

INTRODUCTION TO  
FREEMASONRY

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## Introduction

Freemasonry is an initiatic institution, dedicated to the moral and intellectual improvement of humanity by encouraging individual growth. It has a presence in most countries and has often been defined as a “peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated with symbols.” The general form of its current practices is approximately four hundred years old.

The basic organizational unit in Freemasonry is a local lodge. Lodges around the world tend to range in size from twenty to fifty members, but can be larger depending on the area. In the United States, lodges often have hundreds of members. Lodges around the world usually operate under the authority and jurisdiction of a Grand Lodge. As each country in the world is considered sovereign it was originally intended that each country have one Grand Lodge (one Grand Lodge per state in the United States and Mexico and one per province in Canada), with the geographic area of its authority known as its jurisdiction. In practice, however, many countries and states now have more than one Grand Lodge and this can sometimes create contentions over legitimacy and jurisdictional authority.

The concept that allows individual Masons from different Grand Lodges to have Masonic relations with one another is known as *recognition*. Grand Lodges must choose to extend official recognition to other Grand Lodges before their members can intervisit. There are many historical, geographical and political factors that may influence whether or not recognition exists between any two Grand Lodges. Criteria for recognition usually includes legitimacy of origin (whether a Grand Lodge derives its authority from an older Grand Lodge) and *regularity* (whether a Grand Lodge properly follows established Masonic traditions, referred to as the Ancient Landmarks).

The process for joining a Masonic lodge is more or less the same around the world. An individual must usually have sponsorship from two existing members, submit an application, pass through an investigative process and receive a unanimous election from the lodge membership. Once initiated, Masons can advance through ranks (known as symbolic degrees) as they make intel-

lectual and philosophical progress . A particular series of degrees is referred to as a rite. There are different rites, with varying numbers of degrees which are practiced by Masons around the world. Almost all lodges in the United States work the York Rite for the first three degrees of Freemasonry, which are called the Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft and Master Mason.

In studying Freemasonry every person discovers that there are many aspects to the organization. Generally speaking, they can be divided into three broad categories—philosophical, historical, and organizational. The philosophical aspect of Freemasonry introduces the student to the profound subjects of initiation, symbolism and tradition, and their potential to impact his life for the better. The historical aspect teaches the student how the traditions and teachings that make up Masonry came to be, their relationship to the spiritual search of mankind and the way Masonry has affected the world since its emergence. The organizational aspect helps the student understand how the organization is governed and perpetuated, and provides many opportunities for the development of professional skills.

While studying Masonic symbolism, history and organization can be interesting and exciting, the goal is to be able to translate the lessons and experiences that one gains from Masonry into one's daily actions. Freemasonry, if approached with humility, an open heart and an open mind will make one a gentleman, a better family man, and a better citizen. It should also be understood that while Freemasonry is not a religion, it does encourage its members to be active in their own religious traditions.

## **Freemasonry**

Freemasonry can be understood as a traditional initiatic order. It is not a secret society in any strict sense, but rather, a private society with some secrets. While it has taken its modern form during the late Renaissance and the Enlightenment, its traditions, symbols and lessons reach back to pre-modern times.

The general work associated with the initiatic tradition and the purpose of Freemasonry, put simply, is to provide an environment where good men can come together to pursue meaningful

intellectual and spiritual growth. It is often said that Freemasonry “makes good men better.” One of the underlying tenets of the initiatic tradition is the belief that with each individual that becomes a better person the entire world profits thereby.

Being part of the initiatic tradition is what distinguishes Freemasonry from purely social or philanthropic organizations. While there are many different organizations that contribute large sums of money to charity, offer fellowship with like minded men or provide education, Freemasonry is unique in that it is successful in all these things, but is actually focused on offering men a traditional initiation into the mysteries of life and death. The initiatic tradition is the core, defining characteristic of Freemasonry, without which there would be nothing to differentiate Masonry from other social or philanthropic organizations.

