

The Golden Stairs

By David P. Bruce

Introduction

The prolific pen of H.P. Blavatsky left a rich legacy for future generations of theosophical scholars, students, and curiosity seekers. It includes masterworks such as *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine* as well as smaller but still notable works such as *The Key to Theosophy* and *The Voice of the Silence*. One of her shorter literary contributions—often overlooked by those familiar with her major works—is quietly nestled away in volume 12 of her *Collected Writings*: “The Golden Stairs.” Containing just under 120 words, and devoid of technical terms requiring the assistance of a glossary, “The Golden Stairs” is probably one of her more underrated and underappreciated works. But those who have studied it carefully know that its modest appearance belies its true worth. Essentially, it is a list of 13 short precepts for the spiritual traveler, followed by a brief coda. They are as follows:

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

How we are to interpret each of these steps, and how each step relates to the others, will be discussed in due course.

Two Challenges

When we survey the considerable number of works authored by H.P. Blavatsky, it is tempting to discount a shorter piece like “The Golden Stairs.” Its modest size and easy readability no doubt contributes to its being passed over by more ambitious readers who prefer the intellectual challenges posed by *The Secret Doctrine* or *Isis Unveiled*. Whereas these two major works combined fill nearly 3,000 pages, “The Golden Stairs” can be printed on a single sheet of paper. Also, the two aforementioned works present the reader with a slew of technical terms, the meaning and pronunciation of which require consulting a glossary. On the other hand, the

language of “The Golden Stairs” could not be more lucid and simple. Because of these factors, a cursory reading may leave the impression that “The Golden Stairs” is nothing more than a compact collection of pleasant sounding pieties. Having duly read through them once—maybe twice—the casual reader concludes that he may now check it off his theosophical reading list and move on to something more substantial.

Nevertheless, there is more to “The Golden Stairs” than meets the eye. It contains a couple of challenges that may not readily be apparent, but they are not a matter of language, syntax, or strange terminology. The first is a matter of *application*, of putting the thirteen steps into practice, day in and day out. That sounds like a truism, but isn’t that always the case with short lists of moral precepts? Reading them is so much easier than applying them. Of course, this will not come as a surprise to those who have made the attempt to live according to some moral code of conduct, regardless of the religious or spiritual tradition that gave rise to that code.

The other challenge may not be so obvious, and this is where it gets interesting. Essentially, it is one of *understanding*. How can that be, you might ask? You say you have read “The Golden Stairs, two or even three times, and you feel that you understand it completely. But do you, really? The casual reader often underestimates writings such as this. It is almost as though the unsophisticated simplicity of the language serves to camouflage the deeper layers of meaning hidden beneath the surface of the words, just waiting to be discovered. If we are in a hurry, we will deprive ourselves of the opportunity to uncover new insights, which only come to those with patience and perseverance.

A Random List?

“The Golden Stairs” provides a set of enduring guidelines for spiritual aspirants. Its structure is simple and consists of three sections: a terse directive, the thirteen steps, and a concluding statement. The opening sentence (often omitted in some versions) serves as an injunction to those who would climb the stairs: “Behold the truth before you.” The verb *behold* seems to be significant and deliberately chosen. Had Blavatsky written, “*See* the truth before you,” or “*Look* at the truth before you,” would the effect have been the same? I think not. Whereas the words “look” and “see” often apply to perception that is casual and momentary, the word *behold* carries the particular connotation of holding something in view, of considering it in all its aspects, of retaining in the mind’s eye a profundity, all of which suggest a deeper level of perception, as in this line from Sonnet 106 of William Shakespeare: “For we, which now behold these present days, have eyes to wonder. . .”

We may well wonder at the thirteen steps: are they a random list, or is there some logic to the sequence? Can they be divided into groups, and if so, how might that be done? Let us review them:

[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, once we have placed our confidence in, and believe that Teacher to be in possession of it*; [10] *a courageous endurance of personal injustice*, [11] *a brave declaration of principles*, [12] *a valiant defense of*

those who are unjustly attacked, [13] and a constant eye to the ideal of human progression and perfection which the secret science depicts.

For those hoping to gain a deeper understanding of “The Golden Stairs,” it would be quite beneficial to spend some time contemplating the interrelationship of the thirteen steps.

Organization

Are the thirteen steps organized in some way, or are they just an eclectic collection of admirable qualities and inspiring advice aimed at spiritual aspirants? In 1958 the Theosophical Press published an article by Sidney Cook, who had this to say:

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?

Other respected theosophical writers, including John Algeo and Joy Mills, have drawn the same conclusion, which is why we are looking at the overall structure of the “The Golden Stairs” before discussing its thirteen steps in sequence. I believe that knowing how the stairway is organized can lead to a deeper appreciation and understanding of its component parts.

The first four steps—*a clean life, an open mind, a pure heart, an eager intellect*—form the base of the stairway; they provide the bedrock for later stages of development. Without a strong and stable foundation, the aspirant will not reach the temple of divine wisdom, which is ultimately where this metaphorical stairway leads. Algeo includes the fifth step, *an unveiled spiritual perception*, with the first group, but I agree with Cook and Mills who list it separately, the first four being prerequisites to its emergence. To continue, all are agreed that the remaining eight steps fall into two groups of four: *a brotherliness for all, a readiness to give and receive advice and instruction, a loyal sense of duty to the teacher, and a willing obedience to the behests of truth* form the next group, while the last one includes *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*. In other words, the steps are organized thus: 4 + 1 + 4 + 4 = 13.

