

COMPANIONS OF THE STONE
Correspondence Course in The Elements of
Traditional Western Esotericism

Lesson 3

This lesson, which concludes the first unit of this course, will also complete a first pass through the essential techniques we will be introducing at the associate level of the Companions of the Stone. Each unit has its particular practical emphasis, and by the end of each unit we will have introduced a set of practices or ideas that will be developed, with some variations, during later units. These initial practices, though, will be central to all of the work of this course -- as, in fact, they are central to the training methods used in the branch of the Western esoteric tradition we teach. Take the time, therefore, to be sure you have a solid grasp of the methods covered in these first three lessons. Especially at the beginning, it is important to lay a good foundation -- one that will not have to be taken apart and rebuilt later!

There is a wide range of traditional practical methods: some work well for nearly everyone, while others are effective for only a small percentage of people; most are entirely safe, though some can cause psychological or physical damage. In this course, we are going to introduce you to a set of basic techniques that are both effective and safe, and we'll also discuss some of the more advanced areas of work.

Eventually, you will be able to select your own methods from the armory of the Hermetic tradition; for the time being, however, we suggest that you work with the specific exercises that we present, and not mix them with others. Some combinations of practices tend to cancel each other out, and some may even be harmful if done in combination with others. (If you have any questions about specific practices you may be doing, please let us know.)

The most important practice we'll be teaching you is meditation -- a word that has by now been applied to so many things that it may very well convey nothing at all. In this course we mean something very specific by the term. One way of describing it, is to say that is a way of focusing the mind on a spiritual topic so that the higher senses can begin to enter one's awareness. (This is often called "discursive meditation,"

because, especially at first, it can take the form of an interior discourse or conversation.) Although at first it may seem like ordinary musing, it is actually something quite different. Although it is simple, and at times may even be boring, it is one of the most important skills you can learn.

On beginning esoteric work, it can often be very difficult to assess the results one is getting -- or even whether or not one is getting results. This is one reason it can be much more effective to study with someone who has already done similar kinds of work. One of the more common perplexities arises from the results of doing work with the focus of attention. Students often wonder if some phenomenon is real or illusory. Things are not, however, quite so straightforward.

One type of exercise involves fixing one's gaze on an object for some period of time. If you do this, and really succeed in holding your gaze steady, you will find that the object, and indeed much of your visual field, undergo a kind of transformation, a blanking out. Unless and until, of course, you become startled by the effect, and shift your gaze even slightly. This is a well known physiological effect of fixing the gaze. The retina and the nerves that serve it are constructed so that any constant stimulus -- any stimulus that occurs precisely and unvaryingly in a particular place on the retina -- becomes, so to speak, invisible. This is why we usually do not see the blood vessels that supply the retina, for example. Usually, our eyes are constantly making slight motions, so that even objects that are not moving do not cast their images onto exactly the same place from moment to moment. With relaxation, however, and the fixation of vision that can come with the stabilization of attention, it is not hard to stop this vibrating motion, and experience a temporary blanking of vision.

The same thing is true of other sensory systems. A constant touch or constant scent will also disappear -- and not simply as a result of "getting used to it" (as background music, say, disappears). Even more important, this is true as well of consciousness itself, although this is not as easy to demonstrate, since we are so used to seeing through consciousness that it can be very difficult to bring it into the forefront of our attention, as it were. Nevertheless, when Fortune speaks of the art of creating "willed changes in consciousness," she is referring not only to changing the contents of consciousness, or the quality of consciousness, but also to the possibility of changing what we might call the focal length of consciousness, or the tuning of consciousness. Many types of magical activity effect such changes almost by accident, and people can do magic without being able to articulate what is happening when things work well or do not

work well, like the famous fellow who one day found out that all his life he'd been speaking prose. Since our aim is not simply to teach a bag of tricks, but to preserve and pass on what is a very full magical, meditative and philosophical tradition, we think it is important to point these things out, even though they may at first seem like very abstract propositions. When these effects of focused attention are seen from the physiological standpoint, they are mere curiosities of the bodily mechanism; understood from the esoteric point of view, however, they can be keys that open doors into an illimitable region of experience and meaning.

