



# Theosophy, The Theosophical Society & The Founders

*A short overview*



THEOSOPHY,  
THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY  
&  
THE FOUNDERS

## AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Enquirers often seek information about Theosophy, The Theosophical Society and the Founders. While information is available both in electronic and printed versions, finding most of the facts in one place has been a challenge. This publication was put together to provide a short overview. I hope students will feel encouraged to research further.

On behalf of the Madras Theosophical Federation I place on record our gratitude to the Indian Section of The Theosophical Society for the support extended by it.

I am also grateful to all those who helped in bringing out this publication. Senior members helped with ideas and in the process of printing and publishing. Young theosophists helped in verifying facts, making additions to the original text and designing the cover, which reproduces the drawings of William Quan Judge.

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# THEOSOPHY – AN OVERVIEW

Theosophy or '*Theosophia*' means 'Divine Wisdom'. Speaking of the origin of the name, the founder of The Theosophical Society, Mme. H.P. Blavatsky says, "It comes to us from the Alexandrian philosophers, called lovers of truth, Philaletheians, from *phil* "loving," and *aletheia* "truth." The name Theosophy dates from the third century of our era, and began with Ammonius Saccas and his disciples, who started the Eclectic Theosophical system.

Theosophy was and is not the basis of another sect. It is universal in its content and does not encourage dogma; instead, it is the pursuit of truth. In Sanskrit, Theosophy is synonymous with *Brahma Vidya*. A classic statement in Theosophical literature is, "Theosophy is no new candidate for the world's attention, but only the restatement of principles which have been recognised from the very infancy of mankind." Mme. Blavatsky speaking about her best known book, 'The Secret Doctrine' says very candidly, "I may repeat what I have stated all along, and which I now clothe in the words of Montaigne: Gentlemen, "I HAVE HERE MADE ONLY A NOSEGAY OF CULLED FLOWERS, AND HAVE BROUGHT NOTHING OF MY OWN BUT THE STRING THAT TIES THEM."

Theosophical literature for over 130 years has had various phases. A comparative study of religion, philosophy and science by many authors has produced many works of interest. The chief publisher of theosophical books is the Theosophical Publishing House in India, Philippines and the U.S.A. (where the Quest Publications are helped by the Kern Foundation). Books are also published in various languages by various sections. E-publications are also now becoming popular.

Theosophical authors have endeavoured to study the common esoteric foundation of the world's religions. In doing so, they have expounded the truths that form the basis of each religion. Theosophy is called the 'perennial philosophy' because of the richness of its lore. There are some significant parts of theosophical literature which are unique in their exposition of this 'perennial philosophy'. Cosmogogenesis and Anthropogenesis are the two parts of Mme. Blavatsky's landmark work, one that is often referred to as her magnum opus, '*The Secret Doctrine*'. Cosmogogenesis deals with the origin of the universe while Anthropogenesis deals with the origin of man. The volumes have hundreds of verified and cross-verified references from books, some only available in libraries around the world. Strangely, she possessed only a few dozen books and in the year 1888 there was no electronic gadget or the Internet. It is still a mystery to most researchers as to how she performed this feat. Anthropogenesis challenged prevailing

evolutionist theories and presented a holistic approach to evolution that included not only physical evolution but also the unfoldment of consciousness. The esoteric interpretations of mystical symbols like the 'Cross' and the myth of the 'Fall of the Angels' are very interesting and cut across various religions. Theosophists do not accept a personal god, but do recognise the Ultimate, called in Sanskrit, 'Parabrahman'.

"The Secret Doctrine establishes three fundamental propositions:—

(a) An Omnipresent, Eternal, Boundless, and Immutable PRINCIPLE on which all speculation is impossible, since it transcends the power of human conception and could only be dwarfed by any human expression or similitude. It is beyond the range and reach of thought—in the words of Mandukya, "unthinkable and unspeakable."

(b.) The Eternity of the Universe *in toto* as a boundless plane; periodically "the playground of numberless Universes incessantly manifesting and disappearing," called "the manifesting stars," and the "sparks of Eternity." "The Eternity of the Pilgrim" is like a wink of the Eye of Self-Existence (Book of Dzyan.) "The appearance and disappearance of Worlds is like a regular tidal ebb of flux and reflux."