To summarize, steps 1-4 are preparatory in nature, which lead to step 5—an unveiling of the spiritual sight. Steps 6-9 outline additional training within the context of relationships, and steps 10-13 describe the expression of soul qualities such as courage, valor, and constancy. We have now concluded our overview and will begin our examination of each of the thirteen steps.

1. A Clean Life

There is a good reason why “The Golden Stairs” begin with *a clean life*. A clean life serves as the foundation for all the other steps that follow. Theosophist Sidney Cook has described it as “a required basic quality for all inner development.” Similarly, John Algeo called it “an inescapable preliminary.” Some may be tempted to discount the importance of this step, as it lacks the dramatic appeal found in later ones, such as “a courageous endurance,” “a valiant defense,” or “a brave declaration,” all of which are capable of stirring the heart and imagination

of the neophyte with visions of heroic action. But “The Golden Stairs” is not an express elevator whereby one arrives effortlessly at the top floor. In order to ascend to the temple, the learner must tread each individual step, beginning with the first. In point of fact, most spiritual regimens begin with a preliminary stage designed to acclimate and prepare the novice for what lies ahead. Part of this training involves a cleansing and purgation of undesirable qualities and habits. Speaking metaphorically, one does not enter the temple of divine wisdom with muddy shoes. This idea is strikingly illustrated in Dante’s masterful allegory, *Purgatorio*, wherein Dante makes the long, arduous climb up Mount Purgatory in order to ascend to Heaven.

Those of us who are drawn to esoteric teachings are accustomed to having to dig deep for hidden meanings. The elements of a clean life, however, are not shrouded in mystery or buried in occult symbolism. They are obvious, widely accepted, and easily understood. They are found in the ethical teachings of the world’s great religions, and have been put into practice by countless people who adhere to the precept that cleanliness is next to godliness. So, what are the elements of a clean life? They include replacing falsehoods with truthfulness, both in word and action; treating others fairly and not deceptively; replacing crudeness and vulgarity by cultivating refinement and cleanliness in our patterns of thought and speech; showing kindness and charity to others, even to complete strangers, rather than going about our business with a self-absorbed and callous indifference; and finally, eliminating distractions, disorder, and non-essentials from one’s life.

If all this seems a bit daunting, those sages who have ascended the stairs tell us not to be discouraged. Absolute perfection is not required at this stage, only a reasonable degree of attainment. If we keep this in mind, the task becomes manageable and not impossible.

2. An Open Mind

Maintaining an open mind is considered to be a virtue. Here the word *maintaining*, as opposed to *having*, is chosen deliberately. To maintain something implies a conscious effort over a period of time, whereas the word “having” may suggest passivity. The human mind is easily conditioned, a process that begins in childhood and continues through adolescence and into adulthood. Even if we were fairly open-minded as a youth, we probably settled into predictable patterns of thought as we got older. To avoid this conditioning of the mind, a process that is both natural and universal, vigilance and self-awareness are required.

In pluralistic societies, an open mind is conducive to comity and affability in social relations. Everybody has their point of view, their perspective on life, some of which may differ radically from ours, and a closed mind creates barriers that divide instead of bridges that connect. In a technological world that seems to be changing at a breathtaking pace, the solutions of yesterday may no longer be applicable today. Keeping an open mind allows us flexibility and provides options in how we respond to changing circumstances.

Does an open mind preclude us from holding opinions or beliefs? Not necessarily, as long as we hold them lightly. Admittedly, this can be difficult for some people who, when their beliefs are challenged, become defensive or adversarial. Yet our opinions may, and often do, change. Even our most cherished beliefs may change over time. We may believe in the principle of justice, for

example, but our understanding of what justice means may change as we gain knowledge and experience. When we are young, our understanding is limited, but as we grow so does our capacity to understand subtleties or complexities that were previously beyond our reach. Consider what G.M.A. Grube says in *Plato's Thought*: "As we look back over Plato's works as a whole we find that his belief in an order and a purpose in the universe is the same throughout, but that the meaning of his gods deepens and develops from one period of his life to the other."

Plato did not abandon his principles and neither should we, but an open mind makes it possible for us to see those principles in a new light and with a new understanding.

3. A Pure Heart

"The Golden Stairs" lists a pure heart as one of the preliminary qualifications needed before a genuine spiritual awakening can take place. As such, its importance to the aspirant cannot be over emphasized. Employing the metaphor of a ladder instead of a stairway, *The Voice of the Silence* issues a warning to those who are overly eager to forge ahead without having done the necessary preparatory work: "Beware lest thou shouldst set a foot still soiled upon the ladder's lowest rung."

Cleansing impurities from the heart can be a monumental task, especially for those who live in a world of thoughts and ideas and look to logic and reason to solve all their problems. They would do well to heed the words of the French philosopher Pascal: "The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of." As noted above, the process of purification must begin before one can safely ascend the stairway leading to the temple of divine wisdom. Fortunately, the task is made much easier if one has practiced the first step of "The Golden Stairs"—a clean life. The person who has met that challenge is described in Psalm 24 as "He that hath clean hands and a pure heart." (It's worth contemplating how the preliminary requirements of a clean life and a pure heart reinforce each other.)

Also of interest is the fact that in the Book of Psalms the word *heart* appears over 100 times. It speaks of clean hearts and pure hearts; wounded hearts and broken hearts; proud hearts and hardened hearts; troubled hearts and rejoicing hearts. Clearly, the heart is the place wherein the shifting drama of human affairs takes place. The Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky apparently had this in mind when he wrote, "Beauty is mysterious as well as terrible. God and devil are fighting there, and the battlefield is the heart of man."

