

“Drawn into the Vortex of Probation”: Edmund W. Fern’s Case

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*Few men know their inherent capacities — only the ordeal of crude chelaship develops them.*¹

*You laugh at probations — the word seems ridiculous as applied to you? You forget that he who approaches our precincts even in thought, is drawn into the vortex of probation.*²

T. SUBBA RAO, in *Esoteric Writings*, presents an interesting view of occult and spiritual development:

This philosophy recognizes two paths, both having the same end, a glorified immortality. The one is the steady natural path of progress through moral effort and practice of the virtues. A natural coherent and sure growth of the soul is the result, a position of firm equilibrium is reached and maintained, which cannot be overthrown or shaken by any unexpected assault. It is the normal method followed by the vast mass of humanity, and this is the course Śankarāchārya recommended to all his sanyāsis and successors. The other road is the precipitous path of occultism, through a series of initiations. Only a few specially organized and peculiar natures are fit for this path.³

His view draws attention to the two paths envisaged by the Occult Philosophy:

a steady natural path of progress and the path of occultism, which involves tests and challenges which perhaps many people are not prepared to undergo. The essence of such tests is the utter exposure of the personal nature in us — the self — and the accompanying necessity for the individual undergoing such tests to look at his or her own personal nature squarely in the face. This process is called by the Mahatmas “probation”.

In their everyday existence, many people tend to take their sense of self for granted, both as a necessity as well as a normal feature of their lives. Our sense of identification with the self is nothing but complete and we live to tend to its whims and cares, its likes and dislikes, and its many desires. It is only when serious crises happen — a loss, an argument which has turned violent, a deeply personal interest thwarted by opposing forces, an irrational impulse for revenge — that we realize,

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partially, that the self was not that cosy, affable entity which we nourish. According to the teachings of the Buddha, the self is indeed like the stranger that arrives in the middle of the night in a household and kills the householder.⁴

Both Madame Blavastky as well as the Mahatmas suggested that a number of individuals in the early history of the Theosophical Society (TS) were attracted to “the vortex of probation”, and not many succeeded. As will become evident later on in this article, by putting aspiring chelas or disciples on probation the Mahatmas were trying to ascertain if they could indeed be used in their work in order to further the work of the TS. One of them defined this work thus:

The situation is this: men who join the Society with the one selfish object of reaching power making occult science their only or even chief aim may as well not join it — they are doomed to disappointment as much as those who commit the mistake of letting them believe that the Society is nothing else. It is just because they preach too much “the Brothers” and too little if at all *Brotherhood* that they fail. How many times had we to repeat, that he who joins the Society with the sole object of coming in contact with us, and if not of acquiring at least of assuring himself of the reality of such powers and of our objective existence — was pursuing a mirage? I say again then, it is he alone who has the love of humanity at heart, who is capable of grasping thoroughly the idea of a regenerating practical Brotherhood who is entitled to the possession of our secrets.

He alone, such a man — will never misuse his powers, as there will be no fear that he should turn them to selfish ends. A man who places not the good of mankind above his own good is not worthy of becoming our chela — he is not worthy of becoming higher in knowledge than his neighbor.⁵

In her notes to the chronological edition of *The Mahatma Letters*, Virginia Hanson, a respected, lifelong student of the Letters, had this to say about Mr Fern:

Edmund W. Fern was serving as secretary to [A. O.] Hume and probably living in his home. He was somewhat of a psychic and the Mahatmas considered that he might have some valuable potential for the transmission of messages. He joined the Theosophical Society and was elected secretary of the Simla Eclectic Theosophical Society. The Mahatma M. took an interest in him and accepted him as a chela on probation.⁶

Let us consider how the process of probation went for Mr Fern, according to the Mahatmas:

A chela under probation is allowed to think and do whatever he likes. He is warned and told beforehand: “You will be tempted and deceived by appearances; two paths will be open before you, both leading to the goal you are trying to attain; one easy, and that will lead you more rapidly to the fulfilment of orders you may receive; the other more arduous, longer; a path full of stones and thorns that will make you stumble more than once on your way; and, at the end of which you may, perhaps,

