

THE GOLDEN STAIRS

A clean life, an open mind,
A pure heart, an eager intellect,
An unveiled spiritual perception,
A brotherliness for all,

A readiness to give and receive advice and instruction,
A loyal sense of duty to the Teacher,
A willing obedience to the behests of TRUTH,
Once we have placed our confidence in,
And believe that Teacher to be in possession of it;

A courageous endurance of personal injustice,
A brave declaration of principles,
A valiant defense of those who are unjustly attacked,
And a constant eye to the ideal of human progression,
And perfection which the secret science depicts—

These are the golden stairs
Up the steps of which the learner may climb
To the Temple of Divine Wisdom.

—H. P. Blavatsky

THE GOLDEN STAIRS: A COMMENTARY *

By Sidney A. Cook

If there is one thing more than any other on which members of the several Theosophical Societies are of one mind, it is that H. P. Blavatsky—beyond the norm of her time or of ours—had won access to the knowledge of some of Nature’s basic laws and of mankind’s nature and destiny. This knowledge and the powers that go with its winning, not simply its acquisition by the mind, she demonstrated and told, and what she told rings true. For she taught that there was no easy path to the knowledge, and that truth could be known and wisdom achieved only through noble living and courageous service to mankind.

Among the directions that she left for this noble and courageous path is the statement that is known as “The Golden Stairs,” by which progress could be made through human experience until humanity acquired divine knowledge and shared the wisdom of the Gods.

1. A clean life
2. An open mind
3. A pure heart
4. An eager intellect
5. An unveiled spiritual perception
6. A brotherliness for all
7. A readiness to give and receive advice and instruction
8. A loyal sense of duty to the teacher
9. A willing obedience to the behests of Truth
10. A courageous endurance of personal injustice
11. A brave declaration of principles
12. A valiant defense of those who are unjustly attacked
13. A constant eye to the ideal of human progression and perfection

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In the Golden Stairs, H. P. Blavatsky gives us thirteen points, or thirteen steps up the stairs to be mounted. And it should not surprise us if we find that HPB has given us much more than a random list of steps or stages. Does not the fact that she names them a stairway suggest that there must be order and sequence to the steps on the stairs; that the stairway has structure and form and that every step must therefore be trodden in its proper turn? Is there not a suggestion in this idea that no step can be omitted if we would climb to the top, that none can be taken out of order, that it is indeed a stairway, not in symbolic language only, but in actual living fact?

Now if we find on intuitive analysis that the Golden Stairs have such structure and the steps such sequence, some enhancement of our understanding of HPB's stature will surely follow. We shall appreciate even more deeply that she not only brought us the knowledge that humanity is not of the dust, that we are bound for the heights, but teaches us rightly that true knowledge and true living go together. Theosophy will mean more to us as we find meanings within meanings, and as we learn that HPB not only tells us of the mechanism of the universe, its laws, and those of consciousness, the principles of science and philosophy of the Secret Doctrine, but she gives us precepts and detailed instruction, the key to living that will make this knowledge our own as we tread the Golden Stairs.



H. P. Blavatsky

Golden with pure and shining and untarnishable principles, the stairway stands. Golden and glorious will be the result of the treading of the stairway though rough-hewn and difficult each step may appear to the climber. But each must be taken sequentially, one by one. There can be no omissions, no acrobatic feats by which any can be by-passed. It is indeed a stairway, an evolutionary way. "Up the steps of which" is HPB's own descriptive phrase.

If we can trace the structure and see an order to the steps, then the stairway will take on new meaning and value. And there will be fascination in the discovery of teachings within teachings, new wisdom disclosed in HPB's abstruse phrases. The Golden Stairs may become, not merely a list of rules, but a way of life with infinite values in the study of each step.

Let us first take a quick overall glance at this Golden Stairway consisting of thirteen steps. Later we will examine each of them in some detail.