"Harden not your heart," says Psalm 95. One who does this erects rigid barriers to shut out things which are uncomfortable, painful, or distasteful. Perhaps, we all do that to some extent. By contrast, a pure heart is an open and receptive heart, one that is in communion with life. It feels sorrow as well as joy. The thought of lowering those barriers may seem risky to some, but a heart that feels the rain as well as the sun is a heart that is alive. And we are encouraged to do this in a lovely verse from *The Voice of the Silence*: "Hast thou attuned thy heart and mind to the great mind and heart of all mankind."

4. An Eager Intellect

The fourth precept—*an eager intellect*—together with the first three—*a clean life, an open mind, a pure heart*—form a quaternary providing the pilgrim a safe and stable foundation for the ascent. As noted earlier, this undertaking is not without its perils and pitfalls, and those who proceed prematurely are like amateur climbers attempting to scale a steep precipice without the benefit of extensive training and conditioning.

Before commenting on the role that an eager intellect plays in “The Golden Stairs,” we should consider the meaning of *intellect*. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines intellect as “the faculty of knowing and reasoning.” As a short working definition, this is fine, but the writings of H.P. Blavatsky provide much greater depth and detail as to the nature of this important and defining faculty. Referring to her sevenfold model of the human constitution (found in *The Key to Theosophy* and elsewhere), intellect corresponds to the principle of *Manas*, a Sanskrit word meaning “to think,” “to cogitate,” or “to reflect.” This ability to engage in rational and abstract thought forms a distinct line of demarcation between the human and animal kingdoms.

Another feature of *Manas* is its dual nature, the higher and the lower, which HPB describes in *The Key to Theosophy*: “There is a spiritual consciousness, the Manasic mind illumined by the light of Buddhi, that which subjectively perceives abstractions; and the sentient consciousness (the lower *Manasic* light), inseparable from our physical brain and senses. . . . It is only the former kind of consciousness, whose root lies in Eternity, which survives and lives forever, and may, therefore, be regarded as immortal. Everything else belongs to passing illusions.” More specifically, intellect corresponds to the higher aspect of *Manas*. It is what survives from one incarnation to the next. Purucker’s *Occult Glossary* tells us that “*manas* itself is mortal, goes to pieces at death—insofar as its lower parts are concerned.” The only portion of it that survives death is “only what is spiritual in it and that can be squeezed out of it, so to say—the ‘aroma’ of the *manas*; somewhat as the chemist takes from the rose the attar or essence of roses.”

Having framed the word *intellect* within a theosophical framework, let us continue by exploring the significance of an *eager intellect*.

An eager intellect is driven by the need to know and understand. It is different from an open mind. While the latter is characterized by receptivity to new ideas, it lacks the fervent intensity found in the former. An open mind allows one to become familiar with many facets of knowledge, but is often prompted by momentary curiosity or happenstance. In contrast to this somewhat passive state, an eager intellect is marked by an ardent and persistent search for more knowledge and greater understanding. It may also exhibit a penetrating quality that helps one see through the shallowness of clichés and platitudes, and beyond the boundaries imposed by conventional thought.

The uncritical acceptance of popular opinion provides a false sense of security, especially when cloaked in the mantle of authority. Though it may contain some element of truth, it is second-hand knowledge and of little value if we have not thought the matter through for ourselves. To this point, a comment by Leonardo da Vinci bears repeating: “Whoever in discussion adduces authority uses not intellect but rather memory.” Being able to repeat something we have heard does not mean we have understood it. Furthermore, those who exercise their intellect are not afraid to stand apart from the crowd. As Thomas Paine observed, “I do not believe that any two

men, on what are called doctrinal points, think alike who think at all. It is only those who have not thought that appear to agree.”

The Secret Doctrine describes *Manas* as “the seat of Intellect,” but we should remember that *Manas* has a dual aspect—a higher and a lower. The part that deals with the ordinary and commonplace is the lower; that which apprehends truth, whether philosophical, mathematical, or spiritual, is the higher. Both functions are necessary, but the content of lower fades after an incarnation has completed its cycle, while that of the higher is retained in the causal body. Another way of saying this is that the lower mind deals with particulars, the higher mind with universals. The transcendentalist philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson understood this. In his essay entitled “Intellect,” he says, “He who is immersed in what concerns person or place cannot see the problem of existence. This the intellect always ponders.” In other words, if you are always immersed in particulars—the quotidian details of daily existence—you will never be able to see with clarity, for your vision will be obscured by the ephemeral and transitory.

5. An Unveiled Spiritual Perception

The fifth step of “The Golden Stairs” marks a point of transition in the life of the evolving soul. The first four—a clean life, an open mind, a pure heart, an eager intellect—are foundational to the steps that follow. They are developed with conscious intent and effort over the course of many lives, but not necessarily within the context of an overriding spiritual vision. The motivation may simply be one of self-improvement: eliminating coarseness and crudeness from one’s personality, developing catholicity of mind, and cleansing one’s heart of base desires—all of which are commendable but which still revolve around the personal self.

Sidney Cook’s fine analysis of “The Golden Stairs” describes the first four steps as *preparation*, *receptiveness*, *transmutation*, and *searching*. Throughout this long process there has been “a gradual thinning of the veils, an opening of the mind, a purification of the heart, an eagerness of search.” As a result of this rarefaction, the spiritual faculty that had been largely dormant now becomes activated and a point of transition is reached in the development of the soul. Visions of numinosity are experienced, and although they may be brief and infrequent, even one such experience has the potential to make a profound impact. Instead of seeing everything through the personal lens of self-interest, a wider and more universal outlook is possible. Purucker’s *Golden Precepts of Esotericism* describes it this way: “An unveiled spiritual perception is merely the loss of personality in opinions, in views, and of self-satisfaction.”

