

Symbols of the Soul: 2 - The soul as a tree

Chapter 11 of Mysteries and Symbols of the Soul

The soul is often seen as a potential connection between unity and diversity, between spirit and personality. A tree expresses this beautifully, as from the trunk, the symbol of origin, many branches grow out. We are also able to recognise this phenomenon in schematic trees, like family trees and tree diagrams.

No mystery schools were present in ancient India. Esoteric teachings were taught in person, by a teacher to a pupil. Many of the secret Vedic teachings dating back to that period can be found in the so-called Upanishads, approximately written down in 750 b.c. and onwards. However, they have been passed on orally for ages beforehand.

In chapter 12 of the sixth part of the Chandoy Upanishad, we read about a son wishing to be taught by his father about the mysteries of life. He wonders how it is possible that the diversity of names and forms come forth from pure Being. The father subsequently asks his son to fetch a fruit from the fig tree, to break it open and tell him what he sees. The son answers that he does not see anything at all. His father then explains to him that the existence of the mighty fig tree is rooted in the subtle essence invisible to him. The Self of the world and his personal Self are such subtle essences, too.

An enormously extensive symbolism is associated with trees, as countless meanings can be attached to them. Trees thus symbolise, for instance:

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- firmness, as they are often able to withstand all kinds of weather conditions: warmth, coldness, humidity, drought and storm
- growth, because they arise from a small seed principle, they develop steadily and are able to grow much older and taller than a human being
- continuity of life through the seeds from the fruits
- cycles, because many trees have a distinct annual cycle related to the seasons: flourishing in spring, forming leaves in spring and summer, shedding fruits and leaves in autumn and resting in winter.

Initiation

The tree is also associated with initiation. Buddha attained enlightenment after a long meditation under the bodhi tree. It is said that Jesus taught his disciples in a circle of palm trees. Verse 3 of Psalm 1 compares the devout man with a tree, it is planted next to water streams, it offers fruits when the time is due and it has leaves that do not wilt. And in Matthew 7 we read that every good tree brings forth good fruits, a good tree does not bear bad fruits and a bad tree does not bear good fruits.

What is initiation anyway? In a general sense initiation is understood as an action or a series of consecutive actions that take place to include an outsider in a certain group or community. Initiation often involves a learning process that ends and begins with a ritual. This generic description can also be applied to the mysteries of the soul. This involves a lot more, however.

In authentic spiritual traditions initiation primarily refers to self-initiation. A person attains new inner knowledge and new powers by self-activity. A teacher or a mystery school is able to support the pupil of the soul and give him strength, but in the end the pupil must do the work himself. If you want to get a more accurate impression on initiation in the mysteries, you might contemplate on the following quotes from spiritual teachers in the twentieth century.

- Initiation is a victory over the four elements: earth, water, air and fire. Nowadays, initiation does not take place in temples anymore, but in everyday life. Everyday life is where you encounter the four elements and where you must overcome them. (Omraam Mikhaël Aïvanhov)
- Initiation is the result of the power to overcome delusions and illusions that veil the truth and restrict consciousness. (Alice Bailey)
- Initiation is also suffering ordeals, as they are a sign of real progress in the pupil. (Hazrat Inayat Khan)
- Initiation is founding the Kingdom of God within you, by your-self. (Wim Leene)
Initiation is the tiered inclusion in the hierarchy of the newborn man by the sacramental sealing of forces and powers of the original man (J. van Rijckenborgh)
- The knowledge and proficiency received by initiation cannot be obtained in any other manner, except in some far distant future, after many incarnations, by quite different means and in quite a different form. (Rudolf Steiner)

An initiate in the mysteries of the soul could also be referred to as a living connection between earth and heaven. He or she has accepted the assignment to take root downwards and bear fruit upwards (2 Kings 19:30). The earth is the sensory perceptible world in which we live and act. And the notion heaven refers to the domain of the soul, the pure astral world of the concrete archetypes and worlds rising even beyond it. Such an initiate, unlike most people, does not breathe the polluted astral sphere of the earth exclusively anymore, nor is he sustained by it. The polluted astral sphere is the joint result of the downfall of the rebellious angels, the fall of man and thousands of years of unholy life by mankind.