The Companions of the Stone was founded by people who had each pursued the study of the Hermetic and magical traditions in a variety of ways, and who each came to the conclusion that the traditions, and the continuity of the traditions, deserved to be kept alive, and not simply be given over on one hand to the quibbling of academic critics and on the other to the fiddling of magical mechanics and tinkerers. None of us would want to claim to be gurus or masters -- and fortunately the tradition does not depend on gurus or masters for its continuing life, though in fact its history is studded with great souls whose achievements are undeniable. We see ourselves as students of the Hermetic and magical traditions, hoping to assist other students to appreciate and work with those traditions as fully as possible.

One small point might be mentioned here, and that is our spelling of certain key Hebrew words. Some wag once observed that a "tradition" in the modern Western esoteric world is any group of people who can agree on how to spell "Qabalah", and this remark has a certain truth to it. If you have studied any Western European language, you will know that even within the group of languages using the "same" alphabet, letters can have very different sounds. This is even more true when going from one alphabet to another, and English presents special difficulties because many of its letters can have several sounds, depending on context. When Hebrew words were brought into Latin texts during the Renaissance, the usual strategy was to represent the sound of the words as best as possible in roman letters using their Latin values. The spelling "Cabala" dates from this period. The spelling "Kabbalah" is generally used in the academic world, except when referring to the Christianized (or at least de-Judaized) versions of the tradition that developed during the Renaissance; these are often called "Christian Cabala," using the spelling that was used within their texts. The spelling "Qabalah" was developed by nineteenth century occultists as a result of a desire to have romanized spellings that reflected the the actual Hebrew letters that had originally composed the word. The main impetus here was the

need to be able to work with the number-and-letter manipulations of the "literal Qabalah".

One of the main conventions that has been adopted is to transliterate the Hebrew letters (without the vowels, which are indicated by a system of "vowel points" above or below the letters in modern Hebrew) into Roman letters on a one-for-one, and somewhat arbitrary, basis. This provides the reader with information about what the original letters were, though it doesn't necessarily tell much about how to pronounce the words. We will be introducing the Hebrew alphabet and some systematic notes on pronouncing Hebrew words at a later point in this course; at this point, though, we will only be bringing up certain Divine and Angelic names, most of which should not be difficult to pronounce adequately. We will provide both the conventional transliterations, so that students who have not seen them before can become familiar with them, and some notes on pronunciation.

As you have noticed, we have chosen to spell the word "Qabalah." We are not writing either as historians or as claimants to authority in the world of Judaica. We follow the usage of our textbook, and we chose our textbook because of the particular way the author positioned it with respect to the sources of the esoteric traditions it transmits.

Reading

For this lesson, the assigned reading is Chapter V, "Negative Existence," and Chapter VI, "Otz Chiim, The Tree of Life." These chapters provide one way to begin to gain a sense of what is meant by the Qabalistic Tree of Life. It is not the only way to approach the subject, and we will present others in the course of these lessons.

As you go through these chapters in The Mystical Qabalah, compose a brief paragraph (of about five sentences) describing the ideas from each chapter which you find most interesting or thought-provoking. Use your own words, or use phrases and sentences taken from the text, as seems best to you. Write them down in your magical record.

Exercises

Tarot
The Small Cards

Set aside half an hour to forty-five minutes for this exercise. You'll need to do the exercise a total of four times over the

next two weeks; as long as you don't do more than one a day, you can choose how you space these sessions.

Lay out the minor arcana (the 40 pip or number cards, as they are often called) and the court cards (16 altogether), as in Diagram 1, leaving enough space in the center you to stand. Make sure the cards are properly oriented to the four directions. Step into the circle, and turn to face East. Open, and do a minute or two of regulated breathing.

Focus your attention on the suit of Swords. While focusing on these fourteen cards, summon up all the feelings and thoughts associated with the East and springtime: the yellow light of sunrise; a freshening breeze; sprouting seedlings; a feeling of clarity and lightness. Let these rise up within you and around you like a sea of energies, and let yourself be immersed in that sea. Keep your attention on the Swords, and remain in the presence of these energies, for several minutes; then release the energies, close your eyes, and clear your mind.

