

## HEART AND LIGHT IN FREEMASONRY

Delivered at the November Conference of the Cornerstone Society 2002 The Cornerstone Society was formed by a few enthusiastic brethren to provide a forum for brethren to learn together about the true purpose of Freemasonry and what it was designed to accomplish. I wholeheartedly support this initiative because while I accept that many, maybe the majority of our members, have no interest in the deeper meanings of the Craft, nevertheless it is important that at the centre there is a core of brethren who do understand the spiritual message that our rituals contain. I am sure that, like me, there are many who joined freemasonry as earnest seekers after light and wisdom, only to find that much of the Masonry as practised in the English Constitution, and indeed in many parts of the world, has forgotten its destiny – one might more accurately say 'lost its reason'. As a result, the learning of ritual has become a drudge and an understanding of its purpose is almost impossible without a comparative study of other similar systems. Nevertheless, it has survived for nearly 400 years and possibly more – and as far as I am concerned carries the torch for what could loosely be described as the hermetic tradition. It is my fervent hope that through this Society and other similar initiatives it will rediscover its spiritual heritage and become an active catalyst for the transformation of Man's consciousness.

It seems to me a strange coincidence, if indeed it is a coincidence, that the name Solomon, Suleiman or Soliman is a composite word that sounds like Soul of Man. In that way it neatly explains the Temple of Solomon that we are building in the heavens, not made with hands. It is of course built with the souls of enlightened mankind, represented in Masonry by smooth ashlar, perfect cubes of white stone or crystal – it is a temple of 'light'.

The soul or psyche of the universe as a whole, with our individual souls as reflections, holds the key, through contemplation and meditation, for both an understanding of and identification with ultimate truth, ultimate beauty and ultimate goodness. It is through this connection between our soul and the universal soul that we can link ourselves to the greater cosmos. Plato says that there is a 'whole', which he describes as a being with life. The principle of this being's life is its soul. This being has an outward exteriorised aspect which is the phenomenal world and an interiorised aspect of the noumenal world on which the phenomenal world depends for its existence, animation and growth. Proclus tells us that the soul has two circular motions of power. 'One leads round and round in a circle of generation fed by opinion, while the other delights in an intellect-filled life and leads us from generation to true being, that being the first and most excellent state'. Our ritual tells us that this very same faculty of intellect can lead us even to the throne of God himself, which explains the importance of the second degree with its emphasis on intellect as a prerequisite for enlightenment. I have said it before, and it is worth repeating, that I do not consider the word intellect has the same meaning as the word intellectual in the academic sense. It is more akin to higher mind, which is what Dante was referring to when on the subject of enlightenment he talks of 'Il ben intelletto'. You don't have to be an academic to achieve enlightenment. In fact many of the people who have done so had powerful intellects but do not appear to have had much formal education.

Mind is usually thought of as immaterial, while brain is material. Mind has not always been located in the brain, and there is a current theme in most traditions that associates mind with the heart. The opening prayer in Supreme Grand Chapter contains this association when it says 'cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love Thee and worthily magnify Thy Holy Name.' There is also a parallel tradition that locates the centre of the individual soul in the heart.

The Chinese radical or letter, hsin, is derived quite literally from the image of the human heart – reduced to a symbol of a downward pointing triangle with three dots around it. It signifies at one and the same time, the heart, the mind and the centre. Cirliot's dictionary of symbols reminds us of the centrality of the heart in traditional symbolism. The heart we are told "was taken as the true seat of the intelligence, the brain being merely instrumental, hence some ancient attempts to explain the profound and continuing analogies between concepts, the moon was said to correspond to the brain and the sun to the heart". The moon thereby represents the changing mind and its doubts, and the heart, being the centre from which a Master Mason cannot err, represents balance and certainty. Ibn Arabi, the Islamic philosopher and poet, says that 'the heart is the organ which produces true knowledge, the comprehensive gnosis of the divine mysteries and esoteric science'.

Life is a continual process of initiation and in the Masonic system there are three major steps leading to enlightenment. There are also many smaller stages, and it is only after you have mastered the knowledge taught by each degree that you can transform into a higher level. The first question we are asked in our initiation ceremony focuses on the heart. It is, we are told, where we are first prepared to be made a Mason – and at the end of our journey we dedicate our purified hearts, only open for the reception of wisdom and truth, to God and the service of our fellow man.

It is important to realise that the opening of the heart is really the awakening of the soul, which consequently produces more light in the individual consciousness leading finally to enlightenment. It is the mystic tie that binds not only all men into one brotherhood but also all the elements of the universe into Unity. The traditional portrayal of Saints surrounded by halos expresses this advanced state, and there are many recorded instances of these initiates bathed in self-radiating light, visible to the naked eye.

