

# Lesson 1

## WHAT IS THEOSOPHY?

From Website of Theosophical Society in America

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED about the “big” questions of life?

Who am I really?

Why is the world the way it is?

Where did I come from?

What am I doing here?

What comes next?

When will I find out all these things?

If you have ever wondered about these or other such apparently unanswerable questions, congratulations. Your ability to wonder proves you are human. We human beings are curious about ourselves and the world around us. That curiosity appears especially in little children, who are continually asking “what?” and “why?” As we grow older, we may learn to live with our unknowing and stop asking such questions — at least overtly. But, being human, we have a passion for knowing the meaning of things, and that passion cannot be wholly suppressed.

The human passion for understanding ourselves and the world around us puts us on a quest for self-discovery. The human species has various names to identify itself. We are, in the technical language of biologists, *Homo sapiens* “the intelligent human.” But other names for our kind might be *Homo jocosus* “the playful human,” *Homo loquax* “the talkative human,” and *Homo faber* “the working human.” We might most appropriately be called *Homo quaeritans* “the questing human,” “the human who is on a search.”

Over the ages, humans have developed several approaches to answering their own questions — for pursuing their search. Three of the most important of such approaches are science, philosophy, and religion, each of which starts from its own assumptions and goes about forming its answers in its own way. Because of those differences, science, philosophy, and religion may occasionally seem to contradict one another. But because they are all trying to answer the “big” questions, their right answers cannot really be contradictory. Instead, we need to understand what causes the differences and how we can find the truth in common to these varied approaches. And that brings us to Theosophy and the Theosophical Society.

### **THEOSOPHY AND THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY**

Theosophy and the Theosophical Society are obviously related, but they are also two different things.

Theosophy is a way of answering the “big” questions of life by trying to reconcile the varied approaches of science, philosophy, and religion, without limiting itself to any of their particular assumptions or ways. It relies on its own assumptions and ways, while embracing all that is true and valuable in other approaches.

Theosophy is both very new and very old. It is new because it can be applied to our curiosity about our own identity and the meaning of

everything in the world around us today. It does that, not with a list of simple, pat answers, but by giving us a new way to look at ourselves and the universe, a way that provides a basis for developing our own answers.

Theosophy is old because it embodies principles that have been known and taught by the sages of the past all over the world. It has been called by many names. In India it is called

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Brahmavidya “The Wisdom of Ultimate Reality” or Sanâtana Dharma “The Eternal Teaching.” In Judaism it is called Kabbalah “That Which Has Been Received.” In China it is called Tao Hsueh “The Teaching of the Way.” In Islam it is called Sufism “The Way of Those Who Wear Wool” (the “pure” or the “wise”). In Christianity it has been called Prisca Theologia “The Ancient Thought about Divine Matters.” It has also been called the Wisdom Tradition, the Perennial Philosophy, the Secret Doctrine, and the Ancient Wisdom.

The term Theosophy is derived from two Greek words, *theos* “divine” and *sophia* “wisdom.” However, Theosophy is not some system of thought prescribed by a deity ruling from on high, but the “Divine Wisdom” that dwells potentially and universally in the human spirit, unfolding gradually through the process of evolution. It is this “Divine Wisdom” within us that stirs our desire to discover who we are and to answer the other big questions.

The term Theosophy was first used in English in 1650 for the teachings of some ancient sages, and was latter applied to the thought of Ammonius Saccas and Plotinus, who founded

the Alexandrian school of Neoplatonism in Egypt in the early third century after Christ. For them Theosophy was the divine knowledge that explained the experiences initiates had in the Greek Mysteries. The term was later used by the Protestant mystic Jakob Böhme, the early Swedenborgians in England, and other seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers on spiritual subjects. And it has been applied to such schools of thought as Pythagoreanism, Gnosticism, Hermeticism, Alchemy, Advaita Vedanta, and Mahayana Buddhism, as well as to such philosophers as Nicholas of Cusa (1401-64), Paracelsus (ca. 1490-1541), and Giordano Bruno (1548-1600).

