

A Lay Chela on Occult Study



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THE PRACTICAL BEARING OF OCCULT TEACHING on ordinary life is very variously interpreted by different students of the subject. For many Western readers of recent books on the esoteric doctrine, it even seems doubtful whether the teaching has any bearing on practical life at all. The proposal which it is supposed sometimes to convey, that all earnest inquirers should put themselves under the severe ascetic regimen followed by its regular Oriental disciples, is felt to embody a strain on the habits of modern civilization which only a few enthusiasts will be prepared to encounter. The mere intellectual charm of an intricate philosophy may indeed be enough to recommend the study to some minds, but a scheme of teaching that offers itself as a substitute for religious faith of the usual kind will be expected to yield some tangible results in regard to the future spiritual well-being of those who adopt it. Has occult philosophy nothing to give except to those who are in a position and willing to make a sacrifice in its behalf of all other objects in life? In that case it would indeed be useless to bring it out into the world. In reality the esoteric doctrine affords an almost infinite variety of opportunities for spiritual development, and no greater mistake could be made in connection with the present movement than to suppose the teaching of the Adepts merely addressed to persons capable of heroic self-devotion. Assuredly it does not discourage efforts in the direction of the highest achievement of occult progress, if any Western occultists may feel disposed to make them; but it is important for us all to keep clearly in view the lower range of possibilities connected with humbler aspirations.

I believe it to be absolutely true that even the slightest attention seriously paid to the instructions now emanating *from* the Indian Adepts will generate results within the spiritual principles of those who render it — causes capable of producing appreciable consequences in a future state of existence. Anyone who has sufficiently examined the doctrine of Devachan will readily follow the idea, for the nature of the spiritual existence which in the ordinary course of things must succeed each physical life, provides for the very considerable expansion of any aspirations towards real knowledge that may be set going on earth. I will recur to this point directly, when I have made clearer the general drift of the argument I am trying to unfold. At the one end of the scale of possibilities connected with occult study lies the supreme development of Adeptship; an achievement which means that the person reaching it has so violently stimulated his spiritual growth within a short period, as to have anticipated processes on which Nature, in her own deliberate way, would have spent a

¹ March 1884, Vol. V, p. 131

great procession of ages. At the other end of the scale lies the small result to which I have just alluded — a result which may rather be said to establish a tendency in the direction of spiritual achievement than to embody such achievement. But between these two widely different results there is no hard and fast line that can be drawn at any place to make a distinct separation in the character of the consequences ensuing from devotion to occult pursuits. As the darkness of blackest night gives way by imperceptible degrees to the illumination of the brightest sunrise, so the spiritual consequences of emerging from the apathy either of pure materialism or of dull acquiescence in unreasonable dogmas, brighten by imperceptible degrees from the faintest traces of Devachanic improvement into the full blaze of the highest perfection human nature, can attain. Without assuming that the course of Nature which prescribes for each human Ego successive physical lives and successive periods of spiritual refreshment — without supposing that this course is altered by such moderate devotion to occult study as is compatible with the ordinary conditions of European life, it will nevertheless be seen how vast the consequences may ultimately be of impressing on that career of evolution a distinct tendency in the direction of supreme enlightenment, of that result which is described as the union of the individual soul with universal spirit.

The explanations of the esoteric doctrine which have been publicly given, have shown that humanity in the mass has now attained a stage in the great evolutionary cycle from which it has the opportunity of growing upward towards final perfection. In the mass it is, of course, unlikely that it will travel that road: final perfection is not a gift to be bestowed upon all, but to be worked for by those who desire it. It may be put within the theoretical reach of all; there may be no human creature living at this moment, of whom it can be said that the highest possibilities of Nature are impossible of attainment, but it does not follow by any means that every individual will attain the highest possibilities. Regarding each individual as one of the seeds of a great flower which throws out thousands of seeds, it is manifest that only a few, relatively to the great number, will become fully developed flowers in their turn. No unjust neglect awaits the majority. For each and every one the consequences of the remote future will be precisely proportioned to the aptitudes he develops, but only those can reach the goal who, with persistent effort carried out through a long series of lives, differentiate themselves in a marked degree from the general multitude. Now, that persistent effort must have a beginning, and granted the beginning, the persistence is not improbable. Within our own observation of ordinary life, good habits, even though they may not be so readily formed as bad ones, are not difficult to maintain in proportion to the difficulty of their commencement. For a moment it may be asked how this may be applied to a succession of lives separate from each other by a total oblivion of their details; but it really applies as directly to the succession of lives as to the succession of days within one life, which are separated from each other by as many nights. The certain operation of those affinities in the individual Ego which are collectively described in the esoteric doctrine by the word Karma, must operate to pick up the old habits of character and thought, as life after life comes round, with the same certainty that the thread of memory in a living brain recovers, day after day, the impressions of those that have gone before. Whether a moral habit is thus deliberately engendered by an occult student in order that it may propagate itself