Such cases exemplify the completed Temple of Solomon into which has descended the divine presence from above flooding the whole building with its glory. No wonder people who witnessed this phenomenon exclaimed 'Oh wonderful masons'.

This is surely the message of the Third Degree when the candidate is raised up in consciousness, to be reunited with his companions on a plane above the physical world of toil that was his former existence. He is now 'in the world but not of it'.

When trying to understand the psychological effects of the ritual, and I use the word 'psychological' in its original sense – the science of the psyche or soul – it is necessary to look at the lives of those people who have experienced enlightenment or Nirvana as it is called in Buddhism, and see what similarities there are between their experiences and the content of our rituals. There are four stages of consciousness in the evolution of the intellect. Animals are limited to the first two, which are perceptual and receptive intelligence. In the third stage we have self-consciousness or conceptual intelligence where a name or symbol has been attributed to a collection of information. In this way language is formed and the possession of language brings with it self-consciousness. The relationship between language and initiation is an interesting study in its own right. Suffice it to say that there is a direct and parallel link between the evolution of human intellect and the evolution of language. Nowadays self-consciousness is developed in a child in parallel with language at about the age of three.

Beyond this level we have the supra-conceptual intellect whose elements are no longer concepts but intuitions, and this level of consciousness is the goal of Freemasonry. So what are the separate and distinct stages in the three degrees and how do we know they were designed as a progressive science leading to enlightenment?

When considering a definition of intellect it would be well to remember that the intellect is that part of the mind that knows as opposed to the moral nature which is the part that feels.

The first degree concentrates almost exclusively on our moral nature, which includes many faculties like conscience, love of our fellow man, love of beauty, awe, reverence, sense of duty, sympathy and compassion. This moral nature is not present in very young children and is rare until adolescence so it is a late acquired faculty. In historical terms it probably only appeared about twelve thousand years ago and even now there are many people who do not exhibit a moral nature in their lives. So while self-consciousness has been around on the planet for at least 300,000 years, a moral nature is a relatively recent phenomenon. And yet it is an essential qualification as the foundation stone of any system leading to enlightenment and without a strong moral code of behaviour there can be no hope of progress. This moral foundation is laid in the North East corner as the first stone in the Temple. It is clear from a study of those who have attained enlightenment that such an exalted state compels the practise of an elevated moral code – followed by a desire to teach others the wisdom that is gained from the experience. One can see this in the lives of Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, St. Paul, Dante, Spinoza, Emerson, Whitman, Brunton and many others. Freemasonry concentrates much effort on teaching the necessity of developing virtuous and moral qualities because without such a code of conduct the powers of intellect could easily be misused by the developing ego. In fact I would go so far as to say that an over-inflated feeling of self-importance is one of the biggest problems in Freemasonry today. Going through the Chair of a lodge naturally develops self-confidence in the individual but unless it is tempered with humility it can so easily lead him astray. I need not elaborate on the times we are exhorted to practise virtuous behaviour, as there are scores of examples in the ritual, but above all 'humility is the essential qualification'. It is difficult to see how to reverse the trend in the Craft where the desire for honours far outweighs the desire for light and wisdom. Freemasonry rewards the worthy Mason with the greatest gift of all, but it is not a material gift and it is certainly not another gong or a higher rank.

The second common effect of the state of enlightenment, which is reflected in the ritual of the second degree, is an extreme intellectual illumination, which comes as it were from an innate faculty within the person. For instance, Rawley says of Francis Bacon that 'although he was a great reader of books, yet he had not his knowledge from books, but from some grounds and notions from within himself'. The Illuminati become independent of education, they get the answer as if dictated to them. Blake, describing his poem, Jerusalem, says 'I have written this poem from immediate dictation – I may praise it since I dare not pretend to be any other than the secretary – the authors are in eternity'. He goes on to say 'I am not ashamed, afraid or averse to tell you what ought to be told – that I am under the direction of messengers from heaven daily and nightly'. Plotinus tells us the way in which we can know the Infinite. 'Not by reason', he says, 'for it is the office of reason to distinguish and define. The Infinite cannot be ranked among its objects. You can only apprehend the Infinite by a faculty superior to reason, by entering into a state in which you are your finite self no longer – in which the divine essence is communicated to you. This is ecstasy. It is the liberation of your mind from its finite consciousness. In the reduction of your soul to its simplest self, its divine essence, you realise this union or identity.' Remember the charge after being raised when the Master begs the candidate to observe that the eye of human reason cannot penetrate the veil that lies between the levels of self-consciousness and enlightenment, 'unless assisted by that divine light which is from above'. And yet it would seem that when this shift of consciousness occurs it is as if the old self stays on one side of the veil and the new Self crosses over and is recognised as a separate identity within the person. Buddha said the attainment of Arahathship or mastery 'will cause a man being one to become multiform', and Walt Whitman described this other state as his Soul 'the other I am'. The author of the Shakespeare sonnets tries to express the beauty of this elevated state when he compares enlightenment, which is eternal, with Nature which is constantly dying and being renewed. In this sonnet the first two lines compare the state of enlightenment with Nature, the next six describe the temporal state of Nature and the last six the eternal state of enlightenment.

