

Taming the Astral Body: The Theosophical Society's Ongoing Problem of Emotion and Control

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Abstract

In New York City in 1875, a group interested in Spiritualism and occult science founded what would become the Theosophical Society. Primarily the creation of Henry Steel Olcott and Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, the Theosophical Society went through a number of early incarnations. One original version promised to teach occult powers. After Blavatsky found that she could not honor earlier promises to teach occultism, she shifted the focus of the Society to one that promoted Universal Brotherhood instead, highlighting notions of the body and demanding the control of emotion as a means to rebuff demands for training. With this refocusing, Blavatsky reestablished control of the Society and asserted herself as the central channel of esoteric knowledge. Thus, by shifting the focus from the attainment of occult powers to the more ambiguous “spiritual enlightenment,” Blavatsky erected an elaborate, centralized system of delayed spiritual gratification, a system contingent upon the individual’s adoption of specific morals and values, while simultaneously maintaining control of the human body on all its levels: spiritual, social, physical, mental, and especially emotional.

Introduction

During a meeting of the Theosophical Society in New York City on October 18, 1876, the co-founder and legal counsel for the newly established organization, William Quan Judge (1851–96), gave a lecture about his personal experiences in the study of Theosophy. He spoke about his recent experiences of astrally traveling and implanting his thoughts and ideas into the minds of others. He did this through focusing his will and commanding his “double,” or astral body, to go to these places and influence others. In describing this process, he stated directly that “Thoughts are objective and become as it were living beings.” He concluded this lecture optimistically, stating to the participants that the work of the Society was to assist and act as a theater for individual

members to study occultism and pass through the “mysterious portal at whose door we stand” and to obtain the highest occult powers (Deveney 2004:15–19).

In contrast to Judge’s optimism regarding the liberation of the double and the attainment of hidden capabilities, a series of articles appeared in *The Theosophist*, the primary international Theosophical journal, in the early 1880s that signaled a shift in view about the inner self. The astral body emerged as a liability that had to be controlled, with the final goal being spiritual enlightenment. In Judge’s lecture, there was no mention of Masters¹ students, or any structure to the process of studying occultism or the attainment of the highest spiritual powers. However, after relocating its headquarters to India in 1879, the Theosophical Society adopted many Indian religious customs and worldviews, translating or adapting them into western concepts. Among these were more disciplined attitudes about occultism and the steps by which the occult sciences were approached. Coupled with this new emphasis on discipline, the inner self was scrutinized and divided into seven levels or principles and, most significantly, the body—along with its needs, desires, and passions—was deemed problematic and had to be contained and controlled. The spiritual teacher came to be called the guru, and the student the *chela*. The relationship between the two was increasingly regulated, and the Theosophical Society became the means and mediator through which the individual came to be viewed as a possible student of the Masters.

In this essay I argue that early notions of the astral body, or the liberated double as Theosophists occasionally called it, and the demands for occult training to attain the liberation of this body created a crisis of control within the Theosophical Society, a crisis which placed the primary leaders, especially Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–91), in a position of obligation to

¹ Theosophists used the terms Masters, Adepts, and Mahatmas interchangeably to indicate a man or woman who had reached the highest states of occult knowledge and spiritual enlightenment and who, in turn, assisted others through teaching to become spiritually enlightened.

deliver on promised occult training while competing with others who offered similar teachings. After Blavatsky found that she could not honor earlier promises, she shifted the focus of the Society to one that instead promoted Universal Brotherhood, highlighting notions of the body and demanding the control of emotion as a means to rebuff demands for training. With this refocusing, Blavatsky reestablished control of the Society and asserted herself as the central channel of esoteric knowledge. Thus, by shifting the focus from the attainment of occult powers to the more ambiguous “spiritual enlightenment,” Blavatsky erected an elaborate, centralized system of delayed spiritual gratification, a system contingent upon the individual’s adoption of specific morals and values, while simultaneously maintaining control of the human body on all its levels: spiritual, social, physical, mental, and especially emotional. By studying the way Blavatsky developed her system of delayed spiritual gratification, we can better understand the way emotions and the body are used within religious groups to maintain control and exercise authority over its members.

Shifting the Gaze to the Far East and Seeking Spiritual Enlightenment

When the Theosophical Society was founded in 1875, the primary purpose was to study, in a scientific manner, the many ideas and powers introduced by George H. Felt (1831–1906). Felt claimed to have discovered the “geometric figures of the Egyptian cabala.” With these he was able to control elemental spirits and, in turn, these spirits could have “effect on animals and their relations with humanity.” Felt agreed to teach these techniques to the group at a later date with due preparation. Taking these suggestions, the students of Felt resolved to establish a society for the “study and elucidation of Occultism, the Cabbala, etc.” (Olcott 1895: 119, 126, 121). Led by Henry Steel Olcott (1831–1907), Blavatsky, and Judge, this group organized themselves and from these early meetings the Theosophical Society slowly emerged. At this time there was no reference to

masters or higher spiritual attainment. The only teacher mentioned was Felt. Not long after Felt had made his promises “to exhibit ... the race of beings which, invisible to our eyes, people the elements” (Olcott et al. 1946: 24), he collected \$100 “to defray the costs of his promised experiments,” but delivered no elementals and eventually “went out of the Society” (Olcott 1895: 139).

Felt’s departure and unfulfilled promises left the Theosophical Society in a bind. The society existed to investigate occult phenomena and obtain occult powers, but they lacked a person to teach them. This is when Olcott and Blavatsky began to search for an alternative teacher, while also asserting that they themselves were in communication with magical adepts. In 1877, Blavatsky published her two-volume *Isis Unveiled*, which claimed to examine religion and science within the context of Western occultism and spiritualistic phenomena. Significantly, she did not find role models for adepts in the Tibetan masters who would later become the center of Theosophical teachings, but instead looked toward Egypt. Before coming to the United States, Blavatsky had lived in Egypt and claimed to have met occult masters there. Taking Blavatsky on her word, Olcott dispatched a member of the Society to Egypt and Tunis to retrieve one of the many “African wizards” Blavatsky claimed resided there.² Egypt was seen as a place of magic and the Middle East was still a place of mystery, or at least it was in the Theosophical imagination.

