

## CHELAS AND LAY CHELAS

A "CHELA" is a person who has offered himself to a master as a pupil to learn practically the "hidden mysteries of Nature and the psychical powers latent in man." The master who accepts him is called in India a *Guru*; and the real Guru is always an adept in the Occult Science. A man of profound knowledge, exoteric and esoteric, especially the latter; and one who has brought his carnal nature under the subjection of the WILL; who has developed in himself both the power (*Siddhi*) to control the forces of Nature, and the capacity to probe her secrets by the help of the formerly latent but now active powers of his being—this is the real Guru. To offer oneself as a candidate for Chelaship is easy enough, to develop into an adept the most difficult task any man could possibly undertake. There are scores of "natural-born" poets, mathematicians, mechanics, statesmen, &c. but a natural-born adept is something practically impossible. For, though we do hear at very rare intervals of one who has an extraordinary innate capacity for the acquisition of occult knowledge and power, yet even he has to pass the self-same tests and probations, and go through the self-same training as any less endowed fellow aspirant. In this matter it is most true that there is no royal road by which favourites may travel.

For centuries the selection of Chelas—outside the hereditary group within the *gon-pa* (temple)—has been made by the Himalayan Mahatmas themselves from among the class—in Tibet, a considerable one as to number—of natural mystics. The only exceptions have been in the cases of Western men like Fludd, Thomas Vaughan, Paracelsus, Pico di Mirandolo, Count St. Germain, &c., whose temperamental affinity to this celestial science, more or less forced the distant Adepts to come into personal relations with them, and enabled them to get such small (or large) proportion of the whole truth as was possible under their social surroundings. From Book IV. of *Kui-te*, Chapter on "The Laws of Upasanas," we learn that the qualifications expected in a Chela were: —

1. Perfect physical health;
2. Absolute mental and physical purity;
3. Unselfishness of purpose; universal charity; pity for all animate beings;
4. Truthfulness and unswerving faith in the law of Karma, independent of the intervention of any power in Nature: a law whose course is not to be obstructed by any agency, not to be caused to deviate by prayer or propitiatory exoteric ceremonies;
5. A courage undaunted in every emergency, even by peril to life;
6. An intuitional perception of one's being the vehicle of the manifested Avalokitesvara or Divine Atma (Spirit);
7. Calm indifference for, but a just appreciation of, everything that constitutes the objective and

transitory world, in its relation with, and to, the invisible regions.

Such, at the least, must have been the recommendations of one aspiring to perfect Chelaship. With the sole exception of the first, which in rare and exceptional cases might have been modified, each one of these points has been invariably insisted upon, and all must have been more or less developed in the inner nature by the Chela's *unhelped exertions*, before he could be actually "put to the test."

When the self-evolving ascetic—whether in, or outside the active world—has placed himself, according to his natural capacity, above, hence made himself master of, his (1) *Sarira*—body; (2) *Indriya*—senses; (3) *Dosha*—faults; (4) *Dukkha*—pain; and is ready to become one with his *Manas*—mind; *Buddhi*—intellection, or spiritual intelligence; and *Atma*—highest soul, *i.e.*, spirit; when he is ready for this, and, further, to recognize in *Atma* the highest ruler in the world of perceptions, and in the will, the highest executive energy (power), then may he, under the time-honoured rules, be taken in hand by one of the Initiates. He may then be shown the mysterious path at whose farther end is obtained the unerring discernment of *Phala*, or the fruits of causes produced, and given the means of reaching *Apavarga*—emancipation from the misery of repeated births, *pretya-bhāva*, in whose determination the ignorant has no hand.

But since the advent of the Theosophical Society, one of whose arduous tasks it is to re-awaken in

the Aryan mind the dormant memory of the existence of this science and of those transcendent human capabilities, the rules of Chela selection have become slightly relaxed in one respect. Many members of the Society who would not have been otherwise called to Chelaship became convinced by practical proof of the above points, and rightly enough thinking that if other men had hitherto reached the goal, they too, if inherently fitted, might reach it by following the same path, importunately pressed to be taken as candidates. And as it would be an interference with Karma to deny them the chance of at least beginning, they were given it. The results have been far from encouraging so far, and it is to show them the cause of their failure as much as to warn others against rushing heedlessly upon a similar fate, that the writing of the present article has been ordered. The candidates in question, though plainly warned against it in advance, began wrong by selfishly looking to the future and losing sight of the past. They forgot that they had done nothing to deserve the rare honour of selection, nothing which warranted their expecting such a privilege; that they could boast of none of the above enumerated merits. As men of the selfish, sensual world, whether married or single, merchants, civilian or military employés, or members of the learned professions, they had been to a school most calculated to assimilate them to the animal nature, least so to develop their spiritual potentialities. Yet each and all had vanity enough to suppose that their case would be made

