

# MADAME BLAVATSKY, BUDDHISM AND TIBET

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## Preface ( 2005)

Madame Blavatsky was a psychic pioneer of some distinction who interacted with many other such pioneers. Probably most readers discount her claim to have real Tibetan teachers, men not spirit guides. Many would question her first hand acquaintance with Tibetan culture- she seems generally unaware of the many Tibetan works that have since reached the West but in her time had not.

And yet, to some scholars like Suzuki and Conze, there did seem to be an authentic Mahayana inspiration. In recent years, there has been a new wave of argument.

Now read on...

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Let's begin with two contrasting quotations.

*“ The role of the redoubtable Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky in popularizing “eastern “ doctrines remains hotly contested. However it is now clear, that despite the*

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*legend which she and her hagiographers propagated, Blavatsky never stepped on Tibetan soil. Her claims that her later writings derived from Himalayan Mahatmas forming a kind of Atlantean brotherhood residing in secrecy in a remote region of Tibet and with access to long-hidden antedeluvian sources of wisdom, need not be treated seriously.”*

Harry Oldmeadow “ The Western Quest for ‘Secret Tibet’” **Esoterica** III (2001) 48-107

( Oldmeadow is identified with the Traditionalist school, whose leader Guenon “exposed” Theosophy.)

*“ The theosophical movement has in general not knowledge enough of theosophy to see what the Reigles have done.” – Henk Spierenburg, May 2003.*

Every year on 8 May, Theosophists throughout the world pay tribute to Madame Blavatsky, co-founder of the Theosophical Society. Since the publication of Dr Vernon Harrison’s paper “ J’ Accuse” by the Journal of the Society for Psychological Research in April 1986, the pain of the over-hasty negative 1885 verdict of that body on HPB has been much reduced.

Not directly addressed by Dr Harrison though was the problem of Madame Blavatsky’s Tibetan connection. Arthur Lillie, Richard Hodgson and their successors had thought to explain this by reference to published sources available in HPB’s time, recycled and at times garbled by her in a spurious claim to initiated knowledge of the Tibetan tradition.

Defenders of HPB, including the “Old Lady “ herself, have in contrast claimed that she had lived in Tibet, as well as enjoying personal contacts with Tibetan Buddhist figures. From the time of Sinnett onwards, biographers have wrestled with the fragmentary and contradictory data.

At one theosophical history conference in London scholars heard both the” for” (Jean Overton Fuller) and “against” (Robert Gilbert) case for HPB’s travels in Tibet. But another line of research focuses, not on HPB’s movements, but on her writings. To what extent does she show special knowledge of Tibet?

In 1999, an American Theosophist Richard Taylor began a research project into Blavatsky and Buddhism. Taylor was part of a postgraduate group in Buddhist Studies at The University of California, Berkeley. He assembled a list of Buddhist publications available in her lifetime, which is rather longer than might be expected. It is possible to see where HPB quotes from these, sometimes through her footnotes, though in other cases, (as G.R.S. Mead regretfully observed a century ago) she does not cite even when borrowing chunks of text.

Thus she employs Emil Schlagintweit “ Buddhism in Tibet” ( London, 1863). In our time, David Reigle, Daniel Caldwell and Richard Taylor appear to have been the persons who realised this. Her definitions of parinishpanna, parikalpita, paramarthasayta and

samvritisatya ( The Secret Doctrine I pages 56-8 are notable examples.) Sometimes she appears to misunderstand what she is quoting.

At the same time, Taylor concluded that we also find in early theosophical writing, especially in the Mahatma letters, a knowledge of Tibetan terms which was not (so far as we know) generally available to western scholars of HPB's time. The Mahatma Letters also indicate that some at least of HPB's teachers saw themselves in Buddhist terms.

Rich Taylor's findings, though unfinished, were placed on the Blavatsky. Net site, but not published in paper form. They form an excellent recent introduction to the subject.

Yet the revelation through Blavatsky was not Tibetan Buddhism. After all, Tibetan Buddhists today do not subscribe to Theosophy. What then was it? A set of answers has been provided by another American scholar, David Reigle (working with his wife Nancy Reigle, whose name should generally be assumed in references below to David.).

