden seers, nor as a mere vulgar adventuress; we think that she has achieved a title to permanent remembrance as one of the most accomplished, ingenious and interesting impostors in history.⁴

Spiritualists, both Christian and agnostic, had long quarreled with HPB over reincarnation, as well as her refusal to admit that there was any communication with the souls of the dead in spiritualistic scéances. After the

³ Caldwell, Daniel, ed. *The Occult World of Madame Blavatsky*. (Tucson AZ: Impossible Dream Publications, 1991).

⁴ Society for Psychical Research. "Report on the Committee Appointed to Investigate Phenomena Connected with the Theosophical Society," *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, vol. 3. London: 1885, pp. 201-400. Controversy from within and without the SPR has followed this report since its publication, and in 1986, the SPR issued a lengthy press release entitled, "Madame Blavatsky, Co-Founder of the Theosophical Society was Unjustly Condemned, New Study Concludes." This new study was by Vernon Harrison of the

SPR exposé, most spiritualists still remaining within the Theosophical Society left in droves.⁵

Likewise, most academics in her time regarded H.P.B. as a dilettante and distorter of genuine Eastern religions. In 1893 Max Müller wrote a long and contemptuous review of Blavatsky's attempt to "found a religion" called "Esoteric Buddhism." Here, the preeminent Orientalist of the nineteenth century laid out what was and was *not* the real Buddhism, and how seriously Blavatsky had blundered in this regard.

Müller begins by noting HPB's "great shrewdness" in making the source of her doctrines 'esoteric' and in claiming that she drew from a secret and apparently oral tradition. He writes, " 'Gautama,' we are assured, 'had a doctrine for his "elect" and another for the outside masses'." But rather than acknowledge the fact that all Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions make the same claim, Müller compares Blavatsky's statements to those of "Ctesias as to a race of people who used their ears as sheets to sleep in."

If I were asked what Madame Blavatsky's Esoteric Buddhism really is, I should say it was Buddhism misunderstood, distorted, caricatured. There is nothing in it beyond what was known already, chiefly from books that are now antiquated.... I cannot give a better explanation of the change of Brahmanism into Buddhism than by stating that Buddhism was the highest Brahmanism popularised, everything esoteric being abolished.... Whatever was esoteric or secret was *ipso facto* not Buddha's teaching; whatever was Buddha's teaching was *ipso facto* not esoteric....⁶

SPR (not a Theosophist): "J'Accuse: An Examination of the Hodgson Report of 1885," *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, London, April 1986, vol. 53, pp. 286-310.

⁵ Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and psychical research in England, 1850-1914*, chapter five *passim*.

⁶ "Esoteric Buddhism," *Nineteenth Century* Vol. 33 (May 1893) pp. 775-781.

At which point Müller quotes very well-known passages from the—*nota bene*—Pali canon, demonstrating the complete absence of all esotericism in Buddha's teaching. Nor are there any hidden manuscripts: "The fact is, that there is no longer any secret about Sanskrit literature, and I believe that we in England know as much about it as most native scholars."⁷ Müller goes on to show how, unlike Madame Blavatsky, the Buddha despised all miracles except one, that of confession.

And when his own disciples come to him asking to be allowed to perform the ordinary magic miracles, he forbids them to do so, but allows them to perform one miracle only, which everybody could, but nobody does, perform, namely, to confess our sins, and again not in secret, not in a confessional, but publicly and before the whole congregation. If Madame Blavatsky would have tried to perform that one true Buddhist miracle, if she had tried to confess openly her small faults and indiscretions ... [she] might still [have done] some good.⁸

Finally, Müller candidly admits the great paucity of European knowledge regarding Buddhism, "particularly with regard to what is called the Mahāyāna, or Northern Buddhism." But according to this scholar, as according to all nineteenth century scholars, the locus of true wisdom is in the stable and printed text, not in a living (and sometimes ambiguous) tradition:

There are still several of the recognised canonical books of the Northern Buddhism, the Nine Dharmas, of which the manuscripts are beyond our reach, or which frighten even the

⁷ "Esoteric Buddhism" p. 767.

⁸ "Esoteric Buddhism," p 784.

most patient students by their enormous bulk. In that sense Madame Blavatsky would be quite right—that there is a great deal of Buddhism of which European scholars know nothing. But we need not go to Madame Blavatsky or to her Mahâtmas in Tibet in order to know this, and it is certainly not from her books that we should derive our information of the Mahāyāna literature. We should go to the manuscripts in our libraries, even in the Bodleian [Oxford], in order to do what all honest Mahâtmas have to do, copy the manuscripts, collate them, and translate them.⁹

Despite his obvious Christian leanings, despite the fact that Buddhism became “corrupted and vulgarised when it became the religion of barbarous or semi-barbarous people in Tibet, China and Mongolia,” yet Müller writes that “I love the Buddha and admire Buddhist morality” and because of this, he cannot remain silent, and must put down Blavatskyism, especially when “the number of her followers ... has become so large in India, and particularly in Ceylon.”¹⁰ Müller’s academic exposé culminated what had been a long and sustained attack by Orientalists on HPB’s productions, and few academics have taken her seriously since.

Nevertheless, Blavatsky has remained popular in some quarters and her work has played no small part in inspiring the New Age movement of the current *fin-de-siècle*. And thus HPB’s “amateurish” production continues to frustrate professional students of Asia. In his article, “Fictitious Tibet: The Origin and Persistence of Rampaism,” Agehananda Bharati apparently speaks for all scholars in once again attacking Blavatsky, claiming that her work

⁹ “Esoteric Buddhism,” pp. 786-7.

¹⁰ “Esoteric Buddhism,” p. 772.

culminates in the ridiculous output of *The Third Eye* and its sequels by "Lama Lobsang Rampa," (actually one Cyril Henry Hoskin):

Mme. Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine*, a multivolume work, is such a melee of horrendous hogwash and of fertile inventions of inane esoterica, that any Buddhist and Tibetan scholar is justified to avoid mentioning it in any context. But it is precisely because serious scholars haven't mentioned this opus that it should be dealt with in a serious publication and in one whose readers are deeply concerned with the true representation of Tibetan lore. In other words, since Blavatsky's work has had signal importance in the genesis and perpetuation of a widespread, weird, fake, and fakish pseudo-Tibetica and pseudo-Buddhica, and since no Tibetologist or Buddhologist would touch her writings with a long pole ... it behooves an anthropologist who works in the Buddhist and Tibetan field to do this job....

I do not doubt that in her earlier years, Blavatsky must have been a highly eclectic, voracious reader. But as with all nonscholars in the field of religious systems, she did not unmix the genuine from the phony; she obviously regarded all sources as equally valid. Not knowing any of the primary languages of the Buddhist-Hindu tradition, she had to rely on whatever had been translated. And, as an epiphenomenon to the awakening interest in oriental studies, a large number of unscholarly writings emerged, produced by people who thought, or pretended, that they could get at the meat of the newly discovered wisdom of the East by speculating about it in their own way rather than by being guided by its sources, or by seeking guidance from authentic teachers in those eastern lands.¹¹

It is not quite true, as Bharati implies, that all 20th century Buddhist scholars have completely ignored Blavatsky. She continues to receive small but steady notice even up to the present, for instance in a recent study by Donald S. Lopez, Jr., (1998) *Prisoners of Shangri-la*—although Lopez is no more

¹¹ Agehananda Bharati, "Fictitious Tibet: The Origin and Persistence of Rampaism," *Tibet Society Bulletin*, Vol. 7, 1974.

charitable in his view than Bharati.¹² He focuses almost entirely on Blavatsky's unusual theories of anthropogenesis (a relatively minor part of her 16-year *oeuvre*) while ignoring her fairly orthodox Buddhist views on the emanation of the universe, karma, reincarnation, skandhas, nirvāṇa, etc.

Yet not all Buddhist scholars have dismissed HPB. The French Orientalist Emile Burnouf wrote supportively of the Theosophical Society in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* last century. Protesting against Theosophists' attempts to distance themselves from exoteric Buddhism plain and simple, Burnouf wrote,

This [universal brotherhood] declaration [of the Theosophical Society] is purely Buddhistic: the practical publications of the Society are either translations of Buddhist books, or original works inspired by the teaching of Buddha. Therefore the Society has a Buddhist character.¹³

Likewise, several prominent Buddhologists this century (a distinct minority) have declared that H.P.B. was an accurate transmittor of Buddhist teaching, and a small number of Buddhologists actually joined the Theosophical Society. D.T. Suzuki wrote that H.P.B. was "one who had truly attained,"¹⁴ and praised her work *The Voice of the Silence* as being "true Mahayana Buddhism."¹⁵ Likewise Lama Kazi Dawa Samdup (who in the service of W.Y. Evans-Wentz, translated *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*) said that H.P.B. had

¹² Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998, chapter two, *passim*.

¹³ "Le Bouddhisme en Occident," *Revue des Deux Mondes*, July 15, 1888.

¹⁴ *Eastern Buddhist* (old series) vol. 5, p. 377.

¹⁵ *The Middle Way*, August 1965, p. 90.

“... intimate acquaintance with the higher lamaistic teachings....”¹⁶ One of the most important Buddhologists of the century, Edward Conze, was a Theosophist. Mircea Eliade, in his published journal, wrote for January 15, 1964,

yesterday and today, almost the whole time with Ed. Conze. He gave two lectures on Buddhism—amusing and extremely well attended. Long conversations between us. I learned that he was, and still is, a theosophist: he admires *The Secret Doctrine*, and believes that Mme. Blavatsky was the reincarnation of Tsongkapa.¹⁷

The reasons for this great divergence of opinion on H.P. Blavatsky must be inquired into.

Religious Practitioners on HPB

If Blavatsky were only championed by a small group of devotees, and ridiculed by everyone else, one could conclude that she was merely a cult leader. But Bharati is right in at least one respect, namely that “Blavatsky’s work has had signal importance” on Western interpretations of Eastern thought, and to some degree on Eastern people’s interpretation of themselves. Perhaps it is Blavatsky’s Theosophical influence on the Eastern hemisphere which is least familiar to Western scholars. During Blavatsky’s lifetime, over 125 branches of the Theosophical Society sprang up in India,

¹⁶ *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, p. 7 footnote.

more than the total branches of the T.S. in all other countries combined. For a time, the Theosophical Society joined forces with the Arya Samaj and other native Hindu and Buddhist revival movements, while the Indian National Congress, later to be so instrumental in gaining India's independence, was formed and run largely by British Theosophists, especially Allan O. Hume.¹⁸ S. Radhakrishnan, one of India's leading philosophical and political figures this century, writes,

When, with all kinds of political failures and economic breakdowns we were suspecting the values and vitality of our culture, when everything round about us and secular education happened to discredit the value of Indian culture, the Theosophical Movement rendered great service by vindicating those values and ideas. The influence of the Theosophical Movement on general Indian society is incalculable.¹⁹

In 1975, for the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Theosophical Society, the Indian government commissioned a stamp with the distinctive logo and the motto of the Theosophical Society, "There is no religion higher than truth."

In Sri Lanka the Theosophical impact was even more profound. To the present day, February 17th is a Sri Lankan holiday, honoring the birthday of the first President of the Theosophical Society, Henry S. Olcott, champion of Buddhism and foe of Christianity. When Olcott and Blavatsky arrived in

¹⁷ Quoted by Cranston, H.P.B.: *The Extraordinary Life and Influence of Helena Blavatsky*, p. 501.

¹⁸ Louis Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1950), p. 437; Mohandas Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, quoted in *The Theosophical Movement 1875-1950*, p. 71.

¹⁹ Quoted by Cranston, H.P.B.: *The Extraordinary Life and Influence of Helena Blavatsky*, p. 192.

Sri Lanka in 1880, Christian missionaries had completely dominated the island, and the education of youth was almost entirely in the hands of Christian schools—only two Buddhist schools existed. By 1900, due to the effective ideological and financial campaigns of the Theosophists, over 200 Buddhist-run schools were in operation, as well as a Buddhist Theosophical Society with many branches busily engaged in printing newspapers and administering land.²⁰ Theosophists cannot be held responsible for the entire revival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, as Richard Gombrich rightly remarks; the ground had been well-prepared by the advent of widespread literacy, the rise of a middle class, and the inculcation in learned Sri Lankans of Protestant values.²¹ Nevertheless, it is clear that the Theosophical impact was far-reaching.²²

To Japan, also, the Theosophical revival spread. Col. Olcott's visit to Japan February 9th to May 5th, 1889, was warmly welcomed by the Japanese and fiercely opposed by Christian missionaries. The Tokyo newspaper *Dandokai* reported, "The arrival of Colonel Olcott has caused great excitement among the Christians in Japan. They say that he is an adventurer, a man of bad principles, and an advocate of a dying cause. How mean and cowardly they are!" Another issue of the *Dandokai* wrote,

²⁰ *The Middle Way*, 1973, p. 44.

²¹ Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism*. (London: Routledge, 1991) p. 174.

²² Too far-reaching, according to Gananath Obeyesekere, who blames Theosophists not only for their distorted and modernist 'Protestant Buddhism' but also for the violent forms Buddhist nationalism has taken in Sri Lanka this century. See his "Buddhism and Conscience," *Daedalus* vol. 120 (1991) and "Religious Symbolism and Political Change in Ceylon" in *Two Wheels of Dhamma*, ed. Bardwell Smith, AAR Monograph Series, no. 3 (Chambersburg, 1972), pp. 58-78. Also see Richard Gombrich and Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed*.

Since Colonel Olcott's arrival in Japan, Buddhism has wonderfully revived. We have already stated that he has been travelling to all parts of the empire. He has been everywhere received with remarkable enthusiasm. He has not been allowed a moment of leisure. He has taught our people to appreciate Buddhism, and to see our duty to impart it to all nations. Since his discourses in Tokyo, the young men of the Imperial University and High Schools have organized a Young Men's Buddhist Association, after the model of the Young Men's Christian Association, to propagate our religion....²³

The Theosophical revival of Buddhism in the East had its arc in the West as well, and it wasn't long before Blavatsky's Sri Lankan student Anagarika Dharmapala founded a branch of his Mahabodhi Society in London, and began his tireless campaign for the restoration of the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gayâ to Buddhist control.²⁴ Likewise, the first Buddhist Society in England was founded by Theosophists in 1926, who found the parent body of the Theosophical Society by that time too wide-ranging and diluted. Early members included Buddhologists Christmas Humphreys and Edward Conze.²⁵ Among many other Western writers, Alan Watts also came to Buddhism through Theosophy, and writes, that "Even though I now remonstrate, mildly, against some of [Humphrey's] interpretations of Buddhism, I shall love him always as the man who really set my imagination going and put me on my whole way of life."²⁶ The impact of Blavatsky and her Theosophy upon Buddhism East and West is an important chapter of

²³ Quoted in Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves*, Fourth Series, 2nd edition. Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1931, p. 140.

²⁴ Cranston, p. 501.

²⁵ Cranston, p. 500.

²⁶ Watts, *In My Own Way*. New York, Pantheon, 1972, p. 77.

Buddhist studies, strangely ignored, however. Donald S. Lopez writes “The influence of Theosophy on the study of Buddhism in Europe and America remains a largely unexplored topic,” and adds, “Links between Theosophists and Tibetan Buddhism also merit a book-length study.”²⁷

Thus, despite harsh criticism of Blavatsky by the majority of Western Buddhist scholars, *practising* Buddhists in both the East and West often admire HPB and her pioneering influences even when they have no interest in Theosophy *per se*. For example, *Tricycle* magazine recently honored Blavatsky in its Buddhist “Ancestors” column, followed a few issues later by Olcott.²⁸ Several high Tibetan lamas as well seem to respect Blavatsky’s work, especially for one of her last productions, *The Voice of the Silence* (1889).²⁹ The XIVth Dalai Lama wrote the forward to the 1989 Centenary edition of *The Voice of the Silence*, saying, in part,

I believe that this book has strongly influenced many sincere seekers and aspirants to the wisdom and compassion of the Bodhisattva Path. I very much welcome this Centenary Edition and hope that it will benefit many more.³⁰

This is not unprecedented, since in 1927 the staff of the 9th Panchen Lama helped Theosophists put out the “Peking Edition” of *The Voice of the*

²⁷ Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, footnote 12, p. 234-6.