Ascent and descent

A tree too, is a living connection between earth and heaven. A deciduous tree is rooted in the earth and stretches its crown out into the heavens. A tree is a living and breathing being, through which water and nutrients rise up from the soil, through the roots, the trunk and the branches towards the crown. A downward stream carrying organic nutrients created from carbon dioxide, water and sunlight through photosynthesis in the leaves, flows to the roots from the branches and the trunk. Likewise there is a continuous rising and descending of light forces in the renewed human soul.

The importance of the correct balance between ascent and descent is also expressed in the following phrases from the classical text Tabula Smaragdina or the Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus: *'It climbs from the earth and descends from the sky, and it absorbs the force of things superior and things inferior. Thus, you will hold the glory of the world and all obscurity will flee from you.'*

It contains a beautiful promise: all obscurity will flee from you. The light can manifest itself then by ascending and descending. Physically, we recognise ascent and descent as breathing in and out. That is partly the reason that the spirit is referred to as breath or pneuma, also. If something

does not breathe, it is dead. Every living human being breathes, but that does not necessarily mean that every human being breathes spiritually, of course. If a seeker encounters an authentic spiritual tradition, it is made clear to him that – in a symbolic sense – he lives in darkness, that he is not enlightened and has been cut off from the abundant heavenly grace. In other words, he does not form a living connection between earth and heaven.

In the first verse of chapter 11, the prophet Isaiah compares man with the remnants of a felled tree, which he calls the stump of Jesse. At the same time he or she is offered the greatest of perspectives. A divine seed resides within him or her, enabling a mighty recreation process if man pays attention to it.

The fruits of the spirit

For Isaiah writes about a shoot that will develop, bringing forth the fruits of the spirit. What are those fruits? In chapter 5 of his letter to the Galatians, the apostle Paul refers to them as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness and self-control.

A symbolic tree resides in all of us, one that we could call – the tree of knowledge of good and evil, based on the paradise myth from Genesis 3. It is the central cerebrospinal nerve system of the body, its trunk is formed by the spinal cord and the crown is formed by the brain. The spinal cord contains a fiery consciousness force called the serpent fire. Unholy energies circulate throughout the central cerebrospinal nerve system.

Jacob Boehme speaks about a fire that is ignited in Lucifer, and thus, relates to the downfall of the rebellious angels and the fall of man, among other things. According to the paradise myth the serpent in the tree of knowledge of good and evil has tempted man to eat from the fruits of that tree, with the result that man was forced to attach himself gradually to the material earthly reality and take on a physical body.

Apart from the symbolic black serpent that sparked the involution of man, for the purpose of reification, a white serpent exists. The white serpent encourages man, to take the path back to the lost paradise, the path of evolution, starting from the lowest point of materiality, the nadir. We see the black and the white serpent in a blended symbolic tree of the knowledge of good and evil, known as the staff of Mercury, the Hermes staff and the caduceus.

The staff of Mercury

Both serpents are twisted around the trunk in three and a half turns, and the crown has been replaced by two wings, enabling the ascend and descend in order to be a messenger of the gods, a living connection between heaven and earth, just like the Greek god Hermes or his Roman equivalent Mercury. The two serpents represent the spinal nerves of the nervus sympathicus, to the right and left along the spinal cord in the human body. Indian philosophy distinguishes these three energy channels as Ida, Pingala and Sushumma. The story about the restoration of Lazarus from death, as described in chapter 11 of the gospel of John, allows for associating the three channels with Maria, Martha and Lazarus of Bethany.

The little spheres on the top and the bottom of the staff symbolise the opened root chakra and the opened crown chakra. In earlier days, initiation often involved letting the fiery force in the root centre rise up through the three energy channels into the crown chakra, by means of all

kinds of exercises. This yoga-path entails major dangers for modern man, as this path has been out of line with man's development for a long time already. It is also out of line with the highly polluted astral sphere of the earth.

