

The Esoteric School of Theosophy

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Every person that joins the Theosophical Society receives a welcoming letter from the current international president, Radha Burnier. At the end there is a somewhat mysterious postscript:

There is an Esoteric School connected with the Theosophical Society, which those who have been members of the Society for a certain time and who fulfill the required conditions may enter if they wish. The Esoteric School is meant for all those who wish to live truly Theosophical lives, and not merely study Theosophy. Wisdom comes to those whose minds are capable of receiving it. Members of the Esoteric School prepare themselves by a life of purity and self-discipline to become worthy to receive [the wisdom].

What is the Esoteric School? What do their members do that cannot be done in the Society as a whole? And what are the "required conditions" to enter?

The Esoteric School (ES) developed in the first decades of the life of the Theosophical Society. Before we can better understand its nature and purpose, we need to examine briefly the history of its formation.

A New Experiment

Most spiritual and religious organizations throughout recorded history were designed to promote a specific set of teachings given by their founders. These teachings brought light to many around the world but unfortunately also led to quarrels among the different beliefs. Thus religions have frequently acted as means of division rather than of union.

The founding of the Theosophical Society in 1875 was described as an "experiment" in a new approach (Chin, 125). It too was inspired by some enlightened beings (known as the Mahatmas or Masters of Wisdom), and its founders and leaders also gave some specific teachings we call "modern Theosophy". But the TS was not meant to become one more sect among many, promoting its own teachings exclusively. Rather, the goal was to form a nucleus of *universal* brotherhood without distinctions—a brotherhood that is not based on the profession of a common faith, but one where people with different beliefs and views can come, share, learn, and work together, united in the common aspiration to find truth by whatever path each person chooses. While some members may feel attracted to Theosophical teachings, those who feel differently are free to follow their own paths, without being compelled to adopt any particular approach.

This open platform, which offers the freedom necessary to bring people together from different traditions or none, also has certain limitations, which soon became evident. As the Theosophical teachings spread, a number of people were inspired by them and joined the TS. Naturally enough, these members longed to have a space entirely dedicated to a spiritual discipline based on these principles. But they could not do this in their lodges without limiting the freedom of those who wanted to study different teachings. Should the TS give up its attempt to be a universal brotherhood and promote one particular way of life? Or should it merely become an organization to spread teachings from different traditions, leaving those who longed to live a Theosophical life alone in their efforts?

Early attempts to address this problem were made by forming "inner groups" within some TS lodges. However, none of these loosely organized efforts were successful. Finally, in 1888, after repeated requests, H.P. Blavatsky agreed to create a special section within the TS called the "Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society" The ES provided a way to encourage among its members the practice of the spiritual life based on Theosophical teachings, while at the same time protecting the nonsectarian quality of the TS as a whole.

This section, headed by Mme. Blavatsky, was to be independent and to be connected to the general Society only through the Society's president and founder, Henry Steel Olcott. But sometime before her death in 1891, HPB decided that "all official connection between the two should end" so that "the perfect freedom and public character of the Society" could not be

interfered with (Blavatsky, 12:485). The name of the ES was then changed to "Eastern School of Theosophy," and later to its current one: "Esoteric School of Theosophy." Today the two organizations are independent and have no official connection, save in the fact that only members of the TS can be admitted into the ES.

Beyond the Great Range

In order to understand the character of the ES we need to examine one more element that played an important role in its formation.

One of Mme. Blavatsky's goals was to oppose the growing scientism of her era, which portrayed the universe as a clockwork mechanism with no room or need for anything religious or spiritual. To this end she performed occult phenomena that could not be explained by the laws known to the scientists of the time, showing there were realities beyond their ken. (For more information about this, see my article "Psychic Phenomena and the Early Theosophical Society (/publications/quest-magazine/2750)," *Quest*, Summer 2012.) These phenomena, HPB claimed, were not "miracles" of any kind. They followed certain "occult laws" well known to the Masters of Wisdom, of whom she was a disciple and with whom she and some other members were in direct communication.

In the early 1880s, two disgruntled employees at the international headquarters of the TS in India accused HPB of faking the phenomena and forging the communications coming from the Masters. Richard Hodgson, a young and inexperienced member of the newly formed Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in Britain, went to India to investigate the charges. In a report published in 1885, he pronounced her a fraud. This, of course, became worldwide news, making Hodgson and the SPR famous.