The thinning of the veils is a good metaphor, but one should not assume that the sudden influx of light is analogous to that of a lamp that has been turned on by a toggle switch with only an on and off position. It is more in the nature of a lamp with a dimmer switch, allowing a gradual brightening or dimming along a sliding scale. Purucker’s *Fountain Source of Occultism* notes that “behind every veil there is another, but through them all shines the light of truth, the light the liveth forever within every one of us, for it is our inmost self.” We may see that numinous light but momentarily and lament its inevitable fading from view as the veil descends. But Cook encourages us with this observation: “Once there has come the dawning of this spiritual perception, the new direction . . . can only be but temporarily forsaken”

6. A Brotherliness for All

Those who have had a genuine experience of an unveiled spiritual perception—however brief or slight it may have been—now see the world through new eyes. A single moment of transcendence has revealed a universal outlook on life, one that inspires and conjoins, leaving an indelible impression in its wake, even as the tide of old habits and patterns of thought attempt to reassert their influence. The fact that this vision of numinosity is described as *unveiled* is important. To *unveil* something indicates that what is being revealed was there behind the curtain all along. We were just unaware of its existence. Similarly, this innate spiritual faculty—termed *buddhi* in theosophical literature—has just been waiting for the right catalyst or set of conditions to activate it. It may have been largely inactive or dormant before, but once awakened and brought into daily consciousness, it cannot be put back to sleep.

One of the fruits of this inner awakening is the distinct sense of solidarity we have with other members of the human family. We no longer feel quite as isolated or separated from others. We sense that there is some invisible bond uniting us to the rest of the human beings on the planet, even though most of them are, and will remain, complete strangers to us, our paths never destined to cross, at least not in this lifetime. This sense of connectedness is expressed in the sixth step of “The Golden Stairs” as “a brotherliness for all.” It is also expressed in the first Object of the Theosophical Society which speaks of a “universal brotherhood of humanity.”

Those who have not experienced a true moment of transcendence tend to dismiss the ideal of human solidarity as a pipedream, a noble vision of dreamers and poets, but not likely to be achieved in a world divided by race and religion, language and culture. They will say that in a world governed by self-serving interests that thrive on pitting one group of people against another for their own selfish gain, such dreams of unity and universal brotherhood are idealistic but unrealistic. However, those who have been blessed by a moment of deep spiritual insight know that true brotherhood and sisterhood is no pipe dream; it is not some distant Utopia as envisioned by imaginative writers. It is a reality in nature, but it is one of those deeper realities not visible to the profane eye. In other words, because we cannot see it does not mean it is not there. The law of gravity operated long before it was discovered by Newton. So, too, the unity of spirit that binds all of humanity together is there, has been there, and will continue to be there. It is for each person to discover that reality for him or herself.

When the spiritual aspirant experiences the unity of spirit first-hand, revealing all of humanity to be brothers and sisters, this moment of insight leaves a vivid and lasting impression, fundamentally changing how the world is viewed. No longer does universal good will and harmony seem to be unattainable. Of course, that idyllic state will not be realized in the foreseeable future and it certainly doesn't exist now, but the vision of transcendence leaves an undeniable sense that it will be realized at some point in our evolutionary journey. For the time being, however, there is still mistrust, hatred, and conflict among the factions of humanity. Human nature will not change overnight and many will agree with Gothic architect Horace Walpole who said, “The world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel.”

It is easy to play the cynic while seeing only the worst in people; those who take this stance say they are being realistic, citing examples from history to justify their views. They say human nature is flawed by selfishness and greed, that it has been so for thousands of years and will continue for thousands more. They point to turbulent times of societal upheaval when reason and civility vanish, the resultant vacuum being filled by violence and chaos, as happened in the eighteenth and twentieth centuries during the Reign of Terror in France, the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, and the Killing Fields of Cambodia. As Alexander Hamilton said in Federalist No. 16, "When the sword is once drawn, the passions of men observe no bounds of moderation." When observing the absurdity of human behavior throughout history, one doesn't know whether to laugh or cry. The philosopher Montaigne seemed to choose the former when he quipped, "When it is so common to do evil, it is practically praiseworthy to do what is merely useless."

The cynics have a point. Human nature is indeed flawed; but just because you cannot see a glacier moving does not mean there is no movement. A difficult task is not necessarily an impossible task. Moreover, seeing the worst in people is a habit, even a choice. Why not see the good? That can become a habit, too, if we so choose. When we notice the good in other people, rather than their faults, we are actually helping them grow. The recognition of our oneness with others provides an inner imperative for the aspirant, one that is stated quite clearly in *The Key to Theosophy*: "It is only by all men becoming brothers and all women sisters, and by practicing in their daily lives true brotherhood and true sisterhood, that the real human solidarity . . . can ever be attained."

7. A Readiness to Give and Receive Advice and Instruction

The Secret Doctrine contains numerous passages that may strike the reader as mysterious, abstruse, or even unfathomable. This is part of its allure. However, this passage from the Proem is not one of them: "An alternation such as that of Day and Night, Life and Death, Sleeping and Waking, is a fact so common, so perfectly universal and without exception, that it is very easy to comprehend that in it we see one of the absolutely fundamental laws of the universe." Even the casual reader will see that there is nothing abstruse or cryptic in that assertion, for the truth of it has been affirmed by human experience throughout the ages.

