

8 The “Quickening of Evolution”: The Stages of Initiation as the Cornerstone of Besant’s Early Theosophy

A close reading of Annie Besant’s early Theosophical writings pulls the reader towards identifying the “Quickening of Evolution” as lying at the core of her thinking. As the successor of H. P. Blavatsky and the president of the Theosophical Society from 1907 until her death in 1933, Besant had a great impact on the history of the Theosophical Society. In 1909 she met young Krishnamurti for the first time and identified him as the future world-teacher. His decision to renounce this role and dissolve the Order of the Star in the East (later, the Order of Servants was founded – see Figure 2) in 1929 is seen by many scholars as one of the major factors accounting for the decrease in the membership and influence of the Theosophical Society in the years that followed (Krishnamurti himself continued teaching and was an important proponent of the “esoteric” scene of the 20th century).¹ However, Besant was not just one of the most outstanding figures of the post-Blavatskyian era of the Theosophical Society; she also played an important part in the history of India more broadly. After she settled in India, she engaged in numerous endeavors that aimed to reform and “uplift” the subcontinent. When she eventually entered politics, she championed self-rule and Indian nation building. As Rajagopalachariar (1878–1972) who was an Indian politician and close associate of Gandhi² puts it: “Among those who have materially contributed to the shaping of India, Mrs. Besant is one of the biggest personalities. She helped young India to feel sure of the greatness of Indian culture and religion.”³ One of the areas she engaged in was the development of the educational system. Malaviya, with whom she founded the Benares Hindu University in 1915, lauded her with the following words:

1 Wessinger Lowman, “The Second Generation Leaders of the Theosophical Society (Adyar),” 18, 26–29, 33, 44–45.

2 “Rajagopalachariar, Chakravarti,” in *A Dictionary of World History*, ed. Edmund Wright, 2nd ed., Oxford reference online premium (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007).

3 C. Rajagopalachariar, “Annie Besant and the Revival of Religion in India,” in Cousins, *The Annie Besant Centenary Book*, 58.

India owes a special debt to her. She rendered very valuable services to the cause of education, the study of religion and also to the cause of India’s freedom. Along with her fellow workers she founded the Central Hindu College at Benares in 1898 and heartily co-operated in establishing the Benares Hindu University.⁴

In 1921, Annie Besant received “the degree of Doctor of Letters”⁵ from Benares Hindu University, honoring her for her part in its establishment. She engaged with the cause of education in India not only as an organizer and founder of schools, but also as a teacher (see Figure 3). As the Theosophist couple Edward L. Gardner and Adelaide Gardner put it, “although not primarily a teacher, for many



Figure 2: Order of the Servants of the Lord. Front row (on the floor) from left: Mrs. Padma Bai Snajiva Rao, Mr. B. Shiva Rao, Vasanti Dalal, B. Sanjiva Rao, N.S. Rama Rao, Krishnalal, Samant, Rathunandan Prasad. Second row: Ms. Arundale, William H. Kirby, George Arundale, A. Besant, J. Krishnamurti, C. W. Leadbeater, C. Jinarajadasa, J. Nityananda, Maria Luisa Kirby. Third row (standing): Banki Behari Varma, G. V. Subba Rao, Damodar Prasad, M. G. Kanetkar, Irving S. Cooper, J. N. Gurtu, E.A. Wodehouse, C.S. Trilokekar, D.k. Telang, K.R. Deobhankar, Y. Prasad. (Photograph by an unknown photographer. Shanti Kunj, Benares, 1912. Courtesy of the Theosophical Society, International Headquarters: Adyar Library and Research Centre, Chennai).

⁴ Madan M. Malaviya, “Service to Education,” in Cousins, *The Annie Besant Centenary Book*, 70.

⁵ Malaviya, “Service to Education,” 70.



Figure 3: Besant at the Vasantha Pathashala, Vasantha is the Sanskritized version of Besant and Pathashala can be translated as school. So this is a picture of the Besant School in Karachi. The school was founded in 1917 under the auspices of the Society for the Promotion of National Education (SPNE), which merged with the Theosophical Educational Trust in 1921. (Photograph by an unknown photographer. Karachi, 1919 or 1920. Courtesy of the Theosophical Society, International Headquarters: Adyar Library and Research Centre, Chennai).

years she devoted herself to this aspect of Theosophical work – teaching.”⁶ Referring to “the path of spiritual growth,”⁷ they go on to explain that “the technique of spiritual training that Mrs. Besant presented was the traditional path of the religion of the world – of all the religions – but stripped of sectarian accretions and clearly restated in the ethical and psychological terms of her day.”⁸ Although the accounts cited above are surely biased, since they were collected as part of the centenary celebrations of Annie Besant’s birthday in 1947, they nevertheless provide a picture of Besant’s importance to at least some Indians, not least among whom were such prominent figures as Malaviya, Nehru (see above), and Gandhi. In the

⁶ E. L. Gardner and Adelaide Gardner, “Mrs. Besant as Teacher,” in Cousins, *The Annie Besant Centenary Book*, 172.

⁷ Gardner and Gardner, “Mrs. Besant as Teacher,” 172.

⁸ Gardner and Gardner, “Mrs. Besant as Teacher,” 175.

same anthology, Gandhi wrote: “When Dr. Besant came to India and captivated the country, I came in close touch with her and, though, we had political differences, my veneration for her did not suffer abatement.”⁹ Given her roles in both India and Theosophy, her writings have been selected here as examples to illustrate the hybridization processes in the Indian Middle Class around the turn of the 20th century.

8.1 The Problem of Describing Annie Besant’s Life: State of the Research

The richness of Annie Besant’s life has been frequently acknowledged, not to mention documented in numerous biographies. Still the most detailed, and therefore the most helpful as a source for historical minutiae, is Arthur Nethercot’s work, published in two volumes amounting to a total of almost a thousand pages.¹⁰ The first volume of this biography – which was by no means the earliest to take Besant as its subject – was published in 1960, the second in 1963. Nethercot was able to conduct interviews with several of Annie Besant’s contemporaries, among them Bhagavan Das and Jawahrlal Nehru. Unfortunately, these interviews are now lost – or no one has yet looked in the right place – and Nethercot often cites his sources in summaries over many pages, making it difficult, and at times impossible, to verify his sources. This leaves us with a large and very detailed but unreliable source that can only partially be cross-referenced with other major accounts of Besant’s life. In some cases, Nethercot’s sources can be traced and re-evaluated, as, for instance, in the case of the purported connection between Besant’s reading of *The Voice of the Silence* and her first visit from a Theosophical master (see below). Nethercot’s biography should thus be read with care, and is best taken as a well-researched and (sometimes) documented work of “faction,” rather than as a scholarly biography.

A game-changer in this respect was Anne Taylor’s 1992 biography. Taylor’s work offers an insightful study of its subject which seeks to describe a continuity between Besant’s political engagement in England and her political career in India, with Taylor viewing Besant’s Indian career as consciously planned and conscientiously executed.¹¹ Taylor’s thesis, although well-argued and backed by thorough research, is overdetermined.

9 Mohandas K. Gandhi, “Veneration Despite Differences,” in Cousins, *The Annie Besant Centenary Book*, 94.

10 Nethercot, *The First Five Lives of Annie Besant*; Nethercot, *The Last Four Lives of Annie Besant*.

11 Taylor, *Annie Besant*, 277–92.

Muriel Pécastaing-Boissière, Besant's most recent biographer, directs harsh, but in my view justified, criticisms at both Nethercot and Taylor. She maintains that both biographers describe Besant's life in terms of episodes of periodic success embedded in a life that was ultimately a failure. In addition, Pécastaing-Boissière reads Nethercot and Taylor as being informed and constrained by gender biases and psychologizing tendencies, while at the same time misjudging Theosophy as both a philosophy and an organization.¹² I agree with Pécastaing-Boissière, whose points strike home particularly clearly with regard to the issue of gender bias, since both Nethercot and Taylor systematically depict Besant as being dependent on her male collaborators. This kind of narrative risks underplaying Besant's own agency. On the other hand, if Pécastaing-Boissière's predecessors "misjudged" Theosophy, she may well be guilty of idealizing it. In her narrative, Besant's engagements with the Indian independence movement and the Theosophical Society are interpreted as humanist and socialist endeavors. Orientalist and colonialist tendencies in Besant's work and her ambivalent role as an English citizen in India are for the most part ignored. In addition, both Annie Besant's Theosophy and the Indian context remain under-researched in Pécastaing-Boissière's work.¹³ Nevertheless, she provides a well-documented account of Besant's career that is especially enlightening in its contextualization of her subject's life with respect to Victorian culture.

