

AN UNENDING PATH

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IN her short article, “Practical Occultism” H. P. Blavatsky (HPB) made a point of distinguishing between the theosophist and the practical occultist. She said:

It is easy to become a Theosophist. Any person of average intellectual capacities, and a leaning toward the metaphysical; of pure, unselfish life, who finds more joy in helping his neighbour than in receiving help himself; one who is ever ready to sacrifice his own pleasures for the sake of other people; and who loves Truth, Goodness, and Wisdom for their own sake, not for the benefit they may confer — is a Theosophist.

These are the qualities of the theosophist that she enumerates, none of which require membership in an organization. Practical occultism, on the other hand, is of a very different nature. She said that even within the TS there are few practical occultists. With that as a background, we come to the theosophical approach. So we necessarily find ourselves asking questions. It is not unusual for someone who becomes associated with the TS to ask: “Where should I begin?” What is it that can and should be studied?

¹ Boyd, T. (2020). *The Theosophist*, vol. 141. N. 8.

The practice of the theosophist is threefold: study, meditation, and service. If we look at J. Krishnamurti's *At the Feet of the Master*, it says that we are to study, but study first that which will most help us to help others. We are encouraged to think for ourselves: What is it that helps us help others? How do we study that, and where do we find it?

I interact with theosophical members and groups around the world, and it can be surprising the areas that theosophists choose for the focus of their study. For some, their study focuses on the understanding or cultivation of the psychic realm. This is an aspect of the human constitution that seems to have attracted the attention of many. In whatever we study, we make a choice, and to deepen we must persist over time. So it is best to choose wisely, especially in the beginning, as one small step in the wrong direction over time will take us far away from the direction that we originally intended.

The purpose of our study is to elevate the mind so that we can see clearly. An example might be the experience of going up to a mountain peak. There are many ways to reach the peak, but at the top we find before us a vision of the patterns and appearance of the Earth below. We call it "below" because for the moment we are viewing it from the mountain top, but it is the Earth where our day-to-day lives take place. In those mountain top experiences we have a clear vision of what is below.

We may think of it as unfortunate, but whatever peak experience we have, whether it is actually standing on a physical mountain, or the elevation that occurs occasionally in meditation, eventually we have to come down. When we do, we find ourselves once again engaged in our normal activities, living under the influence of the personality that we have cultivated over a lifetime. In that peak experience we may have thought we could escape the personality's controlling influence, but it is not that easy. So we have this experience of clearly seeing, but are left to guide ourselves by the memory of what we have seen. It is no longer visible in the same way, but we do remember, and within us there is a knowledge that cannot be taken away.

There is a meditation teacher who has become quite well known in the West who commented that “after the ecstasy, come the dishes”. After these peak experiences we are back washing dishes, taking children to school, going to the workplace, but, hopefully, somehow we do it differently, we have changed.

In our theosophical approach this elevation is cultivated in the process of study, meditation, and service. From our perspective it would be well to have a complete teaching, something that develops us as holistically as possible. In the writings of HPB she refers to the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, and to one particular approach — the Lam Rim, or The Graded Path to Enlightenment, a body of wisdom teachings specific to Tibetan Buddhism.

Lam Rim is thought of as a complete package, so that there is a stage in these teachings suited to whatever one’s level of unfoldment may be. From the perspective of this tradition, there are three different levels of practitioners: those of a smaller scope, a medium scope, and then the great scope.

The smaller scope is for the person who is simply seeking relative relief of their suffering. For them the scope of their vision cannot yet conceive of a purpose or possibility beyond finding happiness within this life and the everrepeating wheel of samsara. They want happiness now, and perhaps a better rebirth in another life in a family with more wealth or authority.

The medium scope is directed to those practitioners who have seen the folly of this repetitive cycle of suffering, and seek liberation from it. This is the path of the Pratyeka Buddhas. The path of personal liberation from samsara, from the realm of suffering, is the middle path.

Then there is the great scope, the path of those who choose to become like the Buddha, the Bodhisattva path. “May I attain enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings”, is the Bodhisattva Vow. This is akin to the theosophical approach to the wisdom path.

In our theosophical literature there are profound teachings that have been given by wise beings that address the many levels of our being. Some of these texts are very short. Much like sutras, these texts are compact, leaving it for us to expand. Even with the Lam Rim teachings there is the large body of teachings, approximately 1,000 pages; an abbreviated version of about 200 pages; and an extremely abbreviated version, which is about 2 pages. But each version connects a student to a body of wisdom teachings.