This principle of polarity is intrinsic to the seventh step of "The Golden Stairs": *a readiness to give and receive advice and instruction*. Giving and receiving are part of life. Over the span of a person's lifetime, the giving and the taking may reach a kind of balance. It is natural for an infant, a child, or an adolescent to be in need of food and shelter, love and guidance, and much more. Upon reaching adulthood and becoming a productive citizen, he or she may have the opportunity to give back to their family, community, or nation. Many people do this freely and joyfully—some from a sense of gratitude for the opportunities they have had in life; others from a belief that sharing the fruits of one's labor is simply the right thing to do.

Giving and receiving play a role in our inner life as well. As we tread the lower steps of "The Golden Stairs," we depend on wise elders for advice and instruction. As we ascend that stairway, gaining valuable knowledge and experience, we soon find ourselves in a position to

help others who stand today where we stood yesterday. While the impulse to help is praiseworthy, discretion is needed. This line from *Poor Richard's Almanac* is just as true today as it was in Benjamin Franklin's time: "Fools need advice most, but wise men only are the better for it." I am reminded of an assignment I was given many years ago. My job was to revise an out-of-print booklet called "The Mysteries of Existence" for a new edition. At that time, I had an inflated opinion of my editing skills. After spending many days working on the text, I gave my draft to a seasoned editor, expecting her to respond with profuse words of praise. Instead, I was given a reality check: the manuscript came back with red markings on every page. I was surprised and disappointed, but I quickly set my emotions aside and decided to use it as a learning experience. You may have noticed that people are generally more willing to dispense advice than accept it. The point is that when good advice comes our way, we may need to get our ego out of the way first in order to benefit from it.

8. A Loyal Sense of Duty to the Teacher

Throughout her entire adult life—all the while having to endure adversity, ill health, and *ad hominem* attacks—Mme. Blavatsky unwaveringly exemplified the eighth step of "The Golden Stairs": *a loyal sense of duty to the teacher*. The teacher-pupil relationship is an important one, carrying obligations on both sides. This applies in the secular realm as well as in the spiritual. As a young woman, the lifelong bond that HPB forged with her spiritual teachers was one built on trust, confidence, and respect. While acknowledging that the word *teacher* is open to various interpretations, let us first consider it in the ordinary sense of the word.

In his commentary on "The Golden Stairs," John Algeo points out the hierarchical nature of this relationship, "Since teacher and student are on different levels with respect to the knowledge that joins them." He also points out that whereas today we are a student, tomorrow we may be a teacher—even to the one that teaches us now, but perhaps in a different field of knowledge. Theosophy teaches that we evolve through many lifetimes. The transcendentalist philosopher Emerson used the metaphor of a stairway to depict this process: "We wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight."

We see this loyalty to one's teacher in the life of Ludwig van Beethoven, who as a young man traveled to Vienna to study with Joseph Haydn. Beethoven had already established himself as a virtuoso pianist, but now wanted to hone his skills as a composer. Haydn was a prolific composer of symphonies, concertos, string quartets, and other musical genre. According to Jan Caeyers' book *Beethoven: A Life*, since the death of Mozart, "Haydn had taken [Mozart's] place as the most influential and modern of all composers." He agreed to mentor Beethoven three times a week, an arrangement that was extremely beneficial for Beethoven's musical growth. But as Lewis Lockwood notes in his book *Beethoven: The Music and the Life*, "On the personal side their relationship seems not to have been easy." Tensions arose due to generational and political differences; after one year they parted ways. "Ruffled feelings on both sides stemmed from innate artistic differences," adds Lockwood. In spite of this, Caeyers affirms that "on musical grounds, there is no doubt that Beethoven revered Haydn as a master of the highest level." In fact, several weeks before Beethoven's death, a friend gave him a gift: a lithograph of

the small house where Haydn was born. With only weeks to live, says Caeyers, “Beethoven then made a final symbolic gesture and had the artwork framed,” thus rising above personal differences and demonstrating a loyal sense of duty to his teacher.

Students of esoteric literature are familiar with the adage, “When the pupil is ready the teacher will appear.” This venerated maxim has been repeated so often that it has devolved over time into a cliché, a familiar phrase devoid of the power to inspire critical thinking and one that is generally taken or rejected at face value. Recognizing that human nature has a tendency to foster self-delusion, one wonders how many “pupils” there are who remain content to wait for a teacher while doing precious little to get ready for that relationship. We can easily see how effort and training are required to become a competent teacher, but what about the pupil? What is his responsibility? Is not some sort of preparation required of the pupil? Can you study calculus without having first studied geometry? Algebra without first having mastered basic arithmetic? At the very least, is it not incumbent upon the pupil to cultivate an open mind, free of preconceived ideas and prejudices, and a mind free of distractions? In reality, the relationship of teacher and pupil is one of giving and receiving, with preparation required on both sides. So, if there is any truth to the maxim quoted above, it probably has very little to do with *waiting* but a lot to do with *doing*—doing whatever it takes to bring oneself to a state of readiness and receptivity.

As to teachers, we may have many during our lifetime, all of whom contribute something to our overall growth and development. Some function as guides, as in the case of a music appreciation teacher who introduces the students to music from different styles and eras. Others function as coaches, helping students learn specialized skills, such as wrestling, archery, or playing a musical instrument. A great many serve as merchants of information, which they convey in a clear and organized fashion to those who are able to pay for it. In all these cases, the teacher plays a valuable role, for as the Greek philosopher Plutarch noted, “Natural ability without training is blind.” However, learning is not just about accumulating skills and facts. Plutarch also said, “The mind is not a vessel that calls for filling.” In a similar vein, the French philosopher Montaigne lamented, “We labor only to fill our memory, and leave the understanding and conscience empty.” In *The Prophet*, Kahlil Gibran asserts, “No man can reveal to you aught but that which already lies half asleep in the dawning of your knowledge,” thus echoing Plato. As to teachers from the wisdom tradition, some serve as guides, others as coaches, and still others as retailers of occult knowledge. All that is well and good, but perhaps the most valuable mentor is one who has lived the life, and consequently serves as an authentic exemplar of wisdom.