As was shown in later studies, Hodgson systematically disregarded the evidence in favor of HPB. In 1986, over a hundred years later, Vernon Harrison, a longstanding member of the SPR and an expert on forgery, published a study of the Hodgson report in the *SPR Journal*. Harrison concluded that HPB was unjustly condemned. (For an online version of Harrison's study, visit www.theosociety.org/pasadena/hpb-spr/hpbspr-h.htm (<http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/hpb-spr/hpbspr-h.htm>).) Nevertheless, when it first appeared, the Hodgson report was almost a deathblow to the TS, and even HPB feared that this would destroy it. In an attempt to save the Society, Olcott proposed to redirect its activity and publications, dropping all mention of phenomena, the occult, and the Masters, to work on the less controversial field of comparative religion, philosophy, and science.

One of the Masters, Koot Hoomi, said that although this move was well-calculated to save the physical integrity of the Society, it would kill its soul.

The Society has liberated itself from our grasp and influence and we have let it go—we make no unwilling slaves. He [Olcott] says he has saved it? He saved its body, but he allowed through sheer fear, to its soul to escape, and it is now a soulless corpse, a machine run so far well enough, but which will fall to pieces when he is gone. Out of the three objects the second alone is attended to, but it is no longer either a brotherhood, nor a body over the face of which broods the Spirit from beyond the Great Range. (Jinarajadasa, 125-26)

By denying its "occult" dimension the TS had become an exoteric organization with lofty aims, but empty of its occult life, and the influence of the Masters was seriously restricted. But even if the TS could successfully limit itself to the exoteric field, it would still be doomed to fail. Why? Probably because the foundation stones of the TS were not laid with the exoteric work in view. No organization that deals with subjects such as the Lemurian and Atlantean civilizations, psychic phenomena, unseen Masters and their disciples, and occult initiations is fit to be a "respectable" member of the academic world.

Mme. Blavatsky, aware of this situation, was seeking a way of retaining the link between the TS and its occult source of inspiration. The formation of the ES afforded this opportunity, as the existence of the Masters was naturally and openly accepted by those members eager to lead a spiritual life based on Theosophical teachings.

The Purpose of the ES

Although a feeling of devotion to the Masters and their work for humanity is an important element for many of its members, the ES is not a temple where the Masters are worshipped, nor is it intended to fulfill the role of a religion. The meetings revolve around a meditative study and inquiry on Theosophical spirituality, and the members agree to follow a daily discipline based on purity of life, meditation, study, service, and self-awareness.

Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that the ES is not primarily meant to promote the members' personal development. The ES aims at preparing people to be helpers of humanity.

The ideal aspirant is one who sees the depth of the ignorance and suffering in which he (or she) and the world are buried. Being sensitive to this state of affairs, he wonders how things could be changed. He may help to palliate the suffering through charitable organizations, education, and movements for social reform, but he sees that, although external changes are useful and even necessary, they do not address the root of the problem. The real cause of sorrow is in the hearts and minds of people. What is needed is to help humanity move from a selfish to an unselfish state of consciousness. But he realizes that only those who are beyond the need of help can really help others, and that he can participate in this work to the extent that he frees himself from his own spiritual ignorance. *Individual* spiritual growth is necessary, not as an end in itself, but as a means to a wider, *collective* goal. Thus the ES offers a path for transcending the personal ego so that the aspirant can assist the Masters in their altruistic work.

The ES is an occult organization, but only in the sense in which the word "occult" was used at the time of its formation. (The word "occultism" was made popular by the TS in the late nineteenth century. At the time, it was used to refer to the spiritual path that leads one from the personal ego to the higher Self. Later the word was applied by other movements and authors to a variety of things that Mme. Blavatsky used to call the "occult arts.") The ES was never meant to be a school of magic. In fact, both HPB and the Masters were opposed to the creation of such a thing, even though a number of members were asking for it. The ES does not teach how to develop psychic powers, to activate chakras, to awaken kundalini, or anything related to the manipulation of occult forces.