1. A clean life
2. An open mind
3. A pure heart
4. An eager intellect

We immediately recognize these first four steps as describing a high standard of human development and self-control such as men and women attain without special guidance, in ordinary cultured and ethical living. Cleanliness, openness of mind, purity of heart, and eagerness of intellectual search are characteristic of many thousands of people everywhere in the world, many whom we all know.

The four qualifications are all associated with the development and control of our mental, emotional, and physical nature and they are of that order attainable without any special guidance, or knowledge of, or contact with the Wisdom teachings. However, they are prerequisites for the fifth step, the unveiling.

5. An unveiled spiritual perception

Here comes the perception, the recognition that there is something more: a Self in man, a plan in Nature for him, a vision of a larger purpose in life. We will return to the consideration of the special significance of each step and its relationship to those that follow.

6. A brotherliness for all
7. A readiness to give and receive advice and instruction
8. A loyal sense of duty to the teacher
9. A willing obedience to the behests of truth

Referring back, we find that the first four steps were all descriptive of the well-rounded qualities of our lesser self. They were personal qualifications.

Then in the fifth step comes the vision of the greater.

Now in the next four steps we find expressions of relationship—brotherliness, giving, receiving, advice, instruction, duty, and obedience. These are not unilateral conditions, but conditions of relationship, involving other people.

The final four of the thirteen steps of the Stairs are given as:

10. A courageous endurance of personal injustice
11. A brave declaration of principles
12. A valiant defense of those who are unjustly attacked
13. A constant eye to the ideal of human progression and perfection

These four also fall into a group for each constitutes an expression, not of relationship but again of the Self, but now calling upon the Higher Self. The qualities are endurance, bravery in support of principles, opposition to injustice, an eye to the Great Plan—all expressions of the Self in action and service.

And so we have:

- 1 to 4: Preparation
- 5: The unveiling and the vision
- 6 to 9: Relationship and training
- 10 to 13: The discovery and release of the Self in enlightened action

So far we have discovered some meaning to the grouping, some significance to the order and to the sequence of the steps on the stairway. Let us now examine them in more detail and we may find still other evidences of ordered structure.

1. A clean life

This, in our fullest understanding of it, is a required basic quality for all inner development. It constitutes a standard to be attained in the ordinary course of evolutionary movement, of unawakened progress through the evolutionary urge without any particularly conscious co-operative effort. It signifies a degree of attainment that is perhaps ordinarily understood by the term *good citizenship*. A clean life implies, not necessarily the attainment of intellectual heights or a rounded perfection of character, but that crudeness is replaced by goodness and what may be called magnetic cleanliness. It is not descriptive of the person in whom the baser urges of human nature still find expression, but of those who have reached a standard of human conduct and attitude that can become the foundation for inner spiritual development, a condition acquired through unawakened evolutionary progress to the point where conscious effort and intent can be brought to bear. If we examine the basic meaning of “a clean life” we find that “clean” is derived from an old Anglo-Saxon word meaning clear or pure. And I think of water, clear and pure in the sunshine, and of a clean life as one that if

flooded with light would disclose nothing to cause any degree of shame to one's self or to another.

A clean life makes the unclean unwelcome. It involves inner and outer physical cleanliness with none of the toxins of excess; no response to the emotionally unclean, the distortions of so-called art; a mind unretentive of the foul and in which the unclean finds no sustenance.

The keyword is *preparation*. It is a life unselfconsciously prepared, brought to a stage of cleanliness and good citizenship as evolution in due season prepares all her children to step forth in self-conscious development. Unaided evolution brings us to this broad platform from which to take off on our conscious way.

2. An open mind

Here begins a co-operative growth. Hitherto evolution, without our conscious aid or understanding, has created a clean life and developed a capacity for conscious self-control. Here is an advance; here prejudices, preconceptions and fixations of mind have to be dealt with. *Reception* seems to be the keyword, the opening of the mind to permit examination of the new and possibly conflicting idea, which heretofore might automatically have been disregarded; examination, not for acceptance because of automatic fitting into long-established mental grooves, nor for rejection because of failure to fit. Blind acceptance or blind rejection is no indication that the grooves are either rightly or wrongly shaped or worn. Some new idea may be contrary to our principles. Yet it should be examined and the principles reviewed, for even a principle may evolve and what is principle now, in the light of broadened view and greater wisdom, may prove less than eternal. Lesser principles must be replaced by larger, wider and possibly more inclusive principles. All this must be consciously undertaken for the development of the open mind as a step on the Golden Stairs.