Unfortunately, for Olcott and Blavatsky, no Egyptian wizard appeared. After this attempt, many other potential masters were evaluated. None fit the requirements. Their perceived inadequacy was due to the fact that the role model for what an adept ought to be like was not derived from a real human, but came instead from the fiction of English writer Lord Edward

² Bechofer-Roberts (1931: 99). See also Liljegren (1957). Liljegren offers an in-depth discussion of Egypt in the mind of early Theosophy. See also Johnson (1994), in which he details the various people Blavatsky attempted to cast as adepts and mahatmas. Deveney (2004) discusses early figures whom Blavatsky “evaluated” as potential masters for her claims of gnosis transmission.

George Bulwer-Lytton. Two of his novels, *Zanoni* (1842) and *A Strange Story* ([1862] 2006), were the primary inspirations for Blavatsky's adepts and their powers. In *Zanoni*, Blavatsky found a role model for how a master should act and from where one should originate—the East; from *A Strange Story*, she obtained her early tripartite model of the divisions of the human body and the types of powers a master should command.³ None of the adepts in North America, Europe, or the Middle East could meet these expectations. Thus, Blavatsky and Olcott adjusted their gaze farther; they began to look toward India and Tibet.

In 1879, Blavatsky and Olcott relocated to India in hopes of revitalizing and reforming the Society. Here they also hoped to establish contact with higher masters, with whom Blavatsky claimed she had made contact earlier in Egypt and Tibet. Yet after arriving in India, a shift in focus, terminology, and learning processes emerged within the Society and its rhetoric. While Blavatsky had always stated that the processes involved in obtaining occult powers were difficult, requiring significant time and energy and always carrying a hint of danger, a new need to regulate the process began to emerge. As Blavatsky learned more about Hinduism and Buddhism, these elements came to the forefront of her teachings, and myriad Sanskrit and Hindi words proliferated in her writing. She attempted to fit them into a western framework with varied success. One of the first was in reference to members who could become students of the Masters. Whereas initially anyone could begin the process of occult learning, the organizational change of focus required the potential student to prove him- or herself worthy. In the Theosophical journals, numerous essays emerged describing the necessary qualities that a potential student ought to possess before even

³ In a footnote to her description of the tripartite division of man, Blavatsky adds, “See Bulwer-Lytton ‘Strange Story,’ p. 76. We do not know where in literature can be found a more vivid and beautiful description of this difference between the life-principle of man and that of animals, than the passages herein briefly alluded to” (Blavatsky 1877: 1: I: 329).

becoming a chela, or student, of a Master. For example, “Each candidate was warned that he must wait for years in any event, before his fitness could be proven, and that he must pass through a series of tests.”⁴

Within just a few years of relocating to India, Blavatsky located her adepts in Tibet, a place mysterious to the West. As various Eastern locations fell under control of European colonial powers, their mystery and power to evoke the fantastic dissipated. Tibet remained a place that resisted colonization and thus maintained its mystique. By the end of the nineteenth century, Tibet emerged as “the source and pre-serve of secret knowledge and as the abode of lost races” (Lopez 1998: 50). Blavatsky claimed to have lived with adepts for seven years and that she was the only one who could reliably speak for them. In this move to maintain control of the message of the Society, Blavatsky “found” the adepts she had been looking for in the mysterious mountains of Tibet. It was through their words and statements that new tests and demands were made of the Society’s members. These were usually in the form of letters sent by the Masters to other Theosophical members. From these letters, many of the society’s new teachings emerged. While many people believed that the letters were appearing due to the efforts of the Masters, others saw Blavatsky as having a hand in their creation. In 1885, a former servant of Blavatsky’s made allegations that Blavatsky had falsified the Mahatma letters and the servant had assisted in their distribution. These accusations created a scandal that challenged Blavatsky’s legitimacy and claims of connection to the mahatmas.⁵ They also cast doubt upon the difference between Blavatsky’s writings and those of the Masters. Shortly after the allegations were released,

⁴ This essay, entitled “Chelas and Lay Chellas,” became a fundamental within Theosophy, as illustrated by the number of times it has been republished. A cursory scan of the Theosophical publications noted seven occurrences spanning from 1911 to 2007 (Anonymous 1883: 10).

⁵ See Gomes (2005) for a detailed analysis of the claims of forgery and letter manufacture leveled against Blavatsky by her former housekeeper, Emma Coulomb.

Blavatsky left India and began traveling in Europe. She traveled for two years, all the time writing for various Theosophical journals and composing her next significant work. In 1887 she settled in London, and in 1888 published her magnum opus, the two-volume *The Secret Doctrine*. Despite the prior allegations, many followers sincerely believed in the messages of the Masters contained in the letters and understood their tests as steps that were necessary to obtain occult powers.

These tests frequently boiled down to the moral behavior of the candidate. Regulating these behaviors became a vital part of Theosophical doctrine. One of the first focuses was on sexual behavior. However, due to the general Victorian prohibition regarding the discussion of sexuality, the message was given in coded language. Conditions such as “absolute mental and physical purity” (Anonymous 1883: 10) were demanded. Even married couples were counseled to limit their physical interactions. Marriage was recast as a “union of the male spirit with the female soul.” While sexual intercourse was necessary for the propagation of the species, it could also devolve into “a brutal act, which lowers man and woman.” One essay ends by stating the “remedy for all these evils is continence” (An American Buddhist 1884: 162). For the Theosophists, though, the problem was not the sexual act. This act was necessary for the continuation of the human race. Instead, as scholar of Theosophy Siv-Ellen Kraft notes, the “sex problem” was related to “its ‘fallen’ concomitants of lust and sensuality—to freed carnal appetites and sexual intercourse for the sake of pleasure” (Kraft 1999:112).

The Masters were more serious about the matter of marriage. According to their early correspondence, married individuals simply could not become adepts. This prohibition also included anyone who had lost their virginity. Still, they stated that those who were married “can acquire certain powers and do much good to mankind” (Chin 1993: 119). In a letter, the Masters stated, “Food, sexual relations, drink, are all natural necessities of life; yet excess in them brings

on disease, misery, suffering, mental and physical, and the latter are transmitted as the greatest evils to future generations” (Chin 1993: 274). The biggest problem with these necessities, as well as others like ambition and securing happiness, is that they promote selfishness, which leads one away from higher knowledge. One must strive “in the name of Truth, Morality and universal charity” to destroy their false ways (Chin 1993: 275). Thus, one must learn to control these desires and thoughts, and the best way to control sexual desire is to never indulge in it. Not surprisingly, Blavatsky stressed the connection between celibacy and genius (Kraft 1999: 129). Of course, these assertions called Blavatsky’s own marriages into question, to which she replied that neither were ever consummated (Cranston 1993:36–37, 133).