This degree of the Esoteric Section is probationary, and its general purpose is to prepare and fit the student for the study of practical occultism or Raj yoga. Therefore, in this degree, the student –save in exceptional cases–will not be taught how to produce physical phenomena, nor will any magical powers be allowed to develop in him; nor, if possessing such powers naturally, will he be permitted to exercise them before he has thoroughly mastered the knowledge of SELF, of the psycho-physiological processes (taking place on the occult plane) in the human body generally, and until he has in abeyance all his lower passions and his PERSONAL SELF.

Disappointment is sure to come to those who have joined this Section for the purpose of learning "magic arts" or acquiring "occult training" for themselves, quite regardless of the good of other people less determined. (Blavatsky, 12:488)

HPB said that the study (let alone the practice) of occult teachings sets in motion forces that can harm students if they are not prepared (Blavatsky, 12:678). Practical occultism should only be attempted by a person who has attained a certain degree of purity and transcended the illusion of the personal self. The purpose of the ES is to provide the tools for the earnest student to undergo this process of transformation. Once the student has accomplished it (which may take several lives of earnest work) a Master of Wisdom will accept him as a disciple. Only then he can safely start treading the path of practical occultism under the guidance of his Master.

While HPB was alive, the ES served as a place where she could impart some esoteric instructions related to this preparation for the occult path, to be worked out among the ES members before making them public. (In her view, whenever a person studies a subject he "magnetically" attracts the thought-forms produced by people who have previously studied the topic. These thought-forms may either help or hinder the understanding, depending on their accuracy. It was probably expected that the study by ES members would produce the right thought-forms before the general public had access to the teachings). Those teachings were later published partially by Annie Besant in her third volume of *The Secret Doctrine* and eventually made available in their entirety in volume twelve of Blavatsky's *Collected Writings*.

The ES is not esoteric because it has a body of teachings that are kept secret from the rest of the TS members. Although there is material produced specifically for the ES, these teachings can be found throughout the Theosophical literature. Rather the ES material focuses on the teachings that have to do with the *practice* of the spiritual life according to Theosophical principles. Thus the occult aspect of the school is not based on the existence of special information or secret ceremonies, but on the inner processes to which members are subjected.

A second purpose of this organization has to do with the collective. Every homogeneous group of people becomes, consciously or unconsciously, a channel for different kinds of energies, whether spiritual, intellectual, or emotional, whether uplifting or debasing. The ES attempts to gather together a group of people with a common goal and lifestyle so that a certain influence can be conveyed through them. (This, of course, does not mean that every person who joins the ES is inwardly in tune with its aim, or that there are no people outside the ES who are in harmony with its aim and work.) It is the duty of each ES member to do his best to attune himself to the aims of the ES and to be in harmony with other members, so that he becomes a vehicle instead of an obstruction for the energy that is intended to be spread.

Joining the ES

As was said before, the TS offers an open platform for everybody without asking its members to adopt any particular belief or practice. Those ready to fulfill the necessary requirements are free to join the ES, if they feel drawn to this particular spiritual path. But those TS members who are not particularly attracted to it are free to follow their own practice, if any, and this will in no way be a hindrance to their TS life and activities.

Any person, after having been an active member of the Theosophical Society for a couple of years, can apply to join the ES. However, because this school is meant as a place to *tread* a certain spiritual path and not merely to study about it, there are some conditions the aspirant has to fulfill. Some people dislike the fact that they cannot be freely admitted, but this attitude does not seem reasonable. The ES is an organization that proposes a particular lifestyle. If somebody is not willing to adopt it, why would he want to join the ES? It is like wanting to join a tennis club while being unwilling to hit a ball with a racquet.

The requirements to join the ES should not be felt as an imposition from outside, but simply as part of a lifestyle the aspirant is ready to embrace willingly. Blavatsky wrote that although the discipline will not affect family duties, "every member of the Esoteric Section will have to give up more than one personal habit, such as practised in social life, and to adopt some few ascetic rules" (Blavatsky, 12:488).

For the ES to have any transformative effect, the aspirant has to be willing to work on any physical and psychological habits that may hinder his spiritual life. If a member is not willing to do this to the best of his capacity, joining the ES will not have a positive effect on him; moreover he will become an inharmonious element within the organization.

