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Theosophy and Asceticism

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ENQUIRER. I have heard people say that your rules require all members to be vegetarians, celibates, and rigid ascetics; but you have not told me anything of the sort yet. Can you tell me the truth once for all about this?

THEOSOPHIST. The truth is that our rules require nothing of the kind. The Theosophical Society does not even expect, far less require of *any* of its members that they should be ascetics in any way, except — if you call *that* asceticism — that they should try and benefit other people and be unselfish in their own lives.

ENQUIRER. But still many of your members are strict vegetarians, and openly avow their intention of remaining unmarried. This, too, is most often the case with those who take a prominent part in connection with the work of your Society.

THEOSOPHIST. That is only natural, because most of our really earnest workers are members of the Inner Section of the Society, which I told you about before.

ENQUIRER. Oh! then you do require ascetic practices in that Inner Section?

THEOSOPHIST. No; we do not *require* or *enjoin* them even there; but I see that I had better give you an explanation of our views on the subject of asceticism in general, and then you will understand about vegetarianism and so on.

ENQUIRER. Please proceed.

THEOSOPHIST. As I have already told you, most people who become really earnest students of Theosophy, and active workers in our Society, wish to do more than study theoretically the truths we teach. They wish to *know* the truth by their own direct personal experience, and to study Occultism with the object of acquiring the wisdom and power, which they feel that they need in order to help others, effectually and judiciously, instead of blindly and at haphazard. Therefore, sooner or later, they join the Inner Section.



ENQUIRER. But you said that “ascetic practices” are not obligatory even in that Inner Section?

THEOSOPHIST. No more they are; but the first thing which the members learn there is a true conception of the relation of the body, or physical sheath, to the inner, the true man. The relation and mutual interaction between these two aspects of human nature are explained and demonstrated to them, so that they soon become imbued with the supreme importance of the inner man over the outer case or body. They are taught that blind unintelligent asceticism is mere folly; that such conduct as that of St. Labro which I spoke of before, or that of the Indian Fakirs and jungle ascetics, who cut, burn and macerate their bodies in the most cruel and horrible manner, is simply self-torture for selfish ends, *i.e.*, to develop will-power, but is perfectly useless for the purpose of assisting true spiritual, or Theosophic, development.

ENQUIRER. I see, you regard only *moral* asceticism as necessary. It is as a means to an end, that end being the perfect equilibrium of the *inner* nature of man, and the attainment of complete mastery over the body with all its passions and desires?

THEOSOPHIST. Just so. But these means must be used intelligently and wisely, not blindly and foolishly; like an athlete who is training and preparing for a great contest, not like the miser who starves himself into illness that he may gratify his passion for gold.

ENQUIRER. I understand now your general idea; but let us see how you apply it in practice. How about vegetarianism, for instance?

THEOSOPHIST. One of the great German scientists has shown that every kind of animal tissue, however you may cook it, still retains certain marked characteristics of the animal which it belonged to, which characteristics can be recognised. And apart from that, every one knows by the taste what meat he is eating. We go a step farther, and prove that when the flesh of animals is assimilated by man as food, it imparts to him, physiologically, some of the characteristics of the animal it came from. Moreover, occult science teaches and proves this to its students by ocular demonstration, showing also that this “coarsening” or “animalizing” effect on man is greatest from the flesh of the larger animals, less for birds, still less for fish and other cold-blooded animals, and least of all when he eats only vegetables.

ENQUIRER. Then he had better not eat at all?

THEOSOPHIST. If he could live without eating, of course it would. But as the matter stands, he must eat to live, and so we advise really earnest students to eat such food as will least clog and weight their brains and bodies, and will have the smallest effect in hampering and retarding the development of their intuition, their inner faculties and powers.



ENQUIRER. Then you do not adopt all the arguments which vegetarians in general are in the habit of using?

THEOSOPHIST. Certainly not. Some of their arguments are very weak, and often based on assumptions which are quite false. But, on the other hand, many of the things they say are quite true. For instance, we believe that much disease, and especially the great predisposition to disease which is becoming so marked a feature in our time, is very largely due to the eating of meat, and especially of tinned meats. But it would take too long to go thoroughly into this question of vegetarianism on its merits; so please pass on to something else.

ENQUIRER. One question more. What are your members of the Inner Section to do with regard to their food when they are ill?

THEOSOPHIST. Follow the best practical advice they can get, of course. Don't you grasp yet that we never impose any hard-and-fast obligations in this respect? Remember once for all that in all such questions we take a rational, and never a fanatical, view of things. If from illness or long habit a man cannot go without meat, why, by all means let him eat it. It is no crime; it will only retard his progress a little; for after all is said and done, the purely bodily actions and functions are of far less importance than what a man *thinks* and *feels*, what desires he encourages in his mind, and allows to take root and grow there.

ENQUIRER. Then with regard to the use of wine and spirits, I suppose you do not advise people to drink them?

THEOSOPHIST. They are worse for his moral and spiritual growth than meat, for alcohol in all its forms has a direct, marked, and very deleterious influence on man's psychic condition. Wine and spirit drinking is only less destructive to the development of the inner powers, than the habitual use of hashish, opium, and similar drugs.

