

Yoga and the Siddhis in Early Theosophical Writings

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Bio: Dr. Alexandrova is Associate Professor of Instruction at the University of Texas at Austin. She teaches a variety of courses on Russian cultural history, literature, and language. Her current research interests include the history of ideas in the late Russian Empire, theories of physical culture and modern yoga, alternative spiritualities, and Theosophical currents in Russia and abroad. She is also a certified yoga teacher (RYT 200) and a long-time yoga practitioner and meditator. Dr. Alexandrova's work has appeared in *The Russian Review*, *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*, and *The Conversation*. She is currently writing a book entitled *Madame Blavatsky's India: In Search of Āryāvarta* (under contract with Oxford University Press).

Paper: "Yoga and the Siddhis in Early Theosophical Writings"

In this paper, I trace the evolution of the concept of the siddhis in the early Theosophical Society, as both an important component of the process of establishing authority within the organization, and as an evolutionary goal that suggested the possibility of the development of certain special powers through physical and spiritual practices, as prescribed to the Society's members. Importantly, the notion of the siddhis, or "phenomenal powers," as possessed by the Theosophical Masters, was closely linked with Theosophical understanding of science and with the nature of knowledge transmission. The first half of the talk engages with existing scholarship on the topic, and establishes a theoretical framework for the examination of the use of the siddhis, based on both scholarly perspectives and practitioners' definitions. The second part of the article analyzes specific examples of the use of the siddhis by early Theosophical leaders –Helena Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott –and examines how the siddhis were understood and treated in the Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society.

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