Catherine Wessinger's *Annie Besant and Progressive Messianism* provides an in-depth analysis of Besant's Theosophical thought. Although Wessinger places her analyses solemnly in the service of illustrating "Besant's millenarianism,"¹⁴ she successfully makes intelligible the way in which Theosophy appealed to Besant's pre-Theosophical ideas. Wessinger concludes that Besant shared the "Victorian belief in progress and [the] desire to ameliorate current social conditions."¹⁵ According to Wessinger, Besant's "ultimate concern"¹⁶ was "service or self-sacrifice."¹⁷ Alongside Besant's focus on ideas of progress and a "desire to solve the world's problems,"¹⁸ Wessinger claims that she "found in Theosophy a doctrine that taught that human nature could be transformed by individual effort and that humanity as a whole would be transformed

12 Pécastaing-Boissière and Terrier, *Annie Besant*, 10.

13 Pécastaing-Boissière and Terrier, *Annie Besant*.

14 Wessinger Lowman, *Annie Besant and Progressive Messianism (1847–1933)*, 6.

15 Wessinger Lowman, *Annie Besant and Progressive Messianism (1847–1933)*, 33.

16 Wessinger Lowman, *Annie Besant and Progressive Messianism (1847–1933)*, 7.

17 Wessinger Lowman, *Annie Besant and Progressive Messianism (1847–1933)*, 10.

18 Wessinger Lowman, *Annie Besant and Progressive Messianism (1847–1933)*, 307.

by new stages in human evolution.”¹⁹ Wessinger here points towards what I will describe below as the “Quickening of Evolution.” It will be seen that this dimension of her thought was pivotal to Besant’s early Theosophy, and probably also to her later writings. In what follows, I will discuss her ideas about initiation as the center of the “Quickening of Evolution” and will trace the varying views of the concept of initiation from Besant’s predecessors, such as Manilal Dvivedi and Blavatsky, through to the *Sanâtana Dharma Text Books*.

8.2 The Importance of the “Quickening of Evolution” in Besant’s Early Theosophical Writings

By tracing some of the relations that repeatedly occur in this notion of the “Quickening of Evolution,” it will be seen that it was a hybrid concept based on other similarly hybrid concepts. As a preliminary step, I will seek to show that the “Quickening of Evolution” was one of the central features of Annie Besant’s early Theosophy. This section will examine Besant’s early writings on Theosophy. The textual corpus comprises several of Besant’s works written between 1889 and 1904, including *Death and After?*, *The Seven Principles of Man*, *Karma*, *Man and His Bodies*, *In the Outer Court*, *The Path of Discipleship*, and *The Ancient Wisdom*. Although it has not been possible to consult all her works, those considered here represent the majority of Besant’s literary production during this period.

The corpus comprises more than 2500 pages of Annie Besant’s early writings. Reading these pages makes clear that several topics recur frequently (see below on the dimensions of the “Quickening of Evolution”), all of which point towards “initiation” standing at the center of her “Quickening of Evolution.” As a result of this research, three of her works stand out as forming the core corpus of her writings on initiation. These are *In the Outer Court*, *The Path of Discipleship*, and *The Ancient Wisdom*. These three texts come from two different genres of books. The first two are edited verbatim records of talks given by Besant, while the latter is an introductory work to Theosophy composed as a monograph. It is important to note that, while I use the term the “Quickening of Evolution,” Besant uses a much wider terminology to describe and talk about this concept.²⁰ This concept will be traced through the corpus by examining three

¹⁹ Wessinger Lowman, *Annie Besant and Progressive Messianism (1847–1933)*, 310.

²⁰ Annie Besant coins the expression in *The Ancient Wisdom* as “the quickening of evolution of the world.” Cf. Besant, *The Ancient Wisdom*, 409.

of the terms she uses in this way. These are “quick,” “rapid,” and “haste.” I begin with a quantitative analysis of the frequency of their use, before going on to examine a number of quotations that include these terms. This process will lead to a description of the “Quickening of Evolution,” which will be seen to have a number of conceptual components which share a fundamental concern with the training of humanity in order to accelerate its evolution.

The word “quick” appears some sixty times in the whole corpus, but in only a fraction of these passages is it used in the context of the acceleration of evolution. Derivative terms are listed below in order of frequency of occurrence. The first number refers to the number of times the term occurs in the texts, while the second gives the number of times it is directly linked to evolution in the sense of the “Quickening of Evolution.” For some derivative terms, a third number captures the number of occurrences of one of these terms together with a synonym for evolution (e.g., “progress”). Detailed explanations are given in the footnotes.

1. quickly (28, 2)
2. quicken (9, 6)
3. quickening (9, 1)
4. quickened (8, 1, 2)²¹
5. quickens (3, 2)
6. quick (3, 0)
7. quicker (1, 0)
8. quickenings (1, 0)

The idea of the “Quickening of Evolution” is expressed by derivatives of “quick” in fourteen paragraphs across the examined texts. These paragraphs are clustered in *The Ancient Wisdom*, from 1897, and *Dharma*, from 1899, accounting for eight out of the fourteen appearances. The remaining uses are found in *Man and His Bodies*, from 1896 (quicken, 1); *Evolution of Life and Form*, from 1900 (quickened, 1); and *Thought Power*, 1901 (quicken, 2).²² No derivatives of “quick” were found referring to an idea of accelerating evolution in any of the other works examined.

²¹ In the first instance, “quickened” is linked to “the progress of the world,” which is interpreted as a synonym for “evolution.” In the second, “quickened” is used in connection with “germs of thought,” which in turn “[in] our minds helped in their evolution.”

²² The two quotes which are not directly linked to “evolution” are found in *The Path of Discipleship* from 1896 (quickened, 1 – “progress of the world”) and *Thought Power* from 1901 (quickened, 1 – “germs of thought”).

I now turn to the word “haste” and its derivations. “Haste” occurs as:

1. hasty (5)
2. hastily (4, 0, 1²³)
3. hastening (3, 3)
4. hasten (3, 1, 1²⁴)
5. hastened (3)
6. hastens (1, 0, 1²⁵)
7. unhasting (1, 0)

Interestingly, “haste” occurs significantly less frequently than does “quick,” but in seven of its twenty appearances it is related to ideas of evolution. Again, this usage appears most prominently in *The Ancient Wisdom* (3). In contrast to “quick,” there is also one occurrence in an early work, *What Theosophy Is* (1), from 1891. The other three times it appears are in *The Path of Discipleship*, 1896; *Thought Power*, 1901; and *Some Problems of Life*, 1899.

The term “rapid” and its derivations occur more frequently than either “quick” or “haste.” Given the number of quotations examined, a fourfold categorization has been adopted here. The first number in brackets states the total numbers of occurrences. The second number refers to occurrences that are directly linked to the word “evolution” within a sentence. The third number refers to occurrences that are directly connected to other terms which can be read as being synonymous with “evolution,” such as “progress,” “growth,” etc. The last number represents all those passages in which “rapid” is indirectly connected to ideas of evolution. “Rapid” occurs as:

1. rapid (38, 5, 16, 0)
2. rapidly (36, 4, 8, 3)
3. rapidity (17, 3, 1, 1)

Although this usage is absent from writings prior to 1893, two instances appear in the *General Presentation* at the World’s Parliament of Religions of 1893, after which point they are found in almost all the publications examined. Again, we find a clustering of the terms in *The Ancient Wisdom*, *In the Outer Court*, and

23 The number refers to a quote in which “hasten” is connected to “growth.” In the context of the quote, “growth” cannot be understood in the sense of “evolution.”

24 The number refers to a quote in which “hasten” is connected to “our own progress.” In this case, progress seems to be synonymous with “evolution.”

