

Theosophy and the Arts

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Abstract

The cosmology of Ancient India, as transcribed by the Theosophists, contains innovations that greatly influenced modern Western culture. Here we bring these novel embellishments to the foreground, and explain their influence on the arts.

1. Introduction

Following the death of Madame Blavatsky in 1891, Annie Besant ascended to the leadership of the Theosophical Society. The literature of the post-Blavatsky period began with the very influential *Thought-Forms* by Besant and C. W. Leadbeater, of 1901.

The cosmological model of Theosophy is similar to the classical Sanskrit of 6th century BCE. The pancha kosa, in particular, is the model for these authors. The classical pancha kosa (five sheaths or levels) are, from bottom up: physical, vital, mental, intellectual, and bliss.

The related idea of the akashic record was promoted by Alfred Sinnett in his book *Esoteric Buddhism* of 1884.

2. The Esoteric Planes and Bodies

The Sanskrit model was adapted and embellished by the early theosophists.

2-1. Sinnett

Alfred Percy Sinnett (1840 – 1921) moved to India in 1879, where he was the editor of an English daily. Sinnett returned to England in 1884, where his book, *Esoteric*

Buddhism, was published that year. This was the first text on Theosophy, and was based on his correspondence with masters in India.

2-2. Blavatsky

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831 – 1891) – also known as HPB – was a Russian occultist and world traveller. While reputedly in India in the 1850s, she came under the influence of the ancient teachings of Hindu and Buddhist masters. She co-founded the Theosophical Society in New York City in 1875. In 1877 she published her first book, *Isis Unveiled*, which is basic to Theosophy. The following year, Blavatsky (traveling with Henry Steel Olcott, journalist and co-founder of the Theosophical Society) arrived in India and stayed for some time with the Sinnetts in Simla. She then returned to Europe, where her second book, *The Secret Doctrine*, was written and self-published in 1888 in two volumes.

2-3. Besant

Annie Besant (1847 – 1933), leader of the Theosophical Society after the death of HPB, wrote many books and pamphlets on Theosophy and related matters. One of the basic themes regards the cosmological model of several planes or bodies.

From the point of view of the individual seer, the elements are experienced as ascending levels of consciousness. These are the planes of consciousness. But to a clairvoyant, they appear as three-dimensional sheaths, which surround a physical body with successively larger and interpenetrating sheaths. These are the esoteric bodies of existence.

The planes according to Theosophy

The Theosophical scheme is clearly laid out in *The Ancient Wisdom* of Annie Besant (1897). There are seven planes, of which the first five (counting from the lowest or most dense) are the Physical, Astral, Mental, Buddhist. and Nirvanic. These are worlds which emanate from a manifested Divine Being, the Logos. Their attributes are these, in brief.

1. The Physical Plane consists of spirit and matter: solid, liquid, gas, and ether. There are seven grades of physical spirit-matter.

2. The Astral Plane is the region next to the physical. Its spirit-matter is more highly vitalized and finer than that of the physical Plane. Astral matter permeates the physical world. Feelings appear as shapes in this world, and propagate as vibrations from mind to mind. The personal aspect of the astral is a body that

surrounds a living being, its astral body. The astral body serves as a bridge between the individual consciousness and the physical brain.¹

3. The Mental Plane is the region next above the astral. It is the world of thoughts, intelligence, intellect, the mind. Mental spirit-matter permeates the astral, but is more vital, more fine. It has seven subdivisions. Thoughts manifest as vibrations of forms, thought-forms. Spirits, elementals, and helpers also inhabit this plane. Vibrations create thought-forms which interact via resonance.

4. The Buddhist Plane is the stage for the interaction of the individual mind, or mental body, with the universal mind. There are individuals, but without separation. This bliss-body is the same as the anandamayakosa of the pancha kosa of the Taittiriya Upanashad.

5. The Nirvanic Plane is the locus of the highest aspect of the god within.

6 and 7. The final two levels are hidden from our view.

Of all these, the astral and mental receive the most attention in the theosophical literature.

The bodies

Clairvoyance was an important ability for these writers, and it was believed that it could be developed by training, which they offered. As seen by the clairvoyant, a physical body was surrounded by its astral body, and that in turn by its mental body. And more, there were astral bodies without physical bodies, and mental bodies with or without astral bodies.

The innovations of the theosophists

Thus the clairvoyant, with all faculties activated, might gaze about and observe all kinds of lively activities in the astral and mental fields. This view extended the classical literature somewhat.

2-4. Leadbeater

Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854 – 1934), in his book *The Astral Plane: It's Scenery, Inhabitants, and Phenomena* (1896) went into great detail in his clairvoyant observations. And in his later book, *Clairvoyance* of 1889, following Sinnett, he identified the akashic records as something a clairvoyant could read, .

¹p. 79

2-5. Thought-Forms and the Arts

In their book *Thought-Forms* (1901), Besant and Leadbeater present 49 paintings in full color plates. These are indicated not as abstract expressions, but rather as realistic images of alternate realities. This radical idea of thoughts and feelings as real things animating the astral and mental planes inspired a whole generation of modern painters, most notably Mondrian (after 1908) and Kandinsky (after 1910). In fact, several of Kandinsky's works incorporate images from this book. An exemplary case appears on the cover of the 1999 edition of *Thought-Forms*.