Initiation is a slow and sensitive process and requires great effort on behalf of both the candidate and the existing members of the lodge. For the initiatic experience to be meaningful and enriching, great care and attention must be afforded to each individual candidate. If the new Freemason is to become worthy of the title, he must spend time and energy learning about the history, symbolism and philosophy of the Craft. There is no way around it.

The process of experiencing the initiatic tradition, becoming a part of it and improving oneself through its lessons, is known as *Masonic Formation*. This is an ever continuing process of spiritual and intellectual formation that all Freemasons must undergo. It is the work of fitting the rough ashlar of our imperfect being into the perfect ashlar fit for the divine temple. It is a constant transformation through the use of Masonic symbols, rituals, and teachings on a journey of return to the center of our being. In his work *Meaning of Masonry*, Masonic philosopher W. L. Wilms-hurst writes that “the very essence of the Masonic doctrine is that all men in this world are in search of something in their own nature which they have lost, but that with proper instruction and by their own patience and industry they may hope to find.”

## **Initiation, Rite and Tradition**

Inherent in the traditional character of Freemasonry is that initi-

atic rites are viewed as an aspect of a divinely maintained natural order. In this sense, Freemasonry is one of the last remaining institutions in the Western world to preserve and practice traditional forms. Understanding the terms *initiation*, *rite* and *tradition* is essential to every Freemason's development.

## Initiation

While having a number of meanings and possible interpretations, initiation is foremost a spiritual undertaking. To be initiated into Masonry has always been a highly significant and meaningful step in an individual's life. In a world too often governed by busy schedules, loose tongues, and the accumulation of wealth, Masonry helps provide balance by teaching the values of stillness, silence and selflessness.

The word initiation comes from the Latin word *initiare*, which is a late Hellenistic translation of the Greek verb *myein*. The main Greek term for initiation, *myesis*, is also derived from the verb *myein*, which means "to close." It referred to the closing of the eyes, which was likely symbolic of entering into darkness prior to reemerging and receiving light, and to the closing of the lips, which was a reference to the vow of silence taken by all initiates.

Another Greek term for initiation was *telete*. In the *Immortality of the Soul* Plutarch writes that "the soul at the moment of death, goes through the same experiences as those who are initiated into the great mysteries. The word and the act are similar: we say *telentai* (to die) and *telestai* (to be initiated)." The fact that *myein* means "to close" and its Latin translation, *initiare*, is derived from the earlier *inire*, which means "to go in" or "to begin," shows that a notion of endings and beginnings was inherent to the ancient understanding of these terms. With this understanding initiation is a new undertaking, the beginning of a new, spiritual life.

## Rite

The word rite is derived from the Latin *ritus*, relating to the conduct or structure of the performance of sacred action (*sacrum facere*), particularly of a sacrificial character. From the spiritual perspective, sacred action, or sacrificial action, that is, the forfeiture

of one's potencies to the divine will, is the most normal action that a human being can perform due to his divine nature. This represents, in a very real sense, a coming into one's true self. The Latin *ritus* is also akin to the Greek *arithmos*, meaning number, and therefore related to arithmetic, an important fundamental science in Masonry, and to conceptions of cosmic order in general.

The Latin *ritus* is also related to the Sanskrit *ri*, meaning to flow, usually associated with a stream or a way. Thus the term rite is closely linked by its definition with the term tradition and denotes sacred action in perpetuation of divine order.

## **Tradition**

The word tradition derives from the Latin *tradere*, meaning to give or deliver into the hands of another, to entrust. This word also has Indo-European roots coming from *trans*, meaning to give. With this understanding tradition is transmission. It is the handing down of knowledge and far more than mere repetition.

Tradition is that which has kept its original character and retains its transcendent aspect. Freemasons are concerned with that part of tradition that is most inward and elevated, and thus, what constitutes its very spirit and essence. Tradition also means permanence in what is essential and integrity of principles. One of the ancient charges of Freemasonry, repeated at the installation ceremonies of many Masonic jurisdictions states that "You admit that it is not in the power of any man, or body of men, to make innovations in the body of Masonry." For to make innovations may break the transmission.

## **Symbolism**

Symbolism in its most basic sense means using one thing to represent another. Words, signs and gestures are all forms of symbols. Freemasons, however, study symbolism in a deeper sense.