(c) The fundamental identity of all Souls with the Universal Over-Soul, the latter being itself an aspect of the Unknown Root; and the obligatory pilgrimage for every Soul—a spark of the former—through the Cycle of Incarnation (or "Necessity") in accordance with Cyclic and Karmic law, during the whole term."

Yet another important declaration is found in 'The Idyll of the White Lotus', a 'theosophical story'; it enumerates 'Three Great Truths' which embody the core of theosophical teaching. These are:-

"There are Three Truths which are absolute, and cannot be lost, but yet they may remain silent for lack of speech.

1. The soul of man is immortal, and its future is the future of a thing whose growth and splendour has no limit.
2. The principle which gives life dwells in us and without us, is undying and eternally beneficent, is not heard, or seen, or smelt, but is perceived by the man who desires perception.
3. Each man is his own law-giver, the dispenser of glory or gloom to himself; the decreer of his life, his reward, his punishment.

These Truths, which are as great as is life itself, are as simple as the simplest mind of man. Feed the hungry with them."

Theosophists demonstrated psychic powers. Notwithstanding, it was not a practice encouraged to be pursued by anyone. An example of these powers [which in India are called *'Siddhis'*], can be seen in a landmark investigation on the structure of the atom, by Annie Besant, the second President of The Theosophical Society and her colleague, C.W. Leadbeater. The book *'Occult Chemistry'* was born out of this investigation conducted between 1895 and 1933, much before the advent of the electron microscope. *'Occult Chemistry'* demonstrates that the structure of chemical elements can be observed and the sub-atomic particles enumerated using the Siddhi called *'Anima'*.

Healing has been practised by many theosophists. Prominent among the well-known healers was Col. H.S. Olcott, the President Founder himself. Using the mesmeric technique popularised by Franz Anton Mesmer, Olcott had cured about 6000 people from various ailments. In more recent years the works of Dora Kunz had become popular in America.

There are three little books, called the *'Three Gems'* of theosophical literature. These are: *'At the Feet of the Master'* by Alcyone [J.Krishnamurti], *'Voice of the Silence'* by H.P. Blavatsky and *'Light on the Path'* by Mabel Collins. These have been widely read, translated and commented upon. The first of these is on the lines of various ethical treatises from different world religions and teachers. It lists the four qualifications of Discrimination, Desirelessness, Good Conduct and Love as essential for spiritual progress. The second book is a translation of the Buddhist *'Book of Golden Precepts'* along with other useful points for the earnest disciple on the path of spirituality. The last of these was transcribed clairvoyantly from an ancient manuscript and contains aphorisms that are very profound.

Among the most popular translations are the *'Bhagavad Gita'* by Annie Besant and Bhagavan Das and *'The Science of Yoga'* by Dr. I.K. Taimni; the latter is a translation of the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, with commentaries.

Theosophy cannot be restricted to the publications of The Theosophical Society, as truth can be found everywhere. While there is no clearly defined epistemology or sacred book, the many books authored by theosophists over nearly six generations provide a rich lore of knowledge that calls for careful consideration, deep attention and diligent practice by the earnest student.

# THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY – A VEHICLE OF THEOSOPHY



*Motto:* 'There is no religion higher than truth' – This is the motto of The Theosophical Society. It was donated by the then Maharaja of Benares [Varanasi] when the Founders of The Theosophical Society visited him. Inscribed in the Ramnagar palace, it is a Sanskrit statement found in the Mahabharata. If transliterated from Sanskrit it would read, "Satya nasti paro dharmah". Although 'dharma' has been translated as 'religion', it has many other meanings. It is often said that 'truth' and 'universal brotherhood' are the two pillars of The Theosophical Society.

*Objects:* The three objects of The Theosophical Society have evolved over the decades and are now they read as below:-

1. To form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or colour.
2. To encourage the study of Comparative Religion, Philosophy, and Science.
3. To investigate the unexplained laws of Nature and the powers latent in man.