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find failure after all and be unable to carry out the orders given for some particular small work, — but, whereas the latter will cause the hardships you have undergone on it to be all carried to the side of your credit in the long run, the former, the easy path, can offer you but a momentary gratification, an easy fulfilment of the task.” The chela is at perfect liberty, *and often quite justified from the stand point of appearances* — to suspect his Guru of being “a fraud”, as the elegant word stands. More than that: the greater, the sincerer his indignation — whether expressed in words or boiling in his heart — the more fit he is, the better qualified to become an adept. He is free to, and will not be held to account for using the most abusive words and expressions regarding his guru’s actions and orders, provided he comes out victorious from the fiery ordeal; provided he resists all and every temptation; rejects every allurements, and proves that nothing — not even the promise of that which he holds dearer than life, of that most precious boon, his future adeptship — is able to make him deviate from the path of truth and honesty, or force him to become a *deceiver*. (Letter #74, ML-30, p. 222)

Consider the above-mentioned words in relation to what happened in Mr Fern’s probation in the quote below (a *dugpa* is a person who follows the left-hand path, seeking power and influence to dominate others):

Fern was tested and found a thorough *dugpa* in his moral nature. We will see, we will see; but very little hope left notwithstanding his

splendid capacities. Had I hinted to him to deceive his own father and mother he would have thrown in *their* fathers and mothers in the bargain. Vile, vile nature — yet irresponsible. Oh ye Westerns, who boast of your morality! May the bright Chohans keep you and all yours from the approaching harm is the sincere wish of your friend. (Letter #89, ML-46, p. 278)

The Mahatmas, according to their own words, use the process of probation to expose the personal, coarse nature of candidates to chelaship:

Fern is in the hands of two clever — “dwellers of the threshold” as Bulwer would call them — two *dugpas* kept by us to do our scavengers’ work, and to draw out the latent vices — if there be any — from the candidates; and Fern has shown himself on the whole, far better and more moral than he was supposed to be. Fern has done but what he was ordered to do; and he holds his tongue because it is his first duty. (Letter #75, ML-53, p. 232)

Probationary chelaship helps to magnify whatever was lurking within the candidate’s mind:

His letter of penitence and remorse to M. — which he sends you to keep — is not sincere. If you do not watch him closely, he will mix the cards for you in a way that may lead the Society to ruin, for he swore a great oath to himself that the Society will either *fall or rise* with himself. If he fails next year again — and with all his great gifts, how can such an incurable little Jesuit and liar help failing? — he

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will do his best to pull down the Society with him — as regards belief in the “Brothers” at least. Try to save him, if possible, my dearest friend; do your best to convert him to truth and unselfishness. It is a real pity that such gifts should be drowned in a mire of vice — so strongly engrafted upon him by his early tutors. Meanwhile, beware of ever allowing him to see any of my letters. (Letter #92, ML-54, pp. 288–289)

Although an educational process, chelaship involves a relentless testing and drawing out of a candidates inner and moral nature in order to see if he or she can succeed in integrating their consciousness on the basis of both stability and unselfishness:

Take another case, that of Fern. His development, as occurring under your eye, affords you a useful study and a hint as to even more serious methods adopted in individual cases to thoroughly *test* the latent moral qualities of the man. Every human being contains within himself vast potentialities, and it is the duty of the adepts to surround the would-be chela with circumstances which shall enable him to take the “right-hand path” — if he has the ability in him. We are no more at liberty to withhold the chance from a postulant than we are to guide and direct him into the proper course. At best, we can only show him — after his probation period was successfully terminated — that if he does this he will go right; if the other, wrong. But until he has passed that period, we leave him to fight out his battles as

best he may; and have to do so occasionally with higher and *initiated* chelas such as HPB, once they are allowed to work in the world, that all of us more or less avoid. More than that — and you better learn it at once, if my previous letters to you about Fern have not sufficiently opened your eyes — we allow our candidates *to be tempted* in a thousand various ways, so as to draw out the whole of their inner nature and allow it the chance of remaining conqueror either one way or the other. (Letter #92, ML-54, p. 299)

The mastery of self is the goal as well as the most difficult struggle to be undertaken:

The victor’s crown is only for him who proves himself worthy to wear it; for him who attacks Mara single-handed and conquers the demon of lust and earthly passions; and not we but he himself puts it on his brow. It was not a meaningless phrase of the Tathagata that “he who masters *Self* is greater than he who conquers thousands in battle”: there is no such other difficult struggle. If it were not so, adeptship would be but a cheap acquirement. . . . What may seem present bad faith may in the end prove the truest, most benevolent loyalty. Let time show who was right and who faithless. One, who is true and approved today, may tomorrow prove, under a new concatenation of circumstances, a traitor, an ingrate, a coward, an imbecile. The reed, bent beyond its limit of flexibility, will have snapped in twain. Shall we accuse it? No; but because we can, and *do* pity it, we cannot select it as part of those reeds that