9: A Willing Obedience to the Behests of Truth

Sometimes a spiritual precept is best understood not by what it says, but by what it doesn't say. This counter-intuitive approach can be useful after prolonged and repeated exposure to an aphoristic statement. The once inspiring words have become overly familiar, are repeated mechanically, yielding no further insight or understanding.

Consider, for instance, the ninth step of “The Golden Stairs”: *a willing obedience to the behests of Truth*. There is the voice of Truth and our response to it. Let us dwell on the word *obedience*, which, admittedly, can be problematic. We all have had the experience of being told to obey our parents, our teachers, the rules of society, and so forth. For a child, such guidance is generally beneficial and necessary. As an adult, one may begin to ask questions and think for oneself, rather than blindly following the dictates of authority, whether secular or religious. As Emerson noted, “The faith that stands on authority is not faith.” The ability to exercise free thought is a distinctively human capability. Most people resent being told to blindly follow laws or regulations that they see as unjust or unwise. I say “most people” because there are individuals who exhibit a docile and supine acquiescence to authority of any kind. Immanuel Kant defined freedom as “independence of the compulsory will of another,” further describing it as “the one sole original inborn right belonging to every man in virtue of his humanity.” One cannot ascend the stairs if one remains a compliant captive of conventional thought. The obedience mentioned there is not a begrudging conformity to outer authority, but a voluntary alignment to the Truth revealed by an unveiled spiritual perception.

Once again, it is worth returning to Beethoven. In J.W.N. Sullivan’s *Beethoven: His Spiritual Development*, the author explains: “For the development of a personality a rich and profound inner life is necessary, and for that reason it is usually great artists and religious teachers who impress us as being complete persons.” As he matured, Beethoven remained true to his vision of the truth. Sullivan adds: “The states of consciousness with which he was concerned contained more and more elusive elements, and came from greater depths.” Had Beethoven not remained steadfast to his vision, had he lowered his standards and composed for the masses, the world would have been immeasurably poorer. In an *Epoch Times* article entitled “Ludwig van Beethoven: The Triumph over Suffering,” Raymond Beegle says, “What was within him, his sublime music, was not written for classrooms, or scholars, or critics. It was written for the human heart and precludes either analysis or criticism.”

Like Beethoven’s most sublime music, *e.g.*, his late string quartets and late piano sonatas, “The Golden Stairs” was not composed for scholars or intellectuals. Its appeal is to the heart and not the head. In simple language it presents practical precepts without ornamentation or ostentation. Although Blavatsky employed an impressive array of esoteric terms in her other writings, in this case a determination was made to eschew sophistication in favor of simplicity. Having said that, it is interesting to note that the thirteen precepts of “The Golden Stairs” contain only 89 words, yet there is one word that stands out from the rest. Modern writers rarely use it. It sounds old and *it is* old, which is no surprise, since it derives from Middle English. It seems like a word you might find in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. In fact, you *do* find it in *Canterbury Tales* as, for example, in this line: “Go now . . . and do my lord’s behest.” We find that same word in the ninth step of “The Golden Stairs”: *a willing obedience to the behests of truth*.

The word *behest* refers not to an ordinary request, but to a command or directive that carries the weight of authority. It has a regal tone and may also carry a sense of urgency. Throughout our lives we have received numerous orders—first from our parents, then from our teachers and coaches, and later from employers, public officials, and religious figures. Regardless of how one responds, all these orders have one thing in common: they come from an external authority.

That is not the case with “The Golden Stairs”; it does not tell us to be obedient to an outer authority, but to the voice of truth that speaks from within. It is an interior prompting, sometimes referred to as “the still small voice.” It is always present, but we do not hear it. We *cannot* hear it, because we are distracted by outer things. The first four steps—*a clean life, an open mind, a pure heart, an eager intellect*—prepare us to become receptive to that inner voice. If we find that our lives are out of balance—overstimulated from without, impoverished within—we need to regain our equilibrium. We can begin to cultivate a rich, inner life by learning the value of silence. Doing so will provide us with the necessary ballast against the unending turbulence and turmoil of the outer world. Only then may we become receptive to the behests of Truth.

Recapitulation

At this point in our discussion, we may find it useful to recall an observation made earlier: the thirteen precepts of “The Golden Stairs” is not a random list of items bearing no relation to one another. In his insightful commentary, Sidney Cook poses the question: “Does not the fact that she [Blavatsky] 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?” The obvious answer is in the affirmative. However, this may not be so apparent if one loses sight of the whole by concentrating exclusively on the individual steps, so Cook’s point does bear repeating.

The thirteen steps consist of three groups. The first four steps—*a clean life, an open mind, a pure heart, an eager intellect*—are preparatory and deal with broad principles of ethical living. A person whose life is guided by those principles has already achieved a high level of development; but what may be lacking is an awareness of any greater purpose to human life, such as is provided by the teachings of Theosophy. This knowledge of a divine plan—along with a realization of a greater Self within and the recognition of one’s deeper connection to all of humanity—is brought into view by the next step: *an unveiled spiritual perception*. This seminal awakening to one’s true nature and underlying unity with others leads to the second group, steps 6-9, which are more specific and deal with training and relationships: *a brotherliness for all, a readiness to give and receive advice and instruction, a loyal sense of duty to the teacher, and a willing obedience to the behests of truth*.