The message from these prohibitions was that it was not good enough for someone to behave well; one also had to reform and control one’s inner self. For instance, in 1884 Babu Mohini Mohun Chatterji (1858–1936), a well-known Indian Theosophist and travel partner of Blavatsky and Olcott, lectured at the Theosophical Society in London, reminding his audience:

The personality of a man at any one moment is the result of all his previous acts, thoughts, and emotions, the energy of which constantly inclines the mind to act in a particular way. All attempts therefore, to cure this mental bias by repressing its external expression on the outer plane is ... hurtful ... The internal desire is always forging fresh links in the chain of material existence, even though denied outward manifestation (Chatterji 1884: 281).

Chatterji continued his lecture by giving detailed explanations of the qualities that *chelas* must possess. Of these, he noted that the first aspect is “obtaining perfect mastery of the mind (the seat of emotions and desire), and ... forcing it to act in subordination to the intellect” (Chatterji 1884: 282). Repeatedly, this message was delivered to the membership in an attempt to stave off demands for “phenomena, phenomena, phenomena, [resounding] in every quarter,” and shift the work toward a reformation of individual morality connected with claims of fostering connections with the Masters (Anonymous 1883: 10). In an essay entitled “Projection of the Double,” Blavatsky

was adamant that, to obtain occult powers, one had to reform the interior. She writes, “And, remember, it is by the inner, not the outer, self that we come into relations with the Adepts and their advanced Chelas” (Blavatsky 1883b: 1). She goes on to state that one would not want to converse with a drunkard and so the Masters have no desire to interact with those “in a state of *psychic intoxication*” coming from “carnality, materialism and spiritual atrophy” (Blavatsky 1883b: 1). With this shift, occult powers were now dependent on controlling the inner, spiritual, emotional self. In the process of managing these selves, a complex emotionology⁶ emerged in Theosophy.

Developing a Theosophical Classification System of Emotion

The Theosophical Society’s anxieties about emotion and control matched Victorian anxieties, including the emphasis on manners and controlling one’s emotions, especially in public. Within Theosophy, certain emotions were strongly emphasized, such as love—and this was in contrast to hate, an emotion that was considered especially harmful and the root of all negative emotions. As Karen Lystra notes, for Victorians, love was a complex emotion that encouraged self-consciousness and mutual identification with others (Lystra 1989: 46). Nevertheless, love, and emotions in general, were relegated to the private or domestic sphere (Lystra 1989: 100). Victorians saw love as intense and desirable. Whether it was motherly love or romantic love, like all intense emotions, it required self-control and restraint (Stearns 1994: 35). Victorian marriage manuals encouraged a love “founded on esteem, and esteem is the result of inti-mate acquaintance and confidential intercourse” (Gordon and Bernstein 1970: 669). While these manuals did

⁶ Emotionology, a term coined by Peter and Carol Stearns, refers to “the attitudes or standards that a society, or a definable group within a society, maintains toward basic emotions and their appropriate expression.” It is the rule of emotional expression and performance within any given society or sub-group of a society (Stearns and Stearns 1985).

characterize love as “a union of hearts” before marriage, it was one of a number of factors that must be rationally evaluated. Victorians encouraged emotional cultures, and they saw emotion as central to the self, but there were some emotions that were more dangerous than others. Passions such as love, grief, and guilt were dangerous if expressed intensely. As Peter Stearns writes, “Underlying the extensive discussions of various kinds of emotional goals was a desire to prevent untoward expression or excess combined with equal insistence on the importance of appropriate emotional vigor” (Stearns 1994:53). Thus, the management and direction of emotion was a significant aspect of Victorian culture in both the United States and Britain, and this was reflected in the literature of Theosophy.

By 1900 an elaborate emotional taxonomy was developed by Indian Theosophist Bhagavan Das (1869–1958). Das, who joined Theosophy in 1894 and was quick to take on organizational leadership in India, called his book *The Science of Emotions*. Das drew upon designations found in Vedanta and Buddhism to produce a work systematically linking all emotions to two roots: attraction and repulsion, or love and hate. “Generally speaking, it is true that whatever pleases is liked, whatever pains is dis-liked; ... This desire to be united with an object is Love; to be separated from it, Hate” (Das 1953: 25). Das continues, building on Eastern notions of emotion by essentializing them as desires, “Indian thought ... regards all these moods, functions, mutations usually called Emotions in western philosophy, as *Desires*” (Das 1953: 30). These desires are then categorized either as ultimately leading to the self—also called the soul or *jiva*—to higher states of spirituality, or as lowering the self and keeping it bonded to the material world. This, according to Das, should ultimately lead the individual to seek a universal love and move away from a selfish love. This universal love, or “Essence of Love,” is the unity of all souls or *jivas*, and “this realisation is the very heart of Higher Consciousness” (Das 1953: 562). After Das completed his

taxonomy, Annie Besant (1847–1933), head of the British branch of the Theosophical Society, began promoting the love–hate emotional dichotomy. In a series of lectures later published as *Study in Consciousness: A Contribution to The Science of Psychology*, Besant stated:

An objection is raised to this theory, that the permanent mood of a love-emotion is a virtue, by pointing out that adultery, theft, and other vices may spring from the love-emotion. Here analysis of the elements entering into the mental attitude is necessary. It is complex, not simple. The act of adultery is motivated by love, but not by love alone. There enter into it also contempt of the honour of another, indifference to the happiness of another, the selfish grasping at personal pleasure at the cost of social stability, social honour, social decency. All these spring from hate-emotions. The love is the one redeeming feature in the whole transaction, the one virtue in the bundle of sordid vices. Similar analysis will always show that when the exercise of a love-emotion is wrong, the wrongness lies in the vices bound up with its exercise, and not in the love-emotion itself (Besant 1904: 363).

