

The Deeper Meaning of the Entered Apprentice Degree An Esoteric Interpretation of the First Degree

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Introduction

Albert Pike once wrote: "Freemasonry is the subjugation of the human that is in man, by the Divine; the conquest of the appetites and the passions, by the Moral Sense and the Reason; a continual effort, struggle, and warfare of the Spiritual against the Material and Sensual".

I found this definition of Freemasonry to be an appropriate introduction to what I am about to present.

This lecture is aimed primarily at those brethren who are relatively new to Masonry. However, I think that some of the older Masons may gain some insight from this talk. I believe that many Masons have lost sight of, or are not aware of, what our ritual is really all about. I would like to expose, to you, some of the deeper meaning behind the ritual of the first degree, and hope that you will propagate this information in the future.

I have come to understand that there are three aspects to our ritual: physical, mental, and spiritual. The first degree is mostly related to the physical; the second degree to the mental (or intellectual), and the third to the spiritual. However, each one of the degree rituals has, within it, those same three levels. The **physical** relates to the actions and movement; the **mental** relates to the moral and intellectual aspects and includes, believe it or not, a lesson in Astronomy; and the **spiritual** is what I'm about to explain.

First, I must tell you that there is no *official* view regarding this deeper aspect of our ritual. Grand Lodge cannot provide you with any standard book that contains these explanations (in fact, few Grand Lodge publications refer to the deeper, more esoteric, side of Masonry). Therefore, there are a few different interpretations that you may come across. It doesn't matter - choose whatever is more meaningful to *you*.

Next, I must put forward some arguments that provide evidence that there is a deeper meaning.

Our ritual tells us that there is. At your initiation, you were announced at the door of the lodge as "a poor candidate, in a state of darkness, humbly soliciting to be admitted to the *mysteries* and privileges of *Ancient* Freemasonry". What are these *mysteries*? Is Freemasonry *ancient*?

I will remind you that, during the examination before passing to the second degree, you were asked: "What is Freemasonry?" The answer you were to give is: "A beautiful system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols". Brethren, in this statement are the first clues that there is something that is hidden. Let's examine this statement further.

A “System of **Morality**.....” - Are the rituals of Masonry there merely for the purpose of teaching morals: Temperance, Prudence, Justice, Charity, and Brotherly Love. Was Masonry instituted to teach these *elementary* virtues? As you well know, those who are “fit and proper people to be made Masons” must be “Just and upright men and **strict morals**”. So, ask yourself if Masonry was meant to teach morals to the *already* moral?

“**Veiled** in allegory and illustrated by symbols...” – “**veiled**” means “hidden or covered”, and here is another clue that there is something hidden. “**Allegory**” means

“a story that has a *deeper* or more general meaning *in addition to its surface meaning*“, and this is another clue. A **symbol** is

“something used for or regarded as *representing something else*”, which is yet another clue. As you can see, this statement of the definition of Masonry refers to something *hidden*. This is not a *subtle* hint; it is virtually slapping you in the face for attention.

What is it that is veiled? The Junior Warden's Tracing Board lecture begins “The usages and customs of Masonry have ever *corresponded* with those of the *Egyptian Philosophers*, to which they bear a *near affinity*. The *Pythagorean System* seems to have been established on a *similar plan*”. Here is another statement that hints that there is something hidden *and* that our ritual incorporates *ancient mysteries*.

This points to the *real* secret of Masonry: that our ritual hides deeper, more esoteric, *spiritual* lessons, based on various *ancient mysteries and teachings* that have been taught throughout the ages, in different forms.

These mysteries can not be written or taught within Freemasonry, and are of use only to those who seek the light, through education, contemplation, understanding, and assimilation. It does not matter what religion you may follow, if any, as these mysteries apply to all. The candidate, if he is to benefit by the light to which the Craft leads, must be prepared to keep his mind open, and *seek* those mysteries. We'll return to this point later.