²⁸ “Ancestors” column in *Tricycle* Vol. V, no. 3 (Blavatsky) and Vol. VI no. 1 (Olcott).

²⁹ Interestingly, *The Voice of the Silence* has also become something of a cult classic among Hollywood stars and rock musicians. Elvis Presley was so taken with Blavatsky’s little book that he regularly read from it onstage, and even named his own gospel group, Voice, after the volume.

³⁰ *The Voice of the Silence*, ed. Raghavan Iyer. (Santa Barbara: Concord Grove Press, 1989). Preface.

Silence.³¹ The 9th Panchen Lama (Panchen Lobzang Tub-ten Chö-gyi Nyima) personally wrote a message as well:

ཅི་མི་བཟད་སྤྱུག་བསྐྱེད་མི་འདོད་གང་དག་གི
 དེ་གྱུ་ཉོན་མོངས་འགོག་ཅིང་དེ་སྤངས་པའི། །
 བྲལ་བ་ཐོབ་ཕྱིར་ལམ་བཟང་འགྲད་པའི་ཚུལ།
 ཀུན་ཏུ་བསྟན་ཅེས་བདེན་གསུང་འདོམས་པར་མཛད།།

All beings desire liberation from misery.
 Seek, therefore, for the causes of misery and expunge them.
 By entering on the path, liberation from misery is attained.
 Exhort, then, all beings to enter the path.

And in November of 1988, Sakya Trizin, the head of the Sakya school of Tibetan Buddhism, while visiting the University of Sydney said "I have read little of the writings of Madame Blavatsky, but from the little I have read, I believe that Madame Blavatsky either had direct contact with Tibetan teachings or had read some reliable texts on Tibetan Buddhism."³²

³¹ *The Voice of the Silence*, ed. Alice Cleather and Basil Crump. (Peking: Chinese Buddhist Research Society, 1927). page 113.

³² According to Prof. John Cooper of U. Sydney, in an interview with Theosophical scholar Nicholas Weeks, 1989.

An Asian Worldview

What then are we to make of such disparate views of H.P. Blavatsky and her relationship with Indo-Tibetan Buddhism? Surely it is no coincidence that those who despise Blavatsky's writings are Western scholars and non-practitioners of Buddhism, while those who look upon HPB favorably are often involved in Buddhist practice. What are scholarly critics seeing that practitioners are not? Scholars appear to be reacting in part to Blavatsky's *mélange* of vocabulary and meshing of academically quite separate religious movements: H.P.B. in her writing draws from Vedāntin, Mādhyamika, Theravādin, Gnostic, Platonic, Hebrew, Chaldean, Meso-american and other sources quite indiscriminately. In this way, scholarly indignation appears justified. No one can be an expert in all these fields, and the vocabulary and concepts generated by these religious and mystical traditions are deeply embedded in specific socio-historical contexts. But one typical example of Blavatskyan abandon will suffice:

The *Svastica*, the most sacred and mystic symbol in India, the "Jaina-Cross" as it is now called by the Masons, notwithstanding its direct connection, and even identity with the Christian cross, has become dishonored It is the "devil's sign," we are told by the Indian missionaries. "Does it not shine on the head of the great *Serpent* of Vishnu, on the thousand headed Sesha-Ananta, in the depths of Pâtâla, the Hindu *Naraka* or Hell"? It does: but what is Ananta? As Sesha, it is the almost endless Manvantaric cycle of time, and becomes *infinite* Time itself, when called Ananta, the great seven-headed Serpent, on which rests Vishnu, the *eternal Deity*, during *Pralayic* inactivity. What has Satan to do with this highly metaphysical symbol? The *Svastica* is the most philosophically scientific of all symbols,

as also the most comprehensible. It is the summary in a few lines of the whole work of *creation*, or evolution, as one should rather say, from Cosmo-theogony down to Anthropogony, from the indivisible unknown Parabrahm to the humble *moneron* of materialistic science, whose *genesis is as unknown* to that science as is that of the All-Deity itself. The *Svastica* is found heading the religious symbols of every old nation. It is the "Worker's Hammer" in the Chaldean *Book of Numbers*, the "Hammer" just referred to in the *Book of Concealed Mystery* (Ch. I, §§ 1, 2, 3, 4, etc.), "which striketh sparks from the flint" (Space), those sparks becoming worlds. It is "Thor's Hammer," the magic weapon forged by the dwarfs against the Giants, or the *pre-cosmic* Titanic forces of Nature ..." etc. etc.³³

Without stopping to justify or contextualize any of her references, Blavatsky blazes ahead, seeing the evolutionary symbol of the *svastika* in the Hermetic Smaragdine Tablet, the myth of Prometheus, the *Ignis* of the Latins and the Vishvakarman of the *Veda*. Learned HPB may be, but difficult to take seriously in an academic sense.

But there are three things yet more offensive about Blavatsky, particularly to her contemporaries of the late 19th century. First, HPB was a woman, a fiercely independent and eccentric woman. This in itself was a problem. HPB left her husband, General Nikifor Blavatsky, at the age of 18, and traveled *alone*, from 1848 to 1873 through eastern Europe to Egypt, up to western Europe, across America to the west coast and down through South America, then across the ocean to Sri Lanka, India and back to Europe.³⁴ Additionally, Blavatsky smoked cigars, swore like a pirate, and spoke her mind bluntly, with little regard for the perceptions of others or the mores of

³³ *Secret Doctrine*, vol. 2: 98-9.

³⁴ Cranston, pp. 36-38 and Parts II and III, *passim*.

the time. In short, Blavatsky's entire personality and independence from male control was an offense in Victorian Europe and its colonies.

Secondly, Blavatsky was stridently and vocally opposed to the gender, race and class prejudices of her day. One of her primary interests was to found "the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or color."³⁵ This was not merely a passing fancy, but formed the first object in the charter of the Theosophical Society in 1875, and was considered the essential feature of Theosophy until Blavatsky's death. A letter purporting to be from the Guru of her Gurus, the "Mahāchohan," dated 1880, states,

If Theosophists say: "... the lower classes and inferior races cannot concern us and must manage as they can," what becomes of our fine professions of benevolence, reform, etc.? ... Should we devote ourselves to teaching a few Europeans, fed on the fat of the land, many of them loaded with the gifts of blind fortune, the rationale of bell-ringing, cup-growing, spiritual telephone, etc., etc., and leave the teeming millions of the ignorant, of the poor and the despised, the lowly and the oppressed, to take care of themselves, and of their hereafter, the best they know how? Never! Perish rather the Theosophical Society ...³⁶

By the end of HPB's life the central platform of brotherhood appeared to be based on nothing other than the Mahāyāna doctrine of the bodhisattva's path:

Yea; on the Arya Path thou art no more Srotapatti, thou art a Bodhisattva. The stream is cross'd. 'Tis true thou hast a right to Dharmakaya vesture; but Sambhogakaya is greater than

³⁵ Pamphlet "The United Lodge of Theosophists, Its Mission and Its Future." The Theosophy Company, Los Angeles, no date.

³⁶ Jinarajadasa, compiler. *Letters from the Masters of Wisdom—1870-1900*, 1:7-9.

a Nirvanee, and greater still is a Nirmanakaya—the Buddha of Compassion.

Now bend thy head and listen well, O Bodhisattva—Compassion speaks and saith: “Can there be bliss when all that lives must suffer? Shalt thou be saved and hear the whole world cry?”³⁷

Brotherhood in the abstract no doubt appealed to the Christian powers which had colonized India as elsewhere, but the actual membership of the Theosophical Society was largely Indian, and this offended not only racial sensibilities but the very justification by which England ruled its Indian colony—that of the inability of the Indians to organize responsibly, and hence, to rule themselves.

Thirdly, and possibly the heart of the matter, Blavatsky had a *Weltanschauung* far more similar to Asian mythological worldviews than to missionary monotheism or atheistic rationalism. She neither championed a single religion or religious leader, nor did she attempt to discredit Asian philosophy, demythologize it, or reconstruct it along Western categories, like Beal, Müller, Rhys-Davids, or Oldenberg.³⁸ In contradistinction, much European scholarship on Asian thought during Blavatsky’s time was pursued for the express purpose of ruining it. Samuel Beal writes in 1871,

In knowledge of the existence of this large and complete collection of the Buddhist Scriptures [the Chinese Canon], it is singular that so little use has been made of it, by missionaries or scholars generally.... it must be evident that so long as we are ignorant of the details of their [Buddhist] religion, they will not

³⁷ “The Seven Portals,” in *The Voice of the Silence*, Theosophy Company edition, pp. 77-78.

³⁸ Hermann Oldenberg in particular was a champion of a “rationalistic and euhemeristic method.” (de Jong, *A Brief History of Buddhist Studies in Europe and America*, p. 31.)

be induced to listen to our denunciation of it; nor can we expect that our indifference to their prejudices will tend to remove them.³⁹

How frustrating then, that HPB spread her teachings for the express purpose of ruining Christian progress in Asia, as well as blocking the inroads being made the world over by scientific materialism! In 1888 she wrote,

Verily, the fiendish spirits of fanaticism, of early and mediaeval Christianity and of Islam, have from the first loved to dwell in darkness and ignorance; and both have made

“_____ the sun like blood, the earth a tomb,
The tomb a hell, and hell itself a murkier gloom!”

Both creeds have won their proselytes at the point of the sword: both have built their churches on *heaven-kissing hecatombs of human victims*. Over the gateway of Century I of our era, the ominous words “the karma of ISRAEL,” fatally glowed. Over the portals of our own, the future seer may discern other words, that will point to the Karma for cunningly made-up HISTORY, for events purposely perverted, and for great characters slandered by posterity, mangled out of recognition, between the two cars of Jagannâtha—Bigotry and Materialism; one accepting too much, the other denying all.⁴⁰

Blavatsky saw Asian modes of thought as superior to all others, and in many ways “mythologized” herself and her work (from a Western perspective) just as Asian religious traditions did. Blavatsky’s mythologization took many forms, all of which have parallels in Buddhism. She referred to esoteric texts like the *Books of Kiu-Ti* and the *Stanzas of Dzyan*, forbidden to the profane—similar to certain sections of Tibetan Tantras which require initiation, not to

³⁹ Beal, *A Catena of Buddhist Scriptures from the Chinese*, p. 2.

⁴⁰ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, p. xli.

mention the Tibetan tradition of hidden texts called “terma.”⁴¹ HPB claimed inspiration and visions from hidden gurus, as have many yogis, including the “Great Fifth” Dalai Lama, and Maitreyanātha’s secret instruction of Asanga, founder of the Yogācāra school of Mahāyāna Buddhism. She proposed a complex, mythological origin for the human race, causing ancient humanity to descend from godlike ancestors, not unlike the origin myths of nearly all ancient traditions. Blavatsky wrote about invisible hierarchies of intelligences behind the phenomenal world, not unlike the Buddhist nāgas, dakinis, yakṣas, rākṣas (and their kings), not to mention bodhisattvas of various grades, supervised by myriads of Buddhas. She claimed her teaching was derived from an ahistorical, perennial philosophy, similar to Hindu claims of a *Sanatanadharma* or the Buddhist doctrine of the timelessness of the True Law. On the other hand, HPB often gave allegorical explanations for popular myths and stories, as do some modern lamas. Sogyal Rinpoche, for example, explains the six (*kāra-dhātu*) grades of incarnation in the Buddhist universe in sociological and economic terms, picturing the devas as “tall, blond surfers, lounging on beaches and in gardens flooded by brilliant sunshine ...”⁴²

⁴¹ See Tulku Thondup Rinpoche, *Hidden Teachings of Tibet*, 1986, reprint 1997.

⁴² Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, quoted by Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, p. 80. Lopez is particularly irritated at Sogyal Rinpoche and the apparent parallel with Madame Blavatsky: “[In Sogyal Rinpoche’s book] there are quotations from Montaigne, Blake, Rilke, Henry Ford, Voltaire, Origen, Shelley, Mozart, Balzac, Einstein, Rumi, Wordsworth, and the Venerable Bede, which together create a cosmopolitan eclecticism around Sogyal’s message, as if what the book conveys is not a Tibetan Buddhist tradition but a universal message, a perennial philosophy, that has always been known to those who know, a secret brotherhood not unlike Madame Blavatsky’s Mahatmas. Indeed, the vast popularity of

It is important to state for the record that it may well be the case that none of Blavatsky's claims are true. Though many of her biographers, even her enemies, admit that her Mahatmas may have been real people—this too may be a myth or a lie.⁴³ For the purposes of this paper, it matters not a whit whether HPB forged letters from her hidden gurus, whether HPB ever visited Tibet, or whether her perennial philosophy really exists. The important issue at hand is how far, and in what way, Blavatsky has represented Buddhist ideas, teachings, and methods, and what significance this may hold for modern interpreters of Buddhism in the West.

But this was not the interest of scholarly observers of Blavatsky last century. For promiscuously and ahistorically conflating world religions; for undermining the missionaries; for mocking scientism and its materialistic methods; for disdaining the “middle ground” of the Spiritualists; for aiding and abetting the natives; worst of all, for writing and mythologizing *like native traditions*—for all these reasons (and most of them not scholarly), I propose that Blavatsky was labelled an amateur, an adventuress, and a fraud by her colonialist contemporaries, and the judgment has since stuck, particularly among academics. No trained scholar has looked in depth at Blavatsky and her Buddhistic teachings since the nineteenth century. Buddhist *practitioners* this century, however, discovering Blavatsky for themselves as part of a religious search, have been for the most part unaware

Evans-Wentz's and Sogyal's versions may derive from the way they homogenize the Tibetan text into an ahistorical and universal wisdom.”

of the academic contempt in which HPB has been held; thus they have received her more favorably than scholars, on the whole, as Buddhist practitioners largely share the same *Weltanschauung* which motivated HPB. This explains, at least in part, the great divide in public opinion regarding H. P. Blavatsky.

But in light of the extensive additions to, and revisions in, Western Buddhology over the past century, it is high time for a re-examination of Blavatsky and Buddhism. Buddhist scholars today (one assumes) no longer share Victorian sensibilities, while having the additional advantage of a far more comprehensive access to native Buddhist traditions, especially in Tibet. HPB need no longer be judged on the basis of her personality, her anti-Christian zeal, or the danger her activities present to colonialism. Controversial and flamboyant she was, no doubt: the subject of over 30 positive and negative biographies and countless topical studies (the latter mostly written by Theosophists). Yet the focus of all of these works has been in investigating her claims to psychic powers; chronicling her cultural legacy; producing commentaries to her works; or attacking or defending Theosophy as a valid spiritual path. No modern study has yet evaluated H.P. Blavatsky's works purely on the basis of their merit as accurate or inaccurate representations of Buddhism, judged by the teachings of *bona fide* Buddhists themselves, in native and now translated primary documents. Specifically,

⁴³ For historical personages now identified (dubiously) with HPB's Masters, see Johnson, K. Paul. *The Masters Revealed : Madam Blavatsky and the myth of the Great White Lodge*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

while one very useful volume gathers up Blavatsky's statements *about* Buddhism,⁴⁴ no scholar has yet attempted a systematic study of H.P.B.'s literary *oeuvre* and compared it to undisputed Buddhist doctrine contained in the Pāli, Sanskrit, and Tibetan *Sūtras*, *Śāstras* and *Tantras*. This paper purposes, for the first time, to undertake such a systematic investigation.

Methodology

The method of this study is to take time as an organizing principle. H.P. Blavatsky claimed to be imparting an ancient, esoteric wisdom unavailable to the scholars of the West, or even to most seekers in the East. Her opponents, many of them very eminent Orientalists, accused her of appropriating secondary literature on Buddhism, available in translation (since allegedly HPB knew no canonical languages). One line of defense against this criticism, taken by Theosophists and sometimes by Blavatsky herself, was to point to the magnitude of the Theosophical teachings, their consistency and internal coherence, as demonstrating their validity. Well aware of the criticisms scholars would level at her teachings, Blavatsky attempted to document her "Wisdom Tradition" by marshalling thousands of supportive statements from the literature of the ancient world.