Unselfish love becomes the one universal emotion that leads the individual to forgo selfish desire and reform the self to working toward spiritual elevation of the Universal Brotherhood, designated as one of the goals of the Society. This call to control the disruptive passions and selfish-desire had particular resonance to Theosophists because, according to Blavatsky’s anthropogenesis, it was members of the third root-race,⁷ unable to control their erotic desires and passions, who caused the first “fall” of humanity, or the negative karma humanity was forced to work through (Blavatsky 1988: II:184–185). In a 1909 essay entitled “Some Thoughts on the Sex Problem,” Indian Theosophist Bahman Pestonji Wadia (1881–1958), an editor of *The Theosophist* and leader in workers’ rights in India, stated specifically, “The passions and emotions, which bring in their train follies and vices of all kinds, are really responsible for the mischief—passions and emotions that come into play with the birth of mind in man” (Wadia 1909: 52). He continues

⁷ In 1888, Blavatsky published *The Secret Doctrine*, in which she claimed that humanity evolved from spiritual beings and that there are to be seven phases of evolution. Each phase is called a root-race and is characterized by certain qualities and attributes. It was during the third root-race that humanity evolved the dual genders and consciousness. Mankind, according to Blavatsky, is currently in the fifth root race.

pointing out it is the lower, selfish, physical, erotic wants of man which become “the eternal vulture of ever unsatisfied desire” (Wadia 1909: 52). This fall due to erotic passion is expanded upon later in this essay.

Nevertheless, this message of mankind united in higher aspirations was very compatible with nineteenth-century liberal Protestant notions, especially in the United States. This was a time of many social reform movements, which frequently stressed the need for individuals to forego their own personal needs for the greater good of society. Moreover, liberal Protestants or “Social Christians” saw their mission of reforming society as a way to pave the way for the return of Christ, creating a millennial expectation. Theosophists had their own version of social reform, in which mankind would continue to evolve, returning to its original form as pure spiritual beings. The United States was seen as the site of the next stage in this evolution, later expanded to the United States and Europe. Thus, the Theosophical Society, while claiming to criticize Protestant Christianity and adopt an Eastern epistemology and ontology, unreflectively combined liberal Protestant notions of social reform, post-millennialism, and Victorian morals and values with compatible Indian morals and values under the banner of higher spirituality.⁸ Harnessing this potent cocktail of ideas, they began to stress these standards to their members as essential to higher spiritual attainment. Within this constant moral message was the central focus of controlling the body—physically, mentally, and most importantly, emotionally. This emphasis on control also mirrored the efforts to control the messages from the Masters.

⁸ Stephen Prothero notes a similar process within H.S. Olcott’s Buddhism, which he calls “creolization,” or a mixing of Buddhist language with an underlying Protestant ideology (Prothero 2011:8–11).

Seeking a Unity in Message: Continual Issues Controlling the Message from the Masters

At the beginning of the Society, basic democratic and consensus-building efforts were established. These included a Board of Directors and Chair of the Board, as well as the standard organizational positions of corresponding secretary, treasurer, vice president, and president. This method of institutionalization was in keeping with the time period, as numerous reform movements and alternative religious traditions were also organizing and establishing institutions to better coordinate their activities. Most notably were the Modern Spiritualists, the movement from which Theosophy emerged. For instance, Ann Braude notes that by the late 1860s and early 1870s, Spiritualists, known for their reticence to found and join organizations, were beginning to create associations such as the American Association of Spiritualists (Braude 1989: 166). Thus, the establishment of an institutional framework was the first step in organizing the Society's message and goals.

However, once the Society was stable and operational, the leadership became centralized into a few key figures that essentially held all organizational power. The first amongst these was Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, then Henry Steel Olcott, and finally William Quan Judge. During the 1880s these three resided in different places but coordinated their efforts through correspondence and publications. This distance, at times, made the unity of the organization difficult. Olcott remained in India at the Theosophical Society headquarters until his death in 1907. Blavatsky, as noted above, was in India until the mid-1880s and finally resided in London until her death in 1891. Judge remained the head of the American Theosophical Society until his death in 1896. Most frequently, it was the American Theosophists who were the most distant and who depended on Judge and international journals to keep them abreast of the rest of the Theosophical movement. Later, this list of leaders was augmented by Annie Besant and Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854–

1934), both active in London until Besant assumed international leadership after Olcott's death, when both relocated to the headquarters located in Adyar, India.

Blavatsky asserted herself as the fountainhead of doctrine for the organization with the publication of *Isis Unveiled* in 1877. Nevertheless, one of the first conflicts within the fledgling society was between Emma Hardinge Britten (1823–99) and Blavatsky. Britten was a staunch supporter of Spiritualism and was present at the founding meeting of the Society. Blavatsky, in contrast, turned her back on Spiritualism and became a vocal critic. This caused continuing tension between the two women. The Society ultimately backed Blavatsky and Britten left, continuing to promote Spiritualism. From this point, both were ambivalent about the other. At times they spoke negatively of each other, while at other times they made conciliatory gestures. Nevertheless, Blavatsky established herself as the sole source of occult knowledge, and this left Britten, a talented medium, occultist, and writer, no significant role in the organization.⁹

After Blavatsky and Olcott relocated to India, they were unable to locate their desired teacher. Nevertheless, Blavatsky began to read and incorporate many Indian and Buddhist ideas into the Theosophical doctrine—all the while claiming that her new additions were actually elaborations of what she had discussed earlier. These revised teachings were a syncretic mix of Hinduism and Buddhism, with odds and ends from Western occultism. Blavatsky asserted that the early teachings were given because the membership was not ready for the more complex lessons, but having now begun the work, the members could start working toward the higher forms of truth. Once in India, the Mahatmas began sending letters and communicating the newer teachings to

⁹ For more on the interactions between Blavatsky and Britten, see Mathiesen (2001). Mathiesen notes that there is still so much unknown about this early period of Theosophy that “we may not have fully understood the motives . . . which may be more complex than either woman admitted in print” (41)

others within the Society. Similarly, they began to appear to members physically through astral travel, giving instructions.

