

## Discipleship by: Annie Besant

Reprinted from *The Theosophical Review* for July, 1906

Published in 1935

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

MUCH has been said and written on the Qualifications for Discipleship, as they are set down in Eastern Scriptures; they are laid down therein as the ideal according to which the aspirant should try to shape his life, and are intended to help a candidate for discipleship by pointing to the direction in which he should turn his efforts. Among the Eastern Peoples, Hindus and Buddhists, to whom they were given, they have always been so regarded, and men have taken them as guides in self-culture, as pupils may strive to copy, to the best of their ability, the perfect statue set up in the midst of the class for study. As these qualifications have become known in the Western world through Theosophical literature, they have been used in a somewhat different spirit, as a basis for the criticism of others rather than as rules for self-education. Frederic Denison Maurice spoke once of people who — “used the bread of life as [Page 2] stones to cast at their enemies”, and the spirit which thus uses information is not uncommon among us. It may be open to question whether Those who have spread through the world much information that once was kept secret, may not occasionally have felt a twinge of doubt as to the wisdom of pouring forth teaching liable to so much misuse.

Our great Teacher, H. P. Blavatsky, has suffered much at the hands of those who use the qualifications for discipleship as missiles for attack instead of as buoys to mark out the channel. It has been asked — as in the *Vahan* last year — why a person who smoked, who lost her temper, who was lacking in self-control, should have been a disciple, while — this was not said but implied — many eminently respectable people, with all the family virtues, who never outrage conventionalities, and are models of deportment, are not considered worthy of that title. It may not be useless to try to solve the puzzle.

Those who have read carefully the unpublished letters from Those whom we call the Masters must have been sometimes struck with surprise over the opinions therein expressed, so different is Their envisagement of people and things from the current appreciations in the world. They look at many things that to us seem important with utter indifference, and lay stress on matters that we overlook. So surprising are sometimes the judgments [Page 3] passed that they teach the readers a great lesson of caution in the formation of opinions about others, and make one realise the wisdom of the Teacher who said: “Judge not, that ye be not judged”. A judgment which has not before it all the facts, which knows nothing of the causes from which actions spring, which regards superficial appearances and not underlying motives, is a judgment which is worthless, and, in the eyes of Those who judge with knowledge, condemns the judge rather than the victim. Eminently is this true as regards the judgments passed on H. P. Blavatsky, and it may be worthwhile to consider what is connoted by the words “disciple” and “initiate”, and why she should have held the position of a disciple and an initiate, despite the criticisms showered upon her.

Let us define our terms. A “disciple” is the name given in the occult schools, to those who, being on the probationary path, are recognized by some Master as attached to Himself. The term asserts a fact, not a particular moral stage, and does not carry with it a necessary implication of the highest moral elevation.

This comes out strongly in the traditional story of Jesus and His disciples; they quarrelled with each other about precedence, they ran away when their Master was attacked, one of them denied Him with oaths, and later on showed much duplicity. The truth is that discipleship implies a past tie between **[Page 4]** Master and disciple, and a Master may recognise that tie, growing out of past relationship, with one who has still much to achieve; the disciple may have many and serious faults of character, may by no means — though his face be turned to the Light — have exhausted all the heavy Karma of the past, may be facing many a difficulty, fighting on many a battlefield with the legions of the past against him. The word “disciple” does not necessarily imply initiation, nor saintship; it only asserts a position and a tie — that the person is on the probationary path, and is recognised by a Master as His.

Among the people who occupy that position in the world today are many types. For those who are perplexed regarding them it is well that the law should be recalled, that a man is what he desires and thinks, and not what he does. What he desires and thinks shapes his future; what he does is the outcome of his past. Actions are the least important part of a man's life, from the occult standpoint — a hard doctrine to many, but true. Certainly there is a karma connected with action; the past evil desire and thought, which are made manifest in an evil act in the present, have had their evil fruit in the shaping of tendencies and character, and the act itself is expiated in the suffering and disrepute it entails; the remaining karma of the action grows out of its effect on others, and this reacts later in unfavourable **[Page 5]** circumstance. Action, in the wide sense of the term, is composed of desire, thought and activity; the desire generates thought; the thought generates activity; the activity does not generate directly but only indirectly. Hence the man's desires and thoughts are the most vital elements in the formation of the judgment passed on the man. What he desires, what he thinks, that he IS; what he does, that he WAS. It follows that a man with past heavy karma may, if he become a disciple, expedite the manifestation of that karma, and its fruitage in the outer world may be of actions that do not bring him credit in the eyes of his world. From the occult standpoint such a man is to be helped to the utmost, so that he may be able to pass through the awful strain, the bearing of which successfully means triumph, the succumbing to which means failure.

Moreover, in passing right judgments on actions, not only must we know the actor's past, in which the roots of the actions are struck, but we must know the immediate past, that which immediately preceded the action. Sometimes a wrong action is done, but it has been preceded by a desperate struggle, in which every ounce of strength has been put forth in resistance, and only after complete exhaustion has the action supervened. From outside we see only the failure, not the struggle. But the struggler has profited by the effort that preceded the failure; he is the stronger, **[Page 6]** the nobler, the better, and has developed the forces which will enable him to overcome the difficulty when it next presents itself, perchance even without a struggle. In the eyes of Those who see the whole, and not only a fragment, that man condemned by his fellows as fallen has really risen, for he has won as the fruit of his combat the strength which assures him of victory.