The word symbolism is derived from the Greek *symbolon*, which was a token of identity verified by comparing its other half. In this sense, symbols are the representation or affirmation of a concept or truth by reason of relationship or unity of parts. The meaning represented by the symbol, is actually greater than the whole of

its parts.

Freemasons are concerned with this aspect of symbolism—the gathering of what is scattered—as a means of better understanding the whole of existence. By gathering knowledge from the spiritual traditions of the world and uniting good men who otherwise would have stood apart, Freemasonry serves as the center of union in the Mason’s quest for the truth. Benefiting from the meanings and truth we find hidden within symbols requires synthesis, association and application. Each symbol, when properly perceived by the knowing initiate reflects the hidden relationship between the material and spiritual world and thereby reveals the reality of a higher order. Seriously studying symbolism is an important aspect of growing in Freemasonry.

## **Expectations**

If the purpose of Freemasonry is “to make good men better,” men should only become Freemasons if they are good and are committed to making themselves better. Determining the qualifications of men seeking admission is an essential aspect of upholding the integrity of the Masonic institution. The investigative procedures of lodges are designed to ensure that the members of the lodge have sufficient information about the candidates they vote on.

Ritual is intended to be performed in a solemn manner to provide the most meaningful experience possible for the candidates and the membership. Creating an atmosphere that may lead to a positive transformation of the individual is the goal of Masonic ritual.

Time between degrees should be used for intellectual study, contemplation and self-development. Candidates should demonstrate some degree of improvement in their understanding of Freemasonry before being advanced to the next degree. When this is properly observed every Mason grows into a better man and the bonds of virtue that tie together the brotherhood of humanity are strengthened.

It is intended that lodges provide their candidates with instruction about the teachings and symbols of Freemasonry. Qualified Masons are always encouraged to provide Masonic instruction to

their brethren in the form of presentations, answering questions and promoting discussion. The focus of the Mason's intellectual and philosophical development should be on applying the teachings of Freemasonry in his daily life.

Freemasonry helps teach the importance and benefits of duty and service. If every Mason works hard and takes responsibility for all he does then Masonry will thrive. Masons are expected to attend all meetings of their lodge, and if unable to do so, inform a brother or the secretary of the lodge of the reason in advance.

Officers of a Masonic lodge serve in their offices as a privilege and not a right. It is intended that brothers attain positions of responsibility only after having demonstrated their good faith, ability to make a serious time commitment and sincere desire to correctly perform the necessary duties. The election of the Master is always of importance and only those brethren should be considered for this honor and responsibility who are well versed in Masonic teachings, who have the resourcefulness to lead and whose personal character can serve as an example to be followed.

## **Becoming A Mason**

There are different Masonic organizations around the world with different qualifications for membership. Most accept only men, while some accept both men and women and some only women. The mainstream majority of Masonic organizations typically follows the following rules.

A petitioner must be a man of at least eighteen years of age (twenty-one in some states). He must be free of any previous felonious criminal convictions and be of good moral character. He must also believe in a Supreme Being and the immortality of the soul. There also certain physical qualifications to ensure that a person is free to make his own life decisions and be responsible for himself. There are moral qualifications to ensure the viability of the brotherhood and the lofty ideals of the Masonic Order. The spiritual qualifications support the entire structure of Freemasonry and affirm the Order's consistency with the great Mystery Schools and religions of the world.

## **The Secret Ballot**

After a man has applied for Masonic membership, and his background has been thoroughly investigated, the lodge members will vote by secret ballot to accept or to reject him for membership. The secret ballot is often referred to as the “Ordeal of the Secret Ballot.” To be elected, a man must receive a unanimous positive vote from all present at the meeting.

## **Preparation for Initiation**

If a man senses the stirring in his heart for a deeper understanding of life he may seek out the fraternity. This longing of the heart is the beginning of his initiation and is the reason why each candidate who comes seeking light is said to be first prepared in his heart. While Freemasonry is not a religion, its rites are of a serious and dignified nature which impart teachings that obligate a man to lead a better life. To receive the most from Masonic ritual, a candidate should prepare his mind and heart to understand and absorb the many subtle teachings that Masonry has to offer. The candidate should pay close attention to every part of the ritual. The form of the rituals may be new and unusual to the candidate, but such forms have always been part of the initiatic traditions of the world.