Reigle ( the name rhymes with legal eagle !) found in 1981 that the term " Books of Kiu-te" used by HPB appeared in a book by C.R. Markham " 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1879, called " Narratives of the Mission of George Bogle to Tibet". The reference was in an appendix by Horace Della Penna called in turn " Brief Account of the Kingdom of Tibet". The Books of Kiu-Te are in the Tibetan Buddhist canon, they are the Tibetan Buddhist Tantras. Later it transpired that Henk Spierenburg had published the same identification of the Books of Kie-Te through the Dutch Theosophical Society in 1975, but this had not become known in the English-speaking world. Spierenburg had begun reading the books mentioned by HPB, with a view to collecting together her references to such traditions as Buddhism, the Vedas and the New Testament (This is now a major series, invaluable to students.). He had therefore read Markham and Della Penna, and realised that this book was the source of HPB's term " Kiu-Te" . It would appear that no one had done this before Spierenburg, although a follow-up of HPB's references would have led to it

We owe to Wizards Bookshelf and Richard Robb ( best known for their Secret Doctrine Reference Series) the publication in 1983 of Reigle's booklet " The Books of Kiu-te" which has since been reprinted. Then in 1999 Robb issued " Blavatsky's Secret Books", a hardback collection of the Reigles' papers and research reports. But this has attracted disappointingly little attention. Recently David Reigle's work has started to become more easily available though [www.easterntradition.org](http://www.easterntradition.org)

Reigle has suggested that in " The Stanzas of Dzyan", on which " The Secret Doctrine" is a commentary, HPB has used the first (cosmology) section of the Kalachakra Tantra, but in its longer original form, rather than the shortened form known today. This Tantra was associated with the Panchen Lama at Shigatse in Tibet, with which HPB claimed affiliation. At present, during the minority of the present Panchen Lama, it is in particular the other leading Tibetan dignitary, the Dalai Lama, who has made the Kalachakra Tantra known in the West, and has conducted initiations into it.

But the actual metaphysics presented by HPB and her teachers is not Gelugpa., the school to which both the Dalai and Panchen Lamas belong. It is not, on certain major points, the same as the public teaching of Tsong-ka-pa, the great reformer of that school. It has (suggested Reigle) closer affinities with the Jonangpa school, a smaller and at times persecuted tradition., not well known in the West, though there are now Dorje Ling centres in Brooklyn and Atlanta, USA.

Yet the origins of HPB's teaching are not in Tibet, or at least, not in the Tibetan language. It will be remembered that most Tibetan scriptures were specially translated from the Buddhist Sanskrit, though it was in Tibetan that Tsong-ka-pa and other Tibetan teachers commented on them. The Buddhist Sanskrit originals, about 50% of which may still exist, take us closer to the original of the Book of Dzyan. That original may in turn be in a different language, which HPB called Senzar. The search for it chiefly motivates David and Nancy Reigle

Reigle therefore concludes that HPB's primary teachers were indeed affiliated with Tibetan Buddhism, but they were also initiated into a more secret tradition, not limited to Tibet or to Buddhism.

This endorsement of HPB is significant because of Reigle's Sanskrit scholarship. It is not unknown for an orientalist (if a vague term may be permitted) to have been involved in Theosophy in his or her youth, but the academic community would hold that they should abandon this in maturity and then write off HPB as a crank or worse.

Reigle, in contrast, has established a reputation as scholar in the Sanskrit Buddhist materials, yet he has been led to put HPB firmly into a Tibetan Buddhist context, though it is admitted that there are some problems on matters where she differs from the main Tibetan Buddhist view. It is the Stanzas of Dyzan whose teaching is of most interest to him. "The Voice of a Silence" a later poetic work by HPB is also very important as the first exposition in the West of the bodhisattva ideal, which is central in Mahayana Buddhism..

Reigle can read Tibetan. This is almost unprecedented in the Theosophical world, if one excepts a handful of Tibetans who join the TS for such reasons as access to its libraries.( Sanskrit scholars, in contrast, have not been rare , at least among Indian Theosophists. ).

There has been, coincident with the spread of Tibetan Buddhism in the West, a greater interest in its relationship with Theosophy. The quarterly magazine "Fohat", founded in Edmonton, Canada in 1997 was not only for a time the chief publisher of Reigle papers, but has carried other contributions on related subjects - by its editor Robert Bruce MacDonald, by the late Abhinyano ( a Western Buddhist ) and by Gerald Schueler, an American writer on the magical tradition.

Schueler considers that Theosophy and Mahayana Buddhism are identical in their core, though differing in emphasis, and (at face value only) conflicting at certain points. He

believes that HPB was initiated into Mahayana and into Dzogchen, a form of once secret practice found chiefly in the Nyingma school.

Another student, Grigor V. Ananikian has noted “ The Central Asian Dzogchen is common to and found within Bon, Nyingmapa lineage, as well as in some northern Indian elements of the Sikhs, Nathas....” He would prefer to look northwards to Central Asia and west to Persia for HPB’s school.