25 The number refers to a quote in which “hastens” is connected with “the time when that Monad shall become the spiritual Ego.” This again can be understood as synonymous with “evolution.”

Dharma, spanning the period between 1897 and 1899, although this clustering is not as significant as it is in the case of “quick.”

Taken together, a clear picture emerges from this data. In almost every publication considered here, the idea of the “Quickening of Evolution” is mentioned. In those publications in which the idea is not mentioned by name,²⁶ it is referred to using other terms, as will become clear in the more detailed outline below. For example, if we add “accelerate” to our list, we find additional quotes in *Karma*, *Theosophy and its Practical Application*, and *Death and After?*. The appearance of the idea of the “Quickening of Evolution” across almost every work belonging to the period of Besant’s early Theosophy makes it clear that it was one of the key elements in her thought. The substantive analysis that follows supports this claim of centrality and identifies five different aspects of the “Quickening of Evolution.”

8.2.1 What is the “Quickening of Evolution”?

The earliest passage referring to the “Quickening of Evolution” is found in *What Theosophy Is*.

Thus the soul journeys on his way from life to life until all that earth can give him of experience has been reaped. He reaches the greatest altitude compatible with life in this world, and then a choice is before him. He can pass onward triumphant into realms of loftier nature and there expand and grow; or, this glorious prize within his grasp, he may turn back to earth patiently again to bear the burden of the flesh, until the lowliest child of man has reached his own level and he enters into peace with all his race. The Great Souls that choose this lot are the Saviours of the world, and They wait, watching to help whenever help can be given, the Elder Brothers of our race, the perfected Sons of Man. Blessed beyond all blessings are they who in any fashion can aid Them in lifting the heavy burden of our world, and can co-operate, even if it be in humblest way, in hastening the evolution of the glorious destiny of man. For the Service of Man is the noblest of privileges, and to work for the world the richest of prizes. Our philosophy, our science, our religion have only worth as they make us more useful members of the Brotherhood of Man.²⁷

²⁶ The simple statistical method deployed here does not bring to light any data of interest in the following writings: *Life, Death, and Immortality*. 1886 (pre-Theosophical), *Death – and After?*; several volumes of *Lucifer*, 1892, 1893; *Reincarnation*, 1892; *The Seven Principles of Man*, 1892; *A Word on Man, his Nature and his Powers*, 1893; some of the presentation at the World’s Parliament of Religion. However, it is mentioned in the *General Presentation*, *Theosophy and its Practical Application*, *Lucifer*, 1893; *Avatâras*, 1900; *The Secret of Evolution*, 1900; *The Three Paths to the Union with God*, 1896.

²⁷ Annie Besant, *What Theosophy Is*, Theosophical Tracts no. 4 (London: H.P.B. Press, date of publication not identified [1891]), 6.

This early quotation explains the trajectory of the “Quickening of Evolutions” while embedding it within several key doctrines of the Theosophical Society. First, it is claimed that human beings stand at different stages of evolution, meaning that there are some who are more evolved than others. Secondly, the possibility of liberation from the life of the flesh is spoken of. Thirdly, the necessity of reincarnation is mentioned. These three dimensions are the cornerstones of Besant’s concept of evolution. Finally, we read of the “Great Souls,” “the Elder Brothers” who are members of the “Brotherhood of Man” and are the helpers of the less evolved. By means of this aid, evolution is hastened.

Two pivotal ideas can be detected in this passage. First, the ideal of the perfected helper of humanity and, secondly, the idea of the “Brotherhood of Man,” which latter refers to the Theosophical master narrative (see previous chapter). This idea is developed further in the *General Presentation of Theosophy to the Parliament*, 1893. Besant begins her talk by announcing her subject as “the Evolution of Man. Man, as you take him in the past, man as we see him in the present, man as he shall be in the future, the very first fruits of that future being men living on the earth to-day.”²⁸ The last part of this clause is rather cryptic at first glance but can be illuminated by reference to other Theosophical ideas. Blavatsky’s conception of evolution involves several cycles which are repeated over and over. However, this is not an undifferentiated repetition, as the results of each cycle form part of the next cycle. As a result, in each cycle there will be more evolved humans living on the earth.²⁹ This point is repeatedly discussed by Besant. One key element of this idea is that with the passing of each cycle more and more evolved persons are present in the world to help the evolution of men. These more evolved people are taken from this view, the Theosophical masters.³⁰ What concerns us here are those “men living on the earth to-day” and the relation they have to the current cycle of evolution. As Besant explains, each human has to realize the “inner force, life after life,”³¹ in order to start striving towards “the divine spirit [that has . . .] His Sanctuary in the innermost heart.”³² At first, he “makes slow progression till a time comes in the life of the man when more rapid growth begins to be possible; the time when the man by

²⁸ Besant, “General Presentation of Theosophy to the Parliament,” 157.

²⁹ Meera Nanda, “Madame Blavatsky’s Children: Modern Hindu Encounters with Darwinism,” in *Handbook of Religion and the Authority of Science*, ed. James R. Lewis and Olav Hammer, Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religion volume 3 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2011), 306.

³⁰ See, e.g., Besant, *The Ancient Wisdom*, 47.

³¹ Besant, “General Presentation of Theosophy to the Parliament,” 160.

³² Besant, “General Presentation of Theosophy to the Parliament,” 160.

gradual evolution is beginning to understand the far-off possibility of reuniting.”³³ Then “a conscious acceptance of Man’s true goal in life, the service of his race,”³⁴ takes place. We see here the two poles of 1) gradual evolution and 2) deliberate self-improvement entwined with one another. This is characteristic of Besant’s Theosophical thought, in which human evolution is a conscious process of self-development, in contrast to the Darwinist understanding of the term.

The keystone of Besant’s idea of “self-evolution,”³⁵ or rather “self-improvement,” is “the service.” Evolution, on this view, is connected to an ethical obligation to help the less evolved. Besant explains that, for her, “at once a Socialist and a Theosophist, the matter is of vital importance, for the possibility of realising Socialism turns on the capacity of the human race for self-improvement.”³⁶ The idea of “self-improvement” surfaced in the discourse on liberalism in England and was propounded by figures such as Mill. It was also taken up by the Lamarckism on which Spencer based his ideas about “self-improvement.”³⁷ This is another of the multitude of instances which illustrate that Theosophy was part of a larger discourse on “Evolutionism” (see Chapter 6).

The ideas of “service,” or helping the less evolved, are an important feature in Besant’s conceptualization of the “Quickening of Evolution,” and will be treated below as the fourth dimension of the notion. Having this ideal in front of him, man becomes ready for the next step: initiation. While man strives for the ideal set before him,

the life becomes purer and purer and fuller; and the last cycle of births is entered, which when completed will leave the man one of those who have triumphed over sin and death; and when these last lives are beginning, one lesson comes from those who have already achieved, one special direction is given to the disciple by which his life is to be guided, by which his safety on the path is to be secured.³⁸

33 Besant, “General Presentation of Theosophy to the Parliament,” 160.

34 Besant, “General Presentation of Theosophy to the Parliament,” 161.

35 The term “self-evolution” is used by Besant only in connection to Īśvara. Besant, *Evolution of Life and Form*, 147. Blavatsky uses the term to describe the “special training and education [of the Mahatma who . . .] evolved those higher faculties and has attained that spiritual knowledge, which ordinary humanity will acquire after passing through numberless series of re-incarnations during the process of cosmic evolution, provided, of course, that they do not go, in the meanwhile, against the purposes of Nature and thus bring on their own annihilation.” Helena P. Blavatsky, “Mahatmas and Chelas,” *The Theosophist* 5, no. 58 (1884): 233.

36 Annie Besant, “Karma and Social Improvement,” *Lucifer* IV, no. 24 (1889): 457.

37 Bowler, *Evolution*, 99, 238.

38 Besant, “General Presentation of Theosophy to the Parliament,” 161.

These passages talk about two elements which are presented as necessary preconditions for the exponential acceleration of evolution. The first is the setting of an ideal according to which it is right to help humanity and the second is initiation (“one lesson,” “one special direction”) by men who are more highly evolved (“those who have already achieved”). The evolutionary hierarchy is the foundation of the teacher/student relationship, which occupies an important place in Theosophy (see Chapter 7.1). Education is thus an intrinsic element of Annie Besant’s Theosophy and one of the dimensions of the “Quickening of Evolution.”