Turn to face South. Repeat the above process with the suit of Wands and the energies of the South and Summer: the heat of noonday; the redness of flame; plants in lush, full growth; a feeling of drive and ambition. Again, after several minutes, release the energies, close your eyes, and clear your mind.

Turn to face West, and repeat with the suit of Cups and the energies of Autumn: dusk falling, gentle rain; leaves turning color and drifting down from the trees; harvest; fields set to lie fallow for the coming winter. After several minutes, close your eyes, release the energies, and clear your mind.

Turn now to face North, and repeat with the suit of Pentacles and the energies of Winter: a black midnight full of sharp, glittering stars; snow and bare earth; the dark shapes of tree trunks; the storing up and maintenance of what has been harvested. After several minutes, again release the energies and close you eyes, and clear your mind.

Turn last to face the East again. Release your awareness from the cards. Close your eyes, clear your mind, and do several minutes of regulated breathing. Then close, collect the cards, and write up your work.

Meditation

By this point, you have had a month more or less to explore, through the attention practices, the most basic form of the method of meditation you'll be using as you work through this course. Depending on your prior experience, and on various

subtle factors, you have been more or less successful at clearing and stabilizing your mind, and keeping it focused on the practice. Whatever the results, the experience will be of value in your later work. At this point, however, a more complete form will be presented. This new practice should be done at least twice a week; every day would be best, but not everyone can arrange this. It will be done along with a brief version of the relaxation and attention work, so that it is nested within the pattern of opening, relaxing and breathing, paying attention, and then, afterward, of closing.

Decide at the beginning which days you will set aside for the additional meditation work. If at all possible, never skip these pre-scheduled sessions, even though your mind will be quite creative in coming up with excuses for doing so. A vital part of the Hermetic way is learning to discipline your mind -- and this is an excellent place to begin.

To begin, then, sit in the meditation position given in Lesson 1. Let your body relax without losing the balance or symmetry of the position. Then, for approximately five minutes, do the attention practice as given in the last lesson, with rhythmic breathing.

When this period is finished, turn your mind to the topic as given below. Think about it in a general way for a time, and then choose some particular aspect of the topic, or a train of thought connected with it, and follow that out as far as it will go, considering all the ideas that your mind associates with it. For example, if the topic for your meditation is the element of Earth, you might decide to consider Earth as soil, as the source of plant life and growth; this might lead you to think of the yearly cycle of vegetative life, or of fertility in general, and either or both of these might lead on to the thought of the lunar cycle, and of the Moon; and these ideas in turn might lead you on to others. However far afield the connections go, try to link them back to the original topic, and to other ideas you have come up with in the course of the meditation.

For this lesson, the topic for your meditations will be the four elements: earth, water, fire, and air. Even if you have learned the traditional symbolism of these elements previously, try to focus on the actual physical experience of the elements themselves, and let ideas arise from this, rather than from correspondences you may have learned. In this way, you will begin to develop your own personal grasp of the meaning of these important symbols.

For the time being, you should plan on spending ten minutes or so doing actual discursive meditation in each session. When you are finished, repeat a few more cycles of rhythmic breathing and

attention, and then close with the closing gesture. After each session, note down the ideas that have arisen in connection with the topic, as well as any factors which seem to have helped or hindered the meditative process.

Attention

The attention exercise for this lesson is to be done on each day in which you do not meditate. For approximately the same period, at about the same time, perform the relaxation and attention work of the last lesson. After some five minutes of regulated breathing, however, you may allow your breathing to proceed naturally, without trying to make it stay within any particular pattern. Notice how your attention changes with inhalation and exhalation, and notice when your attention seems to become more focused and when it seems to disperse. When you have achieved some sense of this, recall that energy follows consciousness, and feel the alternate ebb and flow of energy through you as you breathe.

As before, use the opening and closing gestures and the initial relaxation to provide a frame for this practice, and write up the results in your practice journal.