The sources of our Initiation Ceremony, while based, perhaps, on old Operative ceremonies, are a blend of various streams of influence, usually called the “Secret Doctrine” (propagated today as Theosophy), which is common to all the Ancient Mysteries and Initiation systems from the dawn of history. These are combined with elements from more recent systems, such as Hermeticism, the Hebrew Cabala, Rosicrucianism, Muslim Sufism, Christian Mysticism, Buddhism, and others, drawing symbols from *allof* them. Consider also that a number of our Brethren who were involved in forming Masonry as we know it today, were Rosicrucians.

Researching these, and there are many books regarding them, it becomes clear that all these sources have been promoters of the *same* Mysteries, and that they proclaim the same truths. Many of them *also* have rituals with layered meanings and many correspond to *our* Degrees. I encourage you to do your own further research to verify this for yourselves. I will go so far as to say that it is imperative that you do.

The Ritual

Our journey through life is generally a “hoodwinked” fumbling about for something more meaningful but we don't know what, until we eventually realize that we are wasting our energies, and that there just may be something higher, and better, worth hunting for. This is what brings many men to Freemasonry.

It is these two conditions that are reproduced in the two parts of our First Degree Ceremony: one of groping ignorantly in the dark for the Truth behind our earthly existence; and one of seeking it intelligently, with the opened eyes of the Initiate.

Freemasonry requires that every Candidate for Initiation comes "properly prepared". Every ancient and modern Initiation system has required it, and the preparation required in more advanced secret Orders was, and still is, of an extremely intensive nature. Fortunately, ours is not so, and refers to a mental attitude: of open mindedness and willingness to seek for truth.

The First Degree is made up of fourteen distinct acts, in two series of seven each: the first seven are in a State of Darkness; the second seven in a State of Light; *corresponding* to the Ancient Mysteries. Seven is a special number in Masonry, and in Theosophy, but I won't go into that in this lecture.

It is *very* important to understand that the **Lodge** referred to throughout our rituals, in this spiritual sense, is a symbol of our own individual *being*, and if we interpret our rituals in the light of this fact, we shall find that it reveals an entirely new aspect, to most Masons, of the *purpose* of our Craft. It provides a blueprint which can be used to build our own spiritual temple within, and provides signposts pointing us to the knowledge that will prepare us for developing a spiritual consciousness.

I will now proceed to explain some of the ritual of the EA Degree in light of this view.

Outside The Door Of The Lodge

Outside the door of the lodge, the candidate's disrobing, prior to the Ceremony, is symbolic of the mental unclothing required of him. Thereafter, to be taken wherever he is led, and to do whatever he is told, is symbolic of the meekness and docility with which his *mind* should follow *Truth* wherever it may lead, even into apparently perilous places, and among concepts not recognized by the standards and ideas of the outside world.

From “a convenient room”, the Candidate is led to the door of the Lodge, which is tyled, seeking admission. This symbolizes that he "meets with opposition", and cannot gain admission without his guide. In other words, on turning from the world without to the world within, his first discovery is to find his way blocked by the door of the Lodge. In some Lodges outside of Canada, the candidate himself must provide the three knocks. This is much more meaningful, as it symbolizes the candidate seeking admission.

The door of the Lodge symbolizes an obstructive element (within himself). The Candidate is to recognize that any opposition to his own spiritual advancement must be overcome by some help and guidance. The habitual thought-processes, prejudices, and preconceived ideas become obstructions to the perception of things of the world within. We erect and “tyle” our own door, and block our own light, and eventually, on seeking to turn to the Light, find ourselves confronted by darkness and opposition of our *own* creation. Furthermore, he cannot enter without permission from the Master. The Master represents his Master-Principle, and we’ll touch again on that later.

Within The Lodge

After the candidate is admitted to the lodge, on his knees, he is queried as to where he places his trust in circumstances of “**difficulty and danger**”. What *are* the difficulties and dangers he is about to be exposed to? A Candidate for Initiation into the secrets and mysteries of his *own being* should possess a stable **faith** of purpose otherwise, grave risks of failure exist for an unfit person to “rashly run forward” towards experiences for which he is unsuited and *unprepared*.