## **Mentorship**

As every new Entered Apprentice needs guidance and assistance, many lodges will assign a learned brother to serve as his mentor. In this way the needs of the Entered Apprentice can be met and his potential properly cultivated. The mentor is meant to assist the Entered Apprentice with reaching the required level of proficiency and with answering the required questions prior to advancing to the next degree.

The term *mentor* originates in Greek mythology with the name of a friend of Odysseus, who was entrusted with the education of his son, Telemachus. Mentor was actually the goddess Athena in disguise and thus the term, properly defined, refers to someone who represents wisdom and acts as a trusted counselor and guide.

Freemasonry is both a philosophical and educational institution. As a philosophical institution Masonry sets standards that it requires its members to raise themselves up to. However, as an educational institution it promises guidance to its members to attain to those standards. The mentor thus serves as the principal facilitator for new members achieving those standards.

The mentor's broader role is to aid the new member in developing meaningful bonds with the fraternity in general and the brothers of the lodge in particular. The rest of the lodge members also play an important mentoring role and the new Entered Apprentice should feel comfortable engaging his new brothers in conversation and asking questions on Masonic topics.

Many lodges present new members with Masonic books to help them develop an understanding of the lodge's philosophical and intellectual interests. The books may differ for each candidate, depending on his level of knowledge and experience with symbolic and philosophical subjects. By assisting each candidate early in his pursuit of knowledge and self-improvement, the lodge endeavors to develop within him a lifelong interest in Masonic Formation.

## **History of Freemasonry**

There is a difference between what is often referred to in the ritual as "Masonic tradition" and the actual history related to the Order. While using the term "Masonic tradition" can imply many things—from the association with older initiatic rites to certain Masonic customs or practices—it is most often used to mean Masonic mythology when used in the ritual. While most societies and spiritual traditions have certain mythologies about their founding, these accounts and descriptions are usually impossible to prove or disprove and serve a symbolic purpose.

The study of the actual history of Freemasonry, however, is an exciting, but highly debated field. Freemasonry is often described as having "emerged" in 1717, when four London lodges joined to form the Grand Lodge of England, but the Order's traditions, symbols and lessons can be traced to pre-modern times. The two most prevalent Masonic origin theories among scholars are related to the Knights Templar, a medieval order established during

the Crusades, and operative masonic guilds of the Middle Ages.

The theory that the Freemasons are direct descendants of the Knights Templar, while highly controversial, has maintained a continuous presence in Masonic scholarship, in no small part due to its popular appeal. This theory holds that after their suppression by the King of France and the Catholic Church in 1307, the Knights Templar transferred their wealth and power base to Scotland, where the Church could not reach them, and with time and various developments evolved into what we know today as Freemasonry.

The theory that Speculative Freemasonry, as it is known, emerged from the operative masonic guilds that built the cathedrals of the Middle Ages is the one currently accepted by the majority of scholars. According to this school of thought, the operative masonic lodges began to accept members of the aristocracy during the Renaissance as *accepted* and not *operative* masons as civil society developed.

However, many of this theory's previously held assumptions are now being re-evaluated in light of a debate about the process of the so-called *acception* and whether this was an aspect of operative and not speculative Masonry and whether the emergence of Speculative Freemasonry was more a question of evolution or creation.

While it is possible that the truth may contain elements of both theories and others, what is important is that the individuals who were active in shaping Speculative Freemasonry perceived it as an initiatic institution through which men could develop their moral and philosophical potential. Closely investigating the lives of the founders reveals their extensive connections to older secret societies and traditions that no doubt influenced their perception of the role of the Masonic Order.

In general, there are many problems associated with studying the Order's history, but the secrecy of the initiatic tradition and the difficulty of interpreting available evidence has likely played the largest role in keeping mainstream scholars largely unaware of, and often uninterested in, Freemasonry. Persecution of Freemasonry by totalitarian governments has also made Masonic or-

ganizations in many countries seek to maintain a private existence with a minimum amount of exposure.