The third group (steps 10-13) is the most difficult, for it represents the testing that the learner (disciple) will have to undergo before reaching the Temple of Divine Wisdom. Success is hoped for, but it is not guaranteed. The experience of countless saints, sages, and yogis who have scaled the spiritual heights speaks to the unalterable fact that at some point the aspirant will be tested. *The Voice of the Silence* attests to this: “The more thou dost advance, the more thy feet pitfalls will meet.” A similar passage is found in the Book of Sirach: “For gold is tried in the fire, and acceptable men in the furnace of adversity.” But it is not all doom and gloom. The advice given by Geoffrey Hodson is “continue, continue, keep on at all costs” (*Call to the Heights*). “Falls may occur. . . . and if they occur, recovery must be made quickly.” *The Voice* also offers encouragement: “Have perseverance as one who doth for evermore endure.” No failure is permanent as long as one perseveres.

10. A Courageous Endurance of Personal Injustice

In daily life we undergo a variety of tests such as school exams, applying for a driver's license, competency tests for professional licenses, and many more. Unlike those of the spiritual life, these tests share one thing in common: their date and time is known in advance. Spiritual aspirants are not given a schedule; they do not know *when* they will be tested, only that they *will* be tested. Confirmation of this is found throughout the religious scriptures of the world as well as in the writings of those who have lived a sanctified life. The last four precepts of "The Golden Stairs" represent moral qualities needed to meet these inevitable tests, beginning with step nine: *a courageous endurance of personal injustice*.

In Joshua 1:6, the Lord speaks to Joshua: "Be strong and of good courage." So important is this advice that it is repeated in verse 9: "Have I not commanded thee? Be strong and of good courage; be not afraid." In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna chastises Arjuna: "Surrender not to unmanliness . . . forsake this small weakheartedness." In less dramatic fashion, courage is extolled in "Ye Wearie Wayfarer," a poem by the Australian poet Adam Lindsay Gordon:

Life is mostly froth and bubble,
Two things stand like stone,
Kindness in another's trouble,
Courage in your own.

And consider this provocative statement by the Christian apologist C.S. Lewis: "Courage is not simply *one* of the virtues but the form of every virtue at the testing point." Those who would downplay the importance of courage may counter with "Blessed are the meek; for they shall inherit the earth," but they are wrong. Cowards will never inherit anything but misery, fear, and subjugation to the will of others. In Matthew 5:5, the word *meek* means "gentle," not timidity.

Authentic courage (not to be confused with the cheap counterfeits of bravado, insolence, or braggadocio) is most uncommon in human affairs. In a speech given in 1966, Robert Kennedy declared, "Moral courage is a rarer commodity than bravery in battle or great intelligence." In a similar vein, Napoléon Bonaparte observed: "As to moral courage, I have rarely met with two o'clock in the morning courage." What did Napoléon mean by "two o'clock in the morning courage"? Aristotle would have known. Consider this passage from his *Ethics*; "It is thought to be a better proof of courage to remain calm and undismayed in sudden alarms than in those that are foreseen: the action proceeds more directly from the moral state, because it is less the result of preparation."

11. A Brave Declaration of Principles

The adage describing discretion as the better part of valor would seem to apply to the eleventh step of "The Golden Stairs"—*a brave declaration of principles*. There are times in life when we are confronted with the hard choice of either standing by our convictions in the face of opposition, or abandoning them for the sake of personal comfort and safety. These are defining moments. History provides notable examples of heroic souls standing by their convictions, willing to pay the ultimate price—Socrates, Giordano Bruno, Sir Thomas More, and Nathan Hale, just to name

a few. While remaining true to our most cherished beliefs, few of us will suffer the consequences of death by poison, burning at the stake, the sword, or hanging. Our tests may not be so dramatic, but that does not make them unimportant. We have to acquit ourselves well at each and every opportunity, so that eventually the thought of abandoning our principles becomes unthinkable.

In these situations, a little discernment goes a long way. As taught by Aristotle, courage is the golden mean between the two extremes of cowardice and recklessness. What sometimes passes for unbridled courage is really nothing more than bombast, belligerence and effrontery. If our public declarations of principles are tainted by these qualities, they are unlikely to create sympathy among those with a different point of view. Besides, the third step of “The Golden Stairs”—*a pure heart*—precludes such manner of expression. In this regard, animals can teach us something. These words about a canine in Lord Byron’s poem “Epitaph to a Dog” exemplify the golden mean of Aristotle: “Strength without insolence, courage without ferocity.” In his no less commentary on “The Golden Stairs,” Sidney Cook adds, “A declaration of principles will be no less brave, effective for being gentle and tactful.”

Finally, it is worth noting that there is no valor in preaching to the choir. We should not delude ourselves that we are speaking “truth to power” when we are speaking to a friendly audience. When there is a definite price to be paid for speaking the truth, then courage is needed. It may not be martyrdom, but it could be public disapproval, loss of one’s job, or even ostracism from one’s family. We can only speculate as to how many times the dreaded question of “what will people say?” has caused people to betray their professed ideals. Let our *ideals* be the shining stars that guide us through life, not the shifting winds of public opinion.

12. A Valiant Defense of Those Who Are Unjustly Attacked

“The Golden Stairs” contains two references to injustice, both of which are found in the third group of precepts (steps 10-13). As noted earlier, this group represents the qualities of character needed to successfully face the periodic tests and challenges which all aspirants undergo during their spiritual unfoldment. With regard to how one should react to injustice, step 12—*a valiant defense of those who are unjustly attacked*—prescribes an approach which is the polar opposite of the advice given in step 10—*a courageous endurance of personal injustice*. It would seem that step 12 calls for action, while step 10 calls for passivity. Why the difference?

