

Companions of the Stone Emerald Lodge No. 3

First Degree Lecture: On Asceticism

"The charm of asceticism, of the austere and serious girding of the loins in youth."

— Walter Pater

"Asceticism" comes from "ascesis," which means "exercise" or "training," of the sort that an athlete undertakes. The word itself, and its relatives "ascetic" and "asceticism," however, have come to have a much more complicated set of meanings. Basically, asceticism is a matter of adopting a discipline of austerity (or austerities), and an ascetic is someone who does this. But there is more than one reason for taking up an ascetic discipline, and these shape how one goes about it and to some extent the results one gets.

1. Mastery or Efficacy

This is the aspect of asceticism closest to its etymological roots: the kind of discipline and training (and ultimately at the highest levels of mastery only self-discipline will do) that is dedicated to fitting oneself to a particular activity. One gives up things that get in the way, or that take up time that must be used for practice, and one takes on tasks that sharpen one's skills. The athlete, dancer, musician, or scholar.

2. Power or Charisma

The imagery or spectacle of self-discipline and indifference has a very real power (the kind of authority associated with the "aristocratic leanness" of Sherlock Holmes) which is often sought precisely because it has the power to move others. But it also has an interior component, which overlaps with the first sort of asceticism: the "gathering" or "accumulation" of power. Alexander the Great. The fakir.

3. Insight

Austerities and disciplines can be adopted to stop "the outward flow," or even "the transformations of mind-stuff". Training oneself not to use the word "I," -- or any other common word -- can break the bonds of habit, the fascination with and dependence on the sensation of outward-flowing experience. This in turn can uproot the illusion that reality comes from outside, that one is dependent on getting, or controlling, or enjoying, or being distracted by, something external to oneself, in order to be "something" or "someone". Paradoxical tasks.

4. Regret and Righteousness

Often thought of as the monkish or pious reason for asceticism -- self-punishment, perhaps (as is often the case with self-punishment, and indulgence or wallowing in a sense of one's own unworthiness, accurate though it may be) with the idea of averting even greater suffering, as when a prisoner (or child) produces a great show of regret to try to receive a reduced punishment. Yet this merges into other things: the intent to make amends, which may involve hardship, and the intent to do only that which is honorable, and to avoid dishonor, which may involve adopting a severe code. The stoic.

5. Transmutation

Breaking the grasp of proprium (libido dominandi); opening the heart; the "circumcision of the heart". A thing in itself, et a feature of all the others as well, as traditionally practiced.