

# Franz Hartmann: A Pioneer of the Theosophical Movement

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When H.P. Blavatsky, Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, and William Quan Judge founded the Theosophical Society in 1875, many people were attracted by their message, and some stayed on as workers for the Theosophical cause.

One of these was the German physician Franz Hartmann. He was born on November 22, 1838, in Donauwörth, Bavaria, with a strong sense of purpose, and his sublime mission became the spread of the Theosophical message in the West. His importance for the Theosophical movement in Germany, to which he dedicated the last twenty years of his life, is particularly great.

Since his early youth, Hartmann felt torn between two poles: the irrepressible urge for knowledge and self-knowledge on the one hand and on the other hand the deep desire for silence and spending time in nature, where he would communicate with nature spirits.

In 1865 Hartmann graduated from the University of Munich with the degrees of *Doctor medicinae* (doctor of medicine) and *Magister pharmaciae* (master of pharmacy) and emigrated to the United States. He practiced medicine in St. Louis, became an American citizen in 1867, and later moved to New Orleans. Then he decided to travel to Mexico and lived in Córdoba and Orizaba.

Longing to see the Wild West, Hartmann moved to Texas in 1873, where he got married, although his wife died seven months later. In 1879 he moved to Georgetown, Colorado, where he was exposed to spiritualism and began to understand the astral world, but soon perceived the dark side and dangers of spiritualistic experiments and phenomena.

Because Hartmann was looking for something higher, he associated with people of various religious backgrounds during his travels. He stayed in the U.S. for eighteen years, met whites, blacks, believers, unbelievers, Shakers, and freethinkers, and had the opportunity to broaden his worldview. He became acquainted with Indian tribes, boarded for a year in the house of a Jewish rabbi, stopped in Salt Lake City to study the life of the Mormons, and became a Freemason in Colorado.

Eventually Hartmann found the answers about the true meaning of life he had been searching for in HPB's book *Isis Unveiled*. Through the journal *The Theosophist*, he found out about the Theosophical Society and joined it. In his autobiography, he wrote that he longed to meet the Masters and described how one day in 1883, he dreamed of seeing a letter with an unknown handwriting and unknown foreign stamps. When he went to the post office, he found a letter which contained an invitation by Colonel Olcott to come to the TS headquarters in Adyar, India. "A feeling of inner conviction, more reliable than any external motivation," he said, told him that it was the right thing to do and that he could not "devote his future work to any better purpose." He arrived in Adyar on December 4, 1883.

Seeing that people were sending letters to the Masters, Hartmann decided to do the same. He gave Olcott the following brief note and asked him to put it in the "Shrine" (a small wall cabinet used at the time to transmit letters to and from the Masters):

Revered Master! The undersigned offers you his services. He desires that you would kindly examine his mental capacity and if desirable give him further instructions. Respectfully yours.

Hartmann received a response the next day, December 25, 1883, the first of ten letters from the Masters. In the first one, written by Master Morya, Hartmann found out that the Master himself had put into Colonel Olcott's head the idea of Hartmann coming to Adyar. He advised Hartmann to stay for a while in Asia, participate in the work of the Theosophical Society, let the principles of the Theosophical philosophy be known without reserve and speak louder in his heart, and help others so he could be helped to live according to the highest ideals of humanity. Hartmann was convinced that the letter was from the Master because it contained personal information not known to anyone in India.

Hartmann found the second letter, sealed, from the Master Morya in his desk on February 5, 1884, as Olcott and HPB were preparing their departure for Europe:

*Friend!* You seem to me the only fully rational being among the *Pelengs* [Europeans] now left at headquarters. Therefore, with an eye to a variety of unexpected emergencies in future which I foresee, I must ask you to show practically your devotion to the cause of truth by accepting the rudder of the theosophical course.

If I know anything, I know you to be entirely free from those prejudices and predilections that are generally in the way of a calm and dispassionate pursuit of the chief aim of the Society, full equality among men as brothers and an entire unconcern with the childish fairy tales they call their religion, whether exoteric or esoteric.

If you kindly consent to take care of theosophical interests during the absence of Henry Olcott and Upasika [Blavatsky], I will cause him to write you an official letter, investing you with more official power than any other “assistant,” so as to give you a firmer hold of the rod of authority than you would otherwise have with an informal title shared by so many others . . .

Your *pucca* [genuine] authority I ask you to make the best of it in the interests of Truth, Justice and Charity . . . M.

Shortly afterwards, Olcott named Hartmann to an eight-man Board of Control administering the affairs of the headquarters during the colonel’s and HPB’s absence.

