

BOOK REVIEW

WILLAM O. WARE LODGE OF RESEARCH

AS A MAN THINKETH

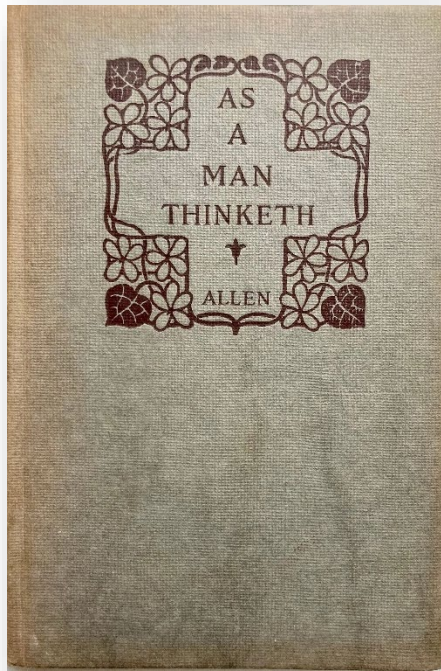
Author: James Allen

Reviewed by: John W. Bizzack, PM, Master, William O. Ware Lodge of Research

DO WE BECOME WHAT WE THINK ABOUT?

Many people are anxious to improve their circumstances but are unwilling to do the work to improve themselves; they, therefore, remain bound. That statement is a paraphrase of a precept by James Allen.

Allen was a British philosopher known for his inspirational books as well as poems. His most famous work is the literary essay, *As a Man Thinketh*.¹ Published in 1903, the book sold well for decades and is now in the public domain. Reprints are in the



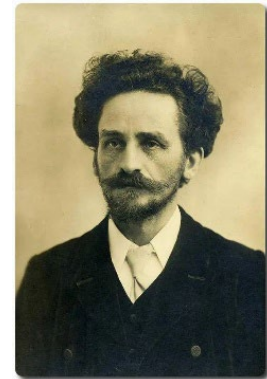
millions. No records are known to exist that link Allen to Freemasonry, but there is an intriguing alignment between Allen's key ideas and the teachings of Freemasonry that warrant an exploration of how they intersect.

We need to be open and aware as Masons that we can receive Masonic inspiration from sources that are not specifically devoted to Freemasonry.

Allen believed each man holds the key to every condition, good or bad, that enters into his life, and that, by working patiently and intelligently upon his thoughts, and by repeated action, he may remake his life and transform not only his circumstances but his character. In Masonic philosophy, in which the embodiment of temperance, fortitude, and justice are taught through ritual and allegory, members are challenged to integrate those virtues with their thinking and actions to refine their character.

Emphasizing the power of thought to shape one's life is hardly a new concept. Neither Allen nor Freemasonry originated the idea. The passage, "As a man thinketh in his heart, so they are," is a translation of Proverbs 23:7, which says, "For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he..." It essentially means that a person's inner thoughts and beliefs directly shape their character and actions. Despite this provenance, *As A Man Thinketh* is religion-neutral.

¹ James Allen, *As a Man Thinketh*, Thomas Y. Crowell Publishers, Authorized Edition, New York, 1913.



Around 2,500 years ago Siddhartha Gautama, most commonly referred to as the Buddha, later said, “What we think, we become.” Almost 2,000 years ago Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius wrote this in his diary: “A man’s life is what his thoughts make of it.”² In the late 1800s, American essayist, lecturer and philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson was attributed the quote: “A man is what he thinks about all day long.” And in the 1950s, Earl Nightingale, an American radio speaker and author, dealing mostly with the subjects of human character development, motivation, and meaningful existence told us that “We become what we think about.” Scores of other philosophers and the erudite could be cited with variations on that theme.

Allen’s exploration of the power of thought dives deeper than other pithy quotes. He examines how our thoughts shape our character and our character shape our actions, and our actions shape our circumstances. Allen’s thinking and reasoning is strictly rational and unemotional. He makes no apology for using cold logic to pursue objective truth.

His whole point is that *how* we direct our thoughts can manifest to help create the life we want. His statement, “Right thought is mastery,” corresponds with other philosophies that tell us that the essence of strength in life lies in self-control. The overlap between Allen’s teachings and Masonic principles lies in their shared emphasis on thought, moral responsibility, and self-improvement.

Allen and Freemasonry agree that the key to mastering our life is by stepping away from old thinking and self, and learning to harness the power of our thoughts. The labor required to master our thoughts cultivates a productive attitude as we take responsibility for ourselves and use that strength of character to shape our lives.

Allen explores the harnessing in terms of a solitary journey. Masonry agrees with Allen but advances the idea that the journey may be best traveled in the company of other good men who are on the same path where the seriousness of purpose is reinforced through solidarity.

Freemasonry also makes clear that the self-improvement journey, to which members are presumed to everlastingly be inspired to pursue, does require a lifetime of commitment and not just temporary motivation. However, achieving that requires something else about which Allen and scholars agree: *seriousness of purpose*. But as Allen points out, many people are anxious to improve their circumstances but are unwilling to do the work to improve themselves; they, therefore, remain bound.

The pragmatic concept of seriousness of purpose embodies a mindset driven by a powerful sense of duty, intentionality, and moral clarity - the core of self-improvement in Freemasonry. The concept was recognized more than 2,000 years ago as essential in self-improvement and closely aligned with the pursuit of virtue, where every action serves a broader intention to contribute to one's personal growth and societal wellbeing.³ Contemporary philosophical and ethical discourses continue to agree

and that seriousness of purpose contributes to the moral landscape of society by encouraging individuals to engage deeply with questions about their role in the world and the pursuit of purpose

² Geoff W. Adams, *Marcus Aurelius in the Historia Augusta and Beyond*, Lanham, MD, Lexington Books, 2013.

³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Translated by Susan D. Collins and Robert C. Bartlett, University of Chicago Press, 2012.

with a commitment to the greater good.⁴ Harnessing the power of thought, whether through Freemasonry or not, demands a person shun idleness.

Allen's brief compendium about the power of our thoughts helps set the stage for those who shun idleness. Freemasonry offers a structure through which the power of thoughts that shape character can be put into action.

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⁴ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, Harvard University Press, Seventh Printing edition, 1989.