In this connection I should like to call attention to a paper by Dr Todd Gibson “ Inner Asian Contributions to the Vajrayana”( Indo-Iranian Journal **40** 37-57 1997) .Gibson challenges the common view that Tibetan Buddhism was essentially transmitted from India. Important developments in esoteric Buddhism, he argues came from the North, from inner Asia. Even the Buddhist mandala seems to have developed there.

Madame Blavatsky occasionally included actual Tibetan language passages or fragments in her work, rendered in our alphabet. Michael Lewis, in association with Ken Small, has recently examined one such phonetic fragment in the Proem to “ The Secret Doctrine”. Lewis has special knowledge of spoken Tibetan dialects. Their unpublished paper “ In the Matrix of the Primordial Deities” indicates a Tibetan original to the first Stanza of Dzyan.

Similarly, David Reigle has been working for some years on the Tibetan terms in the “Cosmological Notes” that appeared as an appendix to the” “ Letters to A.P. Sinnett”. But the whole corpus of Reigle’s work has largely been ignored. Like Dr Harrison at the time of his famous SPR paper, he is not a member of a Theosophical Society despite being, I would suggest, the most important defender of HPB in the world today

Reigle has another qualification. He is initiated into the Kalachakra tradition. This gives him a special perspective on Madame Blavatsky’s claim to have Tibetan links. Unfortunately, except perhaps for Ian Brown of London , other Kalachakra practitioners are not interested in the Blavatsky claim.( Brown took part in the 1986 Theosophical History conference in London). .In 1996, Spirit of the Sun Publications ( Santa Fe, New Mexico ) published David Reigle’s essay “ Kalacakra (sic) Sadhana and Social Responsibility” in book form (available through Wisdom Books in the UK.).

There is also a growing community of academic scholars active in researching aspects of Tibetan Buddhism. They have nothing to say about David Reigle’s Blavatsky work either, even when they know of it. Sometimes this may be because they consider Blavatsky not a respectable figure for them to study. No one ever harmed their academic career by publishing a disparaging reference to HPB in an academic paper, but serious study has been rare. Another problem for the academic scholars is that they would need not only knowledge of Tibetan, but also of Sanskrit, to seriously engage with David Reigle’s research. And then there is the fact that anyone who attempts objective research of Blavatsky may receive abuse from some so-called followers of Blavatsky.

One of the few critical responses to Reigle, or at least his early work, has come from Tim Maroney, in his “ Book of Dzyan” ( Oakland, California , Chaosium, 2000) who relates Blavatsky to the horror fantasist H.P.Lovecraft. Maroney is an OTO initiate but despite this, or perhaps because of it, he is dismissive of Reigle’s attempt to give Blavatsky a Tibetan context, and even reprints part of Hodgson’s report.

The work of Reigle and others on Tibetan aspects of HPB is naturally relevant to the problem of putting HPB into an overall context. Because she uses material from a variety of traditions – and says so- she may be said to have affinities with those schools. So she may be explained partly as a Sufi, or an Ismaili , or a Kabalist, or a Buddhist, a Spiritualist, or a spiritual ancestor of Gurdjieff.

If we as (mostly) Europeans with a heritage of European esotericism claim Blavatsky as mainly European in her inspiration, with some oriental trappings, which may be the emerging academic view today, can we respond adequately to the challenge “ She claimed a Tibetan and Sanskrit inspiration, and study of original language materials is actually substantiating this. “?

I am not saying that knowing Sanskrit confers infallibility on a scholar’s interpretation. There is an instructive case at the moment involving another expert in Sanskrit Buddhist scriptures, and that is Dr Christian Lindtner of Denmark. Understanding Greek also, he read the Christian gospels and detected Mahayana Buddhist originals.. That is relevant to an old argument, in which HPB participated with gusto - whether Christianity borrowed from Buddhism. As it happens, another Sanskrit and biblical scholar, retired British legal professor Duncan Derrett, while admitting more Buddhist influence than do biblical scholars without Sanskrit knowledge, does not accept Dr Lindtner’s judgment on the supposed Mahayana Buddhist originals. Similarly, in a sense, one would not mind if someone refuted David Reigle and the others, but they would need to do it effectively with some knowledge of the original languages.

Another specialist in Sanskrit , formerly of the British Library, is Jeanine Miller, whose new book about Blavatsky is eagerly awaited. And this brings me to an aspect of the oriental connection which is ironic. Reigle and Miller, reading Sanskrit, recognise the authentic inspiration of Blavatsky , and serious Blavatsky students applaud. But R and M also detect genuine Sanskrit and Tibetan elements in the writings of Alice Bailey and her inspirer DK. Some of these same students are then sceptical!

