

Theosophy and the Arts

Ralph Herman Abraham

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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

The cosmological model of Theosophy, as expected, 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.

Among important authors of theosophical books are Helena Blavatsky, Alfred Sinnett, Annie Besant, and Charles Leadbeater.

2. THE ESOTERIC PLANES AND BODIES

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

2-1. Blavatsky

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831 – 1891)– HPB – was a Russian occultist, 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.

2-2. Sinnett

Alfred Percy Sinnett (1840 – 1921) moved to India in 1879, where he was the editor of an English daily. The following year, HPB (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. Sinnett returned to England in 1884, where his book, *Esoteric Buddhism*, was published that year. This was based on his correspondence with masters in India.

2-3. Besant

Leader of the Theosophical Society after the death of HPB, Annie Besant (1847 – 1933) 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 as seen by a clairvoyant, they are seen 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) — 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. p. 79

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 forms, and 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, 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 akasha was a plane of existence between the etheric plane (above) and the mental plane (below). Such planes have figured in the occult cosmologies of the West since Plato.

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, the physical body was surrounded by its astral body, and that in turn by its mental body. And more, there were astral bodies without physical substrates, 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. C. W. LEADBEATER

Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854 – 1934), in his book *The Astral Plane: Its 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, .

2-3. 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, it has been asserted that several of Kandinsky's works incorporate images from this book.

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 thought-forms, catalyzing the new styles in the visual arts now regarded as abstract expressions.

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