In the Theosophical hierarchy, knowledge is handed down from a range of teachers on different levels, from the Brotherhood via the Mahatmas to their representatives, in the first instance especially Blavatsky, and all the way down to children, with the goal of accelerating the evolution of humanity.

Such helping divine Teachers, liberated souls, remain among us [. . . they] aid us to climb more swiftly towards the light. From that Brotherhood has ever come revelation, the revelation of fragments of the Divine Wisdom. They send out their disciples as messengers, who repeat the truths they in humbleness have learned, in order that the world may evolve more rapidly.³⁹

The “divine teachers” and “the revelation” that is based on the knowledge of the possibility of accelerating evolution are combined in this passage in the idea of “progress by living.” This idea encapsulates a preliminary stage in the “Quickening of Evolution.” The first preliminary step is daily practice while living the ideal of helping others. Even before this ideal is set, and fully realized at the higher stages of evolution, it is necessary to “take one faculty after another to train; train your reasoning faculty, your memory, your power of comparison and contrast.”⁴⁰ Daily practice in the sense of bodily training and the purification of the body are preliminary steps to the acceleration of evolution, which is also understood as co-operation with the divine will.⁴¹ When connected to the ideal of the helper of humanity, this practice becomes a plea for educational engagement, which is rooted in the idea of the evolutionary hierarchy and the teacher-student relationship, which mirrors the occult hierarchy. To reiterate, in Besant’s Theosophical thought, the purpose of education is the “Quickening of Evolution.” As she explains:

³⁹ Annie Besant, *Some Problems of Life*, 2nd ed. (London, Benares: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1904), 31.

⁴⁰ Besant, *Evolution of Life and Form*, 158–59.

⁴¹ Besant, *Evolution of Life and Form*, 158–59.

In another way more rapid progress will be made in the days towards which we are looking. In education I suppose it has hardly struck you when dealing with children, when dealing with very young lads, how great are the possibilities that lie within them, if only their teachers had knowledge enough to directly foster the good and to dwarf and starve out the evil in them. [. . .] Now when a young child comes into the world and passes through the early stages of its growth, there is this peculiarity about its aura: it brings with it the karmic outcomes of its past [. . .] within that aura lie the germs of tendencies which may be developed. Some are good and some are evil. The trained eye distinguishing these characteristics, might cultivate the good and starve out the evil by bringing suitable influences to bear on the child.⁴²

In consequence, more evolved men who are able to understand the occult truths and see the auras should teach those who are less evolved in order to bring out the best in them.⁴³ This is why education is a necessity for the “Quickening of Evolution.”

The fifth element, which is connected to the idea of teachers as “karmic helpers,” is the human capacity of “thought power” as understood in Theosophical doctrine. Because human beings have the ability to influence the world and other humans by their thoughts,⁴⁴ mental powers and the individual’s control of their thoughts are critical for the acceleration of evolution.⁴⁵ This idea of thought power has a direct impact on how teacher-student relationships are conceptualized in the Theosophical Society, since teachers can work directly on the minds of their pupils and “influence particular individuals in order that the progress of the world may be quickened and the growth of humanity may be facilitated.”⁴⁶ Annie Besant’s concept of the “Quickening of Evolution” thus touches every aspect of human life: 1) daily behavior, and 2) moral, 3) educational, 4) mental, and 5) spiritual progress.

8.2.2 Summarizing the Five Dimensions of the “Quickening of Evolution”

The preceding analysis has shown that the “Quickening of Evolution” in Annie Besant’s Theosophy involves at least five different elements: 1) daily practice, 2)

⁴² Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 138–39.

⁴³ A similar idea is also present in the Waldorfpädagogik. It seems plausible that Steiner based these ideas on Besant’s writings. For a discussion of the teachers as “karmic helpers” in the Waldorfpädagogik, see Ann-Kathrin Hoffmann, “Vom Kopf auf die Füße stellen. Waldorfpädagogik als Kulturforderung im Zeitalter des Intellektualismus?,” in Bauer; Zander, *Forschungsstand Anthroposophie* (working title, forthcoming).

⁴⁴ Annie Besant, *Thought Power: Its Control and Culture* (London and Benares: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1901), 108.

⁴⁵ Besant, *Thought Power*, 108.

⁴⁶ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 137.

the ideal of service, 3) education, 4) mental powers (thought power), 5) initiation. After initiation, the evolution of the accepted chela is significantly more rapid than before and he will make progress on different planes of being, control additional powers, and be more helpful to the great brotherhood of men who pursue the goal of helping other individuals. The aim of the other four dimensions is thus to prepare the students/disciples for initiation.

In the next section, initiation itself will be examined. I will begin by describing in detail the steps of initiation as presented by Besant in *The Path of Discipleship*. This will be the starting point for the tracing of these steps in Theosophy and beyond. On an analytical level, I will pursue the relationalizings which are manifested in a range of Theosophical texts, from Blavatsky, through Manilal Dvivedi, Subba Row, and many others, to the *Sanâtana Dharma Text Books*. Analyzing these traces of hybridization will point us towards the hybridization processes which were essential for the formation of Besant’s concept of initiation.

8.2.3 Initiation as the Keystone of Annie Besant’s “Quickening of Evolution”

Initiation as a general idea implies either gaining access to a body of “secret” or “special” knowledge or being admitted into a “closed society,” and often serves as a central goal in “esoteric” groups. In many cases – but not all⁴⁷ – these initiations are accompanied by ritual practices involving members of the group into which one is being initiated.⁴⁸ With the exception of Bogdan’s *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation*, there are no in-depth analyses of initiatory practices in “esoteric” currents. In the preceding chapter, I discussed master/disciple relationships in general as an important context for understanding Theosophical ideas on initiation, as well as touching on a number of other points relating to initiation.

Some initiatory practices had a formalized role in the Theosophical Society, although the details are not documented, at least to my knowledge. Despite this lacuna in our evidence, it is known that Annie Besant occasionally initiated people. For example, Nehru wrote about his initiation into Theosophy: “I became a member of the Theosophical Society at thirteen and Mrs. Besant herself performed the ceremony of initiation, which consisted of good advice and

⁴⁷ Godwin describes a kind of Self initiation for the H.B. of L. (probably the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor) in which the future initiate would take a pill and then follow certain instructions communicated to him in writing. Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, 357.

⁴⁸ Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation*, 35.

instruction in some mysterious signs, probably a relic of freemasonry.”⁴⁹ The use of Masonic rituals as initiatory practices was not unique to Theosophy: they are also documented for Steiner’s anthroposophy,⁵⁰ the Golden Dawn, and several other “esoteric” societies, such as the H.B. of L., which drew from numerous traditions.⁵¹ At the current stage of research, it can only be noted that initiation played an important role in Besant’s concept of the “Quickening of Evolution.” While I doubt that this idea of initiation was connected to initiatory rituals in the early phase of Besant’s Theosophy, which is our concern here, it is not unlikely that such rituals were introduced by Besant later, at least for the Esoteric Section and Co-Masonry. The question of whether or not Besant’s Co-Masonry served as a model for what Nehru writes or for Steiner’s masonic rituals remains unanswered at the present time. In the following, initiation is presented as it is described in Besant’s *The Path of Discipleship*, where we do not read of any rituals. Ritualistic practices are rather described therein as belonging to the earlier stages of development through which one passes before actual initiation takes place.⁵²

8.2.4 The Qualities of the Disciple: The Preliminary Path

In *The Path of Discipleship*, we find a chapter on *the Life of the Disciple* subtitled *the Probationary Path, the Four Initiations*. In this paragraph, Besant explains what qualities a disciple must have to be accepted as a student by a Theosophical Mahatma. The view here reflects the early Theosophists’ practical approach,⁵³ which

49 Nehru, *An Autobiography*, 15.

50 Zander, *Anthroposophie in Deutschland*, 1013–15.

51 For several interesting hints about initiation practices, see Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, 224, 361–362.

52 Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 25.

