

MAHATMAS VERSUS ASCENDED MASTERS

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H. P. Blavatsky was the first person to introduce the concept of the Mahatmas (also called adepts or Masters) to the West. At first she talked about them privately, but after a few years two of these adepts, known by the pseudonyms of Koot Hoomi (K. H.) and Morya (M.), agreed to maintain a correspondence with a couple of British Theosophists—A. P. Sinnett and A. O. Hume. This communication took place from 1880 to 1885, and during those years the knowledge about the Mahatmas became more and more public. The original letters are currently kept in the British Library in London as a valuable historical item, and have been published under the title of *The Mahatma Letters*. This book remains an unparalleled first-hand source of information about the Mahatmas and their teachings.

In 1930, fifty years after this correspondence began, Guy Ballard, a former student of Theosophy, was allegedly contacted during a hike on California's Mount Shasta by a mysterious nonphysical character. This figure identified himself as one of the Theosophical Mahatmas, the eighteenth-century occultist known as the Comte de St. Germain. He charged Ballard with the task of transmitting the lessons of "the Great Law of Life," giving rise to what became called "the I AM movement."

Ballard and his wife Edna soon gained a wide following with their version of St. Germain's teachings, creating the Saint Germain Foundation in 1932. The I AM movement reached its heyday in the late 1930s; Guy Ballard's death in 1939, combined with subsequent legal challenges, including a suit launched by the federal government alleging postal fraud, caused it to diminish. The organization continues to exist today, but keeps a low profile (Hanegraaff, 2:587).

The Ascended Master movement reached another stage in 1958, when Mark Prophet, a former student of the Saint Germain Foundation, claimed he was commissioned by "the Ascended Master El Morya" to

transmit the teachings of the Great White Brotherhood through an organization called the Summit Lighthouse. Upon Mark Prophet's death in 1973, leadership of the organization was taken over by his wife, Elizabeth Clare Prophet, who changed its name to the Church Universal and Triumphant. In 1999, Prophet retired from her activities with the church; she died in 2009 (Hanegraaff, 2:1093–96).

Today, largely as a result of the I AM movement and the Prophets' activities, the idea of the Ascended Masters is prevalent in the New Age. Since the Ballards and the Prophets used the names and portraits of the Theosophical Mahatmas for their Ascended Masters, many people assume that they are the same. However, as we are going to see in this article, they differ in some very important respects.

Ascended or Living?

The Ascended Masters, as their name suggests, are supposed to be Masters who have experienced the miracle of ascension, as it is said Jesus did. The original teaching, channeled by Guy Ballard, was that a new Ascended Master would not die but would take the body up with him. This teaching of ascension is in direct opposition to the Theosophical teachings. Mahatma K. H. refers to the idea disparagingly in one of his letters to Sinnett: "There was but one hysterical woman alleged to have been present at the pretended ascension, and . . . the phenomenon has never been corroborated by repetition" (Barker and Chin, 5). HPB also rejects ascension as a fact, calling it "an allegory as old as the world" (Blavatsky, *Collected Writings* 8:389; see also 4:359–60).

After Ballard (who was supposed to have reached the stage of ascension) died of cardiac arterial sclerosis but did not take his body with him, his wife, Edna, said that one could actually ascend after the body died. Thus

the idea of ascension changed during the years, and today Ascended Masters are regarded as disembodied spirits, having transcended their physical bodies. This, again, is contrary to the Theosophical teaching about the Mahatmas. In the early days of the TS, before people in the West knew anything about the Masters, Henry Steel Olcott began to receive letters from some of them. In one early letter, the Master Serapis wrote: "The time is come to let thee know who I am. I am not a disembodied spirit, brother. I am a living man" (Jinara-jadasa [2002], 2:23). That they are living men was verified by HPB, who lived with some of them near Tibet for several years while undergoing her occult training. Later Olcott and several other Theosophists also met some Mahatmas in their physical bodies at different times and in different parts of the world.