With theosophical teachings we have *At the Feet of the Master*, which speaks about four qualifications leading to a serious entry into the path of discipleship: discrimination, desirelessness, good conduct, and the overarching one — love. In the absence of all others, if we have cultivated the capacity for genuine love, it clears the way. We have *The Voice of the Silence*, which is dedicated to “the few”, and intended for a deeper level of unfoldment.

Then we have *Light on the Path*, with its various admonitions. The first part of the book talks about all of the things we must “kill out”. Various desires must be killed out before we move on. After this phase the book talks about those things that we must desire. “Desire possessions above and beyond all else” is one of those, but it says they are possessions of an inner nature. It is similar to the language and ideas expressed in H. P. Blavatsky’s (HPB) “Diagram of Meditation”, where she speaks of “acquisitions” and “deprivations”. The idea is of moving progressively from the attachments of the desire world, going more and more inward. It closes with the section on “seeking”, what it is that we seek — “Seek out the way” — and *how* we seek that way.

In the final verse, after having killed out harmful desires, cultivated proper desires, and sought the way, then we are told to stop: “Don’t do anything.” The last phrase in the book is to stop and look for the flower to bloom after the storm. The point is made that not until the storms of life have shaken us to our roots, does the flower bloom. These are complete theosophical teachings that can guide us along the way from entering the path all the way to enlightenment, if we can make the connections from these abbreviated expressions to their source.

A brief view of HPB’s “The Golden Stairs” gives a similar picture. On a superficial level it could be just a statement of practical virtues. The first step of these stairs is “a clean life”. Obviously to have a clean life is a good thing, and if it only meant that, it is good enough for many. But we are encouraged to look more deeply. What is meant by “cleanliness”? Is it the fact that there is no tint or stain on the shirt we are wearing? Is it that the floor in our home is free from dust? That is certainly an aspect of cleanliness, but is there more to it?

What are the more important elements? There are other clothes we wear and dwellings we inhabit — the personality — which can also become unclean. Perhaps it is pointing us in this direction. What are the thoughts and emotional states that we cultivate and allow ourselves to be bathed in? To what degree do we relish the reports of the news about all of the various troubles on the Earth? To what degree do they disturb us? What do we allow to enter our consciousness that either sullies, or cleanses it? A clean life is more than just a series of habits.

The second stair is “an open mind”. What does it mean to have an open mind? What is the quality of openness? We think of ourselves as having a mind — “my mind”, separate and independent from all other minds. But the capacity to think at all derives from a universal mind, present everywhere, within which there are an infinite number of centers of awareness. We identify and claim a little corner of that universal mind and call it “mine”. This is the nature and quality of a mind that is not open.

In her Diagram of Meditation HPB begins by addressing the open mind. She says that the *very* first thing we must do is to conceive of Unity. At least at the conceptual level we are advised to make efforts to comprehend the meaning of Unity — Oneness, interdependence, nonseparation. Without this foundation we are not moving toward genuine meditation. Openness is an understanding of Unity that goes beyond the merely intellectual.

We do not need to defend our consciousness from expansion, from deepening awareness, or from contrary points of view. Openness is not just being able to read the ideas of communists along with conservatives, or to respond to the questions of young people as well as those who are older and more settled. To be open is to be free from resistance to experience that takes us beyond limits we have accepted and imposed upon ourselves.

The next of the Golden Stairs is “a pure heart”. Purity and cleanliness seem to be similar. In normal thinking, when we clean something enough, we might call it “pure”. Purity probably has nothing to do with cleanliness, except that as we become clean, we become able to perceive purity. Purity is really a state of being unalloyed — not mixed. Pure gold has nothing else in it, and because all the other elements that are combined in impure things diminish the special quality that purity reveals. For example, with pure gold, we can take a piece of it the size of a coin and hammer it so thin that it could cover the floor of a room; with impure gold it would be impossible. Pure gold does not tarnish; electricity flows through pure gold without interruption.

These are a few incomplete thoughts on the teachings that we have been given. It is a sign of the great wisdom of the people who have given them, that they are expressed in such a way that they are potent at whatever level we find ourselves. Whether we are beginners or mature practitioners, these teachings feed us at our level of need. Our part in the process is to be aware that they are without limit. While it might be easy to become satisfied with the crumbs that we are able to digest at this moment, our role is to elevate, to try to look more deeply.

Invariably what we find is that as something opens within us, those exact same teachings speak to us in a very different way; that is the beauty of it. It is an unending path, and we are unendingly supported at every step of the way

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