

INITIATION

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Initiate from the Latin: Initio, meaning, “to begin”.
Initiâmenta, ôrum, n. plural. [Inito], an initiation into secret rites.’

Freemasonry as we know it has traditionally included initiatory rites. What might that mean? In thinking about the origin of the word as given above we might wonder at this new beginning and ask ourselves some simple questions. What does it mean? Where does it lead? Why am I taking it? How must I prepare myself for it? What can I expect? Karlfried Graf Durckheim in his book Dialogue on the path of Initiation says,

To initiate means to open the way to the mystery of one’s true nature in union with the inner Centre that knows no circumference.

So the initiation itself may lead to a greater understanding of the true self, leading us by allegories and symbols to a new, more spiritual way of understanding and knowledge. But what of the ritual itself? What effects does it have on both the brethren involved in it and on the candidate? Of what actually should an initiation consist?

The initiation ritual itself may be a dramatised recognition of a new beginning or the finalisation of a long and maybe arduous apprenticeship. An initiation is also a rite of passage, a passage from one phase of life, now at an end, to another phase, now at its beginning. Here are some events in the life of a brother that have been, in many different cultures, typically marked with a rite-of-passage ritual, which in their broadest sense can be thought of as initiations:

- ▶ Birth
- ▶ Puberty and maturity; adolescence
- ▶ The conception of a child; the birth of one’s first child
- ▶ Old age or infirmity
- ▶ Death

Initiation can also mean advancing from one level of being to another, in terms of both spiritual progression and moral development. In freemasonry the teaching involved in this can be seen in both the allegorical stories and symbols in the tracing boards, and the ritual that is conducted for the candidate and in the general work of the lodge. In a more strict sense, it also recognises that a person’s development and knowledge has reached a stage of awareness, ability, refinement, responsibility, and sometimes also leadership, which is deserving of the recognition of initiation. Therefore in one sense the ritual passes us to a point ahead where, when we reach that stage, we may then be transported further, all the time having gained much in terms of knowledge, understanding and moral development. It is also part of a greater whole, which in freemasonry can be thought of as becoming part of a fraternity of like-minded individuals whose goals and beliefs may differ, but who share much in terms of a quest for high morals, spiritual awareness, tolerance and self-respect. Becoming part of a group requires that the ritual impart both knowledge and a form of identification. This then can be used to distinguish the uninitiated from those who are both at the level of the initiate and those who have progressed further and have been initiated into deeper mysteries. These distinguishing identification marks are important for many cultures. They can range from scarification to castration, from tattooing to the way hair is either cut or not. Many forms also identify the initiate to the community within which they dwell, particularly where the initiate performs some form of service to them such as storytelling, preaching, communing, healing, exorcism or lore keeping.

What happens at an initiation?

At an initiation ceremony, there are a lot of themes and symbols at work. The theme of ‘beginning’, which brings a candidate to consider the routes to initiation, are many and are often of a personal spiritual nature. Whether this is true of every freemason we cannot know, as by its very nature the choices one makes are only made between you and your god and so won’t be speculated upon here, but other themes deserve further study.

First there is the theme of preparation

Most if not all philosophies, religions, cultures, and rites of passage have at least one or more forms of preparation before an initiation can take place. These preparations are usually of a two-fold nature, in that the mind and the body are prepared for the transformation that lies ahead of it. The time the preparation takes varies but is normally a process of many days at least, extending in some rites to many years and consisting of a variety of trials, ordeals and mental puzzles. Common examples are:

Fasting

In a hadith by Abu Hurairah, the Prophet said:

Fasting is not only to restrain from food and drink, fasting is to refrain from obscene acts.

Fasting may involve an abstinence between certain hours, e.g. from dawn to dusk or a continuous fast over a period of many days. There may also be a selective choice of foods, e.g. no meat, no pork/beef/red meat/fish, no cooked food, liquids only or nothing. It may involve choice of company, e.g. male, female, young, old, menstrual women or an absence of any other person, or a choice of language or silence, or abstinence from sexual relationships. This begins the preparation and the cleansing of the body and the mind that will be needed if the initiation is to have a greater deeper spiritual impact upon the candidate.

Meditation

This can be anything from transcendental meditation to quietly contemplating a natural setting, such as an ocean or forest. Particularly in the East, meditation often means not thinking at all but fixing the mind in a spiritual ideal or that of the thought-process dissolving.

According to Zen, meditation does not involve any concept but is an awareness of inner silence. On the mental level, meditation allows us to suspend logical thinking, and creates a state of inner stillness that causes measurable, naturally occurring chemical and physical changes within our bodies. According to an Inuit shaman, Ijugarjuk, true wisdom, which only could be learned far from the dwellings of men, out in the great solitudes; and is only to be attained through meditation, suffering and privation, these are the only things that can open the mind of man to those things which are hidden from others.