through future ages, or whether it merely arises from unintelligent aspirations towards good, which happily for mankind are more widely spread than occult study as yet, the way it works in each case is the same. The unintelligent aspiration towards goodness propagates itself and leads to good lives in the future; the intelligent aspiration propagates itself in the same way *plus* the propagation of intelligence; and this distinction shows the gulf of difference which may exist between the growth of a human soul which merely drifts along the stream of time, and that of one which is consciously steered by an intelligent purpose throughout. The human Ego which acquires the habit of seeking for knowledge becomes invested, life after life, with the qualifications which ensure the success of such a search, until the final success, achieved at some critical period of its existence, carries it right up into the company of those perfected Egos which are the fully developed flowers only expected, according to our first metaphor, from a few of the thousand seeds. Now, it is clear that a slight impulse in a given direction, even on the physical plane does not produce the same effect as a stronger one; so, exactly in this matter of engendering habits required to persist in their operation through a succession of lives, it is quite obvious that the strong impulse of a very ardent aspiration towards knowledge will be more likely than a weaker one to triumph over the so called accidents of Nature.

This consideration brings us to the question of those habits in life which are more immediately associated in the popular views of the matter with the pursuit of occult science. It will be quite plain that the generation within his own nature by an occult student of affinities in the direction of spiritual progress, is a matter which has little if anything to do with the outer circumstances of his daily life. It cannot be dissociated from what may be called the outer circumstances of his *moral* life, for an occult student, whose *moral* nature is consciously ignoble, and who combines the pursuit of knowledge with the practice of wrong, becomes by that condition of things a student of sorcery rather than of true occultism — a candidate for satanic evolution instead of perfection. But at the same time the physical habits of life may be quite the reverse of ascetic, while all the while the thinking processes of the intellectual life are developing affinities which cannot fail in the results just seen to produce large ulterior consequences. Some misconception is very apt to arise here from the way in which frequent reference is made to the ascetic habits of those who purpose to become the regular *chelas* of Oriental Adepts. It is supposed that what is practised by the Master is necessarily recommended for all his pupils. Now this is far from being the case as regards the miscellaneous pupils who are gathering round the occult teachers lately become known to public report. Certainly even in reference to their miscellaneous pupils the Adepts would not discountenance asceticism. As we saw just now, there is no hard line drawn across the scale on which are defined the varying consequences of occult study in all its varying degrees of intensity — so with ascetic practice, from the slightest habits of self-denial, which may engender a preference for spiritual over material gratification, up to the very largest developments of asceticism required as a passport to *chelaship*, no such practices can be quite without their consequences in the all-embracing records of Karma. But, broadly speaking, asceticism belongs to that species of effort which aims at personal *chelaship*, and that which contemplates the patient development of spiritual growth along the slow track of natural evolution claims no more, broadly speaking, than intellectual application. All that is asserted

in regard to the opening now offered to those who have taken notice of the present opportunity, is, that they may now give their own evolution an impulse which they may not again have an opportunity of giving it with the same advantage to themselves if the present opportunity is thrown aside. True, it is most unlikely that any one advancing through Nature, life after life, under the direction of a fairly creditable Karma, will go on always without meeting sooner or later with the ideas that occult study implants. So that the occultist does not threaten those who turn aside from his teachings with any consequences that must necessarily be disastrous. He only says that those who listen to them must necessarily derive advantage from so doing in exact proportion to the zeal with which they undertake the study and the purity of motive with which they promote it in others.

Nor must it be supposed that those which have here been described as the lower range of possibilities in connection with occult study, are a mere fringe upon the higher possibilities, to be regarded as a relatively poor compensation accorded to those who do not feel equal to offering themselves for probation as regular *chelas*. It would be a grave misconception of the purpose with which the present stream of occult teaching has been poured into the world, if we were to think it a universal incitement to that course of action. It may be hazardous for any of us who are not initiates to speak with entire confidence of the intention of the Adepts, but all the external facts concerned with the growth and development of the Theosophical Society, show its purpose to be more directly related to the cultivation of spiritual aspirations over a wide area, than to the excitement of these with supreme intensity in individuals. There are considerations, indeed, which may almost be said to debar the Adepts from ever doing anything to encourage persons in whom this supreme intensity of excitement is possible, to take the very serious step of offering themselves as *chelas*. Directly that by doing this a man renders himself a candidate for something more than the maximum advantages that can flow to him through the operation of natural laws — directly that in this way he claims to anticipate the most favourable course of Nature and to approach high perfection by violent and artificial processes, he at once puts himself in presence of many dangers which would never beset him if he contented himself with a favourable natural growth. It appears to be always a matter of grave consideration with the Adepts whether they will take the responsibility of encouraging any person who may not have it in him to succeed, to expose himself to these dangers. For anyone who is determined to face them and is permitted to do so, the considerations put forward above in regard to the optional character of personal physical training fall to the ground. Those ascetic practices which a candidate for nothing more than the best natural evolution may undertake if he chooses, with the view of emphasizing his spiritual Karma to the utmost, become a *sine qua non* in regard to the very first step of his progress. But with such progress the present explanation is not specially concerned. Its purpose has been to show the beneficial effects which may flow to ordinary people living ordinary lives, from even that moderate devotion to occult philosophy which is compatible with such ordinary lives, and to guard against the very erroneous belief that occult science is a pursuit in which it is not worthwhile to engage, unless Adeptship is held out to the student as its ultimate result.

