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Right and Left Hand Paths (A Historical Perspective) Essaier LXXI

Right and Left Hand Paths By Michael Freedman

It has been estimated that only about 20% of human beings are born with a genetic preference for using the left hand rather than the right hand. The general dominance of right-handed people has led to a widespread cultural bias in favour of that which is on the right.

This article briefly surveys the history of human attitudes to the Right and to the Left. It particularly deals with how the term 'Left Hand Path' applied to Magic or Witchcraft is, for most people, synonymous with evil.

Bias against the use of the Left Hand

Left hand is very ancient. Plato, the Greek philosopher, believed that, "although our several limbs are by nature balanced, we create a difference in them by bad habit. Children should be trained to use both hands equally for all tasks."

His contemporary Aristotle correctly pointed out that our arms are not balanced by nature. An inherited tendency for most people to favour the right hand is universal throughout the human race and for as far back as history provides reliable evidence.

This has led to the popular belief that right-handedness is "good" and left-handedness is in some way wrong. As a result, until very recent times, right-handed parents have nearly

always tried to impose right-handedness on their left-handed children. Because they have usually succeeded, the actual percentage of left-handed adults has been much less than 20%

A universal bias

The very words for left and right, in most languages, are witnesses to a universal bias in favour of right-handedness. In our own language, the word 'right' suggests that it is right to use the right hand. "It could be that the term left had its origin in the fact that, because the left hand is so little used that it is left out of most tasks." [Martin Gardner]

When a compliment is given with malicious intent, it is called a left-handed compliment. Sinister, suggesting something evil or disastrous, is from the Latin word for left. Dexterity which means skilfulness comes from Dexter the Latin word for the right.

Adroit which also means skilful, is derived from the French word for the right, droit. In French, droit also means just, honest and straight. While the French word for the left, gauche, also means crooked or awkward.

In German the word for the left is link, and the word linkische means awkward. The German for the right is echt, which also means just and true. The Italian words for left hand are stanca which means tired, fatigued; and manca, which means that which is defective. The Spaniards call the left hand zurdo and the Spanish phrase a zurdas means the wrong way.

In Sanskrit the word for the right hand is Daksha, which also means capable competent, swift, strong and powerful. Dakshadeva, the god of the Right, was one of the titles given to Shiva and other Hindu gods. The Sanskrit word for the left hand was Varna, which meant tile opposite or contrary. It was also the general term used to signify pairs of opposing qualities, such as beauty and ugliness or wealth and poverty.

In western Kabbalism such pairs of opposites were referred to the seven double letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Like Dakshadeva, the title Vamadeva was often applied to Shiva and to other gods and goddesses. [Ref: The Ambidextroza Universe, by Martin Gardner]

Tantric terms

Although there is a long history of the Left side being regarded as in some way inferior to the right, the specific terms Right Hand Path and Left Hand Path were not used outside of India and Tibet before the last two decades of the 19th century.

Dakshinachara is the Sanskrit term for the Right Hand Path, the southern of the two branches of Tantrism. It worships the female principal Shakti, like the northern branch, but is more "orthodox" in its rituals. The northern branch of Tantrism is called the Varnachara or the Left Hand Path.

The Left Hand Path in Tantra

The Tantrics of the Left Hand Path sought to intensify their own sense impressions and so made enjoyment or sensuality their principal concern. The adept pursued his spiritual objectives of ecstasy and union through his natural functions and inclinations, which were to be sublimated and then gratified in rituals in order to disintegrate and reintegrate his personality. In the life of the Left Hand Path Tantric, the whole world of phenomena and activity was given a new and esoteric significance.

Their practices could include the use of sacred syllables or mantras; sexual activity both in normal surroundings and in graveyards, to remind them of the eternal cycle of Life and Death; the ritual consumption of food and drink, including even meat and alcohol; the cultivation of the body, and like practices that glorify the Supreme Being through its manifestations in the phenomenal world.

The Right Hand Path in Tantra

The Tantrics of the Right Hand Path, on the other hand, gave much emphasis to the various Yogas or 'surrenders' that developed in their system, such as Bhakti or devotion to the Goddess or God. They aspired to union with the Supreme Being through emotional means, their yoga [surrenders] being a self-renunciation in order to reach a state of ecstatic bliss. Their practices included abstinence from sexual activity and from various foods, observances of rituals, bodily postures, breath control, withdrawal of the mind from external objects, concentration, and the like, which would withdraw them from involvement or even interest in the physical world of manifestation. [Ref: The Way of Power: A Guide to the Tantric Mysticism of Tibet, John Blofeld, 1970].

Not bad, not good

There is nothing in the formal definitions of the two Paths of Hindu and Tibetan Tantra to suggest that one or the other was regarded as better or worse. Certainly, this was so in ancient times when they were regarded merely as two different ways of going about the same ultimate goal, with the Right Hand Path being more suitable for the monk, and the Left Hand Path more suitable for the householder or family man.