One of the first individuals to join Theosophy when it came to India was Alfred Percy Sinnett (1840–1921). Sinnett was the Editor of *The Pioneer*, the leading English-language daily of India, and it was in that capacity that he first encountered Blavatsky and Olcott. He quickly became interested in Theosophy and was one of Blavatsky's earliest students.¹⁰ Sinnett, along with fellow early Theosophist Allan Octavian Hume (1829–1912), a British civil servant, political reformer, and one of the founders of the Indian National Congress, began to receive numerous letters detailing the inner teachings of the Masters. Sinnett used these letters to create works such as *The Occult World* (1881) and *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883). The Mahatma letters, as they were called, appeared to fall from the ceiling or materialize in a special cabinet owned by Blavatsky. These letters were later expanded upon by Blavatsky in the *The Secret Doctrine*, superseding the explanations of Theosophical doctrine in Sinnett's books, especially *Esoteric Buddhism*. In *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky completed her shift from occult training and astral projection to claiming that the exclusive aim of the Society was to learn, through individual effort, to become a higher spiritual being for the benefit of humanity. She details a cosmogenesis and anthropogenesis that generally abandoned her former interest in occult phenomena and mapped out the complex theoretical formation of the universe and its cognate, the human being.

Unfortunately for her, many of the members of the Theosophical Society did not forget the Society's early offering of occult lessons and they continually pressed for practical occult teachings. In particular, numerous American members pressured the U.S. representative of the Theosophical Society, W.Q. Judge, to accept them as his *chelas* and provide instruction. These

¹⁰ For more on the life of Sinnett, see his autobiography (Sinnett 1986).

requests can be seen in the letters they wrote to American Theosophical journals, asking for instruction. For instance, in the October 1887 issue of the American Theosophical journal *The Path*, someone who called himself “Zadok” said that he would answer questions from readers (Zadok 1887: 220). With the next issue, the questions began to be published, indicating the concerns and desires of the Theosophists. The first question went straight to the heart of Theosophical claims about purity and spiritual attainment. Zadok was asked, “Is celibacy necessary to the highest spiritual life and attainment?” The inquiry continued, “Is a purely vegetable diet indispensable to a high and serene spiritual life?” Another Theosophist, clearly anxious about not having experienced anything promised, writes, “May one walk for any distance along the Path without being able to see the Astral Light, or without recognizing anything extraordinary?” (Zadok 1887– 1888: 249–250). The next month an inquiry about emotion and its connection to controlling the astral emerged. “What steps must I take to open the heart so as to exercise the Will for governing the Astral body?” (Zadok 1887–1888: 280). In the January 1888 issue of *The Path*, another inquiry about the relationship of emotion to the mind appeared. “Is it well to cultivate the intellect at the expense of the heart?” As in the previous month, more questions about the Astral emerged: “Are the Astral and the lowest plane of mental life synonymous terms?” (Zadok 1887– 1888: 309–310). Furthermore, the February issue contained a revealing letter from an American Theosophist urgently asking for practical occult training. Going by the name “Adelphi,” he writes:

I have been for three years endeavoring to study Theosophy. I have heard lectures, have read an immense amount of literature devoted to that cult, from the sages of old to the Sinnetts, Olcotts, and Blavatskys of the present day. I have conned the Yogi Philosophy and I read The Path. Light on the Path aids me not nor does the Bhagavad-Gita, and why? Because I am yet without the first steps toward practice. (Surely Theosophy—like other sciences—must have something practical about it?) Guide me with your hints. Imagine me alone in a room. How to commence? Show me the first steps upon the practical ladder! All I have heard

and read seemeth to me so elaborately unintelligible that I lay it aside and beg you to instruct me in my Theosophical A B Cs. Astral Light! Is it a figurative light? If abstraction (into insensibility) is necessary, can you instruct me upon Hypnotism (self mesmerism?) “A shining object” is advised to stare at! A mirrow [sic] is a shining object, for instance. But of what avail to stare at a mirror and see reflected ugliness! (Zadok 1887-1888: 344).

These appeals for basic occult instruction make it clear that Theosophists were hungry, almost desperate, for practical teaching about occultism and the astral. In response, Blavatsky created the Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society. Discussion of the Esoteric Section (E.S.) began in 1887 after Blavatsky arrived in London. The Esoteric Section’s creation was announced in the October 1888 issue of *Lucifer*. The preliminary section noted that a “large number of Fellows of the Society” had already formed into “a body of Esoteric students” and as such, they would be reorganized as the Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society. This group in particular was designed to engage in a “deeper study of esoteric philosophy” (Olcott and Blavatsky 1888: 176). The organization of the section also announced Blavatsky as the sole head of the esoteric teachings of the Theosophical Society. The creation of the E.S. was not an easy task and one that almost caused a schism in the society. The relationship between Olcott and Blavatsky was, at times, strained. Sinnett writes that, “‘Quarrelling’ would hardly be the word to use in reference to these disagreements, as the anger involved was always shown by Madame Blavatsky” (Sinnett 1922: 89). Sinnett, quoting from Olcott’s *Old Diary Leaves, Fourth Series*, goes on to tell how the new section was developed by Blavatsky, including a letter threatening to sever the Europeans from the world-wide society headquartered in India. Blavatsky writes:

*Now look here, Olcott. It is very painful, most painful, for me to have to put to you what the French call *marché en main*, and to have you a choice. You will say again that you hate threats and these will only make you more stubborn. But this is not threat at all, but a *fait accompli*. It remains to you to either ratify it [the esoteric section] or go against it, and declare war to me and my Esotericists. If, recognising the utmost necessity of the step you submit to the inexorable evolution of things nothing will be changed. Adyar and Europe will*

remain allies and, to all appearances, the latter will seem to be subject to the former. If you do not ratify it—well, then there will be two Theosophical Societies, the old Indian and the new European, entirely independent of each other (Sinnott 1922: 90; Olcott 1910; 59).

It seems clear that Blavatsky was intent on controlling things within the society in relation to the esoteric teachings and dissemination of the messages from the Masters. Her conflict with Olcott concerned not only the creation of the section, but also Blavatsky's authority. She wanted to impress upon him that he ruled with her permission and that if he did not accommodate her desires, she was prepared to leave the society and take a portion of it with her. The creation of the E.S. solidified the dissemination of occult doctrine under Blavatsky's complete control. In addition to internal conflicts, Blavatsky also had threats from outside the society. One of the external threats was from an American scientist, Dr. Coues.