⁴⁴ Spierenberg, *The Buddhism of H.P. Blavatsky*. San Diego: Point Loma Publications, 1991. Considerable analysis of HPB's use of terms is given in footnotes, along with comparisons to modern studies, but the book presents no overall interpretation or evaluation of HPB as a Buddhist representative.

One of the greatest, and, withal, the most serious objection to the correctness and reliability of the whole work [her *Secret Doctrine*] will be the preliminary STANZAS: "How can the statements contained in them be verified?" True, if a great portion of the Sanskrit, Chinese, and Mongolian works quoted in the present volumes are known to some Orientalists, the chief work—that one from which the Stanzas are given—is not in the possession of European Libraries. The Book of Dzyan (or "Dzan") is utterly unknown to our Philologists, or at any rate was never heard of by them under its present name. This is, of course, a great drawback to those who follow the methods of research proscribed by official science; but to the students of Occultism, and to every genuine Occultist, this will be of little moment. The main body of the Doctrines given is found scattered throughout hundreds and thousands of Sanskrit MSS., some already translated—disfigured in their interpretation, as usual,—others still awaiting their turn. Every scholar, therefore, has an opportunity of verifying the statements herein made, and of checking most of the quotations.⁴⁵

What may not have occurred to Blavatsky, however, is that using tiny fragments to point to the existence of a long-broken whole is a purely subjective method. The veracity of her individual and scattered quotations does little to objectively demonstrate the overarching hermeneutic she puts forward. What is "coherent" and indicative of a perennial philosophy to a Theosophist has obviously been considered "a melee of horrendous hogwash" by outsiders.

The only conceivable manner of adjudicating the dispute is to see what was available to HPB on Buddhism in any Western language up to and including the time of Blavatsky's death, and then closely comparing those presentations of Buddhism to HPB's work. Whatever in Blavatsky's writings cannot be traced to a Western source (particularly in English, French and

⁴⁵ *The Secret Doctrine*, p. xxii-xxiii.

Russian—languages she spoke fluently) must then be collated and compared to what is now known of Buddhism from its primary source documents *and* living traditions. This two step method allows the researcher access to what in Blavatsky was purely derivative, and what unique; then, of what was unique—what may now appear to be justifiable Buddhist doctrine and what may be unverifiable assetion.

It is important to note that just because a work was published in any Western language does not prove that HPB had access to it. One might justifiably argue that simply because Blavatsky refers to a Buddhist MSS., which had also been published in Western translation, there is no *a priori* reason to assume she had no access to a native source. However, such a line of argument (and the near impossibility of learning where HPB lived in what year, and what sources were available to her in that location or through correspondence) suffers by comparison to a higher line of reasoning. Any Buddhist text or doctrine which Blavatsky (or her alleged teachers in their letters) quotes, which was not available in *any* Western recension, is *de facto* proof that HPB was drawing either on an original language source (oral or written), or her own imagination. In most cases it should not be terribly difficult to distinguish the former from the latter in light of current knowledge.

To this end, a nearly comprehensive chronological bibliography has been drawn up, listing all books and articles written about Buddhism in every Western language, year by year from 1667 to 1891, the date of Blavatsky's

death. Because of the overwhelming mass of data, only the most important works (especially translations from original languages) have been collated and attached to this study as Appendix I. Here one may see when important *Sūtras* were translated, when dictionaries for Pali, Sanskrit, Tibetan and Chinese became available, what travellers had remarked on lands HPB claimed to have visited, and what theories and predilections were prevalent before and during the time HPB wrote. With these in sight, Blavatsky's contributions will be easier to recognize.

The "Mahatma Letters," whose six volumes are kept in the permanent collection of the British Museum, deserve special mention, because they have been the nucleus of many a controversy surrounding Blavatsky.⁴⁶ They were written largely to the British editor of the Allahabad *Pioneer*, A.P. Sinnett, from 1880 to 1884, and contain essential Theosophical teachings as well as mundane comments on individuals, the Theosophical Society, and various currents in the world at large. Dozens of authors have attempted to demonstrate that these letters were or were not written by Blavatsky herself, and to settle whether the letters did or did not appear through "occult" agency (appearing at their destinations by dropping from the ceiling, or materializing within books or other objects, etc. as well as by ordinary post).⁴⁷ The

⁴⁶ Barker, A. T., ed. *The Mahatma Letters to A.P. Sinnett from the Mahatmas M. & K.H.* 1st edition 1923. 3rd Edition: Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1979.

⁴⁷ Accusers and defenders include Coulomb, Emma. *Some account of my intercourse with Madame Blavatsky from 1872 to 1884*. With a number of additional letters and a full explanation of the most marvellous theosophical phenomena. (London: Published for the proprietors of the "Madras Christian College magazine", by Elliot Stock, 1885); Cranston, Sylvia. *H.P.B.: The Extraordinary Life and Influence of Helena Blavatsky, Founder of the Modern Theosophical Movement*. (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1993); Fuller, Jean Overton.

Mahatma Letters are a primary source for our study of Blavatsky and Buddhism, because much of HPB's unusual doctrines and vocabulary, which appear in publication only in 1888 with her *Secret Doctrine*, are found years earlier in these private letters. Yet it does not matter, for our current purposes, who wrote the Mahatma Letters, for the Buddhistic teachings contained therein will be held up to the same methodological scrutiny as those works which are undoubtedly Madame's.

To be sure, it would be convenient for Blavatsky's followers if the Mahatmas were proven to exist, or further, materialized before the public together with their most precious possessions, "the *sum total* of sacred and philosophical works in MSS. and in type [throughout history]."⁴⁸ Alas, they have not chosen to do so. However, this paper will assume that the personages "KH" (or "Koothoomi Lal Singh") and "M" ("Morya") were indeed individuals distinct from HPB's famous creative faculties. Not only are these initials convenient monikers, but the content of the letters themselves betray a foreign author. They demonstrate an unfamiliarity with English and make simple mistakes that would be difficult to fake. For

Blavatsky and her teachers : an investigative biography. (London: East-West Publications, 1988); Jinarajadasa, Curuppumullagae. *Did Madame Blavatsky forge the Mahatma Letters?* (Adyar, Madras : Theosophical Pub. House, 1934); Johnson, K. Paul. *The Masters Revealed : Madam Blavatsky and the myth of the Great White Lodge.* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994). Kingsland, William. *Was she a charlatan? A critical analysis of the 1885 report of the Society for Psychical Research, on the phenomena connected with Mme. H. P. Blavatsky.* (London: The Blavatsky Association, 1927); Meade, Marion. *Madame Blavatsky, the woman behind the myth.* (New York: Putnam, 1980); Solovyoff, Vsevolod S. *A Modern Priestess of Isis.* Abridged and translated on Behalf of the Society for Psychical Research from the Russian by Walter Leaf. (1st edition 1895. New York: Ayer Co., 1976); Williams, Gertrude Leavenworth Marvin. *Madame Blavatsky, Priestess of the Occult.* (New York: Lancer Books, 1946).

⁴⁸ *Secret Doctrine*, p. xxiii.

example, in one exchange, Mr. Sinnett complains that Colonel Olcott, President of the Theosophical Society, is a bumbler and out of touch with the social world of Anglo-India. KH responds that “Colonel Olcott is doubtless ‘out of time with the feelings of English people’ of both classes; but nevertheless more in time *with us* than either.”⁴⁹ The next letter from the Mahatma makes it clear that KH has misunderstood both Sinnett’s handwriting and English idiom:

... Did you write “tune”? Well, well; I must ask you to buy me a pair of spectacles in London. And yet—out of “time” or out of “tune” is all one, as it seems. But you ought to adopt my old fashioned habit of “little lines” over the “m’s.” Those bars are useful, even though “out of tune and time” with modern calligraphy.⁵⁰

Blavatsky was neither in the habit of drawing bars over her “m’s” nor so out of touch with English usage as to imagine that “out of time” and “out of tune” were “all one, as it seems.” This is but one example among many, to say nothing of handwriting, style, or the fact that the Mahatma Letters routinely criticize HPB for her adle-brain, her emotional outbursts, and her unfamiliarity with the doctrines of those “beyond the Himalaya.”⁵¹ In

⁴⁹ Barker, Letter No. 4, p. 14.

⁵⁰ Barker, Letter No. 5, p. 19.

⁵¹ In but one typical example, KH explains Blavatsky’s excess zeal in producing psychic phenomena, and claiming that such phenomena was all her guru’s doing, while claiming she had nothing to do with it. “Was, or rather is it lack of intellectual perceptions in her? Certainly not. It is a psychological disease, over which she has little if any control at all. Her impulsive nature—as you have correctly inferred in your reply—is always ready to carry her beyond the boundaries of truth, into the regions of exaggeration; nevertheless without a shadow of a suspicion that she is thereby deceiving her friends, or abusing their great trust in her. The stereotyped phrase: ‘It is not I; I can do nothing by myself ... it is all they—the Brothers ... I am but their humble and devoted slave and instrument’ is a downright *fib*.” Barker’s *Mahatma Letters*, p. 307.

reading the letters, one gains an ambivalent image of Blavatsky, one which is certainly not hagiographic. It is difficult to understand why HPB would forge private letters which made her look worse, not better, before her inmost admirers.⁵² But acknowledging that the letters were (usually) written by other persons than Blavatsky, however, does nothing to prop up her claim that such authors were in fact “great souls ... men of great learning, whom we term Initiates, and still greater holiness of life.”⁵³ Max Müller gave full credence to the idea that HPB had been duped by unscrupulous Asians posing as perfected beings, and this only added to the calamity that was the Theosophical Society.⁵⁴

But again, it matters not whether HPB was such a clever schemer as to forge not one but several sets of consistent handwriting, and arrange (through co-conspirators, no doubt) to have the letters of her Mahatmas delivered phenomenally to correspondents even while dwelling in the opposite hemisphere. Whoever may have written the letters, their contents will be treated as part of the corpus of Blavatsky’s “Buddhistic” work, and judged accordingly, even though we attach different names for their authors.

⁵² However, see Appendix III, where HPB admits in a sworn statement that she at times wrote Mahatma Letters herself (not merely transcribing them but composing them *ex nihilo*) when the subject matter was of a personal nature not related to philosophy or issues of a universal scope.

⁵³ Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, p. 289.

⁵⁴ Müller, “Esoteric Buddhism,” p. 775.

Chapter Two

Blavatsky and 'Esoteric' Buddhism

Overview

Despite Max Müller's protest that "Whatever was esoteric was *ipso facto* not Buddha's teaching; whatever was Buddha's teaching was *ipso facto* not esoteric ..." it has become clear to any student of Buddhism (who does not rely entirely on the Pāli Canon) that most traditions of Buddhism do indeed have texts, rituals, transmissions and/or insights which are reserved from the profane. Nowhere is this more true, however, than in Tibet. The slough of books in the last decades with titles like *The Buddhist Tantras: Light on Indo-Tibetan Esotericism*; *Hidden Teachings of Tibet*; and *Highest Yoga Tantra: An Introduction to the Esoteric Buddhism of Tibet* leave no room for argument on this point. Because of Blavatsky's character, she was drawn to Mahāyāna Buddhism and Tibet in particular. Because she was untrained by Western academies, she failed to harbor the rationalistic and positivist priorities of the scholars of her day. Thus Blavatsky was in a position to see what no other European of her time could: that the mysticism, mythology and obscure symbolism in the works of 'esoteric' Tibetan Buddhism held teachings of great depth and philosophical sophistication, a fact only now coming to be

understood in the late 20th century by Western Buddhist scholars. That Blavatsky was a practising Vajrayāna Buddhist, in touch with a living textual and oral tradition, can be proven now that Western knowledge of ‘esoteric’ Buddhism has grown, and HPB’s sectarian leanings and doctrinal references can be understood in context. First, however, it will be useful to contrast Blavatsky with her contemporaries, to see the great—and at times confusing—contrast HPB provides. Then, Blavatsky’s relationship with Buddhism, and her use of technical Buddhist terms will be examined. Finally, in further chapters, Blavatsky’s Theosophical doctrines on various topics are compared and contrasted with ‘esoteric’ Buddhist teachings now known to Western scholarship.

Blavatsky and Contemporaries

Nineteenth century scholars of Buddhism faced a great difficulty when they considered the mythological and mystical elements of the Buddhist tradition, particularly those surrounding the Buddha’s life and person. While making a notable exception for Émile Senart and his “historical mythological” method (an essentially structuralist method), de Jong writes in his survey of Buddhist studies,

Earlier scholars [pre 1870s] had considered the legendary elements as an addition to a basis of historical facts; once freed from these legendary elements, the historical truth about the Buddha would become clear. It was usual to apply this method—called the subtraction method by La

Vallée Poussin—before Senart’s time and also after him. It was the same method of historical criticism that was developed by New Testament scholars for studying the life of Jesus.¹

Scholars also relied very heavily on the texts of Buddhism (suitably de-mythologized), perhaps because these could be delimited and controlled better than a living tradition with its idiosyncratic leaders and widely varying praxis and emphases. Philip Almond ties this Western focus on *text*—bording on obsession—to the nature of colonialism in his study, *The British Discovery of Buddhism*:

Buddhism, by 1860, had come to exist, not in the Orient, but in the Oriental libraries and institutes of the West, in its texts and manuscripts, at the desks of the Western savants who interpreted it. It had become a textual object, defined, classified, and interpreted through its own textuality. By the middle of the century, the Buddhism that existed ‘out there’ was beginning to be judged by a West that *alone* knew what Buddhism was, is, and ought to be. The essence of Buddhism came to be seen as expressed not ‘out there’ in the Orient, but in the West through the control of Buddhism’s own past.²

Like all scholars who to some degree reify the division between Orient and Occident, Almond overshoots his mark a bit: a few scholars (or as Donald S. Lopez labels them, “gifted amateurs”) did in fact pursue living Buddhism last century. Interestingly, these attempts also tended to revolve around control; in regard to Tibet, they were usually accompanied by unabashed revulsion. L. Austine Waddell, a contemporary of Blavatsky, informs his readers that,

¹ de Jong, *A Brief History*, p. 28.

² Almond, *The British Discovery*, p. 13.

... realizing the rigid secrecy maintained by the Lāmas in regard to their seemingly chaotic rites and symbolism, I felt compelled to purchase a Lāmaist temple with its fittings; and prevailed upon the officiating priests to explain to me in full detail the symbolism and the rites as they proceeded ... the Lāmas were so obliging as to interpret in my favor a prophetic account which exists in their scriptures regarding a Buddhist incarnation in the West. They convinced themselves that I was a reflex of the Western Buddha Amitābha, and thus they overcame their conscientious scruples, and imparted information freely.³

Certainly, after Waddell has “purchased” the lamasery, he does nothing to cure the poor ignorant monks of their ill choice of Messiah. Nevertheless, once Waddell has gained control of “Lāmaism,” he finds little to recommend it.

... [T]he bulk of the Lāmaist cults comprise much deep-rooted devil-worship and sorcery, which I describe with some fulness. For Lāmaism is only thinly and imperfectly varnished over with Buddhist symbolism, beneath which the sinister growth of poly-demonist superstition darkly appears.⁴

In sum, then, late nineteenth century scholarship denied any *bona fide* esoteric teachings to “true” Buddhism, rarely bothered to actually observe and study living Buddhism, and saw Tibetan Buddhism as particularly degraded, demoniac, and un-Buddhist. As Lopez writes in the Tibetan chapter of his recent book, *Curators of the Buddha* (1995),

... with the European construction of “original Buddhism,” [Tibetan practices] were deemed a repulsive corruption of the Buddha’s rational teaching, polluted with demon worship and sacerdotalism to the point

³ Waddell, *Tibetan Buddhism*, pp. viii-ix.