*Emblem:* The emblem of The Theosophical Society consists of many symbols. These symbols are the 'Ankh', the 'Interlaced Triangles', the 'Serpent swallowing its tail', the 'Swastika' and the 'AUM' or 'OM', which is the sacred word. The explanation of this emblem is found among other places in the website, [www.ts-adyar.org](http://www.ts-adyar.org).

*Foundation:* The founding of The Theosophical Society was inspired by the spiritual Masters known in all religions as Saints or *Rishis*. It was founded in the city of New York in the year 1875 by 16 persons (H.S. Olcott, H. P. Blavatsky, Charles Sotheran, Charles E. Simmons, H. D. Monachesi, C. C. Massey of London, W. L. Alden, G. H. Felt, D. E. de Lara, W. Britten, E. H. Britten, Henry J. Newton, John Storer Cobb, J. Hyslop, W. Q. Judge, H. M. Stevens). The Theosophical Society moved its headquarters to Madras [now Chennai] in 1882.

*Mumbai (then Bombay), Simla and India's Freedom Movement:* The two principal Founders spent their first years in India in the cities of Mumbai and Simla. In Mumbai, among others, they came into contact with Mooljee Thackersey, N.D. Khandalvala, Tookaram Taty and Damodar K. Mavalankar. During the stay in Simla, the Founders came into contact with A.P.Sinnett, his wife Patience Sinnett and A.O.Hume, who were campaigning for the freedom of India. Col. H.S.Olcott was particularly interested in this movement. He arranged the first *Svadeshi* exhibition. A.P.Sinnett was the Editor of the well-known newspaper, *The Pioneer*; he wrote about

the freedom of India. His compatriot, A.O.Hume founded the Indian National Congress and is called its 'Father'. Later many theosophists were involved in India's independence movement, chief among whom was Annie Besant, who became the President of the Indian National Congress. Her Home Rule League was a well-known landmark of the Indian Independence Movement. There was a large circle of intellectuals who joined The Theosophical Society and received spiritual instruction from Mme.H.P.Blavatsky.

*Sri Lanka and Buddhism:* The founders along with Damodar K. Mavalankar and C.W. Leadbeater toured Sri Lanka and other places in India. Col. Olcott and Mme Blavatsky took the Pancha Sila in Sri Lanka in the presence of the High Priest Rt. Rev.H. Sumangala and worked for the civil rights of the Sri Lankan Buddhists. Olcott helped establish several educational institutions. He unified the various Buddhist sects and facilitated the creation of a Buddhist flag. He authored the popular 'Buddhist Catechism'. The Founders also sponsored Angarika Dharmapala to address the World Parliament of Religions at Chicago. Olcott's statue stands in Colombo, in recognition of his services to Sri Lanka [then called Ceylon].

*International Headquarters:* In 1882, the Founders received an invitation from Swami T. Subba Row to settle in Madras. On their arrival, they were greeted with an excellent reception. On May 31, 1882, the Founders were invited by G.Narasimhulu Chetty and G.Soobiah Chetty to visit a small estate called Huddlestone Gardens in Adyar. This estate was up for sale. This estate was soon acquired with the help of prominent citizens like Mr. P. Iyaloo Naidu and Judge Muthuswamy Chetty who process. The international headquarters was permanently established here. Today the Adyar estate has expanded considerably and houses the Headquarters Building, the Adyar Library and Research Centre, the Olcott Memorial High School, the Social Welfare Centre, the School of The Wisdom, the International offices, the estate management offices, boarding and lodging facilities, living quarters, the Museum, meeting places and many shrines. It has considerable natural beauty and is a naturalist's delight. The chief tourist attraction is the Great Banyan Tree, which has witnessed many memorable gatherings under it. The estate has many heritage buildings of architectural value. There is a stone plaque for the 'Unknown Theosophist' and a beautifully tiled seat on which J.Krishnamurti lectured, which was gifted by the theosophists of Barcelona. It would be important to note that the great Tamil Saint Ramalingaswami predicted the establishment of The Theosophical Society at Adyar decades before it actually happened. The Theosophical Society has other spiritual centres in different parts of the world.