In recent times, the term has come into more general use, beginning in the year 1875, with the founding of the Theosophical Society. The Society declares three objects:

- To form a nucleus of the universal brotherhood of humanity without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or color.
- To encourage the comparative study of religion, philosophy, and science.
- To investigate unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in humanity.

To help carry out those objects, the Society presents for consideration a contemporary statement of the Ancient Wisdom called Theosophy. The Theosophical Society does not require its members, or Fellows (as they have traditionally been called), to accept all or indeed any of the Theosophical teachings. The motto of the Society is “There is no religion higher than Truth.” The term “religion” in that motto refers not only to churches, but to any system of belief or ideas — including the Society’s statement of Theosophy.

Most Theosophical Fellows agree generally on the basic ideas and ideals of Theosophy, but they are free to reject any of them and to interpret all of them according to their own lights. To be a member of the Society, one must only

subscribe to its objects. Yet the Society does offer a view of life that is remarkable for its comprehensiveness, coherence, and timelessness, a contemporary formulation of an ancient Wisdom Tradition that is the basis for a satisfying, productive life that enables those who follow it to discover their own inner nature and to contribute to the welfare of the world.

Although this Wisdom has been offered throughout the ages under various names and in many languages, its essence is fundamentally the same, however much its outer aspects and manner of presentation may vary. It especially points to the reality of brotherhood and the imperative necessity of practicing it; but it also gives insight into the unexplained around us and helps the development of our latent powers; and it is the inner harmony of religion, philosophy, and science.

#### THEOSOPHY AS RELIGION

*God sends His teachers unto every age,  
To every clime and every race of men,  
With revelations fitted to their growth  
And shape of mind, nor gives the realm of  
Truth*

*Into the selfish rule of one sole race.  
— James Russell Lowell (1819–91)*

The world abounds with differing religions, each addressed to a different people and time. The word religion comes from a Latin term whose root meaning is “to link back.” So different religions link their followers back in different ways to the ultimate source of life, whatever we call it: the Absolute, God, divine Reality, or the like.

Theosophy has been called “the Wisdom Religion,” because it also points the way to that linkage. But Theosophy is not a religion. It does not claim to be a complete and final statement of wisdom and truth, nor does it offer a single interpretation of what Divine Wisdom includes. Theosophy holds that all things, including the human mind, are evolving. We are in the midst of an unfinished world and are ourselves unfinished. Therefore the accumulated knowledge of

#### The Three Fundamental Propositions

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.”

(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.

*The Secret Doctrine, “Proem”*

any subject at any time is necessarily incomplete and can be added to. We are only in the middle of our development, so we still have a great deal to discover.

Theosophy does not bind an individual to any particular belief or creed, but it is dedicated to furthering humanity’s eternal search for the meaning and wholeness of life in a nonsectarian and nondogmatic way. The religions of the world offer methods of this search and are therefore subjects for Theosophical study.



*Helena P. Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott,  
co-founders of the Theosophical Society*

Theosophy respects the Divine Wisdom basic to the inner side of all religious teachings. It does not seek to convert any person from the religion they hold, but rather to explain and interpret on a rational basis the inner meanings of various creeds and ceremonies. Annie Besant, the second international President of the Society, has stated the Theosophical attitude succinctly: “Theosophy asks you to live your religion, not to leave it.”

#### **THEOSOPHY AS SCIENCE**

Another aspect of Theosophy is scientific, particularly its attitude toward observation and experiment, hypothesis and investigation. Of course, there are also differences between science and Theosophy. Science limits itself to what can be quantified and tested by repeated, controlled, and objective experiments. Theosophy also deals with direct experience, but often of a more subjective and qualitative nature. Nevertheless, many of the concepts outlined in Theosophical literature parallel the emerging knowledge of modern science in striking ways.