⁴ Waddell, *Tibetan Buddhism*, p. xi.

that it could no longer be accurately termed "Buddhism" at all, but became instead "Lamaism."⁵

It was in this cultural context of textual obsession and scholarly horror of all things mystical that H.P. Blavatsky not only publicly embraced living Buddhism but soon claimed to speak for it, or at least its esoteric center. However, her true relationship to Buddhism, and especially to 'esoteric' Buddhism is equivocal and often, in her own words, contradictory.

Budhism or Buddhism?

Blavatsky repeatedly stated that she wanted the Theosophical Society to remain unsectarian; the T.S. was not Buddhist, but respected all religions as descendants of a far-distant, primitive "Wisdom Religion," which was now, alas, completely esoteric, along with its Adept caretakers. Responding to Émile Burnouf's assertion that the Theosophical Society was hardly unsectarian, but instead Buddhist through and through, Blavatsky wrote,

We have given our reasons for protesting. We are pinned to no faith.

In stating that the T.S. is 'Buddhist,' M. Burnouf is quite right, however, from one point of view. It has a Buddhist colouring simply because that religion, or rather philosophy, approaches more nearly to the TRUTH (the secret wisdom) than does any other exoteric form of belief. Hence the close connexion between the two. But on the other hand the T.S. is perfectly right in protesting against being mistaken for merely Buddhist propaganda ... For although in complete agreement with him as to the *true* nature and character of primitive Buddhism, yet the Buddhism of today is none the less a rather dogmatic religion,

⁵ Lopez, "Foreigner at the Lama's Feet," p. 252.

split into many and heterogeneous sects. We follow the Buddha alone. Therefore, once it becomes necessary to go behind the actually existing form, and who will deny this necessity in respect to Buddhism?—once this is done, is it not infinitely better to go back to the pure and unadulterated source of Buddhism itself, rather than halt at an intermediate stage? Such a half and half reform was tried when Protestantism broke away from the elder Church, and are the results satisfactory? ...

Here Blavatsky certainly wants to have her cake and eat it too. She denies the Theosophical Society is a vehicle for Buddhist propaganda by in turn alleging that “we follow the Buddha alone”! Blavatsky asserts that “exoteric” Buddhism is, of all world religions, closest to the “TRUTH (the secret wisdom),” yet she disdains that very Buddhism, preferring the “unadulterated source of Buddhism itself,” (the same source, one might add, that Buddhist scholars had been seeking since the beginning of their enterprise). Blavatsky goes on to correct the error of the entire Orientalist establishment — and both Northern and Southern Buddhist practitioners to boot — in their neglect of the true *esoteric* Buddhism:

It is true [as Burnouf says] that no *mysteries* or esotericism exists in the two chief Buddhist Churches, the Southern and the Northern. Buddhists may well be content with the dead letter of Siddhārtha Buddha’s teachings, as fortunately no higher or nobler ones in their effects upon the ethics of the masses exist, to this day. But herein lies the great mistake of all the Orientalists. There *is* an esoteric doctrine, a soul-ennobling philosophy, behind the outward body of ecclesiastical Buddhism. The latter, pure, chaste and immaculate as the virgin snow on the ice-capped crests of the Himālayan ranges, is however, as cold and desolate as they with regard to the *post-mortem* condition of man. This secret system was taught to the *Arhats* alone, generally in the Saptaparna (*Mahāvār̥sa’s Sattapaṇṇi*) cave, known to Fa-hsien as the *Cheta* cave near the Mount Vaibhāra (in Pāli, Vebhāra) in Rājagṛha, the ancient capital of Magadha, by the Lord Buddha himself, between the hours of Dhyāna (or mystic contemplation). It is from this cave—

called in the days of Śākyamuni, Sarasvatī- or 'Bamboo-cave'—that the Arhats initiated into the Secret Wisdom carried away their learning and knowledge beyond the Himālayan range, wherein the Secret Doctrine is taught to this day. Had not the South Indian invaders of Ceylon "heaped into piles as high as the top of the cocoanut trees" [source?] the *ollas* of the Buddhists, and burnt them, as the Christian conquerors burnt all the secret records of the Gnostics and the Initiates, Orientalists would have the proof of it, and there would have been no need of asserting now this well-known fact.⁶

So there *is* an esoteric and essentially "Buddhist" doctrine, but it does not exist in either of the two Buddhist "Churches." Whether HPB means by the "Northern Church" Chinese, Tibetan, Mongolian, or Japanese Buddhisms, or all these combined, one cannot say,⁷ though it is strange that HPB will elsewhere identify Tibetans like the Panchen Lamas and Tsong Kha Pa as possessors of the secret doctrine.

In many other places, too, Blavatsky tries in a very convoluted manner to distinguish exoteric Buddhism (the religion) from esotericism *per se*, the "Wisdom Religion," which was taught secretly by the Buddha (among other Adepts). One tack HPB took, one shared by all Buddhists, is to refer to Buddhism before Śākyamuni, and to assert its eternity and identity age to age. Identifying *this* Buddhism, she feels she may confidently assert what is

⁶ de Zirkoff, ed. *H.P. Blavatsky's Collected Writings*, vol. X, p. 71.

⁷ At times HPB uses the loose term "Northern Buddhism" to mean Chinese Buddhism, as when she says in *The Voice of the Silence*, p. 80: "The 'four modes of truth' are, in Northern Buddhism, *Ku* 'suffering or misery'; *Tu* the assembling of temptations; *Mu* 'their destructions' and *Tau*, the 'path'." (These are HPB's attempts to render the Chinese characters phonetically.) In *The Secret Doctrine*, (1897) vol. 3 p. 388; however, HPB will write, "The Roman Catholics identify Christ with Mikael, who is also his ferouer, or 'face' mystically. This is precisely the position of Vajradhara, or Vajrasattva, in Northern Buddhism. For the latter, in His Higher Self as Vajradhara (Dorjechang), is *never* manifested, except to the seven Dhyān Chohans, the primeval Builders." Here HPB is clearly referring to Tibetan tradition as 'Northern Buddhism.'

the essence of Buddhism. She claims in her earliest work, *Isis Unveiled* (1877) that “The earliest system of the Buddhistic philosophy—which preceded by far Gautama Buddha—is based upon the uncreated substance of the ‘Unknown’, the Ādibuddha.”⁸ Yet she points out that, being so universal and eternal, this wisdom is not owned by those called “Buddhists” alone:

When we use the term Buddhists, we do not mean to imply by it either the exoteric Buddhism instituted by the followers of Gautama Buddha, nor the modern Buddhistic religion, but the secret philosophy of Śākyamuni, which in its essence is certainly identical with the ancient wisdom-religion of the sanctuary, the pre-Vedic Brāhmanism.⁹

While ambiguous, Blavatsky is nothing if not consistently ambiguous.

Twelve years later, at the end of her life, HPB wrote much the same thing in one of her final works, *The Key to Theosophy* (1889):

[Question:] ‘What is the difference between Buddhism, the religion founded by the Prince of Kapilavastu, and *Budhism*, the “Wisdomism” which you say is synonymous with Theosophy?’

[Answer:] ‘Just the same difference as there is between the secret teachings of Christ, which are called “the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven,” and the latter ritualism and dogmatic theology of the Churches and Sects. *Buddha* means the ‘Enlightened’ by *Bodha*, or understanding, Wisdom. This has passed on root and branch into the *esoteric* teachings that Gautama imparted to his chosen Arhats only.’¹⁰

Once again, Blavatsky wants to claim that there is a ‘Budhism’ (one d) and yet continually refers to its presence within an alleged ‘*esoteric Buddhism*.’ She will open her magnum opus, *The Secret Doctrine*, in the same manner, by

⁸ *Isis Unveiled*, vol. 2, p. 156.

⁹ *Isis Unveiled*, vol. 2, pp. 142-3.

referring on just the second page of text to "*Budha*, 'Wisdom,' or knowledge (*Vidya*), the faculty of cognizing, from the Sanskrit root 'Budh,' to know."¹¹ Then, just three pages later, HPB speaks of the esoteric *Budhism* (one d) of Gautama the Buddha!

In other places HPB further confounds the reader. She states that "*Budhism* would mean 'Wisdom', from *Budha*, 'a sage', 'a wise man', and the imperative verb, 'Budhyadhvam', 'Know'."¹² Elsewhere, however, she identifies the "Wisdom Religion" again as 'Budhism,' but this time allegedly related to the Purāṇic figure of *Budha* (illegitimate son of Soma and Bṛhaspati's wife Tārā), who symbolizes the planet Mercury and hence, Wisdom.¹³ Curiously, though, HPB never refers to any doctrines taught by 'Budha,' but refers again and again to the supposed esotericism taught by Gautama Buddha to his élite disciples, whose texts and doctrines she mentions in detail, as we shall see in the following sections of this chapter. So it is quite strange, then, that HPB feels constrained to protest against the title of A.P. Sinnett's landmark Theosophical work, *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883). She repeats the comment of a Pāli scholar [identity unknown] and adds her own judgment as well:

[T]here was in the volume named 'neither esotericism nor Buddhism.' The esoteric truths, presented in Mr. Sinnett's work, had ceased to be esoteric from the moment they were made public; nor did it contain the religion of Buddha, but simply a few tenets from a hitherto hidden

¹⁰ *Key to Theosophy*, p. 13.

¹¹ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine*, xviii.

¹² de Zirkoff, H.P. *Blavatsky's Collected Writings*, vol. IX, pp. 282-3, footnote.

¹³ de Zirkoff, H.P. *Blavatsky's Collected Writings*, vol. VIII, p. 75.

teaching which are now supplemented by many more, enlarged and explained in the present volumes [Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine*].¹⁴

And yet, it is this very “hidden teaching” (that she now supplements) which in just a few pages she will ascribe to the secret instructions of Gautama.

However confusing, even contradictory HPB's assertions, her central points are these: (1) there is a hidden side to Buddhism, and (2) like all Mahāyānists, she claims it was there from the beginning (whether that beginning is with the historical Gautama, or a timeless Dharma) and (3) this “Wisdom Religion” is the inheritance of all nations the world over.¹⁵ These three things no scholar of the 19th century would claim. They would not even acknowledge such claims made by Buddhist sources. In sum: despite her praiseworthy attempt to launch a non-sectarian platform for the study of all world religions, Blavatsky herself was essentially interested in the esoteric Mahāyānist doctrines which she attributed directly to the living disciples of Gautama Buddha who dwelt “beyond the snowy range.” It was these doctrines, and no other, which she labeled the Secret Doctrine.

Followers of Gautama

Whatever HPB's public posturing in relation to the neutral stance held by the Theosophical Society, there is absolutely no ambiguity about her personal religious affiliation. Barely a week after arriving in Sri Lanka from

¹⁴ *The Secret Doctrine* I, xvii.

New York (May 17, 1880), HPB and Colonel Olcott took *pansil* (*pañca-sīla*, the layman's five precepts) at the Buddhist temple in Galle, and took refuge in the Triple Jewel—the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. A great crowd was gathered to witness the historic event, and apparently it was quite a scene. Rick Fields writes,

... It was the first time the Sinhalese had seen one of the ruling white race treat Buddhism with anything approaching respect, and it was (as far as we have been able to discover) the first time that Americans had become Buddhists in the formal sense—that is, in a manner recognized by other Buddhists.¹⁶

Blavatsky's Mahatmas in their letters also make explicit reference to Blavatsky as a *Buddhist*, but continue to distance their 'Occult Brotherhood' from Buddhism plain and simple. This is clear, for example, in one letter dated December 7th, 1883:

There are even at the present moment three centres of the Occult Brotherhood in existence, widely separated geographically, and as widely *exoterically*—the true esoteric doctrine being identical in substance though differing in terms; all aiming at the same grand object, but no two agreeing *seemingly* in the details of procedure. It is an every day occurrence to find students belonging to different schools of occult thought sitting side by side at the feet of the same Guru. *Upasika* (Madame B.)¹⁷ and Subba Row [a Hindu, for a time an ardent Theosophist], though pupils of the same Master, have not followed the same Philosophy—the one is Buddhist and the other an Adwaiter.¹⁸

¹⁵ *The Secret Doctrine* I, xviii.

¹⁶ Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, p. 97.

¹⁷ *Upasika* is Sanskrit for a non-ordained follower of Buddha.

¹⁸ Barker, Mahatma Letter No. 85, p. 393.

But again, like Blavatsky herself, her direct teachers appear to be particularly *Buddhist*, even if their entire 'Brotherhood' is not. KH refers to "our Great Patron—the Savior of the World—the Teacher of Nirvana and the Law"¹⁹ and to the Theosophical Mahatmas as *Bodhisattvas*,²⁰ *Khobilgans*,²¹ *Chutuktus*,²² *Lhas*,²³ *Byang-chubs* and *Tchang-chubs*.²⁴ Not only do they call themselves disciples of Mahāyāna Buddhism in various languages, but they appear quite sectarian despite their protests like the one above. In a letter from Master M, there is the following statement, criticizing certain orthodox Hindus who voiced their disappointment in never meeting a Theosophical "Mahatma" in the flesh:

What have we, the disciples of the true *Arhats*, of esoteric Buddhism and of Sang-gyas [Tib. "Buddha"], to do with the *Shastras* and Orthodox Brahmanism? There are 100 of thousands of Fakirs, Sannyasis, or Sadhus, leading the most pure lives and yet being as they are, on the path of *error*, never having had an opportunity to meet, see or even hear of us. Their forefathers have driven away the followers of the only true philosophy upon earth from India and now it is not for the latter to come to them, but for them to come to us, if they want us. Which of them is ready to become a Buddhist, a *Nastika*, as they call us? None. Those who have believed and have followed us have had their reward.²⁵

¹⁹ Barker, *Mahatma Letters* p. 33.

²⁰ Barker, *Mahatma Letters*, p. 135 etc.

²¹ Barker, *Mahatma Letters*, p. 44. *Khobilgan* is a phonetic rendering of the Mongolian translation of *Bodhisattva*.

²² Barker, *Mahatma Letters*, p. 110. *Chutuktu* is a phonetic rendering of the Mongolian translation of *Arhat*.

²³ Barker, *Mahatma Letters*, pp. 261, 369, etc. *Lha* is Tibetan for a god or anything elevated or sacred.

²⁴ Barker, *Mahatma Letters*, p. 281. Both are phonetic renderings of the Tibetan translation of *Bodhisattva*.

²⁵ Barker, *Mahatma Letters*, p. 455. It is significant that a reprint of this letter, under the auspices of the United Lodge of Theosophists, has changed all the references to 'Buddhism' (two d's) to 'Budhism.' Even now it would appear certain sectors of the Theosophical world are

Another Mahatma letter must be mentioned, one that is unique among such letters, in that it claims to come from the Mahāchohan²⁶ himself, the teacher of Blavatsky's teachers. This letter dates from 1880, referencing Buddhism at every turn in the most sectarian fashion:

... Buddhism is the surest path to lead men toward the one esoteric truth. As we find the world now, whether Christian, Mussulman, or Pagan, justice is disregarded and honour and mercy both flung to the winds.... Why has that struggle [for life] become the almost universal scheme of the universe? We answer: because no religion, with the exception of Buddhism, has hitherto taught a practical contempt for this earthly life, while each of them, always with that one solitary exception, has through its hells and damnations inculcated the greatest dread of death. Therefore do we find that 'struggle for life' raging most fiercely in Christian countries, most prevalent in Europe and America. It weakens in pagan lands, and is nearly unknown among Buddhist populations ... Teach the people to see that life on this earth, even the happiest, is but a burden and an illusion, that it is but our own Karma, the cause producing the effect, that is our own judge, our saviour in future lives—and the great struggle for life will soon lose its intensity.... The world in general and Christendom especially left for two thousand years to the regime of a personal God, as well as its political and social systems based on that idea, have now proved a failure. ... That we, the devoted followers of the spirit incarnate of absolute self-sacrifice, of philanthropy and divine kindness as of all the highest virtues attainable on this earth of sorrow, the man of men, Gautama Buddha, should ever allow the Theosophical Society to represent the embodiment of selfishness, to become the refuge of the few with no thought in them for the many, is a strange idea ... And it is we, the humble disciples of the perfect Lamas, who are expected to permit the Theosophical Society to drop its noblest title, that of the Brotherhood of Humanity, to become a simple school of Psychology. No! No! our brothers, you have been labouring under the mistake too long already. ... ours must be the true philosophy, the true religion, the true light, which gives truth and nothing but the TRUTH ..."

uncomfortable with too close an association between Theosophy and Buddhism. See *Theosophical Articles by William Q. Judge* (Los Angeles: The Theosophy Co., 1980) pp. 321-22.