53 For the early Theosophical practice, see John P. Deveney, “The Two Theosophical Societies: Prolonged Life, Conditional Immortality, and the Individualized Immortal Monad,” in Chajes (née Hall); Huss, *Theosophical Appropriations*. Deveney identifies a shift within early Theosophy from a practical to a non-practical approach towards occultism. He claims that the second generation of the Theosophical Society then totally neglected practice. My book shows that this is not the case. Scripture and learning are integral parts of the “occult practice” of the second generation of the Theosophical Society, so are other practices including meditation, active purification, etc. Of course, the mind and the higher faculties are more highly valued than the body because they may downwardly influence the bodies, but, on the one hand, “thought-control,” meditation, and reading are also practices, while, on the other hand, physical exercise, etc. was also propagated in the Theosophical schools. It is almost symptomatic that Deveney does not quote a single book by Besant, Leadbeater, or any other second-generation Theosophist. In any case, it

finds its continuation throughout the post-Blavatskian period of the Theosophical Society. As we have already seen in earlier chapters, daily practices and purification are preliminary steps on the way towards initiation. The subsequent four stages or initiations lead – in Besant’s jargon – directly “out of the ordinary humanity into a humanity which is divine.”⁵⁴ In the first four stages, the aspirant is not yet accepted by an adept but is only recognized as a “probationary chelâ.”⁵⁵ He (and it is always a “he” in Besant’s presentation) is thus “not expected to perform perfectly everything he begins to practice. He is expected to attempt, but perfect performance is not demanded from him.”⁵⁶ This is a topos which is also common to other master/disciple relationships (see Chapter 7). The teacher will not reveal himself to the student at this point of his path. Referring to, “a Brâhmana, then in England, and a member of the Theosophical Society, Mohini Mohun Chatterji of Calcutta,”⁵⁷ Besant attempts to describe the stages of the probationary path and the qualities that the disciple has to show, at least in a preliminary form, while treading it. The first of these qualifications is “VIVEKA, or discrimination. Discrimination between the real and the unreal, between the eternal and the transitory. Until this appears he will be bound to the earth by ignorance, and worldly objects will exercise over him all their seductive glamour.”⁵⁸ The second is “indifference to worldly objects, Vairâgya,”⁵⁹ which is understood as a result of *viveka* and stands at the end of a long process of training that “has been carried out by a man certainly for life after life.”⁶⁰ The third qualification is “SHATSAMPATTI, the six-fold group of mental qualities or mental attributes.”⁶¹

The first of the six “mental qualities” is: “*Shama*, control of the mind, that definite regulation of thought, that definite understanding of the effects of thought, and of his relation to the world around him, as he affects it for good or for evil by his own thinking.”⁶² *Śama* is presented as the preliminary stage to achieving a complete control of thought that will allow him to direct his thought towards the goals set by the masters. The second is “*Dama*, control of the senses and the body,

would be best to set aside the term “second generation” because it implies some kind of rupture and has the connotation of a degeneration of Theosophical thought.

⁵⁴ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 74–75.

⁵⁵ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 75.

⁵⁶ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 75.

⁵⁷ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 76.

⁵⁸ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 77.

⁵⁹ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 78.

⁶⁰ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 77.

⁶¹ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 79.

⁶² Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 79.

that which we may call regulation of conduct.”⁶³ From the “the occult standpoint [. . . t]he outer appearance or action is only the translation of the inner thought which in the world of form takes shape as what we call action; but the form is dependent on the life within, the shape is dependent on the moulding energy which makes it.”⁶⁴ The third is “*Uparati*, best translated perhaps as a wide and noble and sustained tolerance [. . .] a kind or sublime patience which is able to wait, which is able to understand, and, therefore, demands from none more than he can give.”⁶⁵ As Besant explains, this tolerance is based on the individual achieving insight into the different stages of development of human development, and because of this “he learns tolerance of all different forms of religion, tolerance of all the different kinds of custom, tolerance of all varying traditions of men. He understands that all these are transitory phases which men ultimately outgrow.”⁶⁶ The fourth mental quality is “*Titiksha*, endurance, a patient bearing of all that comes, a total absence of resentment.”⁶⁷ Achieving this quality comes about, in Besant’s view, from an insight into the “Good Law,” which equates with karma.⁶⁸ The aspirant thus “knows that whatever comes to him in life is of his own creating in the past. And so, his attitude is the attitude of absence of resentment.”⁶⁹ Achieving *Titiksha* will aid the aspirant as he strives towards his goal, as he will endure many a trial filled with hardships during his life. This is because “the man who has entered on the probationary path intends to accomplish within a very limited number of lives what the man of the world will accomplish in hundreds upon hundreds of lives.”⁷⁰ Therefore *Titiksha* is one of the key qualities for Besant. We should note that the process through which these qualities are developed may stretch over several lifetimes. Nonetheless, the process will take far less time than it would under normal circumstances, although on this path the aspirant must endure all the effects of his *karma* during a very short period. His life will, consequently, be very intense. He will suffer greatly because the “great Lords of Karma”⁷¹ will balance his debt by putting on him all the burdens he has brought onto himself. This idea of advancing more

⁶³ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 80.

⁶⁴ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 80.

⁶⁵ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 81.

⁶⁶ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 81.

⁶⁷ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 82.

⁶⁸ Besant, *Karma*, 50.

⁶⁹ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 82.

⁷⁰ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 83.

⁷¹ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 84.

rapidly and achieving higher states of evolution by initiation is the key factor for the quickening. Despite the tribulations involved, by knowing the law of *karma* the individual will not fall into despair because he will understand that the turmoil is proof that his longing for initiation was heard by the masters.

That the masters, who have aided the disciple all along, have now finally “heard” the chela is of no little importance for the disciple’s progress. What this means is that he has caught the conscious attention of the masters who will reveal themselves to him and aid him in the accomplishment of the final initiations. “Shraddhâ,” the fifth mental quality, that is “faith, or we may call it confidence – confidence in his Master and in himself,”⁷² is the precondition for *Titiksha* and the effect of the insight into the “Good Law.”⁷³ This quality is confidence in the higher self and in one’s “guru” – again we see the common topos of master/disciple relationships here (see Chapter 7) – that is gained as the initiate comes to understand his guru’s divinity and, consequently, his own: “he understands [. . .] that what his Guru is to-day, he himself is going to become in the lives that still stretch out in front of him.”⁷⁴ This confidence triggers “*Samâdhâna*, balance, composure, peace of mind [. . .] With the gaining of this the probationary path is trodden, the chelâ-candidate stands ready before the gateway.”⁷⁵ Once he reaches this point, the aspirant at last develops “MUMUKSHÂ, the desire for emancipation, the wish to gain liberation, that which, crowning the long efforts of the candidate, shows him

Table 3: Preconditions for initiation according to Besant. By the author.

Preconditions according to Besant	(1) Viveka	
	(2) Vairâgya	
	(3) Shatsampatti	six-fold group of mental qualities: (i) <i>Shama</i> (ii) <i>Dama</i> , (iii) <i>Uparati</i> (iv) <i>Titiksha</i> (v) <i>Shraddhâ</i> , (vi) <i>Samâdhâna</i> ,
	(4) Mumukshâ	

⁷² Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 86.

⁷³ Besant, *The Ancient Wisdom*, 186.

⁷⁴ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 87.

⁷⁵ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 88.

to be an Adhikari, to be ready for initiation.”⁷⁶ With this stage the preliminary phase (see Table 3) ends, and the disciple becomes an accepted chela.

8.2.5 The Stages of Initiation: An Exponential Progression

Besant claims that only a few hints have appeared about these initiations prior to her work, adding that “giving the information is not to gratify curiosity, [. . .] the hints that are given are meant for men who are in earnest, for those who want to know in order that they may prepare, [. . .] And so from time to time these hints are given.” “Two mighty Teachers [. . .] the LORD BUDDHA; and [. . .] SHRÎ SHANKARÂCHARYA”⁷⁷ gave information about the initiations. She claims that “in the teaching itself there is perfect identity, it is only in the phraseology adapting it respectively to one faith or the other that differences arise.”⁷⁸ The equation between Buddha and Śaṅkara is striking in at least three ways. 1) Besant positions herself as a proponent of “Hinduism,” seeking to supplant the central role played by Buddhism in the Blavatskyan era of the Theosophical Society. 2) As part of this strategy, she equates Śaṅkara with Buddha, drawing on his exalted position to elevate the “Hindu” concept. 3) It is a reference to the philosophia perennis and therefore, in the Theosophical context, to the “Great Brotherhood.” In the following, the four stages of initiation will be discussed. As we will see, Besant ideas on initiation were closely linked to master/disciple relationships, to the ideal of service discussed above, and to the expansion of consciousness.