Speculative Freemasonry has a foundation that consists of more than Protestant Christianity and the meaning and value of the deliberate presence of other traditions in the Craft needs to be taken into account. The courtly philosophical climate of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Britain, even where it followed mainly Puritan or Anglican trends, was strongly influenced by the underground tradition sometimes referred to as Arcadia, which encompassed within its philosophy elements of Gnostic, Neo-Platonic, Hermetic, and Kabbalistic thought. As Rosicrucianism surfaced in the early seventeenth century it also showed an affinity to what was referred to by some scholars and a number of its adherents as the Arcadian stream of thought.

The main characteristic of Arcadianism was the renewal of interest in the thinking and literature of the pre-Christian world. Various Pagan and Gnostic traditions that had survived through the Middle Ages received a certain sense of renewed credibility and promise in the eyes of their adherents, as Renaissance thinking began to place greater importance on them. In understanding the streams of thought culminating in Arcadian attractions, it is necessary to look before the Renaissance.

Kabbalistic thought, for example, had gained recognizable form among certain groups in the thirteenth century, well before Petrarch and the later Italian translations of the Hermetic texts. The Jewish esoteric conception of a “Temple of Vision,” an inner spiritual temple, dates back to at least the Essenes, before the time of Christ. This important conception, which envisions the body as a spiritual temple and words and letters as building blocks which can be shaped and arranged to attain divine insight, has been shown by scholars to have maintained a continuous presence among important Jewish thinkers and operative Masons in the Middle-East, North Africa and Europe, through the Middle Ages and up to modern times.

Throughout the thirteenth- and fourteenth-centuries the Scholastics, a group that Thomas Aquinas belonged to, had spent great effort interpreting classical Greek texts from Arabic sources and

including them in the literature of the Christian tradition. Equally, one need only to consult the history and plight of the so-called “ABC’s of Heresy” (Albigensians, Bogomils and Cathars) to see that Pagan and Gnostic influence of the early heretical Christian and Manichean movements had survived in Europe long after the Roman collapse. It was this combination of existing traditions (or remnants of them), the rediscovery of older traditions and the renewed interest in their origins and philosophies that shaped the circumstances in which Speculative Freemasonry was formed.

In *The First Freemasons*, Scottish historian Dr. David Stevenson maintains that the evidence “indicates that the emergence of Freemasonry involved an act of creation, not just evolution.” By noting the key influence of William Schaw and his interest in Hermeticism and the Art of Memory, Stevenson paints a larger picture of how in the years “around 1600 the legacy of the Middle Ages was remodeled and combined with Renaissance themes and obsessions to create a new movement.”

A close study of the broad range of philosophical literary works and public and religious structures produced during this period in Europe reveals a distinct current of symbolism embedded inside seemingly mainstream artistic expression. To those well versed in Masonic symbolism the central themes of the initiatic tradition become quickly evident upon examination of this literature and architecture. It was out of this philosophical climate, united through organizations such as the Royal Society, and through extensive correspondence that is now well documented, that the most well known proponents of seventeenth and early eighteenth-century Freemasonry emerged.

Men like Sir Robert Moray, Elias Ashmole, Jean Desaguliers, James Anderson, and their numerous friends and counterparts from all across Europe. Even if some of their writings regarding the history of the Craft may appear more mythological than factual, in light of the evidence now available, it is clear that they viewed Speculative Masonry as a custodian of the initiatic traditions of the past, charged with their propagation and preservation.

While studying the history of Freemasonry may appear difficult and to require an extensive, in-depth knowledge of some of the

most complex and least understood aspects of world history, it is a worthwhile and highly rewarding endeavor. Developing one's knowledge and understanding of Masonry, even if one small step at a time, is actually developing one's understanding of human history as a whole and its spiritual nature. The more one learns about the profound influence of Freemasonry on the development of world events, the more one begins to appreciate its presence and want to learn more. While there are many who wear the title, the true Freemason is a philosopher and student of life.