The three energy channels also play an important role in the transfiguristic initiation mystery for modern mankind, but the process works in an entirely different and much safer way. Totally different renewing energy streams emerge on the basis of the kundalini of the heart. The latter being the result of an active spirit-spark, and without performing exercises. That process is described in the module 'Spiritual Pentecost' in the book 'Spiritual Easter and Pentecost'.

In the staff of Mercury we are able to recognise the structure of an extremely important composed symbol, known as the tree of life from the Kabbalah. This gnostic tradition emerged within Judaism and later on influenced esoteric movements within Hermetism and Christianity. Hence, not only a Jewish Kabbalah exists, but also a Hermetic Kabbalah and a Christian Kabbalah.

The word Kabbalah literally means tradition. Many people associate this word directly with numerical mysticism and numerology. That is only a minor aspect of the Kabbalah. First and foremost, the Kabbalistic tradition emphasizes the importance of getting through to the deeper meanings hidden in the Jewish Bible, Christians call this the Old Testament. This implies definitely much more than an intellectual activity. Rituals, prayers and songs play a significant role as well in many Kabbalistic traditions.

The tree of life

The tree of life consists of ten circles – also called sefiroth – that are connected to one another. This abstract figure somewhat resembles a real tree rooted in the earth and its crown stretching out into heaven. According to the Kabbalistic tradition, it is a sacred symbol that is not created by man but, just like holy scriptures, has been given by the angels to enlightened people.

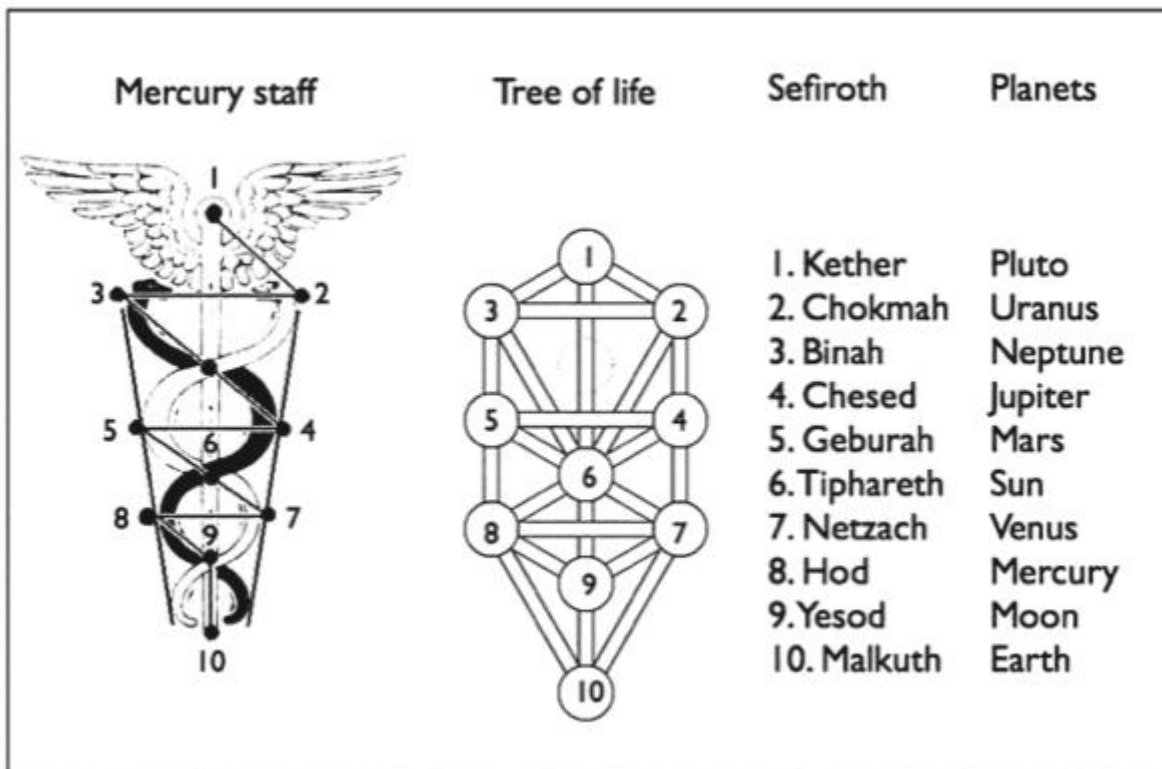
The tree of life of the Kabbalah does not belong to the world of experience of the concrete archetypes, but to the world of experience of the abstract archetypes, also home to numbers and geometric shapes, for example. The tree of life is a blueprint for the divine creation plan and demonstrates how the divine light manifests itself step by step at all levels, as a bolt of lightning or a flaming sword. Whoever understands that blueprint, experiences it and consciously forms a part of it, will be recreated into a new man.