To invite challenge, to invite doubt, does not mean life in constant uncertainty but in constant search with the certainties held lightly enough to let more knowledge in. It means discernment through checking, weighing, discarding, replacement, acceptance, and building a core of truth that is our very own and examining even that core from time to time to ensure that it remains pliable enough for new truth to be absorbed. If by challenge, if by doubt, the foundation of our faith can be destroyed, better it is destroyed so that we may begin the building of a new and more enduring foundation.

An open mind is a receptive mind, but one that excludes all that is sub-standard as determined by the previous step, a clean life. So measured, much so-

called literature, much information that is only gossip, would find no entry. Then the third step comes to our aid.

3. A pure heart

Again the idea of cleanliness of life is stressed, for the word “pure” has a Latin derivation from *purus* meaning clean.

The heart is the testing instrument that determines what the mind shall transmit. The mind accepts and rejects but it also retains and transmits to others. The heart exercises a selective function. It sifts and weighs more surely than the mind alone. A pure heart will permit the mind to transmit only the true. It will reject the false, the wrongly motivated, or the hurtful. “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.” In this biblical passage, “see” means to recognize or know God. They shall recognize or know what is good. The heart is the perceptive instrument that comprehends and understands. The heart transmutes, for while the mind receives and examines all, the heart permits the giving forth of only what is true. The keyword of the step is *transmutation*.

4. An eager intellect

“Eager” comes from the French and means sharp or keen, ardent, burning, quick, enthusiastic. “Intellect” is essentially a Latin word meaning perception but implying more than curious observation. It really means a willingness to know, a search to comprehend. An eager intellect is more than the open, receptive mind. It is eagerness, ardor of search for knowledge.

Openness of mind has brought some knowledge of many things; many facets of knowledge in some degree have been examined; many channels of some kinds of knowledge have been opened; many interests have been stirred.

The pure heart has indicated values to the mind. Now eagerness of intellect is added—eager, active search. And *search* is the keyword.

Let us now review these first four steps of the Golden Stairs.

- A clean life—physical, etheric or magnetic, emotional
- An open mind—mental
- A pure heart—intuitional quality
- An eager intellect—the will

Starting with the equipment of the ordinary clean-living man (or woman)—the broad basic platform of a clean life—we have mounted three additional steps

bringing something of the mental, buddhic, and ātmic qualities (mind, heart and will) selectively, intentionally, and co-operatively into play.

In these first four steps we see the sequential calling forth in growing influence, of all the qualities and powers of humanity.

True, it is but the beginning of their emergence and exercise, but we are on only the four lower steps of the Golden Stairway. The training, however, has to begin here. There must be at least a fair beginning of conscious use and control before the next step can be approached. All of this has been an essential preliminary to the fifth.

From the broad foundation of a general evolutionary standard, a clean life, the next three steps are ascended with conscious effort and search with self-interest in the striving, for there is yet no consciousness of any spiritual purpose or vision of a spiritual goal or plan. The steps have been self-motivated. Discernment has been brought to bear, but all of this strengthening and preparation have been an unconscious approach to the unveiling. Then comes the fifth step.

5. An unveiled spiritual perception

Now comes the contact with the Wisdom. Throughout this process of preparation, there has been a gradual thinning of the veils, an opening of the mind, a purification of the heart, an eagerness of search. A fund of Karma has been unconsciously built up. Inevitably, this work, this eager search, this thinning of the heavy veils, must lead to a knowledge of the Great Plan, a realization of the purpose of life, and a dawning consciousness of an inner or greater Self.