Ritual: The Lesser Ritual of the Pentagram (Banishing)

This ritual exercise, which builds on the one assigned in the last lesson, should be done once a day, ideally after the attention exercise or meditation for the day. (You may wish to try it after the attention exercise for one week, and before the attention exercise for the next week, to see whether and how the results vary.) This is where the private space with "enough open floor space to allow you to walk in a circle without bumping into furniture", mentioned in Lesson 1, will begin to be needed.

1. Stand facing East, in the center of the space around which you will be tracing the pentagrams, and perform the Qabalistic Cross.

2. Step forward to the East until you reach what will be the circumference of the circle. Using the first two (middle and index) fingers of your right hand, trace a banishing pentagram in the air. The banishing pentagram is traced by beginning at the lower left and drawing a line upward to the top, continuing down to the lower right, then to the left arm, the right arm, and back down to the lower left to complete the figure, which should be about three feet across. While tracing it, visualize

a line of blue-white light being traced by your fingers as they move through the air. Then point to the center of the pentagram and vibrate the Divine Name YHVH (Ye-ho-wah).

Banishing Pentagram
of Earth

Begin here

3. From the center of the Eastern pentagram, trace a blue-white line to establish the circumference of the circle until you reach the South. At the Southern point of the circle, trace a second banishing pentagram. Then point to the center of the pentagram and vibrate the Divine Name ADNI (Ah-doh-nai).

4. From the center of the Southern pentagram, trace the next segment of the circumference of the circle to the Western point of the circle; there trace another banishing pentagram, point to its center, and vibrate the Name AHIH (Eh-heh-yeh).

5. From there, continue to the North, and again trace a banishing pentagram and at its center vibrate the name AGLA (Ah-geh-la).

6. Complete the circle by tracing the line back to the center of the pentagram at the East. Return to the center, and face East. Extend your arms horizontally out to the side (toward the North and South), and say:

Before me, Raphael (Rah-fa-el)
Behind me, Gabriel (Gah-bree-el)
At my right hand, Michael (Mee-khah-el)
At my left hand, Auriel (Oh-ree-el)
For about me flame the pentagrams
And within me shines the six-rayed star.

While saying this, visualize the Archangels as towering winged figures at the quarters of the circle, radiant with light. Raphael, wearing yellow and purple, carries a sword; Gabriel, wearing blue and orange, carries a cup; Michael, wearing red and green, carries a staff; and Auriel, wearing citrine, olive, russet and black, carries a pentacle (a disk inscribed with a five-pointed star). As each name is pronounced, the figure expands or springs from the point at the center of the Name at the center of the pentagram, rising a little outward, but with the pentagram somewhat within it. When you refer to the pentagrams, direct your attention to their vivid presence around you. When you speak of the six-rayed star, see a Star of David on your chest, the upward-pointing triangle in red, the downward-pointing one in blue.

7. Complete the rite by performing the Qabalistic Cross once again.

To summarize, then, the work for this lesson is as follows:

First, to perform the relaxation and attention exercises daily, except as noted.

Second, to perform the daily review each day on going to bed.

Third, to do the meditation at least once for each of the four elements.

Fourth, to do the Tarot exercises.

Fifth, to perform the Pentagram Ritual daily, as described.

Sixth, to keep a record of your work, and to prepare and send in the test for this lesson.

Diagram 1

Test

The following questions are intended to help us track your progress through the work of this lesson. As before, your responses should be typed or written legibly on 8 1/2" x 11" sheets of plain white paper, with your name and address written in the upper right corner of the first sheet.

A. Copy out an account of one working of this lesson's Tarot exercise from your magical record. What did you learn from the exercise?

B. Copy out an account of your experiences with one of the meditations from this lesson.

C. Copy out an account of one working of the Lesser Ritual of the Pentagram.

D. Copy out the accounts of two sessions of the attention exercise from this lesson -- one in which you feel you did well, one in which you feel you did poorly. What were the specific differences between the sessions? What factors affected the practice positively or negatively?

E. Copy out the paragraphs you wrote to summarize ideas from the assigned reading from this lesson.

Please mail in your responses to P.O. Box 95536, Seattle, WA 98145. "Attn: Tutorial Committee" should be written on the envelope.