The fact that the Mahatmas retain their bodies is of great importance. They are enlightened yogis, similar in certain respects to those traditionally known in the East. But there is a difference. An enlightened one, after having realized Truth, has gained the right to merge with the All in a state of absolute bliss (called *moksha* or *nirvana*). This prevents him from being in touch with humanity, since he has to abandon the lower vehicles of consciousness. By contrast, the Theosophical Masters, out of compassion, decide to give up entering into *nirvana* so that they remain able to help us in our struggle to realize Truth:

The Master must be in a human body, must be incarnate. Many who reach this level no longer take up the burden of the flesh, but using only "the spiritual body" pass out of touch with this earth, and inhabit only loftier realms of existence. (Besant, 49)

The Mahatmas are in this respect what the Mahayana Buddhists call *bodhisattvas*. They choose to retain the body, not because of any fault in their development but as an act of self-sacrifice. Possessing a physical body subjects the adepts to certain unavoidable limitations. As Blavatsky said, they "are living men, born as we are born, and doomed to die like every mortal" (Blavatsky [1987], 288). Being perfect yogis, they have learned how to take care of their bodies so that they can live much longer than ordinary human beings; nevertheless, the bodies must eventually die.

The Mahatma Letters have several statements about the limitations intrinsic in leading a physical existence. For example, Mahatma K. H. wrote: "I was physically very tired by a ride of 48 hours consecutively" (Barker and Chin, 398). He also stated that he is limited to his physical senses and the functions of his brain "when I sit at my meals, or when I am dressing, reading or otherwise occupied" (Barker and Chin, 257).

But the physical body is where the Masters' evolutionary development is the least apparent. It is said

that if we see an adept on the physical plane, we may not even recognize him as anything more than a good and wise man. Yet on the inner planes, his nature is far beyond that of those who are still caught in the illusion. In their letters, the Mahatmas differentiate between the "inner man" (the spiritual Self of the adept which is relatively omniscient and beyond limitations) and "the outer man," which is a very limited expression of the spiritual Self working through the psychophysical personality. This is why K. H. wrote: "We are not infallible, all-foreseeing 'Mahatmas' at every hour of the day" (Barker and Chin, 450). As he explained: "An adept—the highest as the lowest—is one only during the exercise of his occult powers" (Barker and Chin, 257).

These adepts, then, are not like the Ascended Masters of the New Age, who are said to become godlike, all-powerful beings beyond the laws of nature. In their teachings, the Mahatmas even denied that such beings exist. K. H. wrote: "If we had the powers of the imaginary Personal God, and the universal and immutable laws were but toys to play with, then indeed might we have created conditions that would have turned this earth into an Arcadia for lofty souls" (Barker and Chin, 474). In their letters, the Mahatmas constantly talk about the "immutable laws" of the universe, and say that they can help humanity only within the limits of these laws. They cannot produce a New Age magically; whether we like it or not, this is our job.

Proponents of the Ascended Masters sometimes attempt to account for these discrepancies by claiming that when the TS was founded most of the Theosophical Mahatmas were still "unascended Masters." This leaves room to detach the Ascended Masters from the limitations that all the Mahatmas, "the highest as the lowest," are said to have. But according to the Theosophical teachings, the higher the adept, the less we are likely to hear from him:

The more spiritual the Adept becomes, the less can he meddle with mundane, gross affairs and the more he has to confine himself to a spiritual work. . . . The very high Adepts, therefore, do help humanity, but only spiritually: they are constitutionally incapable of meddling with worldly affairs. (Blavatsky, *Collected Writings*, 6:247)

Another feature of the Ascended Masters teachings is that they are mainly concerned with the "form aspect" of the Masters (their appearance, names, character, etc.). The Theosophical view, when properly understood, is very different. Blavatsky wrote, "The real MAHATMA is then not his physical body but that higher Manas [the spiritual Mind] which is inseparably linked to the Atma [the real Self] and its vehicle [the spiritual Soul]." And she adds that whoever wants to "see" a Mahatma has to elevate his perception to the spiritual planes, because "higher things can be perceived only by

a sense pertaining to those higher things." The spiritual planes, where forms and separation vanish and unity prevails, are far higher than the psychic planes, which are the ones contacted by natural seers. Those who can reach the high state of consciousness that transcends all sense of separateness "will see the MAHATMA wherever he may be, for, being merged into the sixth and the seventh principles, which are ubiquitous and omnipresent, the MAHATMAS may be said to be everywhere" (Blavatsky, *Collected Writings*, 6:239).

The real Mahatma is thus seen mainly as a spiritual state of consciousness, and the forms assumed by his personal aspect are just shadows. To be sure, we can find descriptions of the form aspect of the Mahatmas in the Theosophical literature, not because this aspect is important in itself, but because it provides something for our limited minds to grasp and comprehend. But this personal aspect is meant to be transcended, and whoever is content with it is stuck in the world of illusion.

