

Ascetism, A Word of Friendly Counsel

by H.S. Olcott

Published in 1915

Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Chennai [Madras] India
The Theosophist Office, Adyar, Madras. India

A Hatha Yogi who had spent fifty-seven years in austerities,... and yet who asked me- me, an American, not worth to wipe the feet of a true Raja Yoga- how to control the mind! No delusion is more common among aspirants to the higher knowledge than that the end can be attained with reasonable certainty by physiological restraint. The prevalent idea is that maceration of the body, regulation of the diet, a protracted course of devotions, and the filling of the mind from books, will bring the postulant to the threshold of gnana, if not across it. This was the ruling motive of the desert recluses of early Christianity, of the pillar, fores and cave hermits of all nations; while to this day it rules equally the Roman Catholic monk and nun, the Mohammedan fakir, and the Hindu ascetic. The tortures self-inflicted by the last-named surpass western belief. This is the lower, or Hatha, Yoga, and its gymnastic practices are sometimes horrible and revolting. They have been kept up for centuries, and the tortures are the same now as they were in ancient days - and equally fruitless. The faculties of such ascetics- as is said in the Lalita-Vistara are "wriggling in the grasps of the crocodile of their carnal wants". Some of their penances are thus enumerated:

"Stupid men seek to purify their persons by divers modes of austerity and inculcate the same. Some abstain from fish and flesh-meat. Some abstain from spirits and the water of chaff. Some indulge in tubers, fruits, mosses, Kusa-grass, leaves, frumenty, curds, clarified butter and unbaked cakes. Seated at one place in silence, with their legs bent under them, some attempt greatness. Some eat once in a day and night, some once on alternate days, and some at intervals of four, five, or six days. Some wear many clothes, some go naked. Some have long hair, nails, beard, and matted hair, and wear bark. Some carry on them various talismans, and by these means they hope to attain immortality, and pride themselves upon their holiness. By inhaling smoke or fire, by gazing at the sun, by performing the five fires [i.e., lying uncovered under a burning sun, and having fires built all about them], resting on one foot, and with an arm perpetually uplift, or moving about on the knees, some attempt to accomplish their penance... They all follow the wrong road; they fancy that to be the true support which is untrue; they hold evil to be good, and the impure to be pure." [Vide, for full details, Rajendralala Mitra's Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali, and his Buddha Gaya, pp.24 et seq.] Readers of my own writings may recollect my once meeting at Marble Rocks, on the Nerbudda River, a Hatha Yogi who had spent fifty-seven years in austerities, including a pradakshana, or circumambulation, once in each three years, of that history stream, and yet who asked me- me, an American, not worth to wipe the feet of a true Raja Yoga- how to control the mind! I told him- the poor man- how to do it, as I shall tell my present readers, and if they wish the corroboration, they have only to read the teachings of every great spiritual leader the tree of humanity has ever germinated.

Nobody even dreams how hard is the task of self-conquest, the subjugation of passion and appetite, the liberation of the flesh-prisoned Higher Self, until he has tried. Every such struggle is a tragedy, full of the most painful interest, and provocation of sympathy in the hearts of "good men and angels". That is what Jesus meant when he said there was more joy in heaven over one sinner that repented than over ninety and nine just men that needed no repentance. And yet how bitterly uncharitable is the world- the world of concealed sinners and respectable, undetected hypocrites, usually- over the failure of a poor soul to

scale the spiritual mountains in consequence of lack of reserved power of will at a critical moment. How these undetected ones patronizingly condemn the vanquished, who at least have done what many of them have not, made a brave fight for the divine prize. How they strut about in fancied impregnability, like the street-praying Pharisee of Jerusalem, thanking fortune that their private sins are still hidden, and redoubling their prayers, postures, canting moralities, and ascetism in diet, to deceive their neighbour and themselves!

And the devil did grin, for his darling sin
Is pride that apes humility.

Shakespeare made a man like that say:

And thus I clothe my villainy with old odd ends, stol'n out of holy writ, and seem a saint when most I play the devil

The whole burden of Jesus' preaching was to show that so long as the heart and mind were unpurged ,all external forms and ceremonies were but whitewash to a sepulchre. This was also of his glorious predecessor, the Buddha, who specifically sketched in infinite detail and condemned the forms of hypocrisy, spiritual pride, and self-delusion. He had begun his training for the future struggle with Mara, under the Bodhi tree, by learning and himself practising all the systems of Hatha Yoga, and discovering their futility as helps to salvation. THE PURE HEART AND CLEAN MIND ALONE PERMIT ONE TO ATTAIN SALVATION. This was his doctrine. So, likewise, is it taught in the Aryan Mahabharata [Sec. CXCIX, Vana Parva] which says:

Those high-souled persons that do not commit sins in word, deed, heart and soul, are said to undergo ascetic austerities, and not they that suffer their bodies to be wasted by fasts and penances. He that hath no feeling of kindness for relatives cannot be free from sin, even if his body be pure. That hard-heartedness of his is the enemy of his asceticism. Asceticism, again, is not mere abstinence from the pleasure of the world. He that is always pure and decked with virtues, he that practices kindness all his life, is a Muni, even though he lead a domestic life.