The Candidate then **rises**, to a higher state of awareness, and is told to follow his “guide”, representing his *inner guide*, or “that still small voice”, on which he can truly rely, “with firm but humble confidence”.

Perambulation

The journey **round the Lodge** is a symbolic representation of the Candidate's *own life journeys* in the world outside, prior to his Initiation into the world *within*.

Though still in a state of darkness, he is not alone. He has, with him, an enlightened **guide**. The significance being, as I have already stated, that every traveller through life has, within himself, his own *invisible guide*.

In the course of his symbolic journey he is led to each **Warden**, in turn, with a repetition of the knocks previously given at the door of the Lodge. These represent more obstacles. But now he not only overcomes his own self-created opposition, but awakens, and stimulates into activity, *other* aspects of himself (his psyche and intellect), represented, at this point, by the Wardens (we will deal more with what the Wardens represent, a little later).

After both Wardens (psyche and intellect), have assured themselves of the Candidate's fitness for advancement to the East, he is so certified, and **presented to the Master** (master-principle) for Initiation. But, before the Master accepts him, the Candidate is required to affirm three things:

1. That he **seeks the Light voluntarily**, for its own sake, and from no unworthy or material motive.
2. That his objectives in seeking it are: **knowledge** for himself; and a desire to make himself, in possession of that knowledge, of **more extensive service** to humanity. This means that the enlightenment of

Initiation is not to be for his private benefit only; it must become of importance for the general good.

3. That he will **persevere** in the path about to be disclosed to him; which means perseverance throughout his daily life with all that the Ceremony really represents.

The Candidate has now completed his journeying around the Lodge, which symbolizes his darkened wanderings since his birth in this world. During his life, he has passed blindly (though never without unseen guidance) through places and experiences: sometimes of darkness (the "North"); sometimes of more or less enlightenment (the "South", "West", and "East"); yet entirely ignorant of where he was going, or what the purpose of his life was, or whether at a given moment he was near to, or far from, its true goal. These ignorant wanderings, at last, come to an end, and the moment comes when he heads definitely away from the West, and guided toward the East, as a "candidate **properly prepared** to be made a Mason".

The Obligation

Traditionally, the Mysteries, and all secret Orders, require a **vow of silence and secrecy** from the Candidate, before Initiation, and entrustment with any secret information. The reasons for secrecy, and for being **solemnly obligated** to it, are much deeper than the need for silence about the formal secrets of the Order.

You should be aware that silence and secrecy are imposed more in interest of the individual himself, than in the Fraternity (which would hardly suffer from any indiscretion). Experience will teach him, later on, the deep personal value of silence, and the peril of premature and unwise speech: a peril pointed to in the penalty of the Obligation (and what it represents).

The Restoration to Light

After the Obligation, the Candidate is reminded that, for a considerable time, he has "been in a **state of darkness**". This does not merely allude to the few minutes during which the Candidate has been hoodwinked for symbolic reasons. Remember that the whole ceremony is allegory, that it dramatizes, in a way, "the entry of all men upon this their mortal existence"; and that the whole of that existence has, until now, been spent in a state of darkness, and will remain so until *spiritual consciousness* is regained, which we call "Light". The Master's command, "Let there be Light", therefore implies: let there be a *heightening of consciousness* in that which has, until now, been unconscious.

The **clap of hands**, which all the Brethren engage in at the moment of restoration to light, is the outward expression of the Lodge's co-operation with the Master, in a startling way, in bringing the Candidate from darkness to light. To the Candidate himself, it should mean the sound of the breaking of his inward bonds, resulting in upliftment and sudden vision, which enables him to realize: "Whereas before I was blind, now I see!"