Professor Elliott Coues, a respected member of the London Society for Psychical Research, had fallen out with Blavatsky and in October 1886 formed an independent organization in the United States, "The Gnostic Theosophical Society of Washington." Using his position as an established academic and scientist, Coues made numerous claims in newspapers and magazines, refuting the legitimacy of Blavatsky. At one point, he claimed that he was the president of the "Esoteric Theosophical Society of America," *ad vitum*. Blavatsky used her position as head of the E.S. and corresponding secretary for the Theosophical Society, as well as the wide distribution of Theosophical journals, to counter these claims. In response to Coues' numerous claims of authority, Blavatsky stated in the pages of *Lucifer*:

In reply, I most emphatically state that I am entirely ignorant of the origin or career of the above named "Esoteric Theosophical Society" of which Dr. Coues is said to be the "perpetual President," and that this gentleman is in no way connected with the Esoteric Section of the T.S. of which I am the sole Head; nor can I help thinking that the said Esoteric, "Theosophical Society" is a printer's mistake. The only Esoteric Society which has any Legal right to the name "Theosophical" is that which Col. Olcott founded and chartered in London in

*October, 1888, for the proofs of which see Lucifer of that month (Blavatsky 1889: 313).*¹¹

Even before Blavatsky's statement attempting to invalidate Dr. Coues, Blavatsky was making other statements to bolster her own legitimacy. For instance, in December of 1888, she released a Preliminary Memorandum stating, "The real head of the Esoteric Section is a Master, of whom H.P. Blavatsky is the mouthpiece for this Section" (Caldwell and Spierenburg 1995: viii). In consolidating her power, she also appointed people she could trust—and more importantly control—to subordinate positions, such as W.Q. Judge to the head of the American division of the E.S. and Olcott to the position of representative for "Asiatic Countries" (Caldwell and Spierenburg 1995: viii–ix).

Another threat to Blavatsky arose in London in 1888, with the creation of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. This was a quasi-Masonic, occult organization that claimed to teach individuals, both male and female, the secrets of Hermeticism through progressive initiations. Founded by William Robert Woodman (1828–91), William Wynn Westcott (1848–1925), and Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers (1854–1918), all prominent British occultists and members of fringe Masonic groups, the Golden Dawn drew hundreds in search of occult knowledge, many of them from the Theosophical Society. Historian Robert A. Gilbert suggests that the Golden Dawn's appeal was perceived as a threat by Blavatsky and that "the Esoteric Section was created specifically to avert the loss of would-be-practical occultists to the ranks of the Golden Dawn" (Gilbert 1985: 7).

When Blavatsky created the Esoteric Section, she required an oath of secrecy to be sworn by all the members. Part of this oath was a pledge of obedience to her. The pledge read, in part:

¹¹ See also Theosophy Company (1951, chapter 11), which focuses explicitly on Dr. Coues.

I pledge myself to support before the world the Theosophical movement, and in particular to answer and obey, without cavil or delay, all orders given me through the outer Heads of this school [...] and I expressly agree that I may be expelled from the School and that the fact of such expulsion may be made known to its members, should I violate this pledge of obedience and secrecy (Gilbert 1985: 22).

Not surprisingly, some had objections to these provisions of obedience. William Butler Yeats (1865–1939), a member of the Golden Dawn, also joined the Esoteric Section in December 1888, but he requested the pledge be modified (Gilbert 1985: 7). It is likely that others did the same. Nevertheless, the E.S. emerged as the Theosophical answer to calls for practical occult training and it was exclusively under Blavatsky’s control.

Despite Blavatsky’s control over the Esoteric Section and her effort to make more information available to its members, there were still demands for observable phenomena and practical occult training. While the E.S. was a subsection of the overall membership of the Society, it was still relatively large. It had a very broad membership and many of the members were critical of it for its lack of occult training. In response, Blavatsky created an additional level in the Esoteric Section, her “Inner Group,” or I.G., of students. These members were her most loyal, never wavering in support or speaking publically against her. When she created the Inner Group, Blavatsky stated, “In consequence of the different rates of progress of members, it has been found necessary to form an inner circle of Esotericists, who are deemed to have progressed sufficiently to receive more advanced teachings than those in the outer circle, and who are accordingly pledged to secrecy even as regards other members of the E.S. as well as conforming to a stricter mode of life” (Caldwell and Spierenburg 1995: x). With the creation of this last level, Blavatsky had established the means to rebuff any criticism from those requesting practical occult instruction. It was the Inner Group that received the practical instruction, so it was claimed (Caldwell and Spierenburg 1995: xi), while those in the E.S. proper would have to prove them-selves to be worthy

of this instruction. Moreover, asking to be invited into the Inner Group was grounds for disqualification. One simply had to wait to be invited, an invitation which ultimately never came for most. Thus, Blavatsky established a structure whereby she could deflect all criticism, or if criticism continued, punish those responsible for it by exclusion.

In a circular from 1894, three years after Blavatsky's death, Judge noted, "An Inner Group was later formed by H.P.B. at London, so that she might give out teachings to be recorded by the members, and, if possible, teach them practical occultism" (Stead 1895: 36). The teachings Blavatsky gave were far from practical. Instead, the students attending meetings asked questions and Blavatsky supplied answers. These meetings began on August 20, 1890 and continued until April 22, 1891, just before Blavatsky's untimely death. At these meetings, she continued to elaborate on her initial ideas presented in *The Secret Doctrine* and elsewhere. Always with the stated attempt to clarify, Blavatsky added new vocabulary, dimensions to the planes of existence, and various aspects of the human body. Her explanations frequently made the examined subject more complex and obscure, which in turn necessitated further questioning.¹² It was during this period that Blavatsky gave out a large variety of teachings, which, after her death, became the basis of much of the elaboration and innovation introduced by her organizations' successors, especially Annie Besant, who was the E.S. secretary, and Charles Webster Leadbeater, who, while not an E.S. member, later acquired the notes and teachings and proceeded to build upon them.

