

## WHO IS THE TEACHER?

By Joy Mills

In *The Golden Stairs*, the beautiful and concise statement given to her students by H. P. Blavatsky, two of the steps contain reference to the Teacher:

. . . 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...

For the sincere student who is endeavoring to guide his life by the precepts given by H.P.B., the question inevitably arises: Who is the teacher? It is a question particularly relevant in these days when the so-called guru-industry produces a new "model" almost every year. Before one can feel a loyal sense of duty towards another and certainly before one can obey, willingly, the behests of Truth which come from another, one needs to have some assurance that the other is the possessor of Truth.

Among the basic concepts presented to the student of the theosophical philosophy is the idea that there exists and has existed at all times throughout human history a hierarchy of adepts. Many who read the history of the Theosophical Society recognize that those who were responsible for its establishment in the world attributed its ideals and the message it was meant to convey to certain spiritual Teachers or Mahatmas, Masters of the Wisdom. Consequently, the theosophical student repeating the steps of *The Golden Stairs*, may automatically identify the Teacher with one or another of the Mahatmas spoken of by H. P. Blavatsky. But such unthinking identification does not necessarily answer our question. Even if one accepts that the reference in *The Golden Stairs* is to H.P.B.'s own Teacher, how can we come into contact with that Teacher (or our own Master) in such a way as to have absolute confidence that He is in possession of some truth which we are to obey?

The entire matter is further complicated by a factor which is emphasized again and again not only in theosophical literature but in all literature dealing with genuine occultism. That factor is the need for every student to engage in independent thought, to come to their own realizations, to develop a self-reliance instead of following blindly the dictates of another. So the question becomes an extremely subtle one. How can we be loyal to a Teacher we do not know and at the same time accept the need to think out things for ourselves? To whom are we loyal, and in what does loyalty or willing obedience consist?

## Question of Authority

We may be loyal to a good friend, willing to defend that friend under all circumstances, because we believe that person to be basically honest, morally and ethically upright. We value the judgment of such a friend and often accept their advice. We say that we know our friend and can trust them implicitly. But we do not know the Teacher and, because we do not know such a person for ourselves, often tend to accept without much thought whatever others *say* has come from that Teacher. This inevitably leads us to a consideration of what constitutes authority for us. We all accept various authorities for different aspects of our existence and, in many cases, we submit willingly and unthinkingly. For example, if we are in a strange city and need directions, we assume that a person in a police uniform will give us correct directions. If we consult a doctor, we assume we will receive a correct diagnosis, so that even were we to ask for a second opinion regarding the diagnosis, we seek out another doctor. We invest different individuals with authority because of what we believe to be their qualifications in particular professional areas, often accepting what we are told by such individuals without any question.

In matters that have to do with our own spiritual growth, however, we must exercise a certain care and understand precisely what it is we are doing when we accept some authority or other. There are those, as we well know, who will accept only the words of H. P. Blavatsky as authority, while for others the statements made by Annie Besant or C. Jinarājadāsa or G. de Purucker or W. Q. Judge, constitute the ultimate authority in occult matters. In such cases, there comes about an unquestioning acceptance of everything that individual has said or written. One tends to quote such people almost constantly, arguing not from one's own independent judgment and knowledge but from the presumed authority one has unthinkingly accepted. If we are in an occult or esoteric school, we may come to feel a certain security in simply following whatever the head of that school has told us to do. However, in such a case we have failed to recognize the principal hallmark of the genuine schools of occultism: that the Teacher never absolves the disciple from responsibility for their own decisions. In all authentic occult traditions, whatever pledge is taken is a vow to one's own Higher Self. In the Buddhist tradition, for example, it is said that there is no one to whom an aspirant can take the Bodhisattva vow. Such a pledge can only be taken to oneself! We must invoke only the authority of that Self, knowing that the breaking of a pledge so solemnly taken severs one not from some external authority or Teacher but from the Higher Self, the center of one's own being.

So the question resolves itself into one concerning how we may come into contact with that Higher Self, that Self which is invoked as surety to whatever pledge we may

take to follow the spiritual path. If this is the final authority, the true Teacher, then we need guidelines for coming into touch with that Higher Self. Occult schools have always been in existence for providing such criteria in the world, but the hints given are often difficult to discern and nearly always paradoxical in nature. For they require both a willing obedience to the dictates of Truth and the development of a self-reliant spirit in the quest so that one neither accepts nor rejects without careful consideration and reference to one's own interior perception. While it takes a certain courage for the sincere student to become the independent thinker, there is no substitute for that bravery of the spirit which is willing to examine every idea which is presented. Unless we are able to accept responsibility for our thoughts, our decisions, our beliefs, we are not likely to become genuine *knowers* of Truth.

### **Question of Responsibility**

What, then, are the criteria to be followed? Perhaps the first and simplest, although often difficult in its demands upon us, is that we must start where we are. That means we have to learn to accept our present condition and operate within the orbit of whatever it is we know or do not know. One may be able to fool others into thinking one knows more than is the case but one can never fool oneself! Acceptance of our "unknowing" does not mean the adoption of an open-mouthed gullibility. It is, rather, an honest admission that, while we may not know much, we can only increase our knowledge or understanding by being certain of what it is we *do* know. Inevitably, at this initial stage, we may turn to others outside us who appear to be in a position to teach us. We may turn to books which we intuitively feel carry an aura of authenticity about them, not so much because they contain what we may assume to be final truths but because they seem to point us in the direction in which Truth may lie.

