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EFFORT IS REQUIRED

In some popularized forms of spirituality, words such as *transformation* and *enlightenment* are bandied about so often that you get the impression these are commonplace goods that one can acquire with minimal effort. Opposing this view of easy attainment are those who subscribe to the widespread belief that human nature is what it is—and it can't be changed. In Mahatma Letter 1, even the Master K.H. describes human nature as “prejudice based upon selfishness [and] a general unwillingness to give up an established order of things for new modes of life and thought.”

Is there a shortage of evidence to support such a dim view of human nature? If you look around at our consumer-oriented society, for example, you may be inclined to agree with the following assessment of human greed and superficiality.

Look at the number of things we buy because others have bought them or because they're in most people's houses. One of the causes of the troubles that beset us is the way our lives are guided by the example of others; instead of being set to rights by reason, we're seduced by convention. There are things that we shouldn't wish to imitate if they were done by only a few, but when a lot of people have started doing them we follow along, as though a practice became more respectable by becoming more common.

Sound familiar? What is striking is that these words come not from an astute observer of contemporary society but from the pen of the Stoic philosopher Seneca, a famous Roman philosopher who lived two thousand years ago. Apparently *some* things haven't changed.

So the question remains: Can human nature be changed in a fundamental way? Or are we doomed to forever see the world through the prism of our self-centered ways? To these questions, Theosophy offers an optimistic but realistic response. In *The Secret Doctrine*, Mme. Blavatsky speaks of an “obligatory pilgrimage” which “admits no privileges or special gifts” and which requires “personal effort and merit” over an extended period of human incarnations. In other words, we are all embarked on that “obligatory pilgrimage,” whether we realize it or not, but the eventuality of self-transformation will continue to elude those who are unwilling to make the necessary effort. We know this because, first, nothing worthwhile in life is achieved without strenuous effort. And secondly, we are told by those who have actually achieved these goals that a sustained and monumental effort is required for success. This is a profoundly inspiring and positive message, but one that is also tempered by a realistic view of the undeniable difficulties involved.

The fruits of the spiritual life are there for the taking, but they cannot be reduced to bland commodities sold on the cheap.

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