²⁶ While the meaning of *Mahā* as a Sanskrit term is clear enough, the word *chohan* has been a linguistic puzzle for over a century. See the section on "chohan" below, under the heading "Of Terms and Texts."

There are no other Mahatma letters that back away from such a tight embrace of Buddhism: no Vedānta-leaning letters, no kudos given to Sufi traditions, etc. Thus there can be no doubt that Madame Blavatsky herself, her immediate Mahatma teachers, and her teachers' teacher, are Buddhist by profession and vocabulary, in ever-increasing degree as one moves up the *guruparampara* chain. Blavatsky makes frequent reference to Buddhism, particularly Mahāyāna Buddhism, in her writings, while the Mahatma letters discuss Buddhism on practically every page, often using highly technical vocabulary in Sanskrit, Pali, Tibetan, Chinese and Mongolian.

Theosophists have sometimes argued that the proliferation of Buddhist terms in Theosophical works, correctly used, itself indicates that Blavatsky was in contact with authentic Buddhism, and that her teachings are therefore 'valid.' For instance, Mahatma M writes in one letter (1884) that his Brother KH has gone into 'Tong-pa-ngi,' (*sTong-pa-ñid*, Tibetan for "emptiness"), *i.e.*, *śūnyatā*.²⁷ Another letter (1883), allegedly from a learned Tibetan of Rinch-cha-tze (a town in Tibet) is bursting with Tibetan and Sanskrit words, spelled (mostly) correctly, unlike HPB's phonetic spellings. We read of *Sākya Thub-pa* (Śākyamuni), *ro-langs* ("hungry ghosts," *bhūtas* in Sanskrit) and *Ālaya-vijñāna* ("storehouse consciousness," a technical Yogācāra Buddhist term).

Yet not much can be made of this for our present purposes. The technical Buddhist vocabulary in Blavatsky's works, and even in the highly

²⁷ Barker, *Mahatma Letters*, p. 368.

abstruse Mahatma letters of KH and M, is not in itself generally significant; an enterprising student could have gained access to *most* of these terms through published materials, though widely scattered and difficult to assemble in one place. Of the examples given above, the small town of “Rinch-cha-tze” (*Rin-chen-rTse*) may be found quite near Shigatse and its famous monastery Tashi-lhunpo (*bKras-shis-lhun-po*) on a map near the back of Markham’s *Narratives of the Mission of George Bogle to Tibet* (1876), although the town is there spelt “Rinjaitzay.” The Tibetan word for “emptiness,” *Tong-pa-ñi* can be found on page 33 of Schalgintweit’s *Buddhism in Tibet* (1863). *Thub-pa* and *ro-langs* are both listed in Jäschke’s *Tibetan English Dictionary* (London, 1881), while *Ālaya-vijñāna* is mentioned in Beal’s *Catena of Buddhist Scriptures from the Chinese* (1871), and in Schlagintweit, among other places.

In fact, a great deal of knowledge had been acquired about Buddhism, both Nikāya (‘Hīnayāna’) and Mahāyāna forms, by the time Blavatsky began her Theosophical career—although some of it was not terribly reliable, because produced by Westerners with little training in Buddhist thought. Kowalewsky had published a *Mongol Chrestomathy* in the city of Kasan in 1836—in Russian no less, Blavatsky’s native tongue. By the time of the *Mahatma Letters*, (beginning in 1880) and certainly by the time of HPB’s *Secret Doctrine* (1888), Jäschke’s *Dictionary* was available, not to mention de Körös’ *Grammar of the Tibetan Language and Dictionary*, both published in English in 1834 (London). In 1872 Childers had published his *Dictionary of the Pali Language* (London), while a great many Sanskrit dictionaries were available,

including Goldstücker (1856), Monier-Williams (1872), and Apte (1884).

Chinese Buddhist terms had likewise been made available by Eitel in his 1870 *Handbook for the Student of Chinese Buddhism*. (For a more complete survey of dictionaries, translations and contemporary literature on Buddhism available during HPB's life, see Appendix I.)

This does not prove that because terms and texts may have been mentioned by Western sources, HPB had copied them. But as per the methodology outlined in chapter one, however accurately Blavatsky and her teachers may have used such Buddhist vocabulary, all instances of technical terms or quotes from native Buddhist texts must be dismissed—unless they cannot be traced to contemporary publications in any Western language, or they refer to definitions, details or concepts that were then unknown. In this way one can be certain Blavatsky must have had an independent source. By this measure, HPB's notable Buddhist vocabulary and textual references become quite few.

Of Terms and Texts

Nevertheless, there are still quite a number of Buddhist terms and treatises that HPB and her teachers refer to that have not yet been traced to any contemporary Western-language source, or whose definitions given by HPB don't correspond with what was known last century. Some of these terms have never been positively identified, like the term *lanoo*, allegedly

Tibetan for “disciple,” mentioned in HPB’s 1889 text, *The Voice of the Silence*. Other puzzling Theosophical terms can now be identified as traditional terms in use by Buddhists in various languages. This may be accomplished by referring to more recent and complete dictionaries, new authoritative translations, and new research which has been carried out by both practising Buddhists and Buddhist Studies scholars in the century since Madame Blavatsky’s death. A sample of some Theosophical terms follows, only recently identified as to Buddhist provenance, followed by some texts known to HPB or her teachers last century, but only this century known to scholars.

“Seven Mysteries”

In one of his letters to A.P. Sinnett, the Mahatma known as KH wrote the following unusual claim:

Karma and Nirvana are but two of the seven great MYSTERIES of Buddhist metaphysics; and but four of the seven are known to the best orientalists, and that very imperfectly.²⁸

Certainly ‘four noble truths’ were known to Buddhist scholars last century, but the four truths don’t appear to relate to a set of seven metaphysical mysteries which included Karma and Nirvāṇa. Yet this century the central importance of Maitreyanātha’s *Ratna-gotra-vibhāga* to Buddhist studies has

²⁸ Barker, *Mahatma Letters*, p. 107.

become evident. The opening verse of this text, translated by David Reigle, reads,

Buddha, doctrine (*dharma*), community (*gaṇa* = *saṅgha*), element (dhātu), enlightenment (*bodhi* = *nirvāṇa*), virtuous qualities (*guṇa*), and lastly buddha-action (*karma*); these seven diamond-like subjects (*vajra-pada*), are in brief, the body of the whole text.²⁹

Reigle notes that dhātu is “perhaps the key term in the *Ratna-gotra-vibhāga*,” a synonym for the esoteric doctrine of the *tathāgatagarbha* (“buddha-seed”).

Discussion on this central and hotly disputed doctrine will take place in chapter three below. Suffice it to say that here, in one place, seems to be an indication of the scholarship of Blavatsky’s teacher, as well as an instance of a *bona fide* ‘esoteric’ doctrine of Buddhism—esoteric in that it was revealed by aṇ (as yet) unidentified Maitreyaṇātha to his disciple, Asaṅga in secret.

Asaṅga

Blavatsky makes Asaṅga not only the founder of the Yogācāra school, but also the founder of an apparently separate esoteric school. First, it must be acknowledged that much of what Blavatsky says about Asaṅga appears to have come from written sources of her day. HPB writes,

Aryāsaṅga was a pre-Christian Adept and founder of a Buddhist esoteric school, though Csoma di Körös places him, for some reasons of his own, in the seventh century A.D. There was another Aryāsaṅga,

²⁹ Translated and commented upon by David Reigle, “Book of Dzian Research Report: *Theosophy in Tibet: The Teachings of the Jonangpa School*,” p. 5.

who lived during the first centuries of our era and the Hungarian scholar most probably confused the two.³⁰

However, Blavatsky in her dating of Asaṅga appears to be entirely dependent on Wilson (writing in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. VI, London 1839, p. 240) who believed it “established, that [Aryāsaṅga’s works] have been written at the latest, from a century and a half before to as much after, the era of Christianity.” Importantly, this exact quote of Wilson, with citation of journal and page, may be found on page 32 of Schlagintweit’s *Buddhism in Tibet*, as well as the prefix “Arya” to Asaṅga’s name. But whatever Blavatsky’s dating of Asaṅga, and whether there were one or two important Buddhist figures by that name, Blavatsky makes the important claim that he founded an esoteric school. Now, whatever one may make of the Yogācāra tradition, it has never been known to have been ‘esoteric,’ in the sense of hidden from the masses. To what can Blavatsky have been referring?

It turns out that according to Buddhist tradition, or at least according to the famous historian Tāranātha, Asaṅga was the founder of the Tantric school as well. Benoytosh Bhattacharyya writes,

... according to the Tibetan and Chinese traditions the Tantras were introduced by Asaṅga from Tushita heaven where he learnt the Śāstra from Maitreya Buddha ... Tāranātha further tells us that the Tantras immediately after introduction were transmitted secretly in an uninterrupted manner from preceptor to disciples for nearly 300 years

³⁰ *Secret Doctrine*, Vol. 1, footnote pp. 49-50.

before they got publicity through the mystic teachings of the Siddhas and Vajrācāryas.³¹

It may be that here Tāranātha gives a pious fiction, attempting to legitimate Vajrayāna tradition by tying the origin of the esoteric Tantras to a well-respected figure in history. Be that as it may, it is not clear how Blavatsky could have been aware of this tradition, other than being exposed to it orally from a Buddhist teacher, as Tāranātha's history was not known in the West last century.

Fohat

Blavatsky first writes of this term in 1885 while discussing the several souls in Chinese philosophy: "At death the *hwan* [hun] or spiritual soul wanders away, ascending, and the *pho* [p'o] (the root of the Tibetan word *Pho-hat*) descends and is changed into a ghostly shade (the shell)."³² Afterwards, however, she consistently spells the term as Fohat. In her posthumous *Theosophical Glossary*, (1892) HPB writes,

Fohat (Tib.) A term used to represent the active (male) potency of the Sakti (female reproductive power) in nature. The essence of cosmic electricity. An occult Tibetan term for *Daiviprakriti*, primordial light; and in the universe of manifestation the ever-present electrical energy and ceaseless destructive and formative power.³³

³¹ Bhattacharyya, Benoytosh, ed. *Guhyasamāja Tantra or Tathāgataguhyaka*, pp. xxxiv-v. I am indebted to David Reigle for this helpful reference.

³² Blavatsky's footnote to an article entitled "Zoroastrianism on the Septenary Constitution of Man," reprinted in *Five Years of Theosophy*, p. 152. The etymology is of course quite unlikely, but it indicates more accurately how Blavatsky must have heard the term Fohat pronounced.

³³ *Theosophical Glossary*, pp. 120-121.

Of course there is no mention of a Sanskrit *Daiviprakriti* in any Sanskrit texts, even today—another mystery term. But the connection between Fohat and primordial light is an important one to keep in mind. In her occult cosmogony, *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky elaborates,

He is, metaphysically, the objectivised thought of the gods; the “Word made flesh,” on a lower scale, and the messenger of Cosmic and human ideations: the active force in Universal Life.... In India, Fohat is connected with Vishnu and Surya in the early character of the (first) God; for Vishnu is not a high god in the Rig Veda. The name Vishnu is from the root *vish*, “to pervade,” and Fohat is called the “Pervader” and the Manufacturer, because he shapes the atoms from crude material.³⁴

The spelling of this ‘Fohat’ misled Theosophists for over a century, but I have now identified it as the Tibetan verb རྩོམ་བྱེད་ (*phro-wa*) and/or the noun form

སྤྲོས་པ་ (*spros-pa*). These two terms are listed in Jäschke’s *Tibetan English*

Dictionary (1881) but with inadequate translations. For the verb form ‘*phro-*

wa, Jäschke gives “to proceed, issue, emanate from, to spread, in most cases

from rays of light ...”³⁵ while for the noun *spros-pa* he gives “business,

employment, activity.”³⁶ Jäschke’s definition of the verb certainly

corresponds well with one sense of HPB’s definition, that of “pervading” like

Vishnu, but leaves untouched the mental and creative aspects of the term.

But a comprehensive search of 20th century Tibetan dictionaries, word lists

³⁴ *Secret Doctrine* Vol. I, p. 112:

³⁵ Jäschke’s *Tibetan English Dictionary* p. 361.

and Sanskrit translations has turned up a wealth of information that would appear to validate HPB's understanding of a cosmic, psycho-creative force. Most importantly, Lokesh Chandra in his *Tibetan-Sanskrit Dictionary*, gives for *spros-pa* several Sanskrit equivalents, including 1. *sarga* 2. *prapañca*. According to the most authoritative Sanskrit dictionary, that of Monier-Williams, *Sarga* is defined as "Emission or creation of matter, primary creation ... creation of the world (as opposed to its *pralaya*, 'dissolution,' and *sthiti*, 'maintainence in existence')." ³⁶ From the same source, we find *Prapañca*: "Expansion, development, manifestations (*Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*)... (in philosophy) the expansion of the universe, the visible world (cited in *Upaniṣads*; Kapila's *Sāṅkhya-pravacana*; *Sarvadarśana-saṅgraha*)."³⁷ But in Buddhist philosophy, *prapañca* is much more than this: it is the mental fabrication of dualistic consciousness which literally creates the world as the non-enlightened perceiver experiences it. In seeing the activity of dualistic consciousness on a cosmic scale, HPB sees *prapañca* as many Tantric texts do. This 'Tantric' worldview will be investigated more fully in chapter three.

³⁶ Jäschke's *Tibetan English Dictionary* p. 337-8.

³⁷ Monier-Williams, p. 1184.

³⁸ Monier-Williams, p. 681.

Chohan

Though in her 1892 Glossary HPB identifies the word 'chohan' as Tibetan,³⁹ meaning "Lord" or "Master," "a chief," it can not be located in any Tibetan text or dictionary from last century. Once again, however, it is the spelling which has caused the problem, along with mispronunciation.

"Chohan" is indeed a Tibetan word, མོས་འཆོང་པ། (*chos-'chong-pa*). It is compounded of མོས་ *chos* (Sanskrit *dharma*, "the Buddhist Teaching" or "Truth") with འཆོང་པ། '*chong-pa* (Sanskrit *dhāraṇa*, "holder" or "protector").

Taken together, the word means "protector of the faith" or perhaps better, "holder of the Buddhist teachings." According to Das, the word has two primary meanings, "1. Buddha 2. A title of honor given to distinguished scholars."⁴⁰ Why Blavatsky has prefixed the Sanskrit *Mahā* to the Tibetan *chos-'chong-pa*, to form 'Mahachohan,' as she often did, who can say? It seems more appropriate, rather, to place *Mahā* with the Sanskrit, *dharmā-dhāraṇa*, or add the Tibetan *chen-po* ("great") to the end of *chos-'chang-pa* (with the same effect). It is this sort of linguistic carelessness which gives scholars pause when examining HPB, but in reality it is merely idiosyncratic and of little consequence. Thus it may be that Blavatsky actually had a Buddhist teacher with this title, or was in contact with someone who did, for

³⁹ *Theosophical Glossary*, p. 83.

otherwise it becomes difficult to explain her accurate use of the word as a Tibetan Buddhist title, or an as equivalent to 'Dhyāni-Buddha'.

Bardo

Since the publication of Evans-Wentz's famous book, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (1927), the term "bardo" has become a fixture in Western vocabulary. But last century the term was virtually unknown, belonging as it did to the Tibetan gTer-Ma or "hidden text" tradition, namely the text called *Bar-do Thos-grol*. Blavatsky's student Mr. Sinnett writes to Mahatma KH,

The period of gestation between Death and Devachan [Tib. *bDe-ba-can*, Skt. *Sukhāvatī*] has hitherto been conceived by me at all events as very long. Now it is said to be in some cases only a few days, in no cases (it is implied) more than a few years....