The Theosophical Society is a sort of battlefield of self-slain spiritual fighters; a long line of supposed chelas can be seen as toppled over like so many bricks in a row. Some of them who did not take their failures quietly, and candidly trace them to the real cause, their miscalculation of their moral strength, have turned to rend H.P.B., and those higher than she. I was reading the Path the other day and came across a grand article of hers on "The Theosophical Mahatmas". It was called out by a silly pronunciamento by a hysterical woman in America and another individual, who had failed to become adepts and turned "with bleeding feet and prostrate spirit" to Jesus! How the goaded lioness scorned them; how clearly she defined what would and what would not bring the aspirant into spiritual proximity with the Hidden Sages! To the discontented in general she puts the question:

"Have you fulfilled your obligations and pledges? Have you, who would lay all the blame upon

the Society and the Masters- the embodiments of charity, tolerance, justice and universal love- have you led the life requisite, and fulfilled the conditions of candidature? Let him who feels in his heart and conscience that he has never failed once seriously, never doubted his Master's wisdom, never sought other Masters in his impatience to become an occultist with powers, never betrayed his Theosophical duty in thought or deed- let him rise and protest. During the eleven years (this was written in 1886) of the existence of the Theosophical Society, I have known, out of the seventy-two regularly accepted chelas on probation and the hundreds of lay candidates, only three who have not hitherto failed, and one only who had full success. And what about the Society in general, outside India. Who, among the thousands of members, does lead the life ? Shall any one say because he is a strict vegetarian -elephants and cows are that -or happens to lead a celibate life, after a stormy youth in the other direction, that he is A theosophist according to the Masters' hearts? As it is not the cowl that makes the monk, so no long hair, with a poetical vacancy on the brow, is enough to make one a follower of the divine wisdom." And she depicts the Society's membership as it is to the inlooking eye: "backbiting, slander, uncharitableness, criticism, incessant war-cry, and din of mutual rebukes."

I got a stinging reproach once in Bombay from a Master, when I hesitated to admit to membership an earnest man who had been persecuted, even sent to prison, by Christian bigots, on a pretext. I was bidden to look through my whole body of colleagues and see how, despite their wealth of good intention, nine-tenths of them were secret sinners through weak moral fibres. It was a life lesson to me, and ever since then I have abstained from thinking the worse of my associates, many no weaker or more imperfect than myself, who if they could not climb the mountain were at least, like myself, earnestly struggling and stumbling onward. Years ago- when we first came to Bombay,- I was told by H.P.B. that several of the Mahatmas, being met together, cause to drift by them in the astral light the psychical reflections of the then Indian members of the Theosophical Society. She asked me to guess which one's image was brightest. I mentioned a young Parsi of Bombay, then a pre-eminently active and devoted member. She said, laughing, that on the contrary he was not bright at all, the morally brightest being a poor Bengali gentleman who had become a drunkard. The Parsi afterwards deserted us and became an active opponent, the Bengali reformed and is now a pious ascetic! She explained then that many vicious habits and sensual gratifications often affect the physical self, without leaving deep permanent scars on the inner-self. In such cases the spiritual nature is so vigorous as to throw off these external blotches after a brief struggle. I got a stinging reproach once in Bombay from a Master, when I hesitated to admit to membership an earnest man who had been persecuted, even sent to prison, by Christian bigots, on a pretext. I was bidden to look through my whole body of colleagues and see how, despite their wealth of good intention, nine-tenths of them were secret sinners through weak moral fibres. It was a life lesson to me. But if encouraged and persisted in, evil habits at last overcome the soul's resisting power, and the whole man becomes corrupted. Some tantrikas, Indian and European, have preached the accursed doctrine that the occult postulant can best kill out desire by gratifying and exhausting it. To deliberately gratify lust, or pride, or avarice, or ambition, or hatred, or anger- all equally perilous to the psychic- is quite another matter from falling now and then, through no pre-arrangement and simply because of moral weakness in a particular crisis, into one of those sins. From the latter, recovery is always possible, and may be comparatively easy where the average moral fibre is strong; but deliberate vicious indulgence leads inevitably to moral degradation and a fall into the depths. Says The Voice of the Silence.

Do not believe that lust can be killed out if gratified or satiated, for this is an abomination inspired by

Mara. It is by feeding vice that it expands and waxes strong, like to the worm that fattens on the blossom's heart.

I recall to mind one more instance. Long ago, in the early Society days, a certain Theosophist imposed upon himself the rule of celibacy and wished to be taken as a chela. He held out for a while but then failed: the fleshly appetite was too strong. The person dropped out of active Society work for considerable time, in fact, for years, but at last, gathering himself together, he made a new attempt. He was told that fifty failures did not destroy one's chance, success was possible at the eleventh hour. We read in *The Voice of the Silence* the following word of encouragement:

Prepare, and be forewarned in time. If thou hast tried and failed, O dauntless fighter, yet lose not courage: fight on and to the charge return again, and yet again.

This young F.T.S. returned again to the conflict, was victorious, and today is one of the most active respected members of our Society.

Some western readers have seen the Mahabharata story of the fall of the mighty Rishi Visvamitra through carnal passion. This adept of adepts, this Maha Yoga, had spiritual power so tremendous by centuries of ascetic practices as to make Indra quake upon his celestial throne and cause him to desire his humiliation. So the good took counsel of Menaka, first of the Askaras (celestial choristers), how it might be effected. The beauteous, "slender-waisted" Menaka, according to the plan, presented herself before Visvamitra in his hermit retreat, in all her seductive loveliness, but bashfully seemed afraid of him and pretended to run away. But the complaisant Maruta, the wind-god, suddenly sent a breeze that stripped off her raiment and exposed her charms, like another Phryne, to the astonished gaze of the Rishi. In an instant, the sexual desire, long easily suppressed from lack of temptation, flamed up, and he called her to him, took her to wife, and a daughter- the most lovable Sakuntala- was the fruit of the union.

"Let him that standeth take heed lest he fall," was the warning of the Nazarene.

He also said another thing that the reader would do well to keep always in mind, as a sort of vigilant mastiff at the threshold of his consciousness; "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgement ye judge, ye shall be judged."