The scientific method is basic to the discovery of how the physical world works, and its principal characteristic is an impersonal search for

truth. But all thoughtful scientists today would probably agree with the statement of one of the great Eastern sages: “Every great discovery of science was at first a grand intuition.” Theosophy reaches into the area of these “grand intuitions,” many of which deal with factors beyond the scope of objective proof. But if they are truth, they can be confirmed by all of us who are willing to use our lives as a laboratory.

Science, as such, is not concerned with ethical purposes, though responsible scientists are. All knowledge is power, which can be used for either good or ill, as evidenced by the cures that science has developed to control diseases on the one hand and the instruments of destruction that it has devised for warfare on the other. Theosophy, while pointing out new roads to inner knowledge, also teaches that such knowledge can be safely gained only by those who prepare themselves in action, desire, and thought to hold the welfare of humanity above their personal benefit. Self-development and self-control must go hand in hand with study and adventure in expanding knowledge if both we and the world are to be safe.

#### **THEOSOPHY AS PHILOSOPHY**

In still another aspect, Theosophy is philosophy because it postulates a logical explanation for the universe and its laws, as well as for humanity’s origin, evolution, and destiny. In a message she sent to the American convention of 1888, Blavatsky wrote, “Theosophy [is] the philosophy of the rational explanation of things and not the tenets.” That is, Theosophy is not a body of beliefs, but a way of explaining things — a philosophy. Theosophy offers reasons for life left untouched by either religion or science. It holds that the universe is unified, orderly, and purposeful, that matter is the instrument for the evolution of life, that thought is a creative power which we can learn to use effectively, and that experience of both joy and suffering is the means by which we grow in



character and ability and thus attain wisdom, compassion, and power.

We say that Theosophy includes aspects of religion, science, and philosophy, but those three approaches to truth, when rightly followed, are not contradictory. In fact they blend into one another. They are three ways of viewing the truth of the universe, and what at one time is religion or philosophy will be science at another time. As a British scientist, John D. Barrow, has written (*Theories of Everything*, 4):

Today, physicists accept the atomistic viewpoint that material bodies are at root composed of identical elementary particles, as [that view is] well supported by evidence. It is taught in every university in the world. Yet, this theory of physics began amongst the early Greeks as a philosophical, or even mystical, religion without any supporting observational evidence whatsoever. . . . Atomism began life as a philosophical idea that would fail virtually every contemporary test of what should be regarded as “scientific”; yet, eventually, it became the cornerstone of physical science. One suspects that there are ideas of a similar groundless status by today’s standards that will in the future take their place within the accepted “scientific” picture of reality.

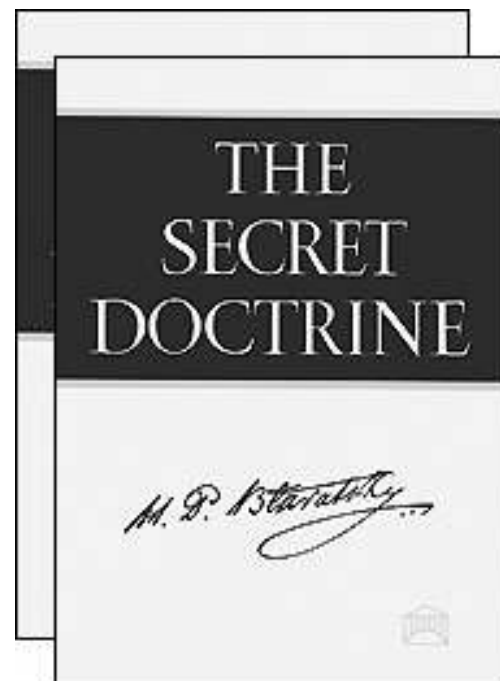
### SOME FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS OF THEOSOPHY

Theosophy — in its religious, scientific, and philosophical aspects — offers such concepts as the following for consideration:

- Ultimate reality is a unified whole — absolute, impersonal, unknowable, and indescribable.
- The universe in which we live is manifold, diverse, constantly changing, relative (which means that each part has meaning and value only in relation to others), and illusory or “mayavic” (that is, its reality differs from its appearance).
- The ultimate reality is the source of all consciousness, matter, and energy, which are