The Masters' Work for Humanity

Today thousands of people claim they are channeling the Ascended Masters. It is clear that these Ascended Masters have their attention focused on this physical plane, doing little more than communicating with us through channels. This is, again, another basic difference with the Theosophical teachings. In Theosophy, as well as in most serious spiritual traditions, this physical plane is seen as an illusion. The Maha Chohan, one of the highest adepts, said: "Teach the people to see that life on this earth, even the happiest, is but a burden and an illusion" (Jinarajadasa [1988], 1:6-7). This concept echoes the teachings of Plato, who said this world is just the shadow of Reality. It is also related to the first Noble Truth the Buddha taught after his enlightenment: "All is *dukkha* (suffering) in this world."

Consequently, as Annie Besant said of the Masters, "the least part of their work is done here," in connection with the physical plane (quoted in Codd [1988], 45). This is one reason why they live in seclusion—most of their activity takes place on the higher planes. This, in fact, is based on a profound knowledge of the structure of the cosmos:

It will be easily seen by any one who examines the nature of occult dynamics, that a given amount of energy expended on the spiritual or astral plane is productive of far greater results than the same amount expended on the physical objective plane of existence. (Blavatsky, *Collected Writings*, 5:338-39)

So what is the Masters' work on these higher planes? This complex subject is beyond the scope of this article. When asked about this, Blavatsky answered: "You

would hardly understand, unless you were an Adept. But they keep alive the spiritual life of mankind" (Blavatsky, *Collected Writings*, 8:401).

By contrast, channeled communications from the Ascended Masters display a great concern with the physical lives and desires of their followers. The Ascended Master literature is filled with promises of magical miracles of health, limitless wealth, and perfect happiness, and "decrees" are given to enable people to "manifest" these things in their lives. This attitude is the exact opposite of the Theosophical one.

Theosophy says that the psychological ego is false, that the idea that we are this body, emotions, and mind is a mistake of perception and the source of sorrow. It says that real happiness comes only as an unsought by-product of reducing rather than increasing our attachment and identification with the personal. This is why Blavatsky wrote that "Occultism is not . . . the pursuit of happiness as man understands the word; for the first step is sacrifice, the second renunciation" (Blavatsky, *Collected Writings*, 8:14). K. H. agreed with this when he wrote: "We—the criticized and misunderstood Brothers—we seek to bring men to sacrifice their personality—a passing flash—for the welfare of the whole humanity" (Barker and Chin, 222). The Theosophical Mahatmas would never pay attention to personal desires. During the early times of the Theosophical Society, some members, completely misunderstanding the nature of the Mahatmas, would bring HPB some personal requests to ask of them. In a letter Blavatsky explained:

The Masters would not stoop for one moment to give a thought to *individual*, private matters relating but to one or even ten persons, their welfare, woes and blisses in this world of Maya [illusion], to nothing except questions of really universal importance. It is *all you* Theosophists who have dragged down in your minds the ideals of our Masters; *you who* have unconsciously and with the best of intentions and full sincerity of good purpose, *desecrated* Them, by thinking for one moment, and believing that *They* would trouble Themselves with your business matters, sons to be born, daughters to be married, houses to be built, etc. etc. (Jinarajadasa [1923], iv; emphasis here and in other quotations is from the original)

And yet this is exactly the kind of thing the Ascended Masters seem to be concerned with. They even teach alleged ways to dissolve unpleasant karma, a conception that the Theosophical Mahatmas emphatically opposed. K. H. wrote:

Bear in mind that the slightest *cause* produced, however unconsciously, and with whatever motive, cannot be unmade, or its effects crossed in their progress—by millions of gods, demons, and men combined. (Barker and Chin, 77-78)

The Ascended Masters are portrayed as cosmic fathers who will take care of their followers' problems. In contrast, Mahatma M. said: "We are leaders but not child-nurses" (Eek, 605). The adepts are impersonal, universal forces, and respond only to those who are developing in that direction:

Although the whole of humanity is within the mental vision of the MAHATMAS, they cannot be expected to take special note of every human being, unless that being by his special acts draws their particular attention to himself. The highest interest of humanity, as a whole, is their special concern, for they have identified themselves with that Universal Soul which runs through Humanity, and he, who would draw their attention, must do so through that Soul which pervades everywhere. (Blavatsky, *Collected Writings*, 6:240)