an exception to the law of countless centuries, as though, indeed, in their person had been born to the world a new *Avatar!* All expected to have hidden things taught, extraordinary powers given them, because—well, because they had joined the Theosophical Society. Some had sincerely resolved to amend their lives, and give up their evil courses: we must do them that justice, at all events.

All were refused at first, Col. Olcott the President himself, to begin with: and he was not formally accepted as a Chela until he had proved by more than a year's devoted labours and by a determination which brooked no denial, that he might safely be tested. Then from all sides came complaints—from Hindus, who ought to have known better, as well as from Europeans who, of course, were not in a condition to know anything at all about the rules. The cry was that unless at least a few Theosophists were given the chance to try, the Society could not endure. Every other noble and unselfish feature of our programme was ignored—a man's duty to his neighbour, to his country, his duty to help, enlighten, encourage and elevate those weaker and less favoured than he; all were trampled out of sight in the insane rush for adeptship. The call for phenomena, phenomena, resounded in every quarter, and the Founders were impeded in their real work and teased importunately to intercede with the Mahatmas, against whom the real grievance lay, though their poor agents had to take all the buffets. At last, the word came from the higher authorities that a few of the most urgent candidates should be

taken at their word. The result of the experiment would perhaps show better than any amount of preaching what Chelaship meant, and what are the consequences of selfishness and temerity. Each candidate was warned that he must wait for years in any event, before his fitness could be established, and that he must pass through a series of tests that would bring out all there was in him, whether bad or good. They were nearly all married men, and hence were designated "Lay Chelas"—a term new in English, but having long had its equivalent in Asiatic tongues. A Lay Chela is but a man of the world who affirms his desire to become wise in spiritual things. Virtually, every member of the Theosophical Society who subscribes to the second of our three "Declared Objects" is such; for though not of the number of true Chelas, he has yet the possibility of becoming one, for he has stepped across the boundary-line which separated him from the Mahatmas, and has brought himself, as it were, under their notice. In joining the Society and binding himself to help along its work, he has pledged himself to act in some degree in concert with those Mahatmas, at whose behest the Society was organized, and under whose conditional protection it remains. The joining is then, the introduction; all the rest depends entirely upon the member himself, and he need never expect the most distant approach to the "favour" of one of our Mahatmas or any other Mahatmas in the world—should the latter consent to become known—that has not been fully earned by personal merit. The *Mahatmas are the servants, not the arbiters of the Law of Karma.*

Lay-Chelaship confers no privilege upon any one except that of working for merit under the observation of a Master. And whether that Master be or be not seen by the Chela makes no difference whatever as to the result: his good thought, words and deeds will bear their fruits, his evil ones, theirs. To boast of Lay Chelaship or make a parade of it, is the surest way to reduce the relationship with the Guru to a mere empty name, for it would be *primâ facie* evidence of vanity and unfitness for farther progress. And for years we have been teaching everywhere the maxim "First deserve, then desire" intimacy with the Mahatmas.

Now there is a terrible law operative in Nature, one which cannot be altered, and whose operation clears up the apparent mystery of the selection of certain "Chelas" who have turned out sorry specimens of morality, these few years past. Does the reader recall the old proverb, "Let sleeping dogs lie?" There is a world of occult meaning in it. No man or woman knows his or her moral strength until it is *tried*. Thousands go through life very respectably, because they were never put to the test. This is a truism doubtless, but it is most pertinent to the present case. One who undertakes to try for Chelaship by that very act rouses and lashes to desperation every sleeping passion of his animal nature. For this is the commencement of a struggle for mastery in which quarter is neither to be given nor taken. It is, once for all, "To be, or Not to be;" to conquer, means Adeptship: to fail, an ignoble Martyrdom; for to fall victim to lust, pride, avarice, vanity, selfishness,