In a further irony, Alice Bailey was of course a theist, and a theme of David Reigle’s most recent work is that Theosophy, as presented through HPB, was non- theistic, that is belief and worship of a personal god outside the individual was not taught. Indeed, Reigle argues that the wisdom religion in ancient India was non-theistic and gradually became overlaid with theism, with disastrous consequences because theism is associated with religious persecution. Jainism, Buddhism and early Hinduism therefore were not theistic. The underlying teaching of the Dalai Lama today is not theistic either.

This is congenial to the original teachings of “ The Secret Doctrine” and The Key to Theosophy” but many Theosophists have been theistic, and in the UK, for example, the efforts of Geoffrey Farthing, Adam Warcup, Blavatsky Trust and others to recall them to non-theism have had limited success.

As historians, however, we are chiefly interested in placing Madame Blavatsky and the Theosophical movement in a historical context. Historians cannot afford to ignore the resurgence of the Tibetan explanation of HPB. They could disregard Geoffrey Barboraka on the grounds that he did not know Tibetan well, but some of those working now in this area clearly do.

While Paul Johnson presented some evidence in “ The Masters Revealed” ( 1994) supporting HPB’s special access to Tibetan Buddhist sources, newer and more detailed studies by David Reigle and other scholars add considerably more weight to the argument.. We may not be able to say definitely what Col. Olcott saw late one evening in 1882, or where HPB was in 1851. But in examining the teaching, which after all is the more important subject, we have vastly more material now available from oriental scriptures with which to make informed comparisons, and we have a series of learned articles by David Reigle and others on their implications.

Let me offer a brief theory of HPB. In his classic work “ HP Blavatsky Tibet and Tulku” ( 1966) Geoffrey Barboraka identified Blavatsky as a tulku, a person in whom another higher entity was manifesting. That book, incidentally, could be the focus for a whole day’s seminar. (In “ The Secret Doctrine” Blavatsky herself explains Boehme, the German mystic , the same way, using the Sanskrit equivalent nirmanakaya. ).

There are personal testimonies to Blavatsky, cited by Barboraka, behaving in this entranced or inspired manner which is familiar to psychical researchers in a lower level of inspiration. In “ The Mahatma Letters” it is clearly stated that as a result of her experiences at the hands of her teachers she was psychologically not complete any more.

The positive side of this tulku status is that passages of her writing are quite brilliant in their knowledge and their expression, even allowing for the editing skills of Wilder, Mead or the Keightleys around her. The negative side is that I am not sure that she could always remember where she had been or what she had said. I do not mean that she was basically a fantasist, laying claim to an occult career she never had; it was her occult work which had led to some diffusion of her consciousness, such as gaps in memory.

Moreover, ideas could clothe themselves in her mind using whatever words or phrases were available in her memory. That is why, for example, in “ The Voice of the Silence” she expressed her basic theme in material gathered from many sources, including a past article in “ The Theosophist”. (Daniel Caldwell has lately reminded us of this article in a valuable note.)

Finally, let us observe how HPB’s Tibetan teachers may have given to the Theosophical Society a limited time. I refer to the well-known statement ( in “ The Key to Theosophy”

for example,) that at the end of each century a special spiritual push was made. This appears to be related to the traditions of the Seven Rishis , and also to the Kalachakra texts.

At the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in England, we find the Theosophical Transactions of Jane Leade ,Dr John Pordage and the Behmenists. At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century we have the Theosophical Society which grows into the New Church of Swedenborgians. These impulses fade and then at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century comes the Theosophical Society still present. But what happens at the end of the twentieth.? Is there a new impulse, as HPB predicted?

Could it be Tibetan Buddhism? Perhaps we take for granted the present Dalai Lama, appearing at a religious conference here, conducting initiations there, his edited lectures on the library shelves, the world's second best known religious leader after the Pope. But this is quite an extraordinary development. Previous Dalai Lamas were unknown outside the Buddhist region. While one wishes the present Dalai Lama long life, we may even soon see another Dalai Lama who is (like the fourth ) a non-Tibetan.

The subject of Madame Blavatsky, Buddhism and Tibet is today an active area of research, rather neglected it has to be admitted by the Theosophical societies, but essential in any serious theosophical history. But if the new wave of defenders of the Tibetan connection of HPB are to win a hearing, they too will have to bring their findings out of the theosophical community and into mainstream academic publications. Even the best of Theosophical journals and publishers reach only a small audience.. Some use of the many western Buddhist publications would help, though some publications will turn up their nose, forgetting perhaps who were the first western Buddhists!