It did not take long for those “unexpected emergencies” to materialize. Hartmann witnessed the defamations of HPB by a couple staying at Adyar, the housekeepers Emma and Alexis Coulomb, and was forewarned about the Coulombs’ conspiracy by another letter from Morya on April 28, 1884:

For some time, Mrs. Coulomb has opened a communication with the enemies of the cause. Hence hints as to trapdoors and tricks. Moreover, when needed trapdoors will be found, as they have been forthcoming for some time. They [the Coulombs] have full entrance to and control of the premises. Mr. Coulomb is clever and cunning at every handicraft, a good mechanic and carpenter and good at walls likewise . . . M.

Hartmann was in Adyar during the visit of William Quan Judge and found in him a valuable friend. After Judge’s departure, HPB and Olcott returned from Europe. Richard Hodgson of the British Society for Psychical Research arrived to investigate the alleged occult phenomena produced by HPB. His report, which accused HPB of being an impostor, caused a scandal. (In 1986, the Society for Psychical Research repudiated these findings.)

Hartmann addressed these events in a report about his stay in Adyar and in his autobiography. In his opinion, Blavatsky’s mission would not have succeeded without occult phenomena because it is difficult to get new ideas across unless the attention is stimulated by external means. But Hartmann also points out that the Society was not founded on phenomena but on the “Universal Brotherhood of Man” and should be judged accordingly.

One day Hartmann realized that advice was not always on hand in Adyar and pondered about the fact that even the chelas (disciples) made mistakes. The next day he received a letter from Master Koot Hoomi (K.H.) addressing his thoughts:

Inadequate as our “instruments” may be, to our full purpose, they are yet the best available since they are but the evolutions of the times. It would be most desirable to have better “mediums” for us to act thro; and it rests with the well-wishers of the Theosophical Cause how far they will work unselfishly to assist in her [HPB’s] higher work.

Although many of the letters Hartmann received addressed the specific events happening in Adyar in 1884–85, others contained advice on the treatment of one’s fellow humans. This example shows the compassionate nature of K.H.:

So long as one has not developed a perfect sense of justice he should prefer to err rather on the side of mercy, than commit the slightest act of injustice. Madame Coulomb is a medium, and as such irresponsible for many things she may say or do.

Hartmann also received guidance about interactions with others. This advice can help us today with our lodges and study centers, or with any community we are trying to maintain:

In such a great work as this Movement no one should expect to find his associates all congenial, intuitive, prudent or courageous. One of the first proofs of self-mastery is when one shows that he can be kind and forbearing and genial with companions of the most dissimilar characters and temperaments. One of the strongest signs of retrogression is when one shows that he expects others to like what he likes and act as he acts . . . Be a help to us and act accordingly. You are too many here. With more or less bits of too much self-personality.

In another letter, K.H. stresses the importance of independent actions for anyone involved in disseminating Theosophical teachings:

I do not have to explain to you first . . . As you have studied the laws of Karma, although not without some help having been given to you in this. For this reason, you do not receive more often instructions from me. We are leaders but not child-nurses. The weak ones, not the strong ones, are in constant need of definite “Orders,” and at times our chelas satisfy their wishes. This is willing slavery, but not healthy growth. Step forward and try to see clearly yourself what is most needed for the Society. Seek out what your duty may be and carry it out. If you do the right thing, I will be at your side; but I will not give any advice, and will not involve myself in anything, unless it be unavoidably required, and you were in great doubt . . .

An infinite field of activity lies before you; the whole world is open to you . . . Great obstacles are to be overcome; the greater is the power required to overcome them, the greater is the growth that comes from it. A constant restraint of passion, a sleepless watch over, and patient forbearance of, human weaknesses, will help towards victory.

Not all letters by the Masters had to do with the Theosophical Society per se: some had more personal recommendations. Master Morya explained to Hartmann that becoming a Buddhist would give him easier access to the path of knowledge, and Hartmann followed suit. Morya advised him a short time later regarding chelaship:

Let me give you an advice. Never offer yourself as a chela but wait until chelaship descends by itself upon you. Above all, try to find yourself, and the path of knowledge will open itself before you, and this so much the easier as you have made a contact with the Light-ray of the Blessed one, whose name you have now taken as your spiritual lode-star. Receive in advance my blessings and my thanks.

Hartmann left India with HPB on April 1, 1885, and returned to Europe. HPB stayed in Würzburg, Germany, and Hartmann moved to Kempten in southern Bavaria. This visit was supposed to be temporary, but he stayed because he met the leader of a small group of Rosicrucians and soon identified himself with this group. Some of what Hartmann wrote in his later books included instructions from this group. *An Adventure among the Rosicrucians* and *The Secret Symbols of the Rosicrucians of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century* are two examples.