This disciple stands on the probationary path; he is a candidate for initiation. He comes under conditions different from those that surround men in the outer world; he is recognised as pledged to the service of Light, and hence is also recognised as an opponent of the power of Darkness. His joys will be keener, his sufferings sharper, than those experienced without. He has called down the fire from heaven; well for him if he shrinks not from its scorching. And well too for him, if, like the Red Indian at the torture-stake, he can face an unsympathetic world with a serene face, however sharply the fire may burn.

What of the famous qualifications for initiation which he must now seek to make his own ? They are not asked for in perfection, but some possession of them there must be ere the portal may swing open to admit him. In the judgment passed on him, which opens or bars the gateway, the whole man is taken into account. With some, so greatly, are other qualities developed, that but a small modicum of those specially demanded weighs down [Page 7] the scale. With others, more average in general type, high development of these is demanded. It is, so to speak, a general stature that is expected, and the stature is made up in many ways. A candidate may be of great intelligence, of splendid courage, of rare self-sacrifice, of spotless purity, and bringing such dower with him may lack somewhat in the special qualifications. Something of them, indeed, he must have. If he have no sense of the difference between the real and unreal; if he be passionately addicted to the joys of the world; if he have no control over tongue or thought, no endurance, no faith, no liberality, no wish for freedom, he could not enter. The completion of the qualities may be left for the other side, if the beginnings are seen; but the initiate must fill up the full tale, and the more there is lacking the more will there be to be done.

It is not well to minimise the urgency of the demand, for these qualities must be reached some time, and far better now than later. Every weakness that remains in the initiated disciple, who has entered the path, affords a point of vantage to the Dark Powers, who are ever seeking for crevices in the armour of the champions of the Light. No earnestness is too great in urging the uninitiated disciple to acquire these qualities; no effort is too great on his part to compass their achieving. For there is something of pathos in the case of a hero-soul who has "taken the kingdom of heaven by [Page 8] violence" and has to pause to give a life-time to the building up of the lesser perfections which in the past he neglected to acquire.

Though the mills of God grind slowly  
Yet they grind exceeding small;  
Though He stands and waits with patience  
With exactness grinds He all.

The lofty initiate who has left some minor parts of human perfection unbuilt must be born into the world of men to lead a life in which these also shall be perfected. And if any chance to meet such a one in the flesh he would do wisely to learn from his best rather than to use his worst as his excuse for his own shortcomings, making it a justification for his own faults that he shares them with the initiate.

Pre-eminently is this true of the criticisms levelled against H. P. Blavatsky. "She smoked". But smoking is not the sin against the Holy Ghost. The use of it to depreciate a great teacher is a far worse crime than smoking, which, at the worst, is only a habit disagreeable to a small minority.

"She had a bad temper". So have a good many of her critics, without a thousandth part of the excuse she well might have pleaded. Few could bear for a week the strain under which she lived year after year, with the dark forces storming round her, striving to break her down, because the breaking down meant a check to the great spiritual movement which she led. In the position she was [Page 9] bidden to hold, the nervous strain and tension were so great, the cruel shafts of criticism and unkindness were rendered so stinging by the subtle craft of the Brothers of the Shadow, that she judged it better at times to relieve the body by an explosion, and to let the jangled nerves express themselves in irritability, than to hold the body in strict subjection and let it break under the strain. At all hazards she had to live, with strained nerves and failing brain, till the hour struck for her release. It is ill done to criticise such a one, who suffered that we might profit.

“She lacked self-control”. Outside sometimes, for the reasons above given, but never inside. Never was she shaken within, however stormy without. It may be said that such statement will be used as an excuse for ill-temper in ordinary people. Let them stand where she stood, *i.e.*, become extraordinary people, and then they may fairly claim the same excuse.

H. P. Blavatsky was one of those who are so great, so priceless, that their qualities outweigh a thousandfold the temporary imperfections of their nature. Her dauntless courage, her heroic fortitude, her endurance in bearing physical and mental pain, her measureless devotion to the Master whom she served — these splendid qualities, united to great psychic capacities, and the strong body with nerves of steel that she laid on the altar of sacrifice, made all else as dust in the balance. Well might her Master [Page 10] joy in such a warrior, even if not free from every imperfection. But where a person has no heroism, little devotion, and but small tendency to self-sacrifice, a strong manifestation of the special qualifications may well be demanded to counter-balance the deficiencies. Man worships the sun as a luminary and not for his spots. In the sunlight of H. P. Blavatsky's heroic figure, the spots are not the things that catch the eye of wisdom. But these spots do not raise to her level those who are nearly all spots, with little gleams of light. It is ill done in these days of small virtue and small vices to criticise harshly the few great ones who may come into our world.

Often, with S. Catherine of Siena, have I felt that intense love for some one even but a little higher than ourselves is one of the best methods for training ourselves into that lofty love of the Supreme Self which burns up all imperfections as with fire. Hero-worship may have its dangers, but they are less perilous, less obstructive of the spiritual life, than the cold criticism of the self-righteous, directed constantly to depreciation of others. And still I hold with Bruno, the Hero-worshipper, that it is better to try greatly and fail, than not to try at all. [Page 11]