However, in turning to any outside authority, we must know what we are doing and be willing to assume responsibility for our choice and acceptance of that outside Teacher. In other words, if something goes wrong (as well it may) and we find ourselves in deep water, we have to be willing to admit that we made the choice that led us into the morass of our difficulties. How much easier it is, on such occasions, to blame the Teacher! We would like to say, "But the Teacher told me to do that," or "I was only following what the book said." But who chose the Teacher? Who selected the book? Of course, it may also be true that we heard only half of what the Teacher said, or read only part of the book! The point is simply that if we quote someone else whom we consider to be more knowledgeable than we are ourselves, we should do so out of our own deep conviction that what has been said has in it the ring of truth. We do not use our "authorities" to silence the "authorities" of others, but we begin to trust the inner quiet authority of our own perception, humbly aware that we may not yet

perceive the fullness of Truth. As we proceed, through study and meditation, testing out ideas by considering them in the light of our own intuitive understanding as well as in the arena of daily existence, we will naturally gain more confidence, more assurance, and with that confidence, new knowledge is born. Paradoxical as it may seem, knowing increases only by knowing.

### **Question of Authorship**

We may examine the question from another point of view in our effort to arrive at an understanding of who is the Teacher. One of the difficulties confronting the earnest student of Theosophy, especially when reading the early literature of the Society, revolves around the question of who wrote what. This may seem a strange statement, but even a cursory examination of the facts surrounding the production of such works as *The Secret Doctrine* and *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett* (to take only two examples of often-quoted texts) highlights the problem. Consider the matter for a moment: the name of H. P. Blavatsky appears as the author of *The Secret Doctrine*, but who was H.P.B.? There was, first of all, a woman who had certain peculiar characteristics and personality traits—an incarnation that confounded the experts, we might say. Then there was a highly advanced occultist who served consciously as a mediator between those she considered her Adept Teachers and the world about her. Further, if we are to accept the testimony of those about her, she relinquished on occasion her vehicles to her Teachers for their direct use. Without pursuing a detailed study of the mystery of who was H.P.B., we are directly confronted with the question as to which aspect of this multiple complex using the name of H. P. Blavatsky wrote which sentences or statements in *The Secret Doctrine*. Can we, by our own thinking, by our own intuitive perception, by our own understanding, consider each statement in those volumes *on its own merits*? Even more puzzling may be the question of who wrote and who were the real authors of the famous letters, attributed to two Adept Teachers and even bearing their signatures, addressed to A. P. Sinnett, A. O. Hume, and others. Statements within the letters themselves indicate that in many instances these were transcribed by chelas, but chelas, we are told, are at several different levels of occult achievement. Other statements in the letters suggest that several means were used in their composition, including “precipitation.” In some cases, the letters were written *in propria persona* by the Teacher whose name was duly signed at the end of the communication. It is not our intention here to examine this question in detail, but rather to point out the simple fact that whatever may be the source for any of the teachings to which we may turn for instruction and inspiration, we are not absolved from the necessity for independent thinking if we are to discover Truth for ourselves.

Consider again the question of the authorship of *The Mahatma Letters*. Some, it is said, were the product of chelas who were later termed “failures.” Does this invalidate the contents of those letters? We may well ask what it is to be a failure, for in one sense the failure is simply the individual who has attempted more than can be achieved. But all honor to the one who attempts the heights even if there is a failure to reach them! The occult tradition would indicate that the failures of one cycle may be the Dhyan Chohans of the next. Surely in the spiritual life it is better to have set our vision beyond our reach than to have rested content within the smaller orbits of our views. So, whether the letters were penned by the Teachers themselves or communicated through chelas, there still remains something in them that inspires the mind and stirs the heart. We sense an inherent validity in the teaching that points to the existence of a Teacher. The question of authorship becomes secondary when we are concerned, not with using the letters to invoke an external authority, but as a challenge to live the life and discover our own pathway to Truth. When seen in that light, the teaching which points to the presence of a Teacher points beyond to the Master within—our own Higher Self.

Recognizing, then, the Teacher in the teachings outside ourselves, we turn within to test the teaching by our obedience to the commands of Truth. Loyal to the inner vision, we find the horizons of our knowing forever expanding, discovering that what appeared to be a Teacher without is actually the true Teacher within, for there is but one Teacher—the supreme Atman in which abides all Truth. It is to that Teacher we pledge our duty as it is to that Truth we give our willing assent. Lead the life and you will come to the wisdom has ever been the dictum of all genuine schools of occultism. Perhaps a clue has been given us in a simple statement found in *The Mahatma Letters*. It matters little who wrote the words—Master or chela—for they carry the authentic ring of truth: “I can come nearer to you, but you must draw me by a purified heart and a gradually developing will. Like the needle the adept follows his attractions.” [Mahatma Letter #47, Chronological edition.] Whether the “I” of that statement is an external Mahatma or the Higher Self of each genuine aspirant, the Atman-Teacher abiding in the heart, is less important than the simple requirements for coming to the Truth. These have been the requirements given in all ages for the one who would know who is the Teacher: a pure heart, a heart aflame with love and compassion, and a will that is born of a steadiness of purpose and a faithfulness to duty, the will that is never daunted by either failure or success, serene amid all circumstances, carrying us ultimately to the realization of the Supreme Truth, where teaching, Teacher and taught are one.