When a child is born into this world, it requires a considerable time before its consciousness becomes adjusted to its new environment, and its vision focused. Time and practice are required before it can accustom itself, and its eyesight, to its surroundings. Similarly, with spiritual rebirth, one passes into a state of awareness of something having happened in oneself of an illuminating nature. One cannot tell *oneself*, let alone others, what it is; one just knows that there has been a shifting of one's focus of consciousness from a lower to a higher level, a feeling of the start of much deeper understanding for the future.

The Lights of Masonry

The **Three Great, though emblematic, Lights** consist of the Volume of the Sacred Law, the Square, and the Compasses. The Three Great Lights are the most important symbols in Masonry.

The **V.S.L.** has a deeper significance. It is the *visible* emblem of the invisible *Cosmic Law*, through which the Creator is manifested in the Universe. It represents the Creator, whose "law" is the basis for everything in existence, as revealed in the Secret Doctrine.

The **Compasses**, resting upon the V.S.L., represent the *Cosmic (or Divine) Principle* issuing from the Creator into manifestation, both cosmically and in the individual. It also represents the candidate's Spirit.

The **Square**, although opposite to, and inextricably conjoined with, the Compasses, represents *cosmic matter*, in which the Divine Principle takes form. It also represents the candidate's material being, or lower nature.

In conjunction, the Three Great Lights reveal the *Cosmic Purpose*: of Spirit and Matter working in unison, and according to Cosmic Law, to construct a perfect Universe, occupied by

Beings seeking perfection, as described in the Secret Doctrine.

The points of the Compasses, being concealed beneath the Square, in this degree, imply that the candidate's *spirit* is, at that time, *overlain*, and prevented from full function by the tendencies of his *material* body. If man is to become perfected and rise to the full possibilities of his being, his spiritual principle must not remain subordinate to the flesh and its tendencies, but gain ascendancy over them.

The Three Lesser Lights directly correspond to the three Great Lights.

The **Sun** symbolizes our *spiritual consciousness*, the **Moon** is a symbol for our *intellectual faculties*, and the **Master** represents our *will-power*, or, the *Master Principle* in ourselves. They are meant to indicate to the Candidate that the three great Cosmic Principles underlying the Universe, are present in *himself*. **This is a very important point!** The Universe is the Macrocosm, he himself is the Microcosm and, in *him* reside three "lights", enabling him to co-operate in working towards a perfect Universe.

The Secrets

Before the Candidate is entrusted with the "secrets" of the Degree, he is told of certain dangers which he has already passed. He is shown the sword and the cabletow.

The **sword** is a symbol of certain *spiritual* perils, mentioned before, of a person *rashly embarking* upon the path of spiritual experience for which he is unsuited and *unprepared*.

The **cabletow** represents the *spiritual suicide* from retreating from that path, once one's eyes have been opened to it. It also represents the umbilical cord, with the Candidate having been "born" into the light.

The "**secrets**" of this Degree are explained as consisting of certain signs, tokens and words. These, of course, are figurative emblems of them. It is what they *signify* that constitutes the secrets, and *that* significance is left for the Candidate to meditate upon, understand, and assimilate into personal practice. Only that way will he really learn them, and begin to understand why they are called "secrets". They can never be *orally* communicated, except in symbolic form. Just as a successful businessman can never convey the "secret" of his success to someone who has himself not practised it, so the secrets of Masonic progress are learned only by those who actually *live* them. They are *clues* to spiritual progress rather than confidential communications of secret information.

The **sign** of this degree should be understood as being, not physical, but *mystical*. Its meaning is that the violation of the Obligation will result in a disconnect between the head (or mind) and the spirit, and then the cosmic truths can not be understood. It also refers to an energy centre within his being (sometimes called Chakras). The throat chakra has to do with communication. When, in our first Degree, you *salute* the Worshipful Master, remember that that gesture signifies the homage you should pay to what is worshipful in *yourself*, namely, your own Master-principle, the Divine Essence in yourself, for the Master of a Lodge symbolically personifies that Master-principle. Apprenticeship in the Mysteries, and in early Masonry, was seven years, due to the fact that the First Degree of spiritual and Masonic life is one of purification of body and mind, in preparation for the attainment of Light. The unpurified can never reach that Light except through purification, and the elimination of everything in him that clouds his vision, and coarsens his nature. This takes time.