This preparation extends beyond the mind to include both the physical body and the soul.

Prayer and vigils

Prayer for most of us is the act of making contact with the inner or outer worlds of the spirit where God dwells. Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish and indeed most religious traditions depend on prayer for a sense of contact with the divine. It is often a short and very personal approach, although for some beliefs an extended ritualised chanting forms the main part of prayer, such as the 100,000 repetitions of the Vajrasattva mantra, 100,000 prostrations, 100,000 repetitions of a Guru's name mantra, 100,000 repetitions of offering of water bowls that form part of Tibetan Buddhism.

The Vigil can be as simple as an hour spent alone in contemplation, or many years as the sole guardian of a sacred place or temple. In the days of chivalry a squire was required to have spent a night alone in prayer, holding vigil over both his sword and a religious icon. Moran Mar Ignatius Zakka I, Patriarch of Antioch and Supreme Head of the Universal Syrian Orthodox Church, informs us that They will keep vigil by night fasting and praying, they perform heavy manual labour in their quest for the pure life. The divine light was cast upon them from on high; some among them who attained perfection in their asceticism even achieved the stage of union with His glory.

Physical training or labour

Amongst the Marathon Monks of Mount Hiei, in order to become a monk it became a common practice to complete a term of 100, 700 and 1000 days of chanting, visiting stations of worship, and other special experiences. All they needed were their two feet, using them to run 40 km per day working up to the last 200 days, where they run up to 84 km per day. The Lung-gom-pa Runners of Tibet are similar. These amazing running monks appear to fly when they run. They seem to float across grassy plains, apparently in a trance. They are said to travel non-stop for forty-eight hours or more, and can cover more than 300 km a day.

There are also spoken, dramatised, hidden, learning and spiritual introductions. Examples of these are the many Canadian and Alaskan Indian cultures such as the Inuvialuit, the Algonquin, the Métis and Cree. The stories of learning are told through movement, song and dance, using symbols and imagination. They are taught about the origin of sacred objects and ceremonies, and their relationship to the animals, plants, rocks and to each other. Only after learning these stories can they progress further. There is also the vitally important spiritual introduction, as shown in many esoteric and religious texts, such as The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abra-Melin the Mage, where the seeker is looking for an event known as 'The knowledge and conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel'. The Angel/Spirit of the Divine Self has played a role in most esoteric beliefs or philosophy, no matter what the geographical or chronological separation may be. In other cultures the candidate may be introduced to those spirits or ancestors who have watched over their family or perhaps their village for many generations. These spirits can be of the kind some perceive as angels, but also the type which have been described by some beliefs as demons. They can also be family members who have died and will now either willingly or perhaps upon payments or offerings serve or protect the individual and the community. Once the theme of preparation has been completed the candidate can move forward to the next theme.

The theme of Movement or Journey

The initiation ritually flags the moment when a person moves from one stage of life or state of being into another. This can metaphorically be expressed as a person moving from one land to a new land, and the ritual expresses what happens at the border, which is the gate. Therefore in some initiations, there is a 'guardian at the gate', requiring the traveller to pass some test before passage is granted. The test might be a series of befuddling questions, or a physical ordeal. In the Mithraic Mysteries, the candidate had to fearlessly overcome the 'twelve challenges', amongst which it was said he was subjected to a grim fast, required to swim a raging torrent, exposed to the solitary terror of the desert wilderness, beaten with rods and then buried up to the neck in snow. These tests and others preceded his final initiation, when he received a small round cake or wafer of unleavened bread symbolizing, in one of the meanings, the solar disc, an emblem of both divinity and supreme knowledge. This was known as the heavenly bread or 'manna' (a word which appears in the story of Moses), which had sacred figures traced upon it, so that at its consumption it would mark the initiate as both the point in the circle and the circle itself ready for the completion of this ritual.

In the Gnostic Christian Nag Hammadi scriptures, discovered in 1945 in the Upper Delta region of the Nile in Egypt, Jesus reputedly said,

When you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower, and when you make male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female, when you make eyes in place of an eye, a hand in place of a hand, a foot in place of a foot, an image in place of an image, then you will enter [the kingdom]. (The Gospel of St. Thomas)

In freemasonry the candidate, having completed the journey around the lodge, is presented with the badge of his office, which has much symbolic meaning, to which the master alludes. Yet, as in many systems of initiation, this is but a first step; there are many more yet to come, some that will challenge the brother even further as he progresses through his life in Freemasonry and in his development as a person of true values, both moral and spiritual.

This journey, by natural progression, leads the candidate to the next and more testing theme.