*Education:* Education has been a great mission for theosophists. Col. Olcott was a pioneer who established schools for the underprivileged. The Olcott Memorial High School, the Social Welfare Centre, the H.P.B. Free Hostel and the Vocational Training Centre are among the institutions run by the Olcott Education Society at Adyar in Chennai. The Olcott Memorial High School is a pioneer in providing free education and mid-day meals. Annie Besant followed in his footsteps. The Central Hindu College founded by her became the nucleus of the now well-known Benares Hindu University. The Besant Education Fellowship runs many educational institutions. Dr. G.S. Arundale, the third International President founded the Besant Theosophical School. It is now part of the Kalakshetra group of institutions established by his wife, the *Bharata Natyam* exponent and theosophist, Rukmini Devi Arundale. The Besant Centenary Trust runs other educational institutions. Jiddu Krishnamurti (who was identified by C.W. Leadbeater and Annie Besant) rose to become one of the best known and respected mystic-philosophers of contemporary times. He has been the inspiration for many schools run by his foundation[s]. Dr. Arundale and Rukmini Devi hosted the famous Maria and Mario Montessori at Adyar. Rudolph Steiner, who was once the President of The Theosophical Society in Germany and later the Founder of the Anthroposophical Society established the now popular Waldorf schools. There are many other unknown theosophists who have established schools across India and the world. Schools have been founded by theosophists in many cities like Madanapalle and Vishakapatnam. In recent times theosophists in the Philippines run the Golden Link College as part of the activities of the Theosophical Order of Service.

Annie Besant brought the Boy Scout and Girl Guide Movement to India. She was awarded the 'Silver Wolf' by Sir Baden Powell.

*Respect for Life:* Animal welfare and vegetarianism have been two areas where theosophists have worked. Notable for this work were two women separated in time. Anna Bonus Kingsford was a well-known anti-vivisectionist who was active in the London Lodge of The Theosophical Society. Rukmini Devi Arundale, during her stint as a member of the Rajya Sabha [India's Upper House of Parliament], was instrumental in establishing the Animal Welfare Board by an Act of Parliament. The Adyar Estate now houses the Besant Memorial Animal Dispensary.

*H.P. Blavatsky, Eminent Members and Others:* The Theosophical Society arrested "the attention of the highest minds" and has had eminent persons as its members. From M.K.Gandhi to T.A.Edison and from Jawaharlal Nehru to Justice Subramania Aiyar, the illustrious names are many. Whether it was a Maharajah or a Police

Inspector like Keshava Pillai, H.P. Blavatsky gathered around her men and women of great character and learning. She was an inspiration to many artists, authors, poets, scientists and musicians. The Irish intellectuals she inspired included John O'Leary, George Sigerson, W.B. Yeats, A.E. [George Russell] and James Joyce. Among the British and American authors influenced by her were Jack London, E.M. Forster, D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot and Thornton Wilder. Among others influenced by her were Flammarton and William Crookes. One may recognise the echoes of her thoughts in the works of L. Frank Baum and J.K. Rowling. The artists who were influenced by her were Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian and many others like Paul Klee and Paul Gaguin. The composers whom she influenced included Gustav Mahler, Jean Sibelius and Alexander Scriabin. Sir Edwin Arnold was a friend of Mme Blavatsky, as was the great Russian painter Nicholas Roerich who was deeply inspired by her. Charles Johnston was married to H. P. B's niece Vera.

Besides William Quan Judge [one of the sixteen Founders], Annie Besant (read her *Autobiography*), C.W. Leadbeater, A.P. Sinnett and Justice S. Subramania Iyer, the early theosophists she inspired included Damodar K. Mavlankar (read Sven Eek's *'Damodar and the Pioneers of the Theosophical Movement'*), T. Subba Row (read N.C. Ramanujachari's *'The Lonely Disciple'*, Franz Hartmann, Countess Wachtmeister, Francesca Arundale, Jose Xifre, Mohini Mohun Chatterjee, S. Ramaswami Iyer, Bhavanishankar, Prince Harisinhji Roopsinhji, Keshava Pillai and Rao Sahib G. Soobiah Chetty (read S. Sarada's *'Blavatsky and Soobiah'*). G.R.S. Mead, W.R. Old (Sephararial, the Numerologist), Archibald Keightly and Bertram Keightly were among the faithful students of H.P.B. in her last years.