In addition to modern painting, other arts were influenced: sculpture, music, architecture, and so on. Conferences on these influences were held in Amsterdam in 2013 and at University in 2015. The early pioneers of visual music, such as Thomas Wilfred, explicitly tried to reproduce the clairvoyance of astral light.

3. The Akasha

In Kolkata on a short visit in 2008, I was invited to speak at the Indian Statistical Institute. There I met Professor Sisir Roy, who showed me his recent paper on the quantum vacuum. It occurred to us that the atomistic model of the quantum vacuum of that article might be applied to cosmic consciousness. Our subsequent work on this idea led to a joint book, *Demystifying the Akasha* in 2010. As I was studying Sanskrit philosophy while in India, the akasha in this title was intended as a reference to the ancient cosmology of India. But it also appears in the Western Esoteric Tradition, specifically in the idea of the akashic record in Theosophy.

3-1. The Ancient Akasha

In *Demystifying the Akasha*, we described in some detail the cosmology of Kashmiri Shaivism. This highly evolved system, dating from around the year 1000 CE, has 36 planes of existence. For comparison with the planes of Theosophy it will be convenient to refer to the earlier Sanskrit system of the five koshas, and that of neoplatonism

3-2. The Akasha in Theosophy

The idea of the akashic record appears in HPB's first book, but without the name. Such planes have figured in the occult cosmologies of the West since Plato.

Sinnett, 1884

In his *Esoteric Buddhism*, he wrote,²

Early Buddhism, then, clearly held to a permanency of records in the Akasha, and the potential capacity of man to read the same when he has evolved to the stage of true individual enlightenment.

Bailey, 1887

Alice Ann Bailey (1880 – 1949) wrote, in her book *The Light of the Soul*,

The akashic record is like an immense photographic film, registering all the desires and earth experiences of our planet.

Blavatsky, 1888

It is in the first volume of *The Secret Doctrine*, entitled *Cosmogogenesis*, that HPB's concept of the akashic record first appears, but without the name already applied by Sinnett.

In the *Cosmogogenesis*, HPB summarizes the central points in six "items of cosmogony." The first two items concern the "first fundamental proposition" —

"the One homogeneous divine Substance-Principle, the one radical cause.... It is called "Substance-Principle," which is essentially the akasha.

She characterized it as a sort of life force; she also referred to "indestructible tablets of the astral light" recording both the past and future of human thought and action.

She further describe it as a part of an element,

Next we see Cosmic matter scattering and forming itself into elements; grouped into the mystic four within the fifth element—Ether, the lining of *Akasa*, the *Amima Mundi* or Mother of Kosmos.³

and also,

It will be only in the next, of fifth, Round that the fifth element, *Ether*—the gross body of /em Akasa, if it can be called even that—will, by becoming a familiar fact of nature to all men, as air is familiar to us now ...⁴

²(Sinnett, 1885; p. 44)

³(Blavatsky and Gomes, 1997; p. 31)

⁴(ibid; p. 57)

Finally, she wrote that the *Aether* of the ancient Greeks was the *Akasa* of the Hindus.⁵

Besant, 1897

In the *Ancient Wisdom*, Annie Besant indicated that the akasha was a plane of existence between the etheric plane (above) and the mental plane (below). This is similar to the cosmology of Marsilio Ficino, the Renaissance Neoplatonist. For the earlier Theosophists, the akasha was located in the astral plane. We are left with this important ambiguity.

3-3. The Akasha in Science

The origin of the field concept in the sciences is shrouded in antiquity, but it came to the foreground with the gravitational field of Kepler (1600) and Newton (1660), and again with the magnetic field of Gilbert (1800) and Faraday (1812). But after the publication of *Isis Unveiled* in 1877, the applications of the field concept multiplied rapidly.

From the records of the Nobel Prize from 1901 to 1935, we see the field concept leading the advances of physics in these developments:

- 1890, Thompson, radiation experiments (prize of 1906)
- 1895, Rontgen, x-rays (1901)
- 1896, Curie, radioactivity (1903)
- 1905, Einstein, photoelectric effect (1922), also special relativity
- 1915, Einstein, general relativity
- 1910, Millikan, electron charge (1923)
- 1913, Bohr, hydrogen atom (1922)
- 1917, Einstein, cosmology
- 1925, Heisenberg, matrix mechanics (1932)
- 1926, Schroedinger, wave equation (1933)
- 1931, Dirac, positron (1933), also quantum vacuum

⁵(*ibid*; p. 139)

- 1932, Chadwick, neutron (1935)

Concurrently, the evolution of field concepts in biology began with the *lan vital* of Henri Bergson (1907), and continues today in the work of Rupert Sheldrake on morphogenetic fields.

4. Conclusion

The occult investigations of the early theosophists advanced the received wisdom of the ancients with novel insights, including visual representations of higher consciousness. Advances in color printing around 1900 enabled the widespread distribution of these visual images of thought-forms, catalyzing the new styles in the visual arts now regarded as abstract expressions. Painting, visual music, and lightshows were particularly transformed by the akasha of the ancient philosophers, augmented and popularized by the Theosophists in 1901.

Whether located in the astral plane, between the mental and the etheric, or surrounding them all, the atomic model of the akasha developed in our book, *Demystifying the Akasha*, supports the idea of the akashic record, including the future as well as the past in a mammoth mathematical system.

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