

Esoteric Contemplation

Taking Your Freemasonry to the Next Level - by Tobin Winters

WHAT do Freemasons do? Have you ever been asked this? This is not an easy question to answer well. Freemasonry is many different things to many different people, however I think there is one aspect of Freemasonry that is the most powerful and has a resounding effect on all aspects that we might consider make up Freemasonry. In my view, because of the ripple effect that improvement in this area of Freemasonry causes, this single point of focus is our paramount mission and it is hiding in plain sight. It takes a little work and reflection to make use of its prodigious power, but if you recognize it for what it is, and utilize it, you can take your Freemasonry to the next level and perhaps just as importantly, continue taking it to additional levels by using the same lessons and applying them in an increasingly cognizant manner.

I am speaking of the esoteric side of Freemasonry and *specifically* contemplation from an esoteric perspective. Contemplation on how the lessons and framework of Freemasonry can be applied to your endless journey toward perfecting the temple that is yourself.

Esoteric versus Superficial

Let's start by defining what is meant by the term esoteric. Plato began using the expression “eso” and “exo” in his works around 360 BC. “Eso” meaning “the inner things” and “exo” meaning “the outside things”. Aristotle also used the same concepts in his writings. Around 166 AD the Greek adjective “esoterikos” appeared in Lucian of Samosata’s work, “The Auction of Lives” which referred to inner or hidden teachings.

We first saw a version of these terms in the English language in 1701 when Thomas Stanley published his “History of Philosophy”. Stanley was describing Pythagoreans, a mystery school following the teachings of Pythagoras, as being divided in to two groups: the “exoteric” which were considered to be in training, and the “esoteric” which were considered those admitted to the inner circle.

Today, the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines esoteric as "*designed for or understood by the specially initiated alone*". [1] Esoteric organizations therefore, like the Freemasons, utilize specific knowledge that is passed along to those that are properly initiated and prepared to receive it. The term exoteric is the antonym. It is the obvious, external or physical aspect. Since exoteric as esoteric sound so similar, I am going to use the terms esoteric (for the inner meaning) and superficial (for the outer meaning) from this point forward.

Duality of all things

By acknowledging Plato's use of these two terms, we are inherently exploring the topic of duality. The concept of duality exists in all things. Male versus Female. Good versus Evil. Night versus Day. Strength versus Weakness and on and on... As above, so below... Esoteric versus superficial. This is a key concept to grasp, because in doing so, the Masonic student recognizes that everything has multiple ways to be viewed and they can usually be classified in to some variation of superficial, or obvious meaning, and hidden, inner, or esoteric meaning.

The lessons of Freemasonry apply to concept of duality in an esoteric and superficial sense. Lectures are superficial when given. Ritual is very superficial. The physical symbols such as the square and compass are superficial representations of something. But each has a deeper meaning. The superficial and the esoteric go together, hand-in-hand to teach us as many lessons as we need to learn.

Examining the square esoterically

Let's take one of these common Masonic symbols as an example for our esoteric contemplation: the square. One of the main lessons we are taught as Masons is that the square represents virtue. We square our actions by the square of virtue. From a superficial, uninitiated perspective we see the square as a device to square our work in construction. As Freemasons we're supposed to use it for more noble and glorious purposes, aren't we?

At a basic esoteric level we recognize it as a symbol of virtue. This is the foundation of esoteric study, recognizing the hidden meaning through special knowledge, in this case attained by the working tools lecture in the Fellowcraft degree.

Now that we have a basic understanding of how a Masonic teaching such as the symbol of the square can be viewed in different ways, let us continue on and discuss what we're supposed to be doing as Freemasons. Let us circle back to the beginning of this discussion and address the questions I first posed by reviewing Masonic directives and clues about our purpose and look in to some of their inner meaning.

One of the working tools of the Entered Apprentice is the common gavel, used to divest our hearts and consciences of all the vices and superfluities of life.

In our Opening Charge, we hear time and again that "The ways of Virtue are beautiful. Knowledge is attained by degrees. Wisdom dwells in contemplation, there we must seek her." We also hear "Let us cultivate the great moral virtues laid down on our Masonic trestle board."

At every degree you are asked, what do you most desire? The response: "further light in Masonry."

By the third degree we find out we are in search of the secrets of a Master Mason, a truly laudable pursuit, and the degree ends with a charge that tell us it is our duty to make the most and best of ourselves.

Masonry has its own set of cardinal virtues, to detail certain qualities of special importance.

Again and again we are directed to improve ourselves; become better men and Masons. It is all throughout our ritual and lectures. A recurring theme, and as most of you would probably agree, our central mission.

There is one particular statement in our lessons that both hints at the primary purpose of Freemasonry AND gives those willing to dig a little deeper the key to unlocking that purpose. It is the response to the question from the first degree, "What come you here to do?"

If I were to ask you as a Mason "What come you here to do?" the automatic response I will receive is "To learn to subdue my passions and improve myself in Masonry". A question and response we ask of and seek from Entered Apprentices in their very first lecture and a reference to this central theme in our Craft: self-improvement. We know we came here to improve ourselves in Masonry, but how exactly do we do it?

The answer is right in front of us in the same phrase that tells us we're supposed to improve ourselves in Masonry. "To learn to subdue my passions AND improve myself in Masonry". If any part of this statement was optional it would read like "To learn to subdue my passions OR improve myself in Masonry". It is not optional to do one or the other. To do one, you do the other. Subduing your passions improves yourself in Masonry. How does it do this? Let's dig a little deeper and uncover some of the inner meaning in this phrase. First we must understand what our ritual means by passions.