The theme of Death or Transformation

As an initiation is a beginning, so it implies an ending. The initiate dies to his old self and is reborn to his new self. Many cultures employ one or several techniques of altering the state of consciousness. This can be done in many ways, from active drama to fasting, the preparation and use of botanical inebriants, exhaustion, trance, piercing and even suspension. For example in North America various Sioux tribes, such as the Lakota, Oglala, Yellowhand and Teton, living in the areas of Dakota, Wyoming and Montana, have extreme piercing rites, chief of which is called the Sun Dance, the subject of the film *A Man called Horse* starring Richard Harris, in which the initiates are pierced once or twice in the chest, fastened to a tree or pole and vow to pull against the piercing until the flesh breaks. The object of this is to enter an extraordinary near death state and meet an animal ally or the 'Great White Spirit' for communion, healing or to obtain special knowledge that will change both their understanding and their view of the mundane world.

In other cultures and initiatory rites involving death there may also be a fearful and frightening Guardian at the Gate, who tests the courage of those who would pass, such as Cerberus, the three-headed watchdog, who guards the entrance to Hades. An example of this is Baron Samedi, as one of the Guédés (a spirit or being, related to death or the transition of life from one form to another), related to and intertwined with Baron Cimitière and Baron La Croix. He bridges the Guédés and Legba, both of whom are guardians of the crossroads, the place where spirits cross over into our world. Of Anubis as 'Wepuat' ('Opener of the Ways'), who conducted the souls of the dead to their judgement, and who monitors the Scales of Truth to protect the dead from deception and eternal death, Plutarch says

The soul [at the point of death] has the same experience as being initiated into great mysteries . . . At first one wearily hurries to and from, and journeys with suspicion, dark as one uninitiated: then come all the terrors of initiation, shuddering, trembling, sweating, amazement: then one is struck with a marvellous light, one is received into pure regions and meadows, with voices and dances and the majesty of holy sounds and shapes: among these he who has fulfilled initiation wanders free, and released and bearing his crown joins in the divine communion, and consorts with pure and holy men.

Finally there is the theme of Gnosis (knowledge) or Revelation

This marks in many initiations a point where, during or after, the initiate is shown a new way of thinking, or of seeing himself, the world or the realm of the spiritual.

The power of sight does not come from the eye, the power of hearing not from the ear, nor the power to feel from the nerves, but it is the spirit that sees through the eyes, and hears with the ears, and feels by means of the nerves.

As said Aureoleus Phillipus Theostratus Bombastus von Hohenheim This move towards Gnosis is often begun by the starting of a descent or underworld journey, as written down in the myth of Persephone, or an ascent as in the upwards paths of The Otz-Chim (the tree of life in Kabbalah). In both of these there is the seeking of a divine vision, and both may include a form of death or rebirth. They often mark a new period in the life of a man, when through his experiences in the initiation he is often confronted and forced to make a decision. This decision will set him on the side of the forces of knowledge, and works at the building of the spirituality and morals of his character. He takes himself in hand, cultivates the qualities that are lacking in his disposition, and seeks with diligence to bring his personality under control, all the time

knowing that he does not know the journey he will take, nor where this learning will take him. He only knows that he has started on the path. As al-Ghazali a great Sufi writer of Persia said,

.. entering the spiritual path is just like shooting an arrow at a point one cannot see, so that one does not know what the arrow is going to hit; one only knows one's own action, and one does not see the point aimed at. This is why the path of initiation is difficult for a worldly man. Human nature is such that a man born into this world, who has become acquainted with the life of names and forms, wants to know everything by name and form; he wants to touch something in order to be sure that it exists. It must make an appeal to his physical senses before he thinks that it exists; without this he does not believe that anything can exist. Therefore it is difficult for him to undergo an initiation on a path that does not touch any of his senses. He does not know where he is going.

To the average person, sacrificing a part of the ego to allow the higher more intuitive and spiritual self to come forward seems almost foolish in these days when personal power and wealth is everything. It is a loss that would seem to weaken man's position in a modern uncaring society, but the submission of the lower personality to the higher and divine self truly results in the attainment of something which is far more satisfying and lasting than temporary wants and desires – the illumination of the human soul by the inner divine light .

For the freemason, initiation should not just be about becoming a member of a group. freemasonry has as its primary themes both the spiritual growth and personal evolution of the new candidate, held within its rituals and explanations, and moves the candidate so that he is gradually guided into an alignment with the higher self through gnosis. Themes and Ritual work where a seed will be planted in him. The germ of truth that an initiation plants within the spirit of a freemason is a perpetual one that will remain intact throughout life, growing stronger as the person rediscovers his moral and spiritual ideals within themselves and their own religious beliefs. I have seen many wonders present in freemasonry today, however, I cannot help but wonder about the missing theme of true and full preparation for candidates. Where has it gone missing?