Theosophy may be the medium of this knowledge but it is not the only approach, although it may be the most clearly defined. The keyword of this step is *realization* in the sense of recognition of the Great Plan, discovery of the nature of the Self, the opening of a new and larger life. The mind, the will, and the heart have been partly trained. They are now directed to new and higher control and purpose. No longer is it just what the mind perceives that governs, even though supported by the judgment of the heart. A new force enters, based upon a spiritual purpose. Lower claims have been transcended, the faculties brought under some control. There is still a consciousness of many limitations, but the vision is now upward; a new direction comes into living. The building starts on a higher level for now we have become responsive to the higher Self and gradually give lesser heed to the claims of the lower self.

It is in this stage of the unveiling of spiritual perception that there comes the understanding that limitations are self-made, and then the beginning of power to

live beyond them, the transforming of self-created circumstances. Someone has said or written: "Nothing splendid has ever been achieved except by those who dared to believe that something inside themselves was superior to circumstances." Karma as a law of justice now comes to be recognized and therefore accepted, and a collateral meaning, "work," adopted.

A reorientation takes place with this ascension of the fifth step. There is a changing emphasis, a higher purpose, a deeper living; the influence—possibly through meditation—of one of the Elder Brethren; an understanding that human beings live under spiritual law and that that law should now be consciously invoked, consulted, and applied.

To the degree that the unveiling proceeds, the life and affairs cease to be governed by outer circumstances and attractions, but are governed from within. Gradually the mind and all the faculties are released for co-operation in consummating this newly unveiled understanding. With a new goal, spiritual perception keeps the eyes upon it and all thought, feeling, and effort in accord.

As has been stated by one theosophical writer,[†] there arises the "endeavor to become the constant seer of love and unity, and constant knower of the truth about things and their fleeting relations to the permanent life." It is with this permanent life that those to whom this unveiling has come, now become concerned. Constancy may be difficult but when once there has come the dawning of this spiritual perception, the new direction—though it be varied and even sometimes overlooked—can only be but temporarily forsaken. Active work and service take the place of passive goodness. Responsibility and duty assume a deeper meaning. It may perhaps add complexity to living, but in the midst of the struggle, the vision that comes with the unveiling brings, as it were, oil to the machinery of life, removing the frictions, adding to the power.

Continuing with our survey of the other steps on the Golden Stairs, the fifth—which we have just examined as the step of realization and of purpose—again provides the broad base for the succeeding four, which are expressive of relationship.

6. A brotherliness for all

We see immediately the effect of the unveiling and the essential sequence. The first four steps represent the acquirement of personal capacities, cleanliness of life, openness of mind, purity of heart, and eagerness of search. Then the unveiling, the

[†] Ernest Wood. *The New Theosophy*. Theosophical Press, 1929.

discovery of spiritual plan and purpose, causes these capacities to be outwardly turned. From the sixth step there is a looking out and, as it were, an outpouring in a sense of gratitude and thanksgiving, of a brotherliness that includes all. For when from the unveiling there follows the deep realization of the spiritual oneness of humanity, none in the end can be excluded. There can then be no limit, for if the brotherhood is real, it cannot be withheld. There cannot be the living of two lives, one of brotherhood given—one of brotherhood withheld—and therefore no brotherhood at all.

7. A readiness to give and receive advice and instruction

If an all-inclusive brotherhood is a difficult condition to attain—as it obviously is—how much more difficult this seventh step: to give advice, to offer it truly and with wisdom so that (if taken) good and not harm will result; to be responsive in offering advice but without urging acceptance; to be graciously unconcerned if advice given is not accepted.

Harder still is the listening to advice. It is a real test of brotherhood to listen to the advice of one who is trying to be helpful and, from any source, accept and apply that which is good and true. In such a brotherhood as the unveiling can reveal, both giving and receiving should be among the mutual joys of the brotherhood relationship.

And all of this applies to instruction as well as to advice if we happen to be placed where it is our function to be trained. If it is our responsibility to give teaching or training, then there is also the commensurate responsibility to present it acceptably.