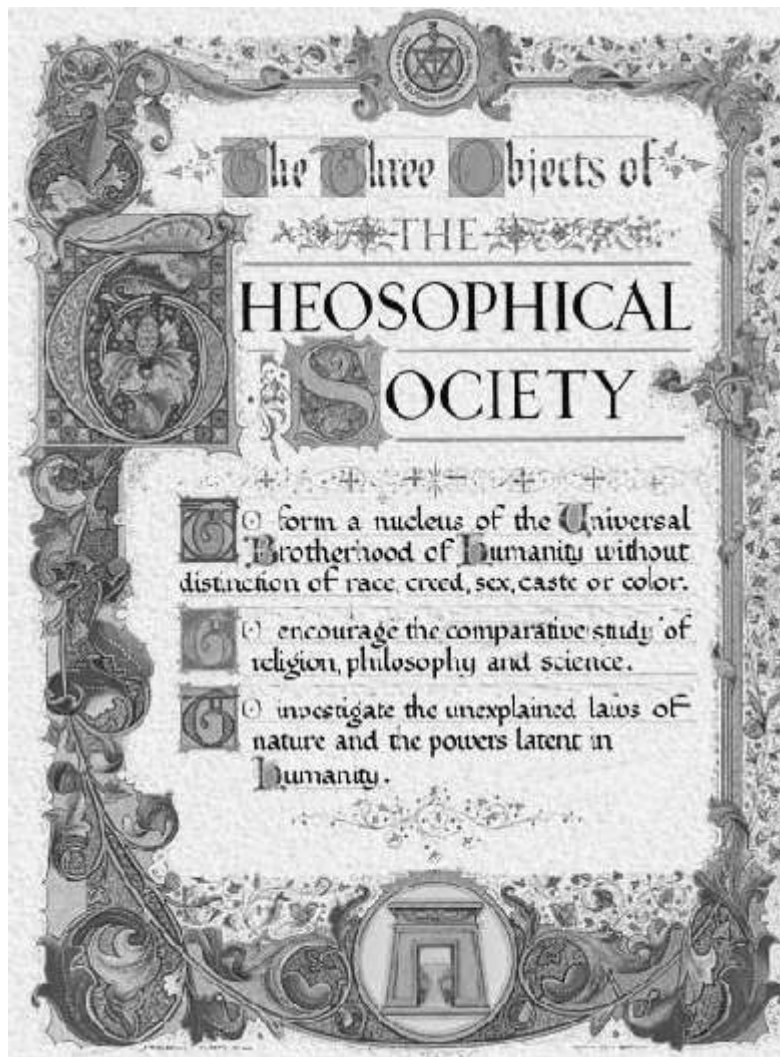
its three mutually necessary aspects in the manifest universe and are present in every being and every particle. There is no dead or unconscious matter.

- The universe and everything in it are emanations or expressions of the ultimate reality, not creations out of nothing by a personal creator.
- The universe is eternal, but with innumerable worlds periodically manifesting within it.
- The universe is pervaded by a collective intelligence, a cosmic mind, which is consciously expressed in varying degrees by all the beings in the universe.
- The physical universe of which we are normally aware is only one aspect of the total universe, which consists of multiple planes, fields, or dimensions of being — coexisting, interpenetrating, and interacting aspects of the whole. Of the seven planes of our solar system, human beings function primarily on the lower three: physical, emotional, and mental.