¹² Although not part of the Esoteric Section or Inner Group, one American Theosophist complained in 1887, "Since the advent of Theosophy in these later times, many words and ideas have been imported from the East, and the result has often been to add to our former bewilderment, rather than to make more clearer the duties and the possibilities of man" (Buck 1887:13-14).

The Inner Group Teachings about the Human Body

One of the most significant teachings that Blavatsky gave centered on the composition of the human body. Blavatsky claimed that the human race was descended from noncorporeal beings, in contrast to primates, and that the legacy of this evolution was a seven-part or septenary bodily composition. The visible body or physical body was the lowest, most dense level. Above this was a series of layers or levels that extended up to the highest and most spiritual. These seven were also subdivided, the various levels given different names at different times. There were also other aspects beyond the seven levels, such as the aura or “auric envelope.” In addition, Blavatsky taught that thoughts and emotions could coalesce into “astral matter” and separate from the body. Various bodily layers could also be detached from the body and made to travel as directed by the will. But Blavatsky’s human body model was not always so intricate; it only became so over time.

When Blavatsky published *Isis Unveiled*, her model was comparatively simple, having three parts, two of which belonged to the material world and one to the spiritual. Prior to the formation of the Theosophical Society, many notions of a split self were present in society. Anglo-American Victorians understood the self minimally to be bifurcated, as espoused by Cartesian dualism. René Descartes (1596–1650) identified the mind with thought and self-awareness. Consciousness was the awareness of mind and thus was proof of the self. Mind was then placed in contradistinction to the body—in particular, the brain. This resulted in a dualism whereby the individual’s sense of self, one’s consciousness, was popularly understood to be distinct from the body in which it resided. Moreover, in the nineteenth century, notions of the self were connected with one’s emotions, creating a “true self.” This true self was seen as spiritual and directly connected with higher sources, however defined. The result was the creation of a double-self, or simply “the double” as it was frequently called in Theosophical circles, which caused individuals

to identify the self as both mind (subject) and body (object) simultaneously. As John Corrigan, a historian of American religion, notes, “The irresistible logic of each of the two compelling views of the self—a spiritual and emotional subject as opposed to embodied, mechanical object—in the end required that the self be both” (Corrigan 2002: 3). It was this metaphysical view of the multi-part self that the earliest Theosophists adopted.

Yet they did not see merely a two-part self. They saw three divisions: the physical body, the astral body, and the soul. The first two were considered to be formed by matter, the astral body of a finer material beyond gross physical bodily form. During this time period, belief in spiritual matter was not uncommon. Blavatsky’s assertion that the astral body was material, therefore, would not be unfamiliar to most. The soul was considered immortal and would reincarnate after death (Blavatsky 1988:I: 17). As mentioned earlier, Blavatsky obtained her three-part model of the self from Bulwer-Lytton and his novel, *A Strange Story*. The significant difference between Victorian divisions of the self and the early Theosophical divisions was the addition of the astral body, a vehicle of the self that can look like one’s gross physical body, but can completely separate from it and travel great distances, or even through time.

Bulwer-Lytton was inspired by Franz Anton Mesmer’s concept of animal magnetism and used it as the basis for his novel. According to Bulwer-Lytton, the human being had a physical level, a mental level, and a spiritual level, the last being the soul. Those with occult powers could see the separate, interpenetrating layers. He described the physical as colored red, the mental body azure blue, and the soul a silvery spark. The first two layers interpenetrate, but the third, the silvery spark or soul, while also interpenetrating, remains separate. “The azure light equally permeated the frame, crossing and uniting with the red, but in a separate and distinct ray, exactly as, in the outer world, a ray of light crosses or unites with a ray of heat, though in itself a separate individual

agency” (Bulwer-Lytton [1862] 2006: 173). The separable mental body is the most significant innovation of Bulwer-Lytton’s tripartite system. This second material body, or the *scin lecca* as he called it, was physical, but not in the normal sense. The Theosophical Society, through Blavatsky, appropriated this second physical body but augmented it. Initially, Bulwer-Lytton’s astral body was connected to the mental; Blavatsky added the emotional to it. The end result was that in early Theosophy, the astral body was not only the true material form of the individual, but also the seat of all interior thoughts and feelings. It was the spiritualized authentic self expressed in astral matter, the true person liberated and, later, the part of the self that must be controlled and regulated.

Freeing this *scin lecca*, or the double, and astrally traveling meant that the individual had freed their mind and emotions from the physical constraints of the body. This “liberation of the double” became so significant that achieving it in a controlled way became the highest achievement in occultism, according to the earliest Theosophists. Indeed, Blavatsky called it the “very last and highest possible achievement in magic” (Deveney 1997: 3). Astral travel, though, did not persist in this exalted position. As Blavatsky learned more, she began to cast her gaze eastward and astral travel became less emphasized.

From 1875 to 1879, the rhetoric, teachings, and terms used by those in the Theosophical Society were distinctly Western. Notions of magic, spiritualism, and occultism were based on occult ideas originating from Europe and America. When “oriental” content was discussed, such as Sufi Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, it was always within a heavy Western construction and contextualization. Later, when Blavatsky had studied Hinduism and Buddhism more thoroughly, she began to recast her teachings in more Eastern terms. This new Hindu- and Buddhist-derived content was incorporated into Blavatsky’s framework. She expanded the body from three divisions to seven. The highest division, that of the soul (or *jiva* as Das called it), remained relatively

unchanged, as did the lowest, the material body. But the middle body, the astral, was reorganized as containing additional levels. These levels were also hierarchized, with those parts belonging to the physical and emotional portions of the person assigned to the lower half and the spiritual and mental assigned to the higher levels. These levels were first spoken of by the Mahatmas to A.O. Hume and then expanded upon and published in *The Theosophist* in 1883 (Blavatsky 1883a).¹³ The levels also gained various Sanskrit labels which, early on, were not clearly defined. Over time Blavatsky clarified these labels, sometimes by introducing new ones, and other times by changing the earlier definitions. The septenary body was referenced again when Blavatsky published *The Secret Doctrine* in 1888. Here she compared the seven layers or principles to a cognate Cabalistic arrangement created by the French occultist Eliphas Levi. This comparison, while highlighting the differences between the systems, also implicitly indicated that the seven principles were not wholly new and connected the Eastern system to a Western occult system, thereby asserting the universality of the divisions.