What are these passions? Images of various vices probably are coming to mind right now. A great definition of these passions can be found in the Christian religion, otherwise known as the seven deadly sins:

- Lust
- Gluttony
- Greed
- Sloth
- Wrath
- Envy
- Pride

This might not be a definitive list, but is a good starting point to begin our examination. How do we subdue these passions so we can improve ourselves? Let's bring the concept of duality back in and apply the opposite of each vice with its corresponding virtue.

Vice	Virtue
Lust	Chastity
Gluttony	Temperance
Greed	Charity
Sloth	Diligence
Wrath	Patience
Envy	Kindness
Pride	Humility

To combat lust we must be more chaste. We must temper our gluttony. Being more charitable forces us to be less greedy, diligence keeps us from sloth, etc.. We can mitigate our vices by working on enhancing ourselves through virtue.

Now when we look back at our symbol we are analyzing esoterically, which by now you might realize was not chosen randomly for this discussion and appears very prominently on the universal symbol of Masonry, the square and compasses, it should be apparent we have taken this symbol to another level by defining virtue. The square has gone from a very superficial instrument to square our construction work, to a square of virtue and now to a specific list of virtues we can use to combat our vices and make us better people and better Masons.

[Apply esoteric learnings through self-reflection](#)

We've taken the square three levels deep in our esoteric analysis so far, but we're not done. In fact, we're actually never done. For this discussion, however, there is another very significant level we can address and take this learning to.

Remember that the term esoteric is the opposite of superficial. We are looking for the inner meaning of this symbol. The analysis we've done so far can be applied to any Mason for their own use, but the next level of learning comes

when you apply this learning to your own personal life by reflecting what this means to YOU.

In our example of the square, I might realize the vice of pride can be balanced with humility. It is a much more esoteric meaning than what we started with but we can go deeper by cogitating on specific ways pride impacts your life. Let's use this as a real life example that I certainly identify with and hopefully you can as well. Let's reflect on this vice.... I have a tendency to think that I am a very thoughtful and intelligent guy and that my experience and systematic approach to solving problems is a good way to do things. I generally think I am right.

This is a form of pride. It is not very humble and is a real problem I think about. Why is this a problem? If you are too proud to admit there is another way to accomplish something, you are missing great opportunities to learn new things. If you think a square of virtue is a square of virtue and that's it, there is no deeper meaning or need to go farther... you are closing yourself off. At the same time, others might be missing an opportunity to take the lead, contribute, and learn. You are closing others off too. No matter your experience, or level of knowledge, there is someone out there who can do better. Every human being has a claim on your kind offices.

Let's make this personal to you. What did YOU do today that could be listed in the vice column? What could you have done to tilt that action over in to the virtue column? Did you jump to a conclusion about somebody when you should have been patient and found out more? Did you ogle an attractive girl instead of thinking that she is someone's daughter or wife? Did you buy something you really didn't need when those resources could have gone elsewhere?

This reflection on self takes our esoteric symbol of the square to an entirely new level because you are confronting your core beliefs, your values, through analysis of your actions. Just knowing the square is a symbol representing virtue does NOTHING to change your behavior OR make you a better Mason. It is like memorizing a piece of ritual without knowing what it means. When you perform that piece of ritual it is obvious you do not feel or mean what you say. But, it is an important first step to taking your learning further. Now that you have that piece of ritual memorized, you can work on what it means and how to deliver it with emotion and feeling. Internalizing and applying the lesson through self-reflection

IS the type knowledge and action that does change your behavior. The next time you ogle a girl you might see your daughter instead. The next time you buy that six pack of beer and wings for the football game you might put that \$20 towards a bill or gift for someone else instead.

Summary

A great saying by Claudy reads, "The symbols of Freemasonry are all things to all men; great for the greathearted, deep for the wise, easy for the simple, stern for the strong, and gentle for the weak." In other words, as our brief dive in to the esoteric symbolism of the square demonstrated, Masonry is what YOU make of it. He realizes that each Mason takes Freemasonry to that level they want to take it.

Some joined Masonry to contribute to charity, some joined for the social aspect, others for self-improvement, and others for the fraternal concept of Brotherhood and many more reasons. For those that joined for charity, helping a Brother in need or fund raising for charitable programs is their way of improving themselves in Masonry. Other Masons try and become better mentors and be available in their fraternal sense of improvement. Others want to get involved in the community and make the public aware of the good things we do. All of these are good things and what Masonry obviously means to these good Brothers.

But consider this: we all promised learn to subdue our passions and improve ourselves in Masonry. If you work on balancing your vices with virtue, won't you do all these afore-mentioned improvements automatically as a result? My Brothers, there are secrets in Freemasonry. I'm not talking about the signs, grips or passes. THE secret of Freemasonry is that its lessons are intentionally superficial. You can easily grasp a lower level and superficial meaning of some of these lessons, but until you make its inner, esoteric meaning make sense to you in your life, it is going to stay superficial. You can get as much or as little out of Masonry as you want. If you want to become a better Mason though, if you believe that you do not stop learning or improving EVER, looking at the esoteric meaning in our lessons and ritual is the first step to get you to that next level. Taking that teaching and applying it to your own life through self-aware contemplation makes that step a reality.

I hope that this presentation will encourage you to reflect on Masonic lessons as they apply to your life. I hope that you also take note of how many times the word virtue appears in our lectures each and every meeting. Finally, I hope that as we part upon the square of virtue tonight, that piece of closing ritual means a little more to you than when you walked in this Lodge room.