To which Master KH responds,

... Another fine example of the habitual disorder in which Mrs. H.P.B.'s mental furniture is kept. She talks of "Bardo" and does not even say to her readers what it means! As in her writing-room confusion is ten times confounded, so in her mind are crowded ideas piled in such a chaos that when she wants to express them the tail peeps out before the head. "Bardo" has nothing to do with the duration of time in the case you are referring to. "Bardo" is the period between death and rebirth—and may last from a few years to a kalpa. It is divided into three sub-periods (1) when the *Ego* delivered of its mortal coil enters into *Kama Loka* [a footnote: Tibetan: Yuh-Kai] (the abode of Elementaries); (2) when it enters into its "Gestation State"; (3) when it is reborn in the *Rupa-Loka* of Devachan [bDe-ba-can, Sukhāvatī] Sub-period (3) lasts

⁴⁰ Das, Tibetan-English Dictionary, p. 431.

in proportion to the good KARMA, after which the *monad* is again reicnarnated.⁴¹

Leaving aside for the moment the other technical words, the term *Bardo* may only be found in two locations prior to the writing of KH's letter (1882): Schlagintweit's *Buddhism in Tibet* (1863) and Jäschke's *Tibetan-English Dictionary* (1881). Schlagintweit says of Bardo:

This is the middle state between death and the new re-birth, which does not follow immediately, but there exists an interval, which is shorter for the good than for the bad. The prolongation of this intermediate state is considered as a punishment caused by evil spirits, who have only power over sinful man. The soul exists during this interval without any shape whatever...⁴²

In Jäschke we read

bar-do, also *bar-ma-do* the intermediate state between death and re-birth, of a shorter or longer duration (yet not of more than 40 days ...); although on the one hand it is firmly believed, that the place of rebirth (whether a man, an animal, or a god etc. go forth from it), unalterably depends on the former course of life, yet in [*Bar-do Thos-grol*] the soul is urged and instructed to proceed at once into Nirwana to Buddha (inconsistently with the general dogma).⁴³

In both scholarly accounts the duration of Bardo is of much concern, as it was to Mr. Sinnett. However, the Mahatma's letter contains new information: that of three primary divisions in the bardo state. According to "The Root Verses of The Six Betweens," in the *Bardo Thos-grol* ascribed to Padmasambhava, there are actually three *bar-dos* during physical life (waking,

⁴¹ Barker, Mahatma Letter No. 16, p. 103.

⁴² Schlagintweit, p. 109.

dreaming and meditating) and three *bar-dos* after physical death: 1. The "death-point" 2. "reality between" which is between the death-point and falling into a new rebirth 3. "becoming," which is between the "reality" phase of death and physical conception.⁴⁴ These match up admirably with KH's statement quoted above, although KH assumes that all fairly moral humans take rebirth in *bDe-wa-can*—an assumption apparently unique to Theosophy. As to the length of time in *bar-do*, the standard time given is, at the utmost, 49 days, or 7 cycles of 7. However, some native commentators have claimed these "days" are measured by the lifespans of one's future birth, some of which are extremely long.⁴⁵

Jñāna Prasthāna Śāstra

The Mahatma Letters make brief mention of a Vaibhāṣika-Sarvāstivāda work, commenting on the Abhidharma: "In the *Jñāna Prasthāna Śāstra*, it is said, 'By personal purity and earnest meditation, we overleap the limits of the World of Desire [*Kāra-dhātu*], and enter in the World of Forms [*Rūpa-dhātu*]'."⁴⁶ This 2nd century BCE work, by the Vaibhāṣika-Sarvāstivāda scholar Kātyāyanīputra, was certainly not available in any western language last century, nor is it available in translation today. It is however a critical text for Buddhism, as it

⁴³ Jäschke, p. 367.

⁴⁴ paraphrased from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, trans. Robert Thurman, pp. 117-118.

⁴⁵ Rinbochay, Lati and Jeffrey Hopkins, *Death, Intermediate State and Rebirth in Tibetan Buddhism*, p. 53.

⁴⁶ Barker, Mahatma Letter No. 16, p. 102. This quote has not yet been compared to the original Sanskrit for accuracy.

became the basis for Vasubandhu's 4th century CE landmark commentary, the *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya*.

The Books of 'Kiu-Te'

By far the most important of all the texts that HPB mentions are the hitherto mysterious "Books of Kiu-Te," for it is out of 'secret commentaries' to these works that Blavatsky claims to extract the "Stanzas of Dzyan." Her entire magnum opus, *The Secret Doctrine*, is nothing but a commentary on these ślokas of 'Dzyan', followed by lengthy comparison of these teachings with contemporary scientific views and the records left by ancient religions. (See Appendix II for a selection of these Stanzas) If these secret "Kiu-Te" commentaries in fact exist, then it is possible to take more seriously Blavatsky's claim that she is presenting to the West, for the first time, extracts from a truly 'esoteric' Buddhism.

Firstly, what may be the books of Kiu-Te? Blavatsky writes,

The *Book of Dzyan*—from the Sanskrit word "Dhyān" (mystic meditation)—is the first volume of the Commentaries upon the seven secret folios of Kiu-Te, and a Glossary of the public works of the same name. Thirty-five volumes of Kiu-Te for exoteric purposes and the use of the laymen may be found in the possession of the Tibetan Gelugpa Lamas, in the library of any monastery; and also the fourteen books of Commentaries and Annotations on the same by the initiated Teachers.

Strictly speaking, those thirty-five books ought to be termed "The Popularised Version" of the Secret Doctrine, full of myths, blunders and errors; the fourteen volumes of *Commentaries*, on the other hand—with their translations, annotations, and an ample glossary of Occult terms, worked out from one small archaic folio, the *Book of the Secret Wisdom of the World*—contain a digest of all the Occult Sciences.

These, it appears, are kept secret and apart, in the charge of the Teshu Lama of Tji-gad-je [Shigatse]. The Books of Kiu-Te are comparatively modern, having been edited within the last millenium, whereas, the earliest volumes of the *Commentaries* are of untold antiquity, some fragments of the original cylinders having been preserved. With the exception that they explain and correct some of the too fabulous, and to every appearance, grossly-exaggerated accounts in the Books of Kiu-Te—properly so-called—the *Commentaries* have little to do with these.⁴⁷

Blavatsky then refers to the Catholic monk Della Penna's dismissive account of the Books of Kiu-Te, an early 18th century account that was unpublished until Markham's 1876 book, *Narratives of the Mission of George Bogle to Tibet*:

... the thirty-six volumes of the law Khiute gives precepts for practising magic, and other foul matters of luxury and lust ... I have not read this infamous and filthy law of Khiute, so as not to stain my mind, and because it is unnecessary. For to confute it one must know in the abstract of what it treats, and there is little good or indifferent that is not mixed up with much more witchcraft, magic incantations, and obscenity. For the monks of this unworthy law it is enough that they learn by heart twenty-five papers to attain the doctor's degree: but for the monks of the Dote to become doctors they must study philosophy for twelve years, and for six months in every year they have daily discussions. After the twelve years have passed they are examined and attain their doctorship. This law of Khiute is the shortest road to holiness, but it is uncertain and rough, because those who observe well the precepts of this law, and practise that which it teaches, can become saint in one life without any other transmigrations, but if they do not observe them well they increase their transmigrations, and very often to to the hell *Narme*...

It will be obvious to any scholar barely familiar with the Tibetan Canon, of course, that the two divisions here discussed are nothing other than the *rGyud-sde* (Tantras) and *mDo-sde* (Sutras) of the Canon called *bKa'-gyur*

⁴⁷ *Secret Doctrine*, Vol. 3, p. 405.

(Kanjur).⁴⁸ Della Penna's spelling of Khiute (not his sentiment) is the obvious influence on HPB's "Books of of Kiu-te," which is actually a quite good phonetic rendering of *rGyud-sde*. Blavatsky is apparently not influenced by Schlagintweit, who spells it Gyut (and gives in the appendix the accurate spelling) nor is Blavatsky drawing, at least for spelling, from Csoma de Kőrös' 1836 "Analysis of the ... Kah-Gyur" (in the journal, *Asiatic Researches*) where he lists each of the major sections of the Buddhist canon, and gives short abstracts of each treatise in them.

Blavatsky, then, is interested in the *rGyud-sde*, but not just Buddhist Tantra in general. In particular she refers to "seven secret folios of Kiu-Te ... and also the fourteen books of Commentaries and Annotations on the same by the initiated Teachers." This would appear more difficult to validate. But David Reigle in his *Books of Kiu-Te* points out that there are in fact Tibetan traditions of secret, lengthy Tantric texts: Tibetan scholar Bu-ston (1290-1364) refers to expanded Tantric texts in his *History of Buddhism (Chos-'byung)*, while the colophon of the *Vin.alaprabhā* refers to itself as a commentary on the *Laghu* ("abridged") *Kālachakra Tantra*. Reigle then quotes D.L. Snellgrove's important work, *The Hevajra Tantra: A Critical Study*, where Snellgrove discusses a commentary on the *Hevajra Tantra* by one Bodhisattva Vajragarbha. In this commentary (the *Hevajrapīṇḍārthaṭīkā*)

⁴⁸ The identification of Blavatsky's "Books of Kiu-Te" as the Tantra section of the Tibetan Canon was made independently by two scholars. Henk Spierenberg does this in his work *Tibetaans Boeddhisme* (Theosophical Society in the Netherlands, 1975), p. 74; while David Reigle makes the same announcement in his *Books of Kiu-Te, or The Tibetan Buddhist Tantras* (Wizard's Bookshelf, 1983) p. 2.

Vajragarbha quotes from a lost longer version of the *Mūla* ("Root") *Hevajra Tantra*. D.L. Snellgrove states,

The actual passages that he quotes, come from no normal tantra; they are always explanatory and doctrinal, and it is to this work [the *Mūla Tantra*] that he frequently refers when he is seeking the figurative meaning of a passage.⁴⁹

Vajragarbha in his *tīkā* states that

From this short [known] version just as it is taught one learns the obvious meaning (*neyārtha*); the real meaning (*nītārtha*) is to be learned from the *Mūla Tantra*.

Clearly then, Tibetan tradition itself accepts that its "published" canonical Tantras may not be the definitive, final (*nītārtha*) exposition of their teachings. Esoteric as the *rGyud-sde* (Tantras) may be, even more esoteric commentaries and/or root texts appear to have once been known, and are now lost, hidden, or unknown. Indeed, to any one who has actually read even a small portion of a Tantric text, it is clear that *any* meaning is inscrutable without the aid of a commentary or oral explanation by a qualified teacher. The Tantric texts are full of symbolism, using numbers, colors, various ritual implements and bodily substances in complex visualizations. At times the symbolism is quite sexual, giving rise to the poor Catholic monk's horror of "this infamous and filthy law of Khiute."

⁴⁹ Snellgrove, p. 17, cited by Reigle, p. 3.

But what is the significance of all this? So there really are a set of secret books, with the right number of folios, called the *rGyud-sde*, referred to constantly by Blavatsky as the source of her “Stanzas of Dzyan” which form the “root text” of her two volume *Secret Doctrine*. So there really appears to be a Tibetan tradition of secret Tantric commentaries known only to exalted beings like Bodhisattva Vajragarbha. Perhaps Blavatsky heard all this second-hand as it were and conjured up her “Stanzas of Dzyan” from her Buddhist-trained imagination?

Blavatsky gives a specific provenance for her Stanzas of Dzyan, saying that they are from “ the first volume of the Commentaries upon the seven secret folios of Kiu-Te.” If the ‘secret Commentaries’ follow the order of the ‘published’ Tantra commentaries in the bsTan-’gyur (Tanjur) Canon—which is to be expected—we must look to the first books of the rGyud-sde (Kiu-Te) section. The first five volumes, containing 55 treatises, deal with the *Kālachakra Tantra*, made so popular these days by the many public initiations given by the current Dalai Lama. It is important to further note that Blavatsky’s “Stanzas of Dzyan” deal exclusively with cosmogenesis and anthropogenesis, which is also the entire subject matter of the first section of the *Kālachakra Tantra*. No other Tantric texts place emphasis on cosmology. Furthermore, as David Reigle notes,

The *Kālachakra* teaching is considered the special domain of the Pañchen Lama and his monastery, Tashi-lhunpo, located adjacent to Shigatse, making that area the major center for *Kālachakra* studies in Tibet. The Mahātmās responsible for giving H.P. Blavatsky much of the material

found in *The Secret Doctrine* are also known [according to Blavatsky] to have had their abodes in that locale.⁵⁰

Further, HPB specifically elevated the Pañchen Lama over the Dalai Lama, unlike most scholars last century (and this) who virtually ignore the Pañchen Lama and the long scholarly tradition of that office. She writes,

It is curious to note the great importance given by European Orientalists to the Dalai Lamas of Lhasa, and their utter ignorance as to the Tda-shu (or Teshu) [Pañchen] Lamas, while it is the latter who began the hierarchical series of Buddha-incarnations, and are *de facto* the “popes” in Tibet; the Dalai Lamas are the creations of Nabang-lob-Sang, the Tda-shu Lama, who was Himself the sixth incarnation of Amita, through Tsong Kh-Pa, though very few seem to be aware of that fact.⁵¹

In summary, while a few Western sources by Blavatsky’s time had made brief mention of the existence of a *Kālachakra Tantra* and the existence of a “Gyut” section of the Buddhist canon, Blavatsky gave significantly more information, which has turned out to be correct. (1) Tibetan tradition does in fact have a record of more extensive and explanatory Tantras, which do not exist in the Tibetan Canon. (2) The *Kālachakra* system is largely cosmological and deals with the creation of the universe from space, through six elements, with extremely complex numerology and astrology. This is the subject of the entire volume one of Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine*. (3) The *Kālachakra* is associated with the scholarly tradition of the Pañchen Lamas, who are in fact

⁵⁰ Reigle, “New Light on the *Book of Dzyan*,” p. 54. The argument of this paragraph is entirely indebted to David Reigle’s work in this article and in his short treatise *The Books of Kiu-Te*.

⁵¹ *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. 3, p. 409 fn 3.

considered the tutors of the Dalai Lamas.⁵² None of this proves that there is in fact a secret *Mūla Kālachakra Tantra*, or that Blavatsky (or her teachers) had access to it. But it does suggest that Blavatsky knew what the Buddhist Tantras were, knew their content and philosophical import better than any Western contemporary, and knew *bona fide* Tibetan traditions surrounding them. This alone gives strong reasons not to dismiss her claims out of hand.

Less Than Forthcoming

Some care has been taken to demonstrate that Blavatsky is something of what she claimed to be, a revealer of hidden, 'esoteric' Buddhist teachings. There is sufficient evidence, by way of vocabulary and textual references unique in the 19th century, to suggest that Blavatsky was indeed in touch with a living tradition, either directly or through one or more Mahāyāna Buddhist teachers. This study of Blavatsky and Buddhism is not a partisan one, however, and the less flattering side of Blavatsky's work cannot be overlooked.

In many places, and on many occasions, Blavatsky's work contains the ideas, and sometimes even the exact words, of previously published Western-language sources on Buddhism, without acknowledgement. It may be that

⁵² It might be argued that Blavatsky gained much of her material on the *Kālachakra Tantra* from Csoma de Kőrös' abstract in his 1836 article "Analysis of the ... Kah-Gyur," or from Schlagintweit's chapter on "The *Kālachakra* System." This will be examined in the last section of this chapter. But neither these nor any other 19th century sources show the connection

Blavatsky meant to give citations, or had given them and somehow they were lost in the process of editing and printing. Alternatively, Blavatsky may have been intending to comment on the works of the “exoteric” authors whom she so despised by incorporating their writings into her own in order to expand upon them, reword them, or contradict them. For example, Blavatsky writes,

The Lassens, Webers, Wassiljew, the Burnoufs and Juliens, and even such “eye-witnesses” of Tibetan Buddhism as Csoma de Kōros and the Schlagintweits, have hitherto only added perplexity to confusion. None of these has ever received his information from a genuine Gelugpa source: all have judged Buddhism from the bits of knowledge picked up at the Tibetan frontier lamaseries, in countries thickly populated by Bhutanese and Leptchas, Bhons, and red-capped Dugpas, along the line of the Himâlayas.... hence they have gone on, gravely discussing the relative merits and absurdities of idols, “soothsaying tables,” and “magical figures of Phurbu” on the “square tortoise.” None of these have anything to do with the real philosophical Buddhism of the Gelugpa, or even of the most educated among the Sakyapa and Kadampa sects. All such “plates” and sacrificial tables, Chinresig magical circles, etc., were avowedly got from Sikkhim, Bhutan, and Eastern Tibet, from Bhons and Dugpas.⁵³

Here, the reader can tell by the quotes that HPB is referring to certain unnamed works by the scholars she has listed (but to condemn).