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have been tried and found strong, hence fit to be accepted as material for the indestructible fane we are so carefully building. (Letter #92, (ML-54, pp. 299–300))

The process of probation will show what the candidate will be capable to do “under different and every kind of opportunities”:

The option of receiving him [Fern] or not as a regular chela — remains with the Chohan. M. has simply to have him tested, tempted and examined by all and every means, so as to have his real nature drawn out. This is a rule with us as inexorable as it is disgusting in your Western sight, and I could not prevent it even if I would. It is not enough to know thoroughly what the chela is capable of doing or not doing at the time and under the circumstances during the period of probation. We have to know of what he may become capable under different and every kind of opportunities. (Letter #74, ML-30, pp. 227)

The Mahatma alludes to Mr Fern’s probation as well as to his character:

Fern is under such a probation; and a nice mess they have prepared for me between them two! As you already know from my letter to Hume, he did not interest me, I knew nothing of him, beyond his remarkable faculties, his powers for clair-audience and clairvoyance, and his still more remarkable tenacity of purpose, strong will, and other, etc. A loose, immoral character for years — a tavern Pericles with a sweet smile for every street

Aspasia, he had entirely and suddenly reformed after joining the Theosophical Society, and M. took him seriously in hand. It is no business of mine to tell, even yourself, how much of his visions is truth and how much hallucination, or even perchance — fiction. (Letter #75, ML-53, p. 231)

One of the important points regarding the probationary stage is to bring people together “into the closest relationship in order to bring out their mutual virtues and defects”:

I may tell you no news if I say that it was Mr Hume’s attitude when the *Eclectic* was formed that caused our chiefs to bring Mr Fern and Mr Hume together. The latter reproached us vehemently for refusing to take in as chelas — himself, and that, sweet, handsome, spiritual and truth-aspiring boy — Fern. We were daily dictated laws, and as daily taken to task for being unable to realize our own interests. And it will be no news, though it may disgust and shock you, to learn that the two were brought into the closest relationship in order to bring out their mutual virtues and defects — each to shine in his own true light. Such are the laws of Eastern *probation*. Fern was a most remarkable psychic subject, naturally — very spiritually inclined, but corrupted by Jesuit masters, and with his sixth and seventh Principles completely dormant and paralysed within him. No idea of right and wrong whatever; in short — *irresponsible* for anything but the direct and voluntary actions of the *animal man*. (Letter #101, ML-57, pp. 343–344)

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During the history of the TS a number of Theosophists were put to the test of confronting their own personal nature and, in spite of many difficulties and inner struggles, were able to emerge from such tests with an abiding and unshakable dedication to the cause of Theosophy. They became pillars in the Theosophical edifice. Perhaps every sincere worker in the Society may face

similar tests, like many others before, now or in the future.

In his first letter to C. W. Leadbeater, in 1884, Master KH wrote, before accepting him as a chela in a second letter:

Like the “true man” of Carlyle who is not to be seduced by ease, “difficulty, abnegation, martyrdom, death are the *allurements* that act” during the hours of trial on the heart of a *true chela*.⁷ ✧

References

1. *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, chron., ed. Vicente Hao Chin, Jr, Theosophical Publishing House (TPH), Quezon City, Metro Manila, Philippines, 1993, letter #110, p. 371. (All letters quoted in this article are from the same source unless otherwise noted.)
2. Letter #131, p. 435.
3. Rao, T. Subba, *Esoteric Writings*, TPH, Adyar, Chennai, 2002, pp.112–113.
4. Grimm, George, *The Doctrine of the Buddha — The Religion of Reason and Meditation*, Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi, 1982, p. 144.
5. Letter #33, pp. 100–101.
6. Letter #73, p. 218.
7. *Letters from the Masters of the Wisdom*, First Series, TPH, Adyar, Madras, 1973, p. 29.

However mean your life is, meet it and live it; do not shun it and call it hard names. It is not so bad as you are. It looks poorest when you are richest. The fault-finder will find faults even in paradise. Love your life, poor as it is. You may perhaps have some pleasant, thrilling, glorious hours, even in a poorhouse. The setting sun is reflected from the windows of the almshouse as brightly as from the rich man's abode; the snow melts before its door as early in the spring. I do not see but a quiet mind may live as contentedly there, and have as cheering thoughts, as in a palace.

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*