A few of the well-known books authored by her included *The Secret Doctrine*, *Isis Unveiled*, *Key to Theosophy*, *Practical Occultism* and *Voice of the Silence*. The *'Collected Writings'* have been compiled by her great grand nephew, Boris de Zirkoff.

**Presidents:** H.S. Olcott, Annie Besant, G.S. Arundale, C. Jinarajadasa, N. Sri Ram and John B.S. Coats were the Presidents of the Theosophical Society and Radha Burnier is the President, at present.

**Ceremonial Organisations:** Theosophists have established many ceremonial organisations. Participation in these is absolutely voluntary and is not in any way mandatory. Annie Besant brought the Co-Freemasonic movement to many parts of the theosophical world. The International Order of The Round Table was founded by Herbert Whyte in 1908. The Ritual of the Mystic Star was carefully formulated by C. Jinarajadasa to give the message of unity among religions and respect for nature and all life around us. The Liberal Catholic

Church and the Bharata Samaja Association are Christian and Hindu organisations which are very tolerant.

*Philanthropy:* Among the philanthropic initiatives of the theosophists have been the Women's India Association, the New Life for India Movement [which stands for Right Means, Right Values and Right Citizenship] and the Theosophical Order of Service founded by Annie Besant in 1908. The latter has been involved in many service activities including education, animal welfare, communal harmony, disaster relief, environment protection, free counselling and medical aid and empowerment of oppressed sections of society. Seeing the plight of match workers in the East End of London, Annie Besant organised a Union for the girls who were match workers. Many years later the first Trade Union in India was established by George S. Arundale and B.P.Wadia of The Theosophical Society. 'World Care Way' which was started on March 10, 2008, is now becoming popular in different parts of the world.

*Publications:* The Theosophical Publishing House and others bring out books on theosophical and related subjects. There are many excellent libraries that run in different parts of the world. There are archives that house invaluable articles. *The Theosophist* is the name of the chief magazine of which the Editor is the President of The Theosophical Society. Sections of The Theosophical Society round the world and other constituent groups have their own publications. At the headquarters the *Adyar Newsletter* and *Wake Up India* are two magazines which are regularly published. It would be relevant to mention that the *Subba Row Medal* has been awarded to eminent authors over the years.

*Theosophy and Science:* Much of what has been stated in 'The Secret Doctrine' by H.P.Blavatsky, 'Occult Chemistry' by Annie Besant and C.W.Leadbeater and other such works in theosophical literature has attracted much attention from the scientific community. The 'Theosophy Science Centre' studies developments in this area.

*Gatherings and Schools:* The annual conventions of The Theosophical Society are held every year, while a World Congress is held every seven years. The School of the Wisdom functions in the winter months at Adyar. There are other gatherings and schools of Theosophy all over the world.

*Structure:* The unit of The Theosophical Society is the Lodge [branch of a fraternal organisation]. The Lodges form National Sections, where enough are available. All these constitute The Theosophical Society.

Any person who is in sympathy with its objects, particularly the first one can become a member. There are no imposed beliefs or practices. The Theosophical Society has been secular and universal in its approach. The organisation has activities across the five continents. Autonomy and empowerment are practised alongside a strict adherence to central principles overseen at the International level.

## THE TWO PRINCIPAL FOUNDERS

## H.P.BLAVATSKY

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky was born on August 12, 1831 [July 31, 1831 on the Russian calendar] at Dnepropetrovsk (Ekaterinoslav), Ukraine in a noble family. Her father's name was Colonel Peter Alexeyevich von Hahn and her mother's name was Helena Andreyevna (née de Fadeyev). Her mother was a novelist. Her sister Vera de Zhelihovsky was associated with her work. H.P.B. was a mysterious child who spent long hours by herself apparently conversing with non-human entities. She became aware of the protection and inspiration of spiritual Teachers whom she referred to as the Masters of the Wisdom. In India they are called *Rishis*.

She was not inclined to get married, but ended up doing so to General Nikifor Blavatsky, who was very much her senior in age. She left home, breaking her marriage, and travelled extensively. In the early years she travelled to Egypt and the East. Later she went to America. She met Col. H.S.Olcott there and together they, along with 14 others founded The Theosophical Society in 1875.