8.2.6 Besant’s Definition of Initiation: The Expansion of Consciousness

The expansion of consciousness was important in many ways to Annie Besant’s Theosophy. As I have explained elsewhere, in her opinion this expansion would lead to an “occult insight” into higher spheres of existence.⁷⁹ This notion

⁷⁶ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 87–88.

⁷⁷ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 90.

⁷⁸ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 91.

⁷⁹ Yves Mühlematter, “Some will be ready to expand ere long into the consciousness of God’: The Purpose of Human Evolution as presented in Annie Besant’s writings” (7th Biannual Conference of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE), Amsterdam, July 02, 2019).

of the expansion of consciousness is also crucial for her understanding of initiation. As she puts it:

initiation means this; it means the expansion of consciousness: which is brought about by the definite intermediation of the Guru, who acts in place of the one GREAT INITIATOR of humanity and gives the second birth in His Name. This expansion of consciousness is the note as it were of initiation, for this expansion of consciousness gives what is called ‘the key of knowledge’; it opens up to the Initiate new vistas of knowledge and of power, it places within his hand the key which unlocks the doors of nature. To what end? In order that he may become more serviceable to the world at large; in order that his power for service may be increased.⁸⁰

We see here that service to the masters, and thereby to the world, is the primary goal of initiation. The expansion of consciousness helps the disciple to engage actively in the higher spheres of being and thus to direct his thought towards helping others.⁸¹ Service to the world equates with the subjugation of the individual under the divine will, and this working under the auspices of the divine leads to the quickening of the evolution of the individual and of humanity as a whole.⁸² Initiation is not sought after for selfish reasons, on Besant’s understanding, but rather for the good of humanity. By expanding his consciousness, the aspirant will be able to direct his efforts more deliberately and will therefore make swifter progress. The “Quickening of Evolution” is thus conceptualized as an exponential progression. In the following, the stages of initiation are discussed following Besant’s presentation of them in *The Path of Discipleship*. It is interesting to see that Besant lays out these stages as part of an Indian religious conceptual framework, mainly drawing on Advaita Vedānta concepts. She states:

I am anxious that you should know the four stages of the Path as they are spoken of in Hinduism, as some people imagine that they were revealed only by the LORD BUDDHA, whereas He but proclaimed again the ancient narrow Path, that all Initiates of the One Lodge have trodden, are treading, and shall tread.⁸³

This illustrates how the idea of a Great Brotherhood and a perennial wisdom which is guarded by that brotherhood underlies Besant’s idea of initiation. As we follow the stages of initiation further, we will see that each stage is marked by

⁸⁰ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 91.

⁸¹ Besant, *Thought Power*, 73–74.

⁸² E.g., Besant, *Dharma*, 54; Annie Besant, *The Three Paths to Union with God: Lectures Delivered at Benares, at the Sixth Annual Convention of the Indian Section of the Theosophical Society, October 19th, 20th and 21st, 1896* (London: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1913), 19; Besant, *Evolution of Life and Form*, 65; Besant, *In the Outer Court*, 111.

⁸³ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 93–94.

specific qualities that must be acquired. The main differences from the probationary path are that the qualities must be mastered in these higher stages and that the guidance of the masters will be direct and conscious.⁸⁴ The first stage is the stage of the “Parivrajaka” or the “Srotâpatti.”⁸⁵ The Pali term given in Buddhism means “he who has entered the stream which separates him from this world,”⁸⁶ as Besant explains. For her this has the same meaning as the term used by Śaṅkara, which she translates as “the wanderer.”⁸⁷ She describes Parivrajaka as a state of non-residence, not simply in the world but also beyond, stating that “his inner life is separated from the world.” As a result, “he can go here, there and anywhere, where his Master may send him. No place has power to hold him, no place has power to bind him; he has shaken off the fetters of place.”⁸⁸ This notion of non-residence also involves the idea that the one who is outside the world does not want anything from it but to follow his teacher and to help humanity. When the aspirant becomes a “Srotâpatti,” “he can never again be uninitiated [. . .] He has stepped into the stream; he is separated from the world.” In this stage, he will have to accomplish three tasks. The first is to “get absolutely rid of [. . .] the illusion of the personal self.”⁸⁹ “The chelâ must recognize himself as one with all other selves, for the Self of all is one. He must realize that all around him, man, the animal and plant worlds, the mineral and elemental forms of life, are all one.”⁹⁰ This realization is presented as part of the expanding consciousness that will pierce the illusion, leading to all false ideas passing from him. The second task that must be accomplished is getting “rid of doubt by knowledge.”⁹¹ What this means is that realizing and actually seeing “certain fundamental truths”⁹² will lead to them being understood as facts. The truths in question are “the great truth of Re-incarnation; [. . .] the great truth of Karma; [. . .] the great truth of the existence of the divine Men, of the Jîvanmuktas, who are the Gurus of humanity.”⁹³ Knowledge is therefore gained by empirical means and this knowledge provides certainty about these laws beyond doubt. The last of these three tasks is “to entirely cast off [. . .] superstition. Superstition means [. . .] reliance on external sectarian

⁸⁴ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 92–94.

⁸⁵ Besant gives the names of both the Buddhist and the Vedānta traditions and parallels them. An overview is given at the end of this paragraph.

⁸⁶ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 93.

⁸⁷ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 93.

⁸⁸ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 93.

⁸⁹ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 96.

⁹⁰ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 93.

⁹¹ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 96.

⁹² Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 96.

⁹³ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 96–97.

rites and ceremonies for spiritual help.”⁹⁴ It does not necessarily follow that Besant belittles rituals and ceremonies entirely. Rather, she understands them as prerequisites, simple tools that belong to previous stages of development.⁹⁵ At the stage considered here, the aspirant has pierced through illusion and hence understands the truth that lies behind such rites, and is, thus, no longer dependent on these outer forms.

Besant identifies the second stage of initiation with Śaṅkara’s “Kutîchaka” and Buddha’s “Sakridâgâmin.” She explains that these terms can be translated as “the man who builds a hut” and “the man who receives birth once more.”⁹⁶ In this stage, the *siddhis* – superhuman powers that are acquired through yogic practices – are to be gained because they are necessary for the further assistance of the masters and therefore for swifter evolutionary progress. In this stage, the initiate will learn to act “in the other worlds that [. . .] lie outside the physical plane.”⁹⁷ The main power one achieves at this stage is that of being able to separate the astral body from the physical and consequently becoming able to leave the physical plane without any disruption of consciousness, allowing one to work consciously on the astral plane.⁹⁸

The third stage, or the third initiation, as Besant has it, is called “Hamsa” in the tradition of Śaṅkara and “Anâgâmin” in the Buddhist tradition. Besant explains that the “Anâgâmin” is “the man who receives birth no more, save indeed by his own free will.”⁹⁹ Hence, this is the stage at which unity is fully understood, “because in his expanding consciousness he had already risen into the region in the universe where that identity is realized, and had experienced ‘I am It’.”¹⁰⁰ Besant’s Indian audience would most likely have understood the

⁹⁴ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 97.

⁹⁵ E.g., Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 17–18; Besant, *The Ancient Wisdom*, 375; Besant, *Evolution of Life and Form*, 118–19; Besant, *In the Outer Court*, 19; Annie Besant, “The Supreme Duty,” in, *The Theosophical Congress Held by the Theosophical Society at the Parliament of Religions, World’s Fair of 1893, at Chicago, Ill., September 15, 16, 17, 186*.

⁹⁶ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 101.

⁹⁷ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 101.

⁹⁸ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 102. It is interesting that Besant denies the possibility of using the astral body as a vehicle for astral travelling in her later works, especially in *The Ancient Wisdom*. However, she does not completely deny the possibility of astral traveling, but changes her nomenclature and explains in more detail what forms can be taken for astral journeys.