cowardice, or any other of the lower propensities, is indeed ignoble, if measured by the standard of true manhood. The Chela is not only called to face all the latent evil propensities of his nature, but, in addition, the momentum of maleficent forces accumulated by the community and nation to which he belongs. For he is an integral part of those aggregates, and what affects either the individual man or the group (town or nation), reacts the one upon the other. And in this instance his struggle for goodness jars upon the whole body of badness in his environment, and draws its fury upon him. If he is content to go along with his neighbours and be almost as they are—perhaps a little better or somewhat worse than the average—no one may give him a thought. But let it be known that he has been able to detect the hollow mockery of social life, its hypocrisy, selfishness, sensuality, cupidity and other bad features, and has determined to lift himself up to a higher level, at once he is hated, and every bad, bigotted, or malicious nature sends at him a current of opposing will-power. If he is innately strong he shakes it off, as the powerful swimmer dashes through the current that would bear a weaker one away. But in this moral battle, if the Chela has one single hidden blemish—do what he may, it shall and will be brought to light. The varnish of conventionalities which "civilization" overlays us all with must come off to the last coat, and the inner self, naked and without the slightest veil to conceal its reality, is exposed. The habits of society which hold men to a certain degree under moral restraint, and compel them to pay tribute to virtue

by seeming to be good whether they are so or not—these habits are apt to be all forgotten, these restraints to be all broken through under the strain of Chelaship. He is now in an atmosphere of illusions—*Maya*. Vice puts on its most alluring face, and the tempting passions attract the inexperienced aspirant to the depths of psychic debasement. This is not a case like that depicted by a great artist, where Satan is seen playing a game of chess with a man upon the stake of his soul, while the latter's good angel stands beside him to counsel and assist. For the strife is in this instance between the Chela's will and his carnal nature, and Karma forbids that any angel or Guru should interfere until the result is known. With the vividness of poetic fancy Bulwer Lytton has idealized it for us in his "Zanoni," a work which will ever be prized by the occultist; while in his "Strange Story" he has with equal power shown the black side of occult research and its deadly perils. Chelaship was defined, the other day, by a Mahatma as a "psychic solvent, which eats away all dross and leaves only the pure gold behind." If the candidate has the latent lust for money, or political chicanery, or materialistic scepticism, or vain display, or false speaking, or cruelty, or sensual gratification of any kind the germ is almost sure to sprout; and so, on the other hand, as regards the noble qualities of human nature. The real man comes out. Is it not the height of folly, then, for any one to leave the smooth path of common-place life to scale the crags of Chelaship without some reasonable feeling of certainty that he has the right stuff in him? Well says the

Bible: "Let him that standeth take heed lest he fall"—a text that would-be Chelas should consider well, before they rush headlong into the fray! It would have been well for some of our Lay Chelas if they had thought twice before defying the tests. *We call to mind several sad failures within a twelve-month.* One went wrong in the head, recanted noble sentiments uttered but a few weeks previously, and became a member of a religion he had just scornfully and unanswerably proven false. A second became a defaulter and absconded with his employer's money—the latter also a Theosophist. A third gave himself up to gross debauchery, and confessed it, with ineffectual sobs and tears, to his chosen Guru. A fourth got entangled with a person of the other sex and fell out with his dearest and truest friends. A fifth showed signs of mental aberration and was brought into Court upon charges of discreditable conduct. A sixth shot himself to escape the consequences of criminality, on the verge of detection! And so we might go on and on. All these were apparently sincere searchers after truth, and passed in the world for respectable persons. Externally, they were fairly eligible as candidates for Chelaship, as appearances go; but "within all was rottenness and dead men's bones." The world's varnish was so thick as to hide the absence of the true gold underneath; and the "solvent" doing its work, the candidate proved in each instance but a gilded figure of moral dross, from circumference to core.

In what precedes we have, of course, dealt but with the failures among Lay Chelas; there have

been partial successes too, and these are passing gradually through the first stages of their probation. Some are making themselves useful to the Society and to the world in general by good example and precept. If they persist, well for them, well for us all: the odds are fearfully against them, but still “there is no Impossibility to him who Wills.” The difficulties in Chelaship will never be less until human nature changes and a new order is evolved. St. Paul (Rom. vii. 18,19) might have had a Chela in mind when he said “to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good I would I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do.” And in the wise Kirátár-juniyam of Bharávi it is written:—

The enemies which rise within the body,  
Hard to be overcome—the evil passions—  
Should manfully be fought; *who conquers these*  
*Is equal to the conqueror of worlds.* (XI. 32.)

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