Nevertheless, quite frequently the work of another writer appears within the main text and footnotes of Blavatsky’s writing without any acknowledgement whatsoever, and this can carry on for a number of pages in a row without once mentioning the author she is actually quoting. Sometimes this

between the *Kālachakra* and the Panchen Lama, nor give specific cosmological information, nor make mention of a tradition of explanatory Tantras besides the opaque Tantras in the Canon.

⁵³ *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. 3, p. 415.

appropriation involves critical Buddhist teaching, which in the absence of quotation marks, citations or references to the author, would appear to be intended as Buddhist teachings emanating directly from Blavatsky or her teachers. For considerations of space we will examine only Blavatsky's relationship with *The Buddhism of Tibet* by Emil Schlagintweit (1863).⁵⁴ Of the many appropriations Blavatsky appears to make, I will mention only a few. Underlining in the following quotes will demonstrate *verbatim* appropriations made by Blavatsky from this text, published a full quarter century before her own *Secret Doctrine*.

On pages 51-2 of his text, Schlagintweit writes,

The Buddhists believe that each Buddha when preaching the law to men, manifests himself at the same time in the three worlds which their cosmographical system acknowledges. In the world of desire, the lowest of the three to which the earth belongs, he appears in human shape. In the world of forms he manifests himself in a more sublime form as Dhyāni Buddha. In the highest world, the one of the incorporeal beings, he has neither shape nor name. The Dhyāni Buddhas have the faculty of creating from themselves by virtue of Dhyāna, or abstract meditation, an equally celestial son, a Dhyāni Bodhisattva, who after the death of a Mānushi Buddha is charged with the continuance of the work undertaken by the departed Buddha till the next epoch of religion begins, when again a subsequent Mānushi Buddha appears.

Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, volume three (1897):

Buddhists of the Mahāyāna mystic system teach that each Buddha manifests Himself (hypostatically or otherwise) simultaneously in three worlds of Being, namely, in the world of Kāma (concupiscence or desire—the sensuous universe or our earth) in the shape of a man; in

⁵⁴ I am indebted to Daniel Caldwell for first making known to me HPB's dependence on Schlagintweit's work.

the world of Rūpa (form, yet supersensuous) as a Bodhisattva; and in the highest Spiritual World (that of purely incorporeal existences) as a Dhyāni-Buddha. The latter prevails eternally in space and time, i.e., from one Mahā-Kalpa to the other—the synthetic culmination of the three beings Ādi-Buddha,* the Wisdom-Principle, which is Absolute, and therefore out of space and time. Their interrelation is the following: The Dhyāni -Buddha, when the world needs a human Buddha, “creates” through the power of Dhyāna (meditation, omnipotent devotion), a mind-born son—a Bodhisattva—whose mission it is after the physical death of his human, or Nānushya-Buddha, to continue his work on earth till the appearance of the subsequent Buddha. The Esoteric meaning of this teaching is quite clear.... [HPB’s footnote:] ... What is given here is taken from the secret portions of *Dus Kyi Khorlo* (Kāla Chakra, in Sanskrit, or the “Wheel of Time,” or duration.⁵⁵

Importantly, HPB has altered Schlagintweit’s text, especially the correspondences in the three realms—but there is no question that overall she has lifted this passage from his book originally. *Nota bene* Blavatsky’s footnote, where she claims to be giving out statements from the secret portions of the *Kālachakra Tantra*. However, HPB’s statements are merely rephrasings of Schlagintweit, taken from his *chapter* on *Kālachakra*, where he gives the Tibetan translation *Dus Kyi Khorlo*—a technically correct and not a phonetic spelling, which as we have seen (at length above) was the habit of HPB. In HPB’s ten-page chapter entitled “The Mystery of Buddhism,” which this passage is taken from, Blavatsky does not mention even once Schlagintweit, his book, or any contemporary Western author except A.P. Sinnett, her student. For all HPB’s unique knowledge of *Kālachakra Tantra*, as described in the previous section, this appropriation of published work (and many others like it) would appear to be quite damaging to her claims.

⁵⁵ Vol. three, pp. 378-9

But because volume three of *The Secret Doctrine* was published only posthumously from manuscripts left by HPB, Theosophists might have a right to object that Blavatsky would have edited the MSS. and added citations before it was published. Further, in the hundred pages surrounding the above quote from *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky does refer to Schlagintweit and specific page numbers several times, although not nearly as often as the expectations of modern scholarship would demand.

But even more clear-cut examples of appropriation from Schlagintweit exist, from documents HPB is known to have published under her own power. From Schlagintweit, p. 34:

Parinishpanna (Tib. Yong grub) ... "completely perfect," or simply "perfect," is the unchangeable and unassignable true existence, which is also the scope of the path, the *summum bonum*, the absolute. Of this kind can be only that which enters the mind clear and undarkened, as for instance, the emptiness, or the Non-ego. In order, therefore, that his mind may become free from all that would in any way attract his attention, it is necessary that man view every thing existing as ideal, because it is dependent on something else; then only—as a natural consequence—he arrives at a right understanding of the Non-ego, and to a knowledge of how the voidness is alone self-existent and perfect.

The Secret Doctrine, volume one (1888):

"*Paranishpanna*" is the absolute perfection which all existences attain at the close of a great period of activity, or Mahā-Manvantara, and in which they rest during the succeeding period of repose. In Tibetan it is called Yong-Grüb. Up to the day of the Yogācārya school the true nature of Paranirvana [*parinirvāna*] was taught publicly, but since then it has become entirely esoteric; hence so many contradictory interpretations of it. It is only a true Idealist who can understand it. Everything has to be viewed as ideal, with the exception of Paranirvana, by him who would comprehend that state, and acquire a

knowledge of how Non Ego, Voidness, and Darkness are Three in One and alone Self-existent and perfect.⁵⁶

In the same section, Schlagintweit gives the Tibetan translation of *parikalpita* (i.e., Kung tag) and defines it as:

...the supposition, the error. Of this kind is the belief in absolute existence to which those beings adhere who are incapable of understanding that every thing is empty.... some believing a thing existing which does not, as e.g. the Non-ego ...

Blavatsky writes,

Parikalpita (in Tibetan Kun-ttag [sic]) is error, made by those unable to realize the emptiness and illusionary nature of all; who believe something to exist which does not—e.g., the Non-Ego.⁵⁷

Schlagintweit: *Paratantra* is whatever exists by a dependent or causal connexion." Blavatsky: *Paratantra* is that, whatever it is, which exists only through a dependent or causal connexion."⁵⁸ Schlagintweit:

We come now to the two truths. They are: Samvritisatya (Tib. Kundzabchi denpa) and Paramārthasatya (Tib. Dondampai denpa), or the relative truth and the absolute one ... A difference prevails between the Yogācāryas and the Madhyamikas with reference to the interpretation of Paramārtha; the former say that Paramārtha is also what is dependent upon other things (Paratantra); the latter say that it is limited to

⁵⁶ Vol. I, p. 42. In his careful study of Blavatsky's technical terms in the "Stanzas of Dzyan," David Reigle cites *parinīṣpanna* as particularly significant for HPB's credibility, as "this meaning, 'absolute perfection,' is well enough attested in the Sanskrit Buddhist texts, but almost none of these were published when *The Secret Doctrine* was written. The only one I know of among those containing the term is F. Max Müller's 1883 edition of the *Sukāvatī-vyūha*." (p. 2-3, "Book of Dzyan Research Report: *Technical Terms in Stanza I*" December 1995.) Unfortunately, there can be no question but that Emil Schlagintweit is the source for nearly all of HPB's teachings on *parinīṣpanna*.

⁵⁷ *Secret Doctrine* Vol. 1, p. 48.

⁵⁸ *Secret Doctrine*, Vol. 1, p. 49.

Parinishpanna, or to that which has the character of absolute perfection.... Samvriti is that which is the origin of illusion, but Paramārtha is the self-consciousness* of the saint in his self-meditation, which is able to dissipate illusions, i.e., which is above all (parama) and contains the true understanding (artha). [footnote] Sanskrit Svasamvedana, "the reflection which analyses itself."

Blavatsky:

[Re:] Paramārtha: the Yogācāryas interpret the term as that which is also dependent upon other things (paratantral) [sic]; and the Madhyamikas say that Paramārtha is limited to Parinishpanna or absolute perfection... [footnote] "Paramārtha" is self-consciousness in Sanskrit, Svasamvedana, or the "self-analysing reflection" from two words, parama (above everything) and artha (comprehension), Satya meaning absolute true being, or Esse. In Tibetan Paramārthasatya is Dondampaidenpa. The opposite of this absolute reality, or actuality, is Samvritisatya—the relative truth only—"Samvritti" meaning "false conception" and being the origin of illusion, Maya; in Tibetan Kundzabchi-denpa, "illusion-creating appearance."⁵⁹

What can be said in Blavatsky's defense? Similar 'appropriations' of published text were discovered also in the Mahatma Letters, written mainly to A.P. Sinnett, published from time to time in Theosophical journals. In one case, known as "The Kiddle Incident," a letter from Mahatma KH was showed positively to have appropriated large sections of text from a speech by a certain Henry Kiddle given at a gathering at Lake Pleasant, America, and printed in a Spiritualist journal *Banner of Light*. In a response, KH explains how an Adept such as himself uses occult means to dictate letters telepathically to students who may be at any distance away. The 'transmission' as it were can be received in a corrupted manner by a less than

⁵⁹ *Secret Doctrine* Vol. 1, p. 48.

competent *amanuensis*, while the very process of telepathic impression is open to infiltration by unrelated thoughts. Writes KH,

Having—owing to our correspondence and your Simla [India] surroundings and friends—felt interested in the intellectual progress of the Phenomenalists, which progress by the by I felt rather moving backward in the case of American Spiritualists—I had directed my attention some two months previous to the great annual camping movement of the latter, in various directions, among others to Lake or Mount Pleasant. Some of the curious ideas and sentences representing the general hopes and aspirations of the American Spiritualists remained impressed on my memory, and I remembered only these ideas and detached sentences quite apart from the personalities of those who harboured or pronounced them.... In a case such as mine, the chela [disciple] had, as it were, to pick up what he could from the current I was sending him and, as above remarked, patch the broken bits together as best he might.... So I, in this instance, having at the moment more vividly in my mind the psychic diagnosis of current Spiritualistic thought, of which the Lake Pleasant speech was one marked symptom, unwittingly transferred that reminiscence more vividly than my own remarks upon it and deductions therefrom.⁶⁰

Of course such an explanation—a jumbled transference of telepathic thoughts—is entirely unacceptable to a scholarly audience. It is but one more example of Blavatsky's Asian *Weltanschauung*, where telepathy is a perfectly normal *siddhi* (occult ability) resulting from intense yogic practice. No doubt HPB's appropriations above would be explained by her in the same manner. The problem is that such a thesis is utterly unverifiable, and worse, unfalsifiable, to the mere worldling, and hence not subject to scholarly investigation and judgment. I merely state here the objective fact that Blavatsky's writings contain the words and ideas of other Western writers,

⁶⁰ Barker, *Mahatma Letters*, pp. 416-17. Tentatively dated by Barker to 1883-4.

unacknowledged, and that these appropriations sometimes are made to appear as emanating from a hidden or occult source like Tibetan Buddhist Tantras.

Conclusion

What then are we to make of Blavatsky? She was not like her colonialist, materialist, and missionary peers. As an avowed Buddhist, HPB claimed to be in touch with the living tradition, and she saw the Buddha and the lamas who upheld his tradition in Tibet as the pinnacle of human possibility, and not as the 'niggers' and 'fakirs' her European peers perceived. For this, she was an object of Christian spite and scholarly scorn.

Despite her appropriations from Western works on Buddhism (and even despite her acknowledgement that not infrequently she personally composed letters ascribed to Mahatmas),⁶¹ there is enough evidence, gathered carefully and methodically, to demonstrate that Blavatsky had access to Tibetan Buddhist sources which no other Westerner during her time had. Her works are by no means merely strings of plagiarisms, but rather very cogent arguments, supplemented by masses of data, that her readers should believe Buddhist claims that there is a perennial philosophy, in the possession of Adepts, which explains the origins of the world and leads to salvation from it.

⁶¹ See Appendix III, where a signed and sworn letter by Blavatsky testifies to this.

Thus far has the diachronic comparative method taken us. The next chapters will study Blavatsky and Buddhism in a more thematic way, comparing and contrasting the teachings of Theosophy to modern translations of Buddhist works and current studies in the field of Buddhist scholarship. Chapter Three examines the concept of the Absolute in both Blavatsky's writings and in several schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism, while Chapter Four compares the creation story given by Blavatsky's "Stanzas of Dzyan" (see Appendix II) with the cosmogenesis outlined in the *Kālachakra Tantra* and related systems.

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Appendix I

Chronological Bibliography of Major Works on Buddhism Available to HPB

- 1817 Morrison, Rev. Robert. "Account of Foe. Tr. from the San-Kiao-Yuen-liew, 'The Rise and Progress of the Three Sects.'" (*Horae Sinicae*, new ed. London)
- 1820 Körös, Alexander Csoma de. "Analysis of the Kah-gyur, etc." (AR)
- 1821 Körös, Alexander Csoma de. "Abrégé des matières du Tandjour." (AMG) [date?]
- 1824 Clough, Reverend Benjamin. *A compendious Pali Grammar, with a copious vocabulary.* (Colombo)
- Klaproth, Julius Heinrich. "Vie de Bouddha d'après le livres mongols." (JA)
- 1826 Schroeter, Friedrich Christian Gotthelf. *A dictionary of the Bhotanta or Boutan language.* (Serampore) [Trans. of Francesco Orazio della Penna's 1731 Tibetan Dictionary]
- 1829 Bitschurin, Iakynth. (Hyacinthe). "Description du Tübet" (In French, from Russian, from Chinese)
- 1832 Adelung, Fr. *Historical Sketch of Sanskrit Literature. With copious bibliographical notices of Sanskrit works and translations.* (From German)
- Körös, Alexander Csoma de. "Translation of a Tibetan Fragment." (JASB)
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* Likely source for HPB

** An established source for HPB

AMG: *Annales de Musée Guimet*

AR: *Asiatic(k) Researches*, begins 1790 (?)

BOR: *Babylonian and Oriental Record*, begins 1886

IA: *Indian Antiquary* (Bombay and London), begins 1872

IS: *Indische Studien*, begins 1850

JA: *Journal Asiatique*, begins 1822

JASB: *Journal of the (Royal) Asiatic Society of Bengal*, begins 1830

JAOS: *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, begins 1843

JCBRAS: *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the RAS*, begins 1846

JNCB: *Journal of the North China Branch of the RAS*, begins 1859

JRAS: *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britian (and Ireland)*,
 begins 1834

JRSB: ??

JS: *Journal des Savants*, begins 1816

RDM: *Revue des Deux Mondes*, begins 1829

RHR: *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, begins 1880

SPAW: *Sitzungsberichte der Preusseischen Akademie der Wissenschaftnm*
Philosophisch-Historische Klasse, begins 1882

Appendix II

“The Stanzas of Dzyan”

(Excerpted from H.P. Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine*)¹

Stanza I.