'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

Thou art more lovely and more temperate;

Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May, And summer's lease hath all too short a date;

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines, And often in his gold complexion dimmed;

And every fair from fair sometimes declines, By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimmed;  
But thy eternal summer shall not fade, Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;  
Nor shall Death brag thou wanderest in his shade, When in eternal lines to time thou growest;  
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Enlightenment is not a permanent state, nor can it be turned on and off like a tap. Plotinus says 'but this sublime condition is not of permanent duration. It is only now and then that we can enjoy this elevation above the limits of the body and the world. I myself have realised it but three times as yet'. Most people who experience it for the first time withdraw into a period of solitude. Afterwards they emerge and feel compelled to teach others the truth they have witnessed. Interestingly they all describe the same place beyond the veil but call it by different names. Jesus called it 'The Kingdom of Heaven'. St. Paul described the experience as being 'a man in Christ called up to the third heaven'. Dante calls it 'Paradiso' as opposed to the lower stages of Inferno and Purgatorio, and his other Self he named Beatrice, meaning 'making happy'. He described the shift as the 'transhumanisation' from a man 'into a God'. Guatama Buddha called it 'Nirvana' which literally means to 'blow away' as in blowing away the old ways. Like the words 'express the gloom' in the charge after raising – the gloom representing the old life with all its miseries which 'rests on the prospect of futurity' like a mist and prevents us from reaching this higher state of consciousness.

It is inevitably an experience beyond words – St. Paul describes being 'caught up into paradise' and hearing unspeakable words' and Dante explained 'my vision was greater than our speech, which yields to such a sight'. And finally Whitman talking to God says 'That Thou O God my life hast lighted, with ray of light, steady, ineffable, vouchsafed of Thee, Light rare untellable, lighting the very light, Beyond all signs, descriptions, languages.'

The third common factor in this experience, which I believe is reflected in the third degree, is the sense of immortality and the loss of the fear of death. This is not an intellectual conviction or a reasoned process of thought, but rather it simply ceases to be an issue when one experiences the truth first hand. How can one be afraid of death when one has tasted the fruits of immortality?

Our ritual teaches us this truth in the charge after raising. 'In this perishable frame resides a vital and immortal principle which will enable us to trample the King of Terrors beneath our feet'. The fear of dying above all things limits our potential to be enlightened. Our ritual says 'death has no terrors like the stain of falsehood and dishonour' and Hiram Abif thought so little of death that he would far rather die than betray a sacred trust. St Paul adds that 'if the earthly house of our tabernacle (in other words, our body) be dissolved, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.... the old things are passed away; behold they are become new'. So for me the message of the third degree is clear. We have nothing to fear from death because the soul is immortal and we have the evidence of many enlightened beings to support this truth. Have not all the great religions been founded on the teachings of someone who achieved this evolved state of consciousness, and don't they all appear to speak from first hand experience? They may call it by different names but it is really one and the same thing.

Other changes occur after experiencing enlightenment, and once experienced a person can never go back to his old ways. There is, for instance, no longer any sense of sin because on this level of consciousness it simply does not exist. There is instead a sense of oneness as all those who have had the experience are on the same spiritual level as part of an unseen brotherhood, a shared presence. Buddha said that 'Arahatship enables a man to comprehend by his own heart the hearts of all other beings and of other men and to understand all minds'. True Master Masons, who have experienced enlightenment are truly on the level with each other and are able to enlighten the minds of others as in the prayer to the Master Elect when it says 'enrich his mind with genuine knowledge that he may the better be enabled to enlighten the minds of his brethren'. There is no doubt in my mind that the rituals were conceived and written by someone who had achieved enlightenment, as a means of instructing others in the processes involved. Sadly over the years much of their import has been lost. It is a bit like finding a few pieces of a jigsaw and then trying to reconstruct the whole from what little we have. One could almost say it is like trying to find the lost words. So brethren I hope I have managed to show how the true nature and purpose of Freemasonry is to lead us from the darkness of ignorance to the light of true knowledge, and to guide us through the veil from self-consciousness to enlightenment.