One of the basic texts of Buddhism, the *Dhammapada*, advises the disciple in the very first chapter not to return anger for anger, hatred for hatred, or retaliation for injustice. The Christian disciple receives similar advice from the Bible, such as turning the other cheek (Matt. 5:39) and “not rendering evil for evil” (1 Peter 3:9). The student of Theosophy views these instances as opportunities for clearing the karmic debts of the past. As stated in Mahatma Letter 123, he understands that personal suffering can be turned to “spiritual advantage” if one has learned to develop a “serene fortitude.” While a stoic endurance may be an appropriate response when we are the target of injustice, we have no right to tell someone else to buck up, turn the other cheek, and accept the misfortunes of life with a smile. That would be callous, unfeeling, and an affront to moral decency. Rather, we have an obligation to come to the defense of those who are unfairly attacked, especially the poor, the weak, and the defenseless.

This raises a question. How does a spiritually minded person launch a “valiant defense” without doing violence to their principles? Some people, while vigorously defending the innocence of a friend or family member, at the same time invest enormous amounts of emotional energy attacking the perpetrator. They apparently subscribe to the adage that the best defense is a good offense. This may be a good strategy in football, chess, the courtroom, or military maneuvers, but not in personal relations. There is a phrase in Abraham Lincoln’s second inaugural address that provides wise guidance: “with malice towards none and charity towards all.” Another president, George Washington, is known to have carried on his person a notebook containing 110 rules of civility, one of which was: “Reprehend not the imperfections of others for that belongs to parents, masters, and superiors.” We can defend the innocent without impugning the character of others.

13. A Constant Eye to the Ideal of Human Progression and Perfection

As in all endeavors, success comes to those who stay the course, despite the challenges or obstacles they may encounter; therefore constancy is a key to success. As for human perfection, that idea may seem foolish and naïve to those who subscribe to conventional wisdom. They believe human nature is hopelessly flawed, supporting their case with countless examples of human folly from past and present. The sages of the Wisdom Tradition were not blind to human failings, but they also saw the inner potential for what humanity is destined to become in the distant future. There is an interesting passage in Mahatma Letter 1, which characterizes human nature as “prejudice based upon selfishness; a general unwillingness to give up an established order of things for new modes of life and thought [and] pride and stubborn resistance to Truth if it but upset their previous notions of things.” But that assessment applies to humanity *en masse* and not to individuals who are ready to do the difficult work of self-transformation.

Eventually, every soul will have to do the work described in “The Golden Stairs.” *The Secret Doctrine* describes the journey of the soul as an “obligatory pilgrimage,” wherein growth is acquired, first by “natural impulse,” and later by “self-induced and self-directed efforts.” It has been said the perfection is the child of time. The timeline of humanity’s evolution, as put forth in *The Secret Doctrine*, encompasses unimaginable stretches of time. So, when a skeptic says human nature hasn’t changed much in two thousand years, they are right, but it’s analogous to me saying my neighbor is still the same person he was two hours ago. If one is content to drift with the crowd, it will be a very long journey; but if one is willing to step out from the masses and travel the steep and thorny road that has been trodden by sages since time immemorial; if one is willing to persevere and practice the teachings of the Wisdom Tradition; then, in the words of HPB, “there is reward past all telling—the power to bless and save humanity.” The choice is ours.

The intellect of man is forced to choose
Perfection of the life, or of the work,
And if it take the second must refuse
A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark.

—W.B. Yeats, “The Choice”

Coda

The thirteen steps of “The Golden Stairs” are followed by a brief coda, or summation, which states: “These are the golden stairs, up the steps of which the learner may climb to the Temple of Divine Wisdom.” Having discussed each of the steps, let us consider the symbolism in the coda. Various metaphors have been used to represent states of high spiritual consciousness. In Exodus 19:3, for instance, Moses climbs the *mountain* to speak to the Lord. In Genesis 28:12, Jacob dreams of a *ladder* ascending from earth to heaven. The *stairway* is also an apt symbol, because it suggests a gradual elevation of consciousness and increasing clarity of vision the further one climbs. Note, too, that climbing a stairway is actual work requiring continual effort, as does putting spiritual precepts into practice. It is also a path leading to a specific destination, in this case, the Temple of Divine Wisdom.

Gold is another widely used symbol, based on its physical properties, such as malleability, resistance to tarnish and corrosion, and its warm, attractive hue. It may symbolize accomplishment, as in the Olympics wherein the winner of an event is awarded the gold medal. It also represents timeless values and spiritual treasures. In *The Voice of the Silence*, for example, we find reference to the “golden flame,” the “golden key,” and the “golden gate.” The truths of the Wisdom Tradition are timeless because they endure throughout the ages and do not change with the fashions *de jour*. As the French historian Jacques Barzun noted in his summa *From Dawn to Decadence*, “It is a false analogy with science that makes one think latest is best.”

Finally, it should be noted that the temple of wisdom is not to be found in some remote desert location or inaccessible mountainous recess. In reality, it is found within—deep within the very heart of our being, where, as *The Voice of the Silence* says, is found “the one unfading golden light of Spirit.” So, if that is the case, why do most people look outside of themselves when that temple lies within? The answer is that it is indeed hidden from view. But why is it hidden? Why is it so difficult to find? G. de Purucker, in his book *The Golden Precepts of Esotericism* explains: “The only thing that prevents your receiving this light is the enshrouding veils of selfhood: selfishness, egoism, anger, hate, envy, and ignoble desires of all kinds.” Removing these veils is the work that all “learners” must do, and that task is outlined in the very first steps of “The Golden Stairs.”