*The Secret Doctrine, the 2-volume magnum opus of Helena P. Blavatsky*

- The universe and everything in it are orderly, following patterns of regular cycles, including alternating phases of activity and rest, governed by a universal principle of cause and effect or karma. In human life, this principle of cycles is expressed, among other ways, by repeated rebirths or reincarnation.
- Evolution, which is the result of an inner and intelligent guidance expressed through personal effort, is good, has purpose, and follows a plan.
- Our material forms are evolving, but so are our conscious knowledge of the universe and our spiritual awareness of our basic unity with all life.
- We are composite beings; we have a number of independently evolved principles or faculties whose development is a purpose of evolution. In both the universe and us, there are seven such principles.
- We are threefold beings: (1) a temporary, single-lifetime personality, (2) an abiding, evolving individuality that reincarnates, and (3) a spark or direct emanation of the ultimate reality. The integration of these three aspects is the driving force of our evolution.
- The process of evolution, which begins by unconscious impulse, must eventually become a conscious process directed by the free will and ever increasing self-awareness of the evolving entities. The conscious participation by human beings in evolutionary change is symbolized as walking a path.
- The evolving entities of the universe include intelligences both less and more advanced than human beings, of whom some of the more advanced (the Masters or Adepts) may serve as helpers and guides to the less advanced.



- The key to the advancement of human evolution is a dedication by the individual to the service of others, that is, altruism — an awareness of brotherly unity and a forgetfulness of personal separateness.
- The pain, cruelty, and frustration we experience in life are the result of ignorance, unbalanced actions, relative dislocations, or change; they are not independently existing evils.
- It is possible, as a result of individual effort in this life, for human beings to come by intuitive knowledge or mystical experience to a full awareness of their nonseparateness from the ultimate reality.
- Correspondences, analogies, meaningful connections, and patterned repetitions exist

among all things in the universe. By using those correspondences, we can use what we know to discover the unknown.

- Behind the exoteric or public forms of all religions and religious philosophies there exists an esoteric or inner teaching that holds such concepts as those listed here.



*The Seal of the  
Theosophical  
Society*

A contemporary effort to express the basis of such fundamental concepts is the Theosophical World View:

THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY, while reserving for each member full freedom to interpret those teachings known as Theosophy, is dedicated to preserving and realizing the ageless wisdom, which embodies both a worldview and a vision of human self-transformation.

This tradition is founded upon certain fundamental propositions:

1. The universe and all that exists within it are one interrelated and interdependent whole.
2. Every existent being — from atom to galaxy — is rooted in the same universal, life-creating Reality. This Reality is all pervasive, but it can never be summed up in its parts, since it transcends all its expressions. It reveals itself in the purposeful, ordered, and meaningful processes of nature as well as in the deepest recesses of the mind and spirit.
3. Recognition of the unique value of every living being expresses itself in reverence for life,

compassion for all, sympathy with the need of all individuals to find truth for themselves, and respect for all religious traditions. The ways in which these ideals become realities in individual life are both the privileged choice and the responsible act of every human being.

Central to the concerns of Theosophy is the desire to promote understanding and brotherhood among people of all races, nationalities, philosophies, and religions. Therefore, all people, whatever their race, creed, sex, caste, or color, are invited to participate equally in the life and work of the Society. The Theosophical Society imposes no dogmas, but points toward the source of unity beyond all differences. Devotion to truth, love for all living beings, and commitment to a life of active altruism are the marks of the true Theosophist.

These teachings have also been set forth in a poetical way, in a form known as the Three Truths of the White Lotus because they originally appeared in a late nineteenth-century symbolic story called *The Idyll of the White Lotus* by Mabel Collins:

There are three great truths which are absolute and which cannot be lost, but which may remain silent for lack of speech.

The human soul is immortal, and its future is the future of a thing whose growth and splendor has no limit.

The principle that gives life dwells in us and around us, is undying and eternally beneficent, is not seen or heard or smelt, but is perceived by the one who desires perception.

We are each our own absolute lawgiver, the dispenser of glory or gloom to ourselves, the decreer of our life, our reward, our punishment.

These truths, which are as great as life itself, are as simple as the simplest human mind. Feed the hungry with them.

### *Questions for Review:*

1. Define theosophy.
2. Why is theosophy considered old?
3. Is theosophy a religion? Why or why not?
4. What is the difference between theosophy as a science as compared to modern science?
5. In what sense is theosophy a philosophy?
6. What are some of the important tenets of theosophy?