The "**Word**" given to the Candidate, which denotes "Strength", refers to the strength or energy with which the Candidate should pursue his work of self-perfecting, *and* the strength obtained from pursuing that spiritual path.

The Apron

The Candidate is invested with the Apron, which is one of the most important and comprehensive of our symbols.

Its **shape** is that of a triangle superimposed upon a rectangle. The **triangle** is the primitive and universal emblem of what is *Spiritual*, while the **rectangle** is that of what is *Material* and, since human nature is a compound of both, the

Apron is a figure of the man himself. And because the triangle and rectangle are among the most ancient ideographs in the world, the Apron is truly described as being "a badge older than that of any other Order in existence." We should think of the triangular flap as a sign of the presence, in ourselves, of the *Divine Essence*: an Essence which comprises all the attributes of Divinity: all knowledge; all power; all wisdom, strength and beauty. The Apron is also of white lambskin; an emblem of purity. It represents the purification required in order to progress on the spiritual path. There is *more* symbolism in the Apron, but you can have fun researching that yourself.

The North East Angle

The N.E. corner has great symbolic significance. It is the meeting place of darkness and light (the sun rises in the East, travels across the sky in the south, leaving the north always in shadow). The **N.E. angle** represents the Candidate's own condition. Standing at this point, he can, at will, advance further East, to the Light, or relapse into darkness in the North; it rests with him as to which direction his life will take. He is to regard himself as a "foundation-stone," and the material for raising thereon a "super-structure." This expression means something more than just character-building: it refers to building, within himself, a *spiritual Temple*.

An important subject in the N.E. corner is the awakening of the duty of **Charity**, which is, of course, *more* than donations of money to the financially distressed. The "Charity" spoken about here is also that of giving from the heart, and *universal compassion* for all living creatures. The Candidate is to learn that charity is the foundation stone of a higher life, and may be practised at different levels, the highest of which is the pouring out of charitable, *compassionate love* to all beings.

Tracing Board Lecture

Remember that the *real* Lodge referred to throughout our rituals, is *our own being*.

The "**form of the Lodge**," is the way in which human nature has been composed and constituted: the length, breadth, height and depth of man's own *being*. His *body* and his *spirit* are "**holy ground**", upon which he should build the *altar* of his own *spiritual life*.

The **West** side of the lodge represents the *rational mind* – material-oriented common sense.

The **East** side represents man's *spirituality*, which is initially under-developed and seldom active.

The **South**, being midway between West and East, is where rational understanding and spiritual intuition meet, and where *intellectuality* can attain its "meridian".

The **North** is the *physical sense*, the lowest perception, a place of darkness and ignorance.

The **depth** of the Lodge ("from the surface of the earth to its centre") refers to the difference in depth between the *superficial* consciousness of our earthly mentality, and the *divine degree* of consciousness resident at man's spiritual **centre**.

The **height** of the Lodge ("even as high as the heavens") implies that the range of consciousness possible to us, when we have developed our potentialities to the full, is *infinite*.

The Lodge is "supported by **three great pillars**, Wisdom, Strength and Beauty". **Wisdom** is gained by an increase of *perceptive* faculty and understanding, gaining mental **strength** and confidence, and developing grace of character and conduct and an inner **beauty** of spirit.

The **covering** of a lodge, a celestial canopy of diverse colours, represents man's *ethereal* nature. The symbolism here refers to what is learned in the Secret Doctrine but I will not go into that here.

The candidate will discern that there is a mystical "**ladder** of many rounds or staves", i.e., that there are numerous *paths*, or methods, by which men can move towards to the *spiritual Light*, and of the three principal ones, the "greatest of these", the one "that comprehends them all", is *charitable Love*, and the Mason who reaches the summit is close to *divine consciousness*.