The Mahatmas do not communicate indiscriminately with people who fail to realize the illusion of the personal self, or who are driven by desires, fears, and ambitions:

They work on this plane through two kinds of agents: direct and indirect. Any person sincere and unselfish working in the line of the Masters' work may receive their inspiration even if they do not know it. Their direct agents are their accepted disciples, who work consciously with the Masters. (Codd, [2000], 9)

Their influence is always available for those of us acting with selflessness and compassion, even though we may be completely unaware of this. As K. H. wrote to Annie Besant: "At favorable times we let loose elevating influences which strike various persons in various ways" (Jinarajadasa [1988], 1:123-24). Thus any philanthropic act we perform may be part of the Mahatmas' work. However, only accepted disciples have a conscious and personal relationship with them. The moral and spiritual qualifications needed to be an accepted disciple are very deep and demanding, and very few in humanity are at the level of spiritual maturity to achieve this. (For a description of these qualifications see *At the Feet of the Master* and *Light on the Path*.)

The teachings of the Mahatmas are calculated to help people rise above the personal ego and realize

the spiritual Self. Approaches like those we see in the New Age have been characterized by the Tibetan lama Chögyam Trungpa as "spiritual materialism." While not denying the reality of the spiritual, these individuals attempt to put it at the service of the personal and material. This approach is appealing for many who are not ready to try to transcend the personal ego, and has turned the New Age into an important business.

Who Are the Ascended Masters?

Who, then, are these Ascended Masters that are communicating with thousands of channels around the world? We cannot be sure. But to appreciate this question it is necessary to realize that the inner planes are inhabited by all kinds of entities (elementals, thought-forms, deceased people, living people whose bodies are sleeping, etc.). Many of these entities enjoy impersonating Masters, saints, and other important historical figures. (For more on this subject see *The Astral Plane* and the pamphlet *Difficulties in Clairvoyance*, both by Charles W. Leadbeater.)

Even in the early days of the TS, mediums and sensitives began to channel messages from fake Mahatmas. For example, after a sensitive by the name of Oxley declared that K. H. had "thrice visited him 'by the astral form' and . . . that he had a conversation with Mr. Oxley," the Mahatma had to ask his disciple, Djual Kool, to write to Mr. Sinnett saying: "Whomsoever Mr. Oxley may have seen and conversed with at the time described, it was not with Koot Hoomi" (Barker and Chin, 253).

In another instance, there was a medium who claimed to be in touch with characters such as Jesus, John the Baptist, Hermes, and Elijah. In a letter to Mr. Sinnett referring to this kind of psychic communication, K. H. wrote: "Mystery, mystery will you exclaim. IGNORANCE we answer; the creation of that we believe in and want to see" (Barker and Chin, 109).

We have to keep in mind that "the Psychic World of super-sensuous perceptions and of deceptive sights—the world of Mediums . . . is the world of the *Great Illusion*" (Blavatsky, [1992], 75-76). In that realm different

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entities can assume any form according to what they find in the seer's mind. Deep powers of clairvoyance, long training, and a strong spiritual maturity, are needed not to be fooled by these entities, because

The slightest wish-fulfillment there [on the psychic plane] takes shape and form. Such a thought-form can be ensouled by a Nature-spirit . . . and thus appear as an angel of light, telling us just what we want to hear. CWL [i.e., Leadbeater] always warned us to be wary of any vision or voice which *flattered* us. (Codd, [1988], 66)

In support of this, Blavatsky offers a suggestive historical fact. Writing in 1889, she observes:

Fourteen years ago, before the Theosophical Society was founded, all the talk [by mediums] was of "Spirits" . . . and no one by any chance even dreamt of talking about living "Adepts," "Mahatmas," or "Masters." . . . Now all that is changed. We Theosophists were, unfortunately, the first to talk of these things . . . and now the name has become common property. . . .

There is hardly a medium who has not claimed to have seen them. Every bogus swindling Society, for commercial purposes, now claims to be guided and directed by "Masters," often supposed to be far higher than ours! (Blavatsky [1987], 301-302)

The idea of the Ascended Masters is hard to believe for many spiritually minded people, who see in them nothing more than a reemergence of the tribal gods

of old. Let us hope this article serves to remove some misconceptions. ■

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