⁹⁹ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 104.

¹⁰⁰ Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 104.

reference here to the famous phrase from *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.11.¹⁰¹ Achieving this state also means that the initiate is now able to bring back memories and insight from the higher planes of existence.¹⁰²

At this stage, as Besant explains, egoism is impossible because the initiate knows that he is one with every being and that he will therefore not long for anything that is not directed towards the good of humanity as a whole. Hence, even spiritual achievements lose their attractiveness if they are concerned with the individual, and everything that is achieved on this stage and those that follow is gained for all of humanity. At this stage further accelerated progress for everyone can be made. In Besant’s words:

He stands in a region of the Universe whence strength comes; down into the world of men, and as he gains it he passes it on, he sheds it on all, he shares it with all. Thus all the world is better for each man who reaches this stage. All he wins is won for humanity, and all that comes into his hands comes only to pass through them into the wider world of men. He is one with BRAHMAN, and therefore one with every manifestation; and he is that in his own consciousness, and not only in hope and aspiration.¹⁰³

At this stage of unity, the initiate will “be love and compassion to everything, love and compassion to all. He spreads round him as it were an all-embracing circle of affection.”¹⁰⁴ When this stage is attained, the stage the name of which is “used so widely and so carelessly, used so often for mere compliment, for an outer appearance instead of for a living reality,”¹⁰⁵ the initiate is one stage short of gaining *jīvanmukti*. Here his waking conscience expands further into the “Turiya region. He has no need to leave the body to enjoy it. He has no need to leave the body to be conscious in it. His consciousness embraces, has expanded to, that, although at the same time it may be working in the lower brain.”¹⁰⁶ He thus has constant access to this region’s knowledge and can apply it while working in the body through the brain.

At this stage he also “throws off the last five ‘fetters,’ that he may become the *Jīvanmukta*.”¹⁰⁷ The first of these five “fetters” is “*Rûparâga*, desire for ‘life in form’ – no desire for such life can move him.”¹⁰⁸ The second is “*Arûparâga*, desire

101 Olivelle translates “I am this.” Patrick Olivelle, *The Early Upaniṣads: Annotated Text and Translation*, South Asia Research (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 285.

102 Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 104.

103 Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 105.

104 Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 105.

105 Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 107.

106 Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 106–7.

107 Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 107.

108 Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 107.

for ‘life without form’.”¹⁰⁹ The third, “Mâna is cast away, and again we have to use an English word far too gross to express the real subtle nature of the fetter cast off – pride.”¹¹⁰ This means that the initiate is not proud about his achievements and does not feel himself to be superior to others because he reached this stage of existence. The fourth fetter to be cast off is “the possibility of being ruffled by anything that may occur.”¹¹¹ This means that “nothing that can happen to the manifested world can shake the sublime serenity of the man who has risen thus to the realization of the Self of all. What matters a catastrophe – it is but the form that is broken.”¹¹² Finally, “Avidyâ – that which makes illusion; the last faint film which prevents the perfect insight and the perfect liberty”¹¹³ is destroyed.

Now the initiate can finally be liberated and becomes “the *Jīvanmukta*, according to the Hindu phrase, the Asekha Adept, or He who has no more to learn, according to the Buddhist nomenclature.”¹¹⁴ When this is achieved, he now has the freedom to choose between different paths. Besant, however, only discusses one possible path as this is obviously the one that is preferred. This is the “Path of the Great Renunciation.” On this path, the *jīvanmukta* “refuses to leave it [the world of men], refuses to go away from it, says that He will remain and take to Himself a body again and again, for the teaching and for the helping of man.”¹¹⁵ Those who decide to stay, to be reborn until human evolution is completed are called “the great Masters of Compassion”¹¹⁶ because they stay on earth to help men in their evolution.

All are glorious who have reached that lofty level, all are divine who stand where They are standing. But perhaps one may dare to say without irreverence, that the dearest to the heart of humanity, gratitude for the renunciation made, are Those who might have gone from us but who stay with us the most closely bound to it by the ties of passionate gratitude for the renunciation made, are Those who might have gone from us but who stay with us, who might have left us orphans but who remain as the Fathers of men. Such are the great Gurus at whose Feet we bow; such the great Masters who stand behind the Theosophical Society. They sent Their messenger, H. P. Blavatsky, to bring the message to the world which the world had well-nigh forgotten, to point again to the narrow and ancient Path along which some feet are treading now, along which your feet may tread.¹¹⁷

109 Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 107.

110 Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 107–8.

111 Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 108.

112 Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 108.

113 Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 108.

114 Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 109.

115 Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 109–10.

116 Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 110.

117 Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 110–11.

This last paragraph shows that initiation was strongly linked in Besant’s early Theosophy to the idea of the Great Brotherhood. The succession of knowledge through the Great Brotherhood, the evolution of humanity, and education as the means for the “Quickening of Evolution” are the three main topics which will be traced further through this book. Before going on, however, I will first draw a preliminary conclusion and attempt to apply the theoretical framework to the material presented above (summarized in Table 4). This will be of considerable assistance in the argumentation below, as these stages will be encountered in several of the other examples discussed.

8.2.7 Overview of the Stages of Initiation as Described in Annie Besant’s *The Path of Discipleship*

Table 4: The stages of initiation according to Besant. By the author.

Stages of Initiation		
Name called by Śhrī Shankarāchārya	Name called by Buddha	Main characteristic
Parivrajaka	Srotāpatti	Not belonging to the world Wants nothing from this world Three fetters Get rid of “the illusion of the personal self” “Get rid of doubt by knowledge” “Cast off superstition”
Kutīchaka	Sakridāgāmin	<i>Siddhis</i> “Develop his inner faculties”
Hamsa	Anāgāmin	Unity Casting off the fetter of Kāmarāga No egoism, all is gained for humanity Love and compassion
Paramahamsa	Arhat	Stage before jīvanmukti Expanding consciousness to the Turīya region Having access to all that knowledge without any break in consciousness Casting off the last five fetters: Rūparāga, Arūparāga, Māna, “the possibility of being ruffled by anything that may occur,” Avidya

Table 4 (continued)

Stages of Initiation		
Name called by Shrī Shankarāchārya	Name called by Buddha	Main characteristic
Jīvanmukta		Great Renunciation Help in the evolution of men Theosophical masters

I argue that these stages are the product of a long hybridization process which manifested as numerous relations (for the conceptualization of the idea of “relations,” see Chapters 3 and 4) in *The Path of Discipleship*. It will be the task of the coming chapters to trace these relations and point to some of the actors who took part in this process of hybridization. The next section will provide a preliminary conclusion for Chapter 8 in which I will point to some possible relations. The following section will then discuss these relations and ask in a deductive manner whether the theoretical approach developed in earlier chapters helps to provide a better understanding of Annie Besant’s early Theosophy and the context in which it developed.

8.3 Preliminary Conclusion: Exponential Evolution, Self-Development, and the Bridging of the Master Paradox

I argue that human self-development is the aim of Annie Besant’s early Theosophy. The line of argument followed above points towards the conceptualization of progress as a human-induced – or at least human-accelerated – process for bringing about the universal good. This conceptualization is connected to the idea of a guiding force, identified in Besant’s writings as the “divine will,” a guiding force that is intrinsically connected to a morality which demands submission to the divine will because this will leads to an acceleration of progress. The idea of the “Quickening of Evolution” describes this connection between self-development and submission to the “divine will” as “service to humanity” and to the “masters.” It likewise has a practical dimension which aims at the “acceleration of individual progress” and, with this, of evolution in general. The path described as part of the “Quickening of Evolution” can be separated into two broad levels: a “beginner’s level,” comprising all the preliminary stages, and an “advanced level” that is reached after initiation. At the end of this process of initiation the chela becomes a master. Becoming

a master is associated, in the Theosophical master narrative, with passing through long spans of life cycles involving numerous incarnations. Human progress is described as a teleological process in which humans eventually become divine. The chasm between those who are “divine” (the masters), or at least close to it, and those who are still evolving (the disciples) seems almost unbridgeable. The apparent impossibility of crossing this divide has been discussed in Chapter 7.1, above, as the “Master Paradox.” Annie Besant’s concept of the “Quickening of Evolution” provides a way of training and teaching as a method for bridging this chasm. Education and following a certain way of life eventually leads one to a spiritual initiation that induces a change of consciousness and perception. As this path is the intermediary stage between the educational epistemology of Theosophy and the higher knowledge, it can be understood as the core of the Theosophical teaching. In the following chapters, several elements of the “Quickening of Evolution” will be traced further through Theosophical writings, starting with H. P. Blavatsky’s *The Voice of the Silence*, which will be identified as a book of initiation. This discussion will, on the one hand, draw attention to the centrality of the idea of the “Quickening of Evolution” in the Theosophical doctrine while, on the other, illustrating how this concept evolved through a long hybridization process of translation, de- and recontextualization, and repetition in which numerous actors were involved.