The framework for these divisions was also established within a tele-ology whereby the aspirant sought to purify his or her body so that he or she might reach spiritual enlightenment and end the karmic cycle of reincarnation. These changes, though, were represented as coming from an ancient text entitled the *Book of Dzyan*. Unfortunately, according to Blavatsky, the physical text was lost and unavailable for examination, though she claimed this was not a problem for occultists because “the main body of the Doctrine given is found scattered throughout hundreds of thousands of Sanskrit MSS” (Blavatsky 1988: I: xxiii). Nevertheless, at the beginning of *The Secret Doctrine*, she included seven sections from the *Book of Dzyan* and a large portion of the volume is devoted to her elaborations and explanations of its meaning. Early in Blavatsky’s commentaries, she notes

¹³ It was subsequently included in the highly influential collection of essays (Mead 1885).

that it was desire that caused man to live, a desire to exist (Blavatsky 1988:I: 44–45). Later, she explains that the material world is the world of desire and equates it with the lowest of the spiritual planes (Blavatsky 1988: I: 572). In describing the Divine Will, she equates it to eros and calls it “desire of manifesting itself through visible creation” (Blavatsky 1988: II: 65). And yet, emotions are what hold humans back from obtaining perfection, as the “human emotional nature” is an “earthly” characteristic, in contrast to the nonmaterial spheres which connect to the highest spiritual principles (Blavatsky 1988: I: 275). Blavatsky becomes more explicit when she claims, “The lower passions chain the higher aspirations to the rock of matter, to generate in many a case the vulture of sorrow, pain and repentance” (Blavatsky 1988: II: 422). Essentially, the problem was that when humanity evolved from the spiritual levels during the third root-race, humanity’s erotic passions caused mankind to corrupt itself by mating with nonhumans. These unbridled passions caused significant karmic harm and now humanity must work through this karma before it can return to the highest spiritual states. Blavatsky writes, “the curse of KARMA [was not] called down upon them for seeking *natural* union ... but, for abusing the creative power, for desecrating the divine gift, and wasting the life essence for no purpose except bestial personal gratification” (Blavatsky 1988: II: 410). All subsequent stages of humanity have been attempting to cleanse humanity from this “fall” from the spiritual to the bestial.

Blavatsky saw this struggle with passion, or the lower nature, as so fundamental to occult training that she put the need for its control in the oaths for both the Esoteric Section and the Inner Group. The fourth point one swore in the Esoteric Oath, right after the points pledging obedience to Blavatsky and to always challenge “evil” spoken about Theosophy or a Theosophical brother, was “I pledge myself to maintain a constant struggle against my lower nature, and to be charitable to the weakness of others” (Gilbert 1985: 22). This struggle with the lower self goes even further

in the Inner Group, where the probationer agrees to “absolute chastity” to become a member. Moreover, at the first meeting, the member had to swear to be “free from all hatred and uncharitable feeling to others” (Caldwell and Spierenburg 1995: xii). In both cases, the lower self, with its erotic passions and desires, was seen as an impediment to spiritual advancement.

In contrast to the emotions, thought—or at least the highest of thoughts—is seen as that which can lead the individual to the higher sources of knowledge. When an aspirant purifies his or her thoughts, he or she connects to the Divine Thought and thus rises to the higher. Thought becomes so important that each and every thought, as well as every act, is recorded on “invisible tablets of the Astral Light” for eternity (Blavatsky 1988: I: 104). What are not recorded are one’s emotions, because these ultimately belong to the lower realms. *The Secret Doctrine* elevates rational thought and devalues emotion, irrational thought, and physical matter.

Blavatsky’s septenary body model mirrors this hierarchy, with the physical body being on the lowest level and the most ethereal and spiritual body being on the top. She described the bodily principles in *The Theosophist* in 1883 (Blavatsky 1883a). *The Secret Doctrine* makes mention of the system, but only obliquely. For instance, quoting the Masters, the system is called “different Natures marvelously mixed” (Blavatsky 1988: I: 189). Also mirrored is the privileging of the mental level and the denigration of the emotional level. The three top spheres—the atman, the buddhic, and the manas—were associated with the spiritual and mental, while the lower parts—the astral or desire body, the pranic, etheric double, and physical body—were connected to emotion and material. These latter two were viewed as flawed and base. Even worse, emotion, which resided in the astral or desire body, could rend the manas in two by its clinging to the base nature. This resulted in the subdivisions of manas into lower and higher. Ultimately, the individual seeking higher knowledge would have to control these lower, astral emotional bodies and purify them,

resulting in, as Besant notes, “[a] new astral body that will in due course of time be formed for use in the next succeeding incarnation” (Besant 1917: 57). However, if a person does not purify the astral body, when he reincarnates he will bring with him the “remnants of his astral body ... the latent germs or tendencies which ... manifest as evil desires and passions in the astral world” (Besant 1917: 57). Thus it is imperative, according to Besant, to control one’s emotions and desires and purify the astral body of all impurities. Failing to do so could lead to many lifetimes of struggle with the emotional residue of previous incarnations.

Conclusions

From the time of the founding of the Theosophical Society in 1875 to the death of Blavatsky in 1891, there was a concerted effort to shift the message of the organization from one that preached the ability of individuals to obtain occult powers to one of controlling one’s emotions and thoughts for the sake of mankind and one’s rebirth. Emotion became the site of the battleground for this control. Initially, emotion was part of the true, free, and spiritualized self. However, it quickly became a liability, one that had to be mitigated and controlled for the sake of higher knowledge. Continually fighting to be the mouthpiece of the Masters, Blavatsky established a complex and sometimes bewildering set of teachings that allowed her to maintain her position of power within the Society. Building on Victorian ambivalence towards emotions, Blavatsky parlayed liberal Protestant notions of proper morality into a doctrine that placed innumerable barriers in front of the members who sought the higher knowledge offered by the Mahatmas. After Blavatsky’s death, Annie Besant and others used Blavatsky’s teachings about the body—physical, mental, and emotional—to continue the elaboration and obscuration of the highest occult knowledge. In this way, the leaders of the Theosophical Society were able to maintain their

supposed connection with the highest Masters, which entailed controlling one of the largest occult organizations to have ever existed.

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