1. THE ETERNAL PARENT (Space), WRAPPED IN HER EVER INVISIBLE ROBES, HAD
SLUMBERED ONCE AGAIN FOR SEVEN ETERNITIES.
2. TIME WAS NOT, FOR IT LAY ASLEEP IN THE INFINITE BOSOM OF DURATION.
3. ... UNIVERSAL MIND WAS NOT, FOR THERE WERE NO AH-HI (celestial beings) TO
CONTAIN (hence to manifest) IT.
4. THE SEVEN WAYS TO BLISS (Moksha or Nirvana) WERE NOT. THE GREAT CAUSES OF
MISERY (Nidana and Maya) WERE NOT, FOR THERE WAS NO ONE TO PRODUCE AND GET
ENSNARED BY THEM.
5. DARKNESS ALONE FILLED THE BOUNDLESS ALL, FOR FATHER, MOTHER AND SON WERE
ONCE MORE ONE, AND THE SON HAD NOT AWAKENED YET FOR THE NEW WHEEL AND HIS
PILGRIMAGE THEREON.
6. THE SEVEN SUBLIME LORDS AND THE SEVEN TRUTHS HAD CEASED TO BE, AND THE
UNIVERSE, THE SON OF NECESSITY, WAS IMMERSSED IN PARANISHPANNA (absolute

¹ Only a few of the *ślokas* (pp. 35-85) are here given from the scores that make up the root text of Blavatsky's work *The Secret Doctrine*, vols. 1 and 2. Small capitals and parenthetical explanations are in the original.

perfection, Paranirvana, which is Yong-Grüb) TO BE OUT-BREATHED BY THAT WHICH IS AND YET IS NOT. NAUGHT WAS.

7. THE CAUSES OF EXISTENCE HAD BEEN DONE AWAY WITH: THE VISIBLE THAT WAS, AND THE INVISIBLE THAT IS, RESTED IN ETERNAL NON-BEING, THE ONE BEING.

8. ALONE, THE ONE FORM OF EXISTENCE STRETCHED BOUNDLESS, INFINITE, CAUSELESS, IN DREAMLESS SLEEP; AND LIFE PULSATED UNCONSCIOUS IN UNIVERSAL SPACE, THROUGHOUT THAT ALL-PRESENCE WHICH IS SENSED BY THE "OPENED EYE" OF THE DANGMA.

9. BUT WHERE WAS THE DANGMA WHEN THE ALAYA OF THE UNIVERSE (*Soul as the basis of all, Anima Mundi*) WAS IN PARAMARTHA (*Absolute Being and Consciousness which are Absolute Non-Being and Unconsciousness*) AND THE GREAT WHEEL WAS ANUPADAKA?

Stanza II.

1. ... WHERE WERE THE BUILDERS, THE LUMINOUS SONS OF MANVANTARIC DAWN? ... IN THE UNKNOWN DARKNESS IN THEIR AH-HI (*Chohanis, Dhyani-Buddhic*)

PARANISHPANNA, THE PRODUCERS OF FORM (*rupa*) FROM NO-FORM (*arupa*), THE ROOT OF THE WORLD—THE DEVAMATRI AND SVÂBHÂVAT, RESTED IN THE BLISS OF NON-BEING.

2. ... WHERE WAS SILENCE? WHERE WERE THE EARS TO SENSE IT? NO! THERE WAS NEITHER SILENCE, NOR SOUND. NAUGHT SAVE CEASELESS, ETERNAL BREATH (*Motion*) WHICH KNOWS ITSELF NOT.

3. THE HOUR HAD NOT YET STRUCK; THE RAY HAD NOT YET FLASHED INTO THE GERM; THE MATRI-PADMA (*mother lotus*) HAD NOT YET SWOLLEN.

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4. HER HEART HAD NOT YET OPENED FOR THE ONE RAY TO ENTER, THENCE TO FALL AS THREE INTO FOUR IN THE LAP OF MAYA.
5. THE SEVEN (*Sons*) WERE NOT YET BORN FROM THE WEB OF LIGHT, DARKNESS ALONE WAS FATHER-MOTHER, SVÂBHÂVAT, AND SVÂBHÂVAT WAS IN DARKNESS.
6. THESE TWO ARE THE GERM, AND THE GERM IS—ONE. THE UNIVERSE WAS STILL CONCEALED IN THE DIVINE THOUGHT AND THE DIVINE BOSOM.

Stanza III.

1. THE LAST VIBRATION OF THE SEVENTH ETERNITY THRILLS THROUGH INFINITY. THE MOTHER SWELLS, EXPANDING FROM WITHIN WITHOUT LIKE THE BUD OF THE LOTUS.
2. THE VIBRATION SWEEPS ALONG, TOUCHING WITH ITS SWIFT WING (*simultaneously*) THE WHOLE UNIVERSE, AND THE GERM THAT DWELLETH IN DARKNESS; THE DARKNESS THAT BREATHES (*m o v e s*) OVER THE SLUMBERING WATERS OF LIFE.
3. "DARKNESS" RADIATES LIGHT, AND LIGHT DROPS ONE SOLITARY RAY INTO THE WATERS, INTO THE MOTHER DEEP. THE RAY SHOOTS THROUGH THE VIRGIN-EGG; THE RAY CAUSES THE ETERNAL EGG TO THRILL, AND DROP THE NON-ETERNAL (*periodical*) GERM, WHICH CONDENSES INTO THE WORLD EGG.
4. (*Then*) THE THREE (*triangle*) FALL INTO THE FOUR (*quarternary*). THE RADIANT ESSENCE BECOMES SEVEN INSIDE, SEVEN OUTSIDE. THE LUMINOUS EGG (*Hiranyagarbha*), WHICH IN ITSELF IS THREE (*the triple hypostases of Brahmâ, or Vishnu, the three "Avasthas"*), CURDLES AND SPREADS IN MILK-WHITE CURDS THROUGHOUT THE DEPTHS OF MOTHER, THE ROOT THAT GROWS IN THE OCEAN OF LIFE.

5. THE ROOT REMAINS, THE LIGHT REMAINS, THE CURDS REMAINS, AND STILL OEAOHOO IS ONE.

6. THE ROOT OF LIFE WAS IN EVERY DROP OF THE OCEAN OF IMMORTALITY (*Amrita*) AND THE OCEAN WAS RADIANT LIGHT, WHICH WAS FIRE AND HEAT AND MOTION. DARKNESS VANISHED AND WAS NO MORE. IT DISAPPEARED IN ITS OWN ESSENCE, THE BODY OF FIRE AND WATER, OF FATHER AND MOTHER.

7. BEHOLD, OH LANOO! THE RADIANT CHILD OF THE TWO, THE UNPARALLELED REFULGENT GLORY, BRIGHT SPACE, SON OF DARK SPACE, WHO EMERGES FROM THE DEPTHS OF THE GREAT DARK WATERS. IT IS OEAOHOO, THE YOUNGER, THE * * * (*whom though knowest now as Kwan-Shai-Yin. — Comment*). HE SHINES FORTH AS THE SUN. HE IS THE BLAZING DIVINE DRAGON OF WISDOM. THE EKA IS CHATUR (*four*), AND CHATUR TAKES TO ITSELF THREE, AND THE UNION PRODUCES THE SAPTA (*seven*) IN WHOM ARE THE SEVEN WHICH BECOME THE TRIDASA (*the thrice ten*) THE HOSTS AND THE MULTITUDES. BEHOLD HIM LIFTING THE VEIL, AND UNFURLING IT FROM EAST TO WEST. HE SHUTS OUT THE ABOVE AND LEAVES THE BELOW TO BE SEEN AS THE GREAT ILLUSION. HE MARKS THE PLACES FOR THE SHINING ONES (*stars*) AND TURNS THE UPPER (*space*) INTO A SHORELESS SEA OF FIRE, AND THE ONE MANIFESTED (*element*) INTO THE GREAT WATERS.

8. WHERE WAS THE GERM, AND WHERE WAS NOW DARKNESS? WHERE IS THE SPIRIT OF THE FLAME THAT BURNS IN THY LAMP, OH LANOO? THE GERM IS THAT, AND THAT IS LIGHT; THE WHITE BRILLIANT SON OF THE DARK HIDDEN FATHER.

9. LIGHT IS COLD FLAME, AND FLAME IS FIRE, AND THE FIRE PRODUCES HEAT, WHICH YIELDS WATER, THE WATER OF LIFE IN THE GREAT MOTHER (*Chaos*).

10. FATHER-MOTHER SPIN A WEB WHOSE UPPER END IS FASTENED TO SPIRIT (*Purusha*), THE LIGHT OF THE ONE DARKNESS, AND THE LOWER ONE TO MATTER (*Prakriti*) ITS (*the Spirit's*) SHADOWY END; AND THE WEB IS THE UNIVERSE SPUN OUT OF THE TWO SUBSTANCES MADE IN ONE, WHICH IS SVÂBHÂVAT.

11. IT (*the Web*) EXPANDS WHEN THE BREATH OF FIRE (*the Father*) IS UPON IT; IT CONTRACTS WHEN THE BREATH OF THE MOTHER (*the root of Matter*) TOUCHES IT. THEN THE SONS (*the Elements with their respective Powers, or Intelligences*) DISSOCIATE AND SCATTER, TO RETURN INTO THEIR MOTHER'S BOSOM AT THE END OF THE "GREAT DAY" AND REBECOME ONE WITH HER. WHEN IT (*the Web*) IS COOLING, IT BECOMES RADIANT, ITS SONS EXPAND AND CONTRACT THROUGH THEIR OWN SELVES AND HEARTS; THEY EMBRACE INFINITY.

12. THE SVÂBHÂVAT SENDS FOHAT TO HARDEN THE ATOMS. EACH (*of these*) IS A PART OF THE WEB (*Universe*). REFLECTING THE "SELF-EXISTENT LORD" (*Primeval Light*) LIKE A MIRROR, EACH BECOMES IN TURN A WORLD...

Appendix III

A Statement by H.P.B.²

(Reprinted from C. Jinarajadasa, ed. *The Early Teachings of the Mahatmas*, 1923.)

This morning before the receipt of your letter at 6 o'clock, I was permitted and told by Master to make you understand at last, you and all the sincere, truly devoted Theosophists, "*as you sow, so you shall reap*", the personal and private questions and prayers, answers³ framed in the mind of those whom such matters can yet interest, whose minds are not yet entirely blank to such worldly terrestrial questions, answers by chelas and novices, often something reflected from *my own mind*, for the Masters would not stoop for one moment to give a thought to *individual*, private matters relating but to one or even ten persons, their welfare, woes and blisses in this world of Maya, to nothing except questions of really universal importance. It is *all you* Theosophists who have dragged down in your minds the ideals of our Masters; *you who* have unconsciously and with the best of intentions and full sincerity of good purpose, *desecrated* Them, by thinking for one moment, and believing that *They* would trouble Themselves with your business matters, sons to be born, daughters to be married, houses to be built, etc. etc. And yet, all those of you who have received such communications, being nearly *all* sincere (those who were *not* have been dealt with according to other special laws) you had a right, knowing of the existence of Beings Who you thought could easily help you, to seek help from Them, to address Them once that a monotheist addresses his personal God, desecrating the *Great Unknown* a million times *above* the Masters, by asking Him (or *It*) to help him with a good crop, to slay his enemy and send him a son or daughter; and having such a right in the abstract sense, They could not spurn you off, and refuse answering you of not Themselves, then by ordering a chela [disciple] to satisfy the addresses to the best of his or her's (chela's) ability.

How many times was I (no Mahatma) shocked and startled, burning with shame when shown notes written in Their [KH's and M's] (two)

² The statement is preceded by these words in Mrs. Gebhard's handwriting: "Extracts from a letter from H.P. Blavatsky dated Wurzburg 24-1-[18]86, copied by Mrs. Gebhard. The contents were confirmed verbally by H.P.B. to Mr. and Mrs. Gebhard in Elberfeld in June, 1886."

[clarifications for a non-Theosophical audience have been added by me in square brackets]

³ [Query: "are answered"?]

handwritings (a form of writing adopted for the T.S. [Theosophical Society] and used by chelas, only *never without Their special permission or order* to that effect) exhibiting mistakes in science, grammar and thoughts, expressed in such language that it perverted entirely the meaning originally intended, and sometimes expressions that in Tibetan Sanscrit or any other Asiatic language had quite a different sense, as in one instance I will give. In answer to Mr. Sinnett's letter referring to some apparent contradictions in ISIS [Unveiled, HPB's first book], the chela who was made to precipitate Mahatma K.H.'s reply put, "I had to exercise all my ingenuity to reconcile the two things". Now the term ingenuity, used for meaning candour, fairness, and obsolete word in this sense and never used now, but one meaning this perfectly as even I find in Webster, was misconstrued by Massey, Hume, and I believe even Mr. Sinnett [all Theosophists], to mean "cunning", "cleverness", "acuteness", to form a new combination so as to prove there was no contradiction. hence: "the Mahatma confesses most unblushingly to ingenuity, to using *craft* to reconcile things, like an astute tricky lawyer", etc. etc. Now had I been commissioned to write or precipitate the letter, I would have translated the Master's thought by using the word "ingenuousness", "openness of heart, frankness, fairness, freedom from reserve and dissimulation", as Webster gives it, and opprobrium thrown on Mahatma K.H.'s character would have been avoided. It is not I who would have used *carbolic* acid instead of *carbonic* acid, etc. [As written in one Mahatma letter] It is very rarely that Mahatma K.H. *dictated verbatim*; and when He did there remained the few sublime passages found in Mr. Sinnett's letters from Him. The rest, He would say, write so and so, and the chela wrote, often without knowing one word of English, as I am now made to write Hebrew and Greek and Latin, etc. [All of which appear in profusion in *The Secret Doctrine*] Therefore the only thing I can be reproached with—a reproach I am ever ready to bear though I have not deserved it, having been simply the obedient and blind tool of our occult laws and regulations—is of having (1) used Master's name when I thought my authority would go for naught, when I sincerely believed acting agreeably to Master's intentions,⁴ and for the good of the cause; and (2) of having concealed that which the laws and regulations of my [occult] pledges did not permit me so far to reveal; (3) *perhaps* (again for the same reason) of having insisted that such and such a note was from Master written in *His own handwriting*, all the time thinking *Jesuitically*, I confess, "Well, it is written by *His* order and *in His* handwriting, after all, why shall I go and explain to these, who do not, cannot understand the truth, and perhaps only make matters worse."

Two or three times, perhaps more, letters were precipitated [by telepathy onto paper] in *my presence*, by chelas who could not speak English,

⁴ [HPB's footnote:] Found myself several times mistaken and now I am punished for it with daily and hourly crucifixion. Pick up stones, Theosophists, pick them up, brothers and kind sisters, and stone me to death with them for trying to make you happy with one word of the Masters!

and who took ideas and expressions out of my head. The [occult] phenomena in *truth* and *solemn reality* were greater at those times than ever! Yet they often appeared the most suspicious, and I had to hold my tongue, to see suspicion creeping into the minds of those I loved best and respected, unable to justify myself or to say one word. What I suffered Master only knew! Think only (a case with Solovioff⁵ at Elberfeld) I sick in my bed; a letter of his, an old letter of his received in London and torn by me, *rematerialised* in my own sight, I looking at the thing; five or six times in the *Russian language*, in *Mahatma K.H.'s handwriting* in blue [*i.e.*, KH's special pencil color], the words *taken from my head*, the letter old and crumpled travelling slowly *alone* (even I could not see the astral hand of the chela performing the operation) across the bedroom, then slipping into and among Solovioff's papers who was writing in the little drawing-room, correcting my manuscripts; Olcott [President of the T.S.] standing closely by him and having just handled the papers looking over them with Solovioff. The latter finding it, and like I flash I see in his head in Russian the thought: "The old impostor (meaning Olcott) must have put it there!", and such things by hundreds.

Well, this will do. I have told you the truth, the whole truth, and *nothing but the truth*, so far as I am allowed to give it. Many are the things I have no right to explain, if I had to be hung for it.

⁵ [later a great opponent of HPB, author of the scathing biography *A Modern Priestess of Isis*]