Although many Rosicrucians emphasize Christian brotherhood, Hartmann always stayed true to the idea of universal brotherhood. For him the unity of all cultures and religions was among the most important spiritual values. In his works he repeatedly pointed out that people all over

the world live similar spiritualities. Through his comprehensive European education and his knowledge of the secret doctrine and the Eastern philosophy of religion, he was able to build a bridge between Western mysticism and Eastern wisdom and demonstrate their common basis scientifically and philosophically. He did this by comparing the writings of Western mystics with those of the Eastern adepts, for example, the German philosopher and Christian theosophist Jacob Boehme (1575–1624):

I have carefully compared the doctrines of Boehme with those of the Eastern sages, as laid down in “The Secret Doctrine” and in the religious literature of the East, and I find the most remarkable harmony between them in their esoteric meaning; in fact, the religion of Buddha, Krishna, and that of the Christ seem to me to be one and identical.

Another example are the comments in his book about Paracelsus, a Swiss physician, alchemist, lay theologian, and philosopher of the Renaissance (1493–1541):

Among those who have taught the moral aspect of the secret doctrine, there are none greater than Buddha, Plato, and Jesus of Nazareth; of those who have taught its scientific aspect, there have been none more profound than Hermes Trismegistus, Shankaracharya, Pythagoras, and Paracelsus. They obtained their knowledge not merely from following the prescribed methods of learning, or by accepting the opinions of the “recognized authorities” of their times, but they studied Nature by her own light, and becoming illuminated by the light of Divine Nature, they became lights themselves, whose rays illuminate the world of mind. What they taught has been to a certain extent verified and amplified by the teachings of Eastern Adepts, but many things about which the latter have to this day kept a well-guarded silence were revealed by Paracelsus three hundred years ago.

In his book *Yoga und Christentum* (“Yoga and Christianity”), Hartmann argued that the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita have been known in Christianity for 600 years, particularly in the works of the great mystic Meister Eckhart (c.1260–c.1328). In this book he explains that the path to the realization of “Christ in us” and the yoga teachings in the Bhagavad Gita are almost identical.

Hartmann’s destiny gave him opportunities to serve the cause of truth, and his search made him one of the most prolific and learned writers of occult literature in the Theosophical movement. He was able to explain difficult concepts in simple and easily understandable words in German as well as in English. Hartmann translated the Bhagavad Gita into German and was the editor of *Lotusblüten* (*Lotus Flowers*). This magazine was the focus of his literary work, which he published for thirteen years. Most of the articles, written by Hartmann himself, were later published in book form. He also answered readers’ questions about Theosophy.

In 1895, in association with Robert Froebe, Hartmann embarked on the translation into German of HPB’s *The Secret Doctrine*, which was published in Leipzig in 1899 under the title *Die Geheimlehre*. Later, Hartmann also translated *The Voice of the Silence* and the third volume of *The Secret Doctrine*.

In 1897 Hartmann founded a new, independent Theosophical organization in Germany to spread Eastern philosophy in the West, which exists to this day. He continued to work and live in different cities in Germany and Austria and lectured about Theosophy for the rest of his life. Hartmann, who regarded the universe as his home and all of humanity as his nation, passed away in Kempten on August 7, 1912.

When I read Hartmann's work, I am reminded to stay vigilant in everyday life, especially when active in communities, be it as a leader or as a participant. As mentioned above, based on his writings it is clear that the First Object of the Theosophical Society, universal brotherhood, irrespective of any dogma, creed, belief or opinion, was extremely important to him. As he wrote:

However opinions may differ in regard to different subjects, and however much the members may discuss these differences of opinion and try to convince each other of what each believes to be true, or to demolish erroneous theories, there ought to be amongst them that harmony of soul-union, which springs from the recognition of the one certain fact that we are all manifestations of the one great divine spirit, in whom we all dwell and live and have our being and who lives and dwells and strives for manifestation in us.

In the same article, Hartmann reminds us that we must not only preach but also practice universal brotherhood and tolerance.

There is nothing in our way to the attainment of wisdom, except the love of self, and the love of self can be conquered only through unselfish acts. Thus, the theory must lead to the practice and without the practice the theory alone is of little value. If we practice the dictates of Universal Brotherhood, we will gradually grow up to the understanding of it and we will finally see in every being not only our brother and sister, but our own real self, which is God in All, though appearing in innumerable forms of manifestation. And having once attained through the expanding power of love that greatness of soul which constitutes the real Theosophist, there will be room for the manifestation of the light of divine wisdom, and as we enter into the wisdom of the gods, the wisdom of the gods will be our own.

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