8. A loyal sense of duty to the teacher

It is a law of the Guru relationship that only the willing and trusting can be taught. It is obviously true of the ordinary teacher-pupil relationship. It is ungenerous to listen to a teacher in pretence and disrespect. Learning from a teacher should be an act of confidence and trust but it does not imply a permanent commitment to accept. However, the brotherhood relationship that flows from the unveiling of truth surely includes learning one from another.

It is a law of Nature also that she teaches only the willing. Unlearned karmic lessons return again and again with increasing forcefulness until at last there is a willingness to receive the lesson. Farther and farther we wander from any fountain of truth until we are ready to be taught. Therefore loyalty is due to those who, for the time, are accepted as teachers.

9. A willing obedience to the behests of Truth

This surely implies confidence in the Truth, which the unveiling reveals to us. It obviously does not mean blind acceptance, with docility and mental inactivity, or any other negative state. It means instead an obedience in which the will is brought to bear to compel obedience to that which is now known to be Truth. Not merely an obedience born of desire or inclination, but an obedience to Truth created out of a Self-directed and thoughtful intent to follow it.

We have examined the, second group of steps on the Golden Stairs—steps of developing relationship to brothers, to advisers and instructors, to teachers, to Truth. Now come the stages of testing, of application, the final group of four steps up which the learner must climb to the Temple of Divine Wisdom. We have traveled with the learner through the stages of his gaining self-control, of a marvelous relationship of developing brotherhood, both essential and sequential stages on the way. Now comes the testing.

10. A courageous endurance of personal injustice

Each person must learn and bear for himself or herself. But if the unveiling has revealed Truth, and if Truth has been pursued, courage enough will be found. Less can be said of these steps: As the climb is made, each climber finds their way becoming more and more individual to themselves, for it becomes increasingly Self-chosen. The lessons are the same, the brotherhood and the relationships become stronger and ever more inclusive, but the way becomes more and more solitary.

“A courageous endurance of personal injustice.” History both in and out of the Theosophical Society is replete with many magnificent and outstanding examples. But the trials come in the small as well as in the large. Silence is generally a concomitant of this enduring. Self-defense has been left far behind, but defense of the Great Work is never forsaken.

11. A brave declaration of principles

This is a test of our knowledge, our certainty, and our convictions. But it is no less a test of our discrimination and finesse. A declaration of principles will be no less brave, no less effective for being gentle and tactful. An uninformed fanatical defense may likely have an effect opposite to the one intended.

12. A valiant defense of those who are unjustly attacked

Again, there is a need for discrimination or discernment. It may be relatively easy to avoid rushing in to help another. It is often difficult to know when and how to defend. There are circumstances when even silence is, for the moment, the best defense, providing the injured brother or sister knows we are standing with them. Then comes the final step.

13. A constant eye to the ideal of human progression and perfection

What is implied is an eye to helpful action, and not merely passive observance; a pledge to the Great Plan in its becoming, now clearly seen, understood, and forever accepted.

Each individual moves up the Golden Stairs at their own elected pace, to become in the end a pillar in the Temple of Humanity. It is a long but fascinating journey, and shared with brothers and sisters all the way.

This is only one way of interpreting the Golden Stairs. Their sequence and design indicate a path which all must eventually travel. For the path is not arbitrary but a natural process, the steps up which—with not one omitted—all will climb. The entire world, all experience, and all of living, constitute the Golden Stairs.

There is a way of life that leads the soul
To happiness undreamed of by the mind
A way whereon the earnest heart may find
A reason for its being, and a Goal.
When laughter grows no more to be enough
And pain no longer turns the heart to tears
The entrance to that Mystic Way appears
And all the world becomes a plastic stuff
That shapes into a Stairs. O world, be Stairs
To me. Be no more hearth or prize or song
Be no more home, but scenery by the long
Long way to Home. Be hand that bares
My soul of all its willfulness to be
A thing apart from what is really me.

—Helen Palmer Owen