The black and white **chequered floor** of the Lodge denotes the dual quality of everything connected with life, and the physical groundwork of *human nature*. Everything material is characterized by inextricably blended opposites: good and evil, light and shade, joy and sorrow, positive and negative. Our experience of the *dualism* of these opposites continues for us, and creates tension, until such time as we are ready for advancement: when we cease to perceive them as opposites, and are realized as a *unity* (one cannot exist without the other), and a *transcendental peace* is achieved, which is symbolized by the **indented border**. This duality is a fundamental Buddhist philosophy to help the achievement of inner peace. A very apt symbol for this is the Yin/Yang. [

Opening the Lodge, and the Officers

The seven Officers - three principal, three assistant, and the Tyler, represent *seven* aspects of *consciousness*, mentally and spiritually interactive, and coordinated into a unity, constituting a "just and perfect Lodge".

The knock of the **Master's** gavel to call the lodge to attention, and the repeat of those knocks by the Wardens, represents the Master-Principle calling you to attend to, and control your own actions (i.e. the **Psyche**, represented by the **Senior Warden**), and to keep down the impulses of his lower nature (i.e. the **Intellect**, responded to by the **Junior Warden**).

The **Senior Deacon**, carrying the messages and commands of the Master to the Senior Warden, is the link between Spirit and Psyche.

The **Junior Deacon**, carrying the messages and commands of the Master from the Senior to the Junior Warden, is the link between the Psyche and the Mind.

The **Tyler** is the *outer sense*, the link with the outside world, and keeps out unwanted influences.

The **Inner Guard** is the *inner sense*, the link between the mind and the outer sense-nature, and evaluates incoming influences.

Summary

Based on what I have just told you, I hope that, next time you go through the opening of the Lodge, you will see it as more than just a mechanical ritual, that you will understand how this should be affecting you, and use it to meditate on, and prepare yourself for spiritual advancement.

Summing up this examination of the Ceremony, we see its purpose as follows:

The Ceremony of our first degree is a comprehensive portrayal of the entrance of all men into, first, physical life, and second, into spiritual life.

The first half of it is designed to restore to Light (in the spiritual sense) a Candidate who seeks Light from his heart, and comes prepared in mind and person to receive it.

The second half of it is meant to teach him, having been brought to that Light, how to retain it and increase it, so that he may never relapse into his former darkness.

The Apprentice stage of Masonry is, therefore, one of purification, education and self-control, which every Brother must *work out*, and *live out*, for himself, *in his own way*. There is no Lodge instruction book for this. No amount of book knowledge, or instruction from others, can teach him what can be learned only from his own experience and effort.

Progress in this journey requires *humility*, and trying to *not* look at matters of the *inner life* with the same eyes as those of the outer life. One cannot apply "common sense" to the use of a sense which, in the present state of human evolution, is far from common. Spiritual things must be *spiritually discerned*, and *not* from the standpoint of unenlightened opinion and non-spiritual perception.

To quote Walter L Wilmshurst:

"He who enters the Lodge in quest of Light should leave all his previous learning behind him with his garments and loose the shoes of personal opinion from off his feet. He should think of himself as a child, and as being taken into a world of new sights and sounds, and where new ideas and even a different logic obtain from those with which he has previously been familiar, and where he must begin to recast his ideas and his life. If it will not, he will but continue to darken his own light, and the Craft can teach him nothing of value, whatever titular rank he may attain in it."

Hopefully, you will view this ritual, from now on, with a different perspective, and use this as a way of attaining spiritual growth. How do you do that? That's mainly up to you. If you are religious, you can apply your religion's principles to parts of the ritual. It's all up to you - that is the secret.

Brethren, this paper only scratches the surface. I'll leave it to you to go and discover more.

About this paper

The creation of this paper has been inspired by the works of Walter L Wilmshurst, J S M Ward, Manley P Hall, Albert Pike, William Hutchinson, Albert G Mackey, A E Waite, George Steinmetz, and C W Leadbeater, all of whom have stated similar views. Most of this paper has been based on the work by Walter Leslie Wilmshurst.

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