Let us now explore briefly the conditions of membership. One of them is vegetarianism. (In the nineteenth century it was difficult to be vegetarian in the West, so this rule was not compulsory. But today it is, since there are many options for a vegetarian diet.) According to Theosophical teachings, the consumption of meat stimulates the animal nature the aspirant is trying to fight against. Also, the influence of the Masters is hindered by an atmosphere saturated by the emanations from the slaughtered animals (Chin, 138). Finally, Theosophical teachings point out that the presence of a nervous system in an organism is the result of an active awareness on the emotional plane. This means that the capacity to feel pain is well developed in the animal kingdom (in vertebrates more than in invertebrates). Eating meat therefore goes against the development of compassion.

Another prerequisite is to avoid the consumption of drugs and alcohol, even if the aspirant wants to use them as alleged "spiritual" means. In the Theosophical view, no artificially altered state of consciousness is regarded as valuable. Besides other harmful effects, these habits attract undesirable elementals and damage the pineal and pituitary glands, which are the organs for the reception of spiritual perception in the brain.

Finally, the sexual life of the aspirant has to be ordered and healthy. It is essential that it take place in the atmosphere of higher emotions, with a person he or she loves and feels responsible for, rather than as an act of gratification of the animal nature.

It is clear that these rules are not in themselves indicators of spirituality. A person may be able to fulfill them quite easily and yet be thoroughly selfish and unfit for the spiritual path. Similarly, another person can be very spiritual and compassionate even if he does not follow them. These rules do not entail any moral judgment, but those willing to tread this particular path need to follow them, both for individual and collective reasons.

Once the aspirant joins the ES, he agrees to follow a daily discipline based on the Theosophical principles of study, meditation, service, and self-awareness. However, in the ES there are no gurus that take responsibility for a member, or control what he does or does not do. The "control" comes from the law of karma: those who are serious receive help and guidance through what happens in their lives, while those who are not miss the opportunity and gradually stagnate.

Effects of Joining

Joining an occult organization such as the ES has some important effects on the neophyte. HPB explained it as follows:

As soon as anyone pledges himself as a "Probationer," certain occult effects ensue. Of these the first is the *throwing outward of everything latent in the nature* of the man: his faults, habits, qualities, or subdued desires, whether good, bad, or indifferent ..

[The vices] will come to the front irrepressibly, and he will have to fight a hundred times harder than before, until he *kills* all such tendencies in himself.

On the other hand, if he ... has any virtue hitherto latent and concealed in him, it will work its way out as irrepressibly as the rest.

THIS IS AN IMMUTABLE LAW IN THE DOMAIN OF THE OCCULT.

Its action is the more marked the more earnest and sincere the desire of the candidate, and the more deeply he has felt the reality and importance of his pledge. (Blavatsky, 12:515)

We have to remember that the motive for joining the ES is not to make life more enjoyable, but to free oneself from the sources of ignorance as rapidly as possible, so that one becomes able to help others. The effects of the occult energies are similar to those of the sun when it begins to shine upon a hitherto obscured piece of land. Everything in it is vitalized, weeds as well as beautiful plants. As in an alchemical process, the neophyte's weaknesses and shortcomings will become more active, so that he has the opportunity to work on them for their purification and transmutation. But he will also have added strength to do this work.

However, there are those who, after experiencing this effect, fall into a tendency of self-delusion, not facing honestly whatever is being brought up. The result of this attitude is that they fall prey to the negative side of this occult process (the stimulation of weaknesses) without taking advantage of the positive one (the additional strength to deal with them).

An additional effect of a sincere intent in this direction is that the neophyte's karma is "reorganized." Life becomes less random and acquires a specific direction that is clear to the observant aspirant. External situations will be shaped in a way so as to afford the necessary challenges and opportunities for the work of inner alchemy. The earnest aspirant has nothing to fear. Nobody has to face more than he is capable of. And even though at times this is hard work, the bright side is that as a result of his efforts, he gradually attains more freedom, wisdom, and strength.

This inner work helps the aspirant progressively awaken to a deeper existence, and his life becomes more meaningful from a spiritual point of view. But maybe the most inspiring aspect of this path is the sense that he becomes a humble part of a mighty power that is toiling to ultimately ensure the happiness of humanity, and that every time he faces and defeats the "evil" inside himself, he is helping defeat it in the whole world.

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