She travelled to India and eventually set up the International Headquarters of The Theosophical Society at Adyar in 1882. She took the five Buddhist [*Pancha Sila*] vows in Sri Lanka [then Ceylon]. H.P.Blavatsky died on May 8, 1891 at London. May 8<sup>th</sup> is commemorated even today as *White Lotus Day*.

During her lifetime, she authored many books and articles. Among these were the landmark books – '*The Secret Doctrine*', '*Isis Unveiled*', '*Key to Theosophy*' and '*The Voice of the Silence*'. Three magazines she contributed to were '*The Theosophist*', '*Lucifer*' and '*The Path*'. The former is still published by The Theosophical Society. H.P.Blavatsky's '*Collected Writings*' compiled by her great grand nephew Boris de Zirkoff contain most of what she wrote.

She influenced many eminent persons of her time and many others, even in subsequent generations. She was the pioneer who took Eastern Wisdom to the West.

The best known biographies of Mme. H.P.Blavatsky are by Howard Murphet entitled, '*When Daylight Comes*', by Sylvia Cranston entitled, '*H.P.B.: The Extraordinary Life and Influence of Helena Blavatsky*' and by Daniel H. Caldwell, entitled, '*The Esoteric World of Madame Blavatsky*'.



## H.S.OLCOTT

*Henry Steel Olcott* was born the oldest of the six children Henry Wyckoff Olcott, a businessman and Emily Steel Olcott on August 2, 1832. He went to the College of the City of New York and then Columbia University. He was married to Mary Epplee Morgan and they had four children of whom two survived beyond infancy.

In one sentence, Olcott was an eminent American, an agriculturist, a journalist, a reviver of Buddhism, a healer, a human rights activist, an educationist and above all, the President-Founder of The Theosophical Society.

He was well-known in his youth as an innovative agriculturist who wrote about two species of sugarcane. He was the Co-Founder of the Westchester Farm School. After his stint as a veteran of the American Civil War he joined the War Department in New York as Special Commissioner. He was then promoted to the rank of Colonel and transferred to the Navy in Washington, DC. His fearless investigation of the fraud in the American Army earned him a place in 1860 on the team that investigated the assassination of the great American President, Abraham Lincoln.

Later he became a Lawyer specialising in insurance, revenue and fraud. In his role as a journalist who investigated the séances of the Spiritualist movement he authored articles and compiled the well-known book *'People from the Other World'* in 1874. He met Mme. H.P. Blavatsky, and together they along with 14 others founded The Theosophical Society in 1875 in the city of New York.

He travelled with H.P. Blavatsky to India. Here he set up the first *Svadeshi* exhibition in support of India's freedom. He was associated with A.P. Sinnett the journalist who wrote in *The Pioneer* about Indian freedom and A.O. Hume, who is known as the 'Father of the Indian National Congress'.

H.S. Olcott along with H.P. Blavatsky and Damodar K. Mavalankar took the *Pancha Sila* [Buddhist vows] in Sri Lanka [then Ceylon]. He is a national hero in Sri Lanka because he helped restore civil rights to the local population and worked for the revival of Buddhism. He also founded schools and universities. He later travelled to Burma and with the assistance of C.W. Leadbeater worked for Buddhism. He unified Buddhist groups across the world and helped create a Buddhist flag. His 'Buddhist Catechism' is a landmark work that is useful for every student of Buddhism.

Together with H.P. Blavatsky, he established the International Headquarters of The Theosophical Society at Adyar, in Madras [now Chennai] in South India. He travelled and worked ceaselessly for The Theosophical Society, lecturing, writing and establishing Lodges [branches] of The Theosophical Society. He set up schools for the underprivileged and introduced the mid-day meal scheme for these children. He healed about 6000 persons suffering from various ailments using the technique popularised by Franz Anton Mesmer. The Adyar Library established by Olcott in 1886 is still a centre of excellence for research. Olcott's '*Old Diary Leaves*' published in several volumes are an excellent record of the early history of The Theosophical Society.

Olcott died at The Theosophical Society's International Headquarters at 7.17 a.m. on February 17, 1907. This date is commemorated as *Adyar Day* every year. He was succeeded by Dr. Annie Besant as the International President of The Theosophical Society.