Numerous relations of the sort conceptualized in Chapters 3 and 4 can be identified in Annie Besant’s concept of the “Quickening of Evolution.” Outstanding examples are the stages of initiation and the preliminary qualifications of the disciples, both of which point towards a process of the translation of Indian concepts into the Theosophical context. Elements from both “Hinduism,” mostly as part of a specific reception of Advaita Vedānta (discussed in more detail below), and Buddhism are presented as stages of initiation in a process of human progress. In this presentation, the elements (stages) are absorbed into the structure (evolutionary progress). The movement of these “elements” points to a “hybridization process” (translation) in which the “Eastern” elements become the center of the “Western” concept of evolutionist progress.

However, there are additional complexities that must also be considered: As the discussion of the reception of “evolutionism” above has illustrated – and as the general theoretical approach in this book assumes – it is highly problematic to label “elements” and “structures” as “Eastern” or “Western.” In the case of the “elements,” as will be seen, these had already been hybridized through the process of translation prior to Besant’s use of them in *The Path of Discipleship*. But these elements were in fact also “hybrids” before translation because they were part of a long tradition of repetition in numerous asynchronous contexts. Similarly, the “structure” is not only “hybrid” in the discursive field concerned

with “Evolutionism” in the “West” (repetition in several contexts) but also in the global colonial discursive continuum, as its reception in the Indian context discussed in Chapter 6.9 shows. In Chapters 9 and 11, it will be seen that the conceptualization of “stages of initiation” as actual “stages” in an evolutionary process developed through an encounter between Manilal Dvivedi and H. P. Blavatsky. Structurally similar developments can be described for numerous other “elements” and “structures” in Annie Besant’s early Theosophy, not least her ideas about master/disciple relationships. These points will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters. In addition, what can be said of the master/disciple relationship is also true of teacher/student relationships as they appear in Besant’s pedagogy (discussed in Chapter 13). The idea of an ancient wisdom, which is closely linked to the Theosophical masters, points to further processes of relationizing. The claim that this ancient wisdom was preserved in several religions and was then rediscovered in Theosophy can be described as a process of epistemological and chronological hierarchical relationizing (see Chapter 4.6). This relationalization is also genealogical because the “masters” who are identified as the “great teachers” of all religions secure the kinship of all religions and the “Great Brotherhood.” What Annie Besant had to say in *The Ancient Wisdom* is paradigmatic for that process of relationizing. In the introduction to this work, Besant employs comparative methods to lay out a genealogy of religions. Therein she explains similarities between religions by employing the paradigm of relationizing described above. She writes:

The second [the first being that religions are the results “ignorance tilted by imagination” and gradually evolved in sequential steps] explanation of the common property in the religions of the world asserts the existence of an original teaching in the custody of a Brotherhood of great spiritual Teachers, who – Themselves the outcome of past cycles of evolution – acted as the instructors and guides of the child-humanity of our planet, imparting to its races and nations in turn the fundamental truths of religion in the form most adapted to the idiosyncrasies of the recipients. According to this view the Founders of the great religions are members of the one Brotherhood, and were aided in Their mission by many other members, lower in degree than Themselves, Initiates and disciples of various grades, eminent in spiritual insight, in philosophic knowledge, or in purity of ethical wisdom. These guided the infant nations, gave them their polity, enacted their laws, ruled them as kings, taught them as philosophers, guided them as priests; all the nations of antiquity looked back to such mighty men, demi-gods and heroes, and they left their traces in literature, in architecture, in legislation.¹¹⁸

Besant explains here the hierarchical idea of the evolution of religions. It is plausible that, in doing so, she draws on Tylor’s idea of a connected evolution of

118 Besant, *The Ancient Wisdom*, 2–4.

religions, since Besant's argumentation is close to that of Tylor in his introduction to *Primitive Culture*.¹¹⁹ However, in contrast to a Tylorian explanation, the evolution of religions is instead said to be guided by the members of the great Brotherhood. These teachers are themselves the result of previous cycles of evolution and can be understood as those who renounced the higher fruits of initiation to "quicken" the evolution of all of humanity. Another important feature of Annie Besant's evolutionism is that the teachers taught the "fundamental truths of religion in the form most adapted to the idiosyncrasies of the recipients." This reflects Besant's view that evolution in humans takes place asynchronously. For every step in that evolution, the means of evolution must be adapted. This idea was expressed in Besant's early Theosophy using a wide range of terms and concepts, a fundamental feature of which was "karmic necessity." Such necessities, she held, were properly understood by masters/teachers, who, as a result, were able to aid their disciples/students in their evolution (see above). This idea of the master/teacher as "karmic helper" seems to have been forged in Besant's encounters with multifaceted concepts of master/disciple relations (see also 7.1, above).

8.4 Hybridization and Encounters in Besant's Early Theosophy: The Textual Level and the Level of the Discourse

It has been seen above that the concept of "translation" as a "movement" of "elements" and/or "structures" works well in describing the "repetition" of "elements" from a linguistic system as they are "transferred" into another. However, I think that it works less well when applied to transfer processes within the same linguistic system, because the term "translation" is tied to the idea of transfer from one language to another. Using it for transfer processes in a single language may, thus, be confusing. Consequently, the term "translation" and the verb "to translate" will be used to talk about transfer from one linguistic system to another while transfer processes that repeat a structure or element within the same linguistic system will be described in terms of "de- and recontextualizing," which I understand as parallel "hybridization processes." The idea of "repetition" should, then, be conceptualized as an effect of the two "hybridization processes" indicated above.

¹¹⁹ Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Resaerches into the Developement of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion Language, Art and Custom*, 2nd ed. (London: John Murray, 1873), 18–19.

This consideration of Besant’s early Theosophy strengthens the argument that “encounters” are the premises for “hybridization processes.” Hence, I maintain that every “contact” leads to “hybridization.” Nevertheless, it seems that there are different degrees of “hybridization,” although – as discussed above – conceptualizing “hybridization” as taking place gradually involves certain problems, not the least of which is the danger of hierarchizing “hybridization processes” (see Chapter 4.1). In subsequent chapters, I will turn to the question of the extent to which it is possible to find terms that describe these different “hybridizations” without employing value judgements. One possible way of doing so, discussed in more detail below, is to distinguish between two different levels: 1) the textual level, and 2) the level of “hybridization.”

Against this background, the terms drawn from Berner’s *Instrumentarium* are inappropriate when it comes to describing the level of “hybridization.” Berner’s *Instrumentarium* works well for the description of “Besant’s idea,” but, as indicated in 4.4 and 4.6, it does not describe the level of “hybridization” in a way that is congruent with Bhabha’s theory. Besant’s work can be read as a hegemonic attempt to close the discourse. Berner’s *Instrumentarium* provides a terminology which allows for the description of this relationalization, although it does not describe what impact this had in terms of “hybridization” on Besant’s Theosophy. In summary, Berner’s *Instrumentarium* is *useful* for pointing out hegemonic attempts at relationizing and therefore for indicating relations, but it does not describe the “relations” or “in-betweens” in accordance with Bhabha’s view. What Berner describes are “traces,” not “relations (see Chapter 4.6).”

In summary, it can be said that the concept of “relationizings” as “traces of hybridization processes” is an analytical tool that allows a) the identification of “hybridization processes” on a textual level and b) the differentiation of patterns of such “hybridization processes.” At the same time, these processes should also be understood in terms of the power-relations that are necessarily at play in them as a result of them being embedded in the global colonial discursive continuum.