The case has been somewhat different in more recent times, particularly since the split in Buddhism into its two "Vehicles", one of which predominated in northern India and Tibet, the other of which was dominant in southern India and Ceylon.

Although the Greater and Lesser Vehicles of Buddhism [Mahayana and Hinayana] cannot be identified with the Left and Right Hand Paths of Vedic Hinduism, there are certain similarities. The southern Hinayana Vehicle tended more toward puritanical asceticism, as did the Right Hand Path, while the northern Mahayana Vehicle tended more towards venerating ritual and involvement in life as a means to enlightenment, as did the Left Hand Path.

The question to be asked then is, how has the term Left Hand Path come to mean the Way of Evil, as it now certainly does for many people in the Western world, both in general society and among occultists of every kind?

Enter Madam Blavatsky

Nearly all 20th century occult thinking, especially at the popular level, has been filtered through Madam Blavatsky and her fellow Theosophists. Most members of the original Golden Dawn [founded in 1887] had been, at one time or another, members of the Theosophical Society, which had been founded twelve years earlier, in 1875. As we now know, Madam Blavatsky compiled her books from a number of previously published works from the 18th mid early 19th century. Moreover, she got nearly everything she taught about occultism wrong. Her gargantuan six-volume occult treatise, *The Secret Doctrine*, which claims to be a commentary on an ancient Sanskrit or Tibetan work, *The Stanzas of Dzyan* is actually a bizarre reworking and commentary on the Kabbalistic Zoharic treatise, *Sefer Dzeniutha*, *The Book of the Concealed Mystery*

Most of Blavatsky's occult teaching was the result of her Spiritualist background interacting with the Southern Indian Hindus and Ceylonese Buddhists among whom she lived for many years. Both these groups were strictly Right Hand Path, as we have set out above. When they told Madam Blavatsky about the northern Indian Tibetan Tantric Left Hand Path, those very puritanical and moral southern Hindus and Hinayana Buddhists threw up their hands in horror.

Thus began, just over a hundred years ago, in the 1880s, the modern idea that the Left Hand Path is evil. Madam Blavatsky refers to the Left Hand Path or Left Hand adepts in about a dozen places, across every volume of *The Secret Doctrine*, which was published in 1888. Here is a selection of her remarks:

"During the highest point of civilisation of the Fourth or Atlantean race, humanity branched off into two diametrically opposite paths, the RIGHT and the LEFT Paths of knowledge. Thus were the germs of White and Black magic sown in those days."

"The Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, is a record between the Adepts of the Right Path, the prophets of God, and those of the Left, the Levites, the clergy of the brutal masses."

"The Apostles had to preserve silence, so that 'The left hand should not know what the right hand did.' In plainer words, this means that the dangerously proficient in the Left hand Science - the terrible enemies of the Right Hand Adepts - should not profit so as to harm both healer and patient"

"In late, - ages, the Initiates of the Left Hand Path took in hand most of those venerable monuments, then deserted, and turned them indeed into phallic monuments. This was a deliberate, wilful and vicious misinterpretation of their real meaning."

Occult terminology changes

A significant change in occult language was brought about by *The Secret Doctrine*. This is indicated by the fact that *Magic, White and Black*, by Franz Hartmann, which was published in 1885, just three years before *The Secret Doctrine* deals with the good and evil forms of magic, but makes no reference whatsoever to either the Right or the Left Hand Paths.

Within a decade, Arthur Edward Waite is saying in *The Book of Black Magic and Pacts* [1898], "Parisian Diabolism is ... flue Black Magic of the Grimoires and not the sovereign horror of the Brothers of the Left Hand Path, wearing their iniquity like an aureole, and deathless in spiritual evil." It is significant that Waite goes on to say that he is not sure whether Left Hand and Right Hand are appropriate terms for Black and White Magic, as though the idea was new to him.

Dennis Wheatley

Let us face it, not that many members of the public or even the occult world have read *The Secret Doctrine*. Even fewer have been able to plod through Waite's books on Magic. The really influential culprit was the best-selling 'Prince of Thriller Writers' of the mid-20th century, Dennis Wheatley. His occult thrillers, such as *Strange Conflict* and *They Used Dark Forces* are full of Black Adepts of the Left Hand Path'.

Forty or 50 years ago, if folk wanted to know about the occult, Dennis Wheatley's novels were about all that were readily available. While the White magicians always won their astral battles in his novels eventually, the Left Hand Adepts seemed to have a lot more fun, fucking, boozing and generally doing whatever they liked. At least, that was how it seemed to me when I was in my 20s and reading every book about Magic that I could my hands on. Unfortunately, many occultists have picked up this novelist's terminology.

I hope that, over the next century, the distortions of the original neutral meanings of the terms Right Hand and Left Hand will fade away, to be replaced by a more mature attitude towards the various paths. Let us hope that, in future, when people want to say something or someone is 'good or evil', they will say it straight out, instead of using misleading metaphors such as Black and White, or Right.