The ten sefiroth are force activities, emanations or properties. The tree of life always clearly distinguishes between the three higher sefiroth – Keter, Chokmah and Binah – and the other seven lower sefiroth. This distinction is also referred to as the veil or the abyss. Among other things, this implies that the higher three sefiroth are not manifest and remain spiritual. The 22 connections between the sefiroth correspond with the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet and also with the 22 great arcana of the Hermetic tarot. The 10 sefiroth and the 22 connections together form the so-called 32 paths of wisdom, described in the classical Kabbalistic book Sefer Yetzira.

An important concept behind the tree of life is that creation or manifestation takes place because while the heavenly light descends it is tempered by ten transformation stations, called sefiroth. That happens in the cosmos and in man alike, in a way that is much like a bolt of lightning and it is reflected in the picture of the staff of Mercury. In general, the Hebrew names are used for the sefiroth.

From top to bottom these are Kether, Chokmah, Binah, Chesed, Geburah, Tipharet, Netzach, Hod, Yesod and Malkuth. The English translations for these words do exist, but they are hardly ever used because this could easily cause confusion, as it would not be immediately clear that it concerns sefiroth.

A lot can be said about the properties that are connected with the ten particular sefiroth. Here, we confine ourselves to the statement that the sefiroth correspond with the planet forces. In more recent books on the tree of life, the sefiroth are mostly linked to the planets in a way that is represented in image 11.



The body, the personality-soul, the soul and the spirit-soul of man can all be regarded as a tree of life. Thus, all those dimensions of ourselves have the same inner structure. In the seventh essay, titled 'The soul as a sevenfold' we will elaborate upon this further.

Annual cycle

We conclude this essay with a short explanation of the transfiguristic spiritual path by means of the annual cycle of a fruit tree. When a child is born, it is to a certain extent still united with heavenly spheres, and it is able to experience the beauty of it. This condition is comparable to the beginning of autumn. The fruit tree still shows itself in full glory. As autumn progresses, more and more leaves will fall from the tree, until it is virtually bare at the beginning of winter.

As a child grows up, it will experience less and less of the heavenly spheres, until it is practically even reduced to zero. This is a necessary precondition for building a personality that is able to function in this world. But unnoticeably, during the maturing of the personality-soul, preparations take place that enable a spiritual awakening. In secrecy, buds are formed. At some point the spirit-spark may wake up in an adult and he or she will be clearly conscious of it.

This moment of the birth of the soul is similar to the beginning of spring, in which the blossom buds of the fruit tree are opening. The new soul is born, grows, increases in power and, after a long-standing process it will reach its peak at the beginning of summer. At that moment the spirit-soul is born and everything will be focused on bringing forth fruits on behalf of the greater picture. This is when man completes his inner assignment.

What can we say, in this regard, about the pine trees, that are always green? Pines are green in every season and have therefore been considered as a symbol of eternal life over the centuries. That is why they have been playing an age-long significant role in the midwinter feast or yule, celebrated on December 21st and the festivities usually last twelve days.

When eternity descends into time, as is remembered at Christmas, the new soul is born in man. And this new soul is able to grow into an immortal soul garment, referred to by the hymn of the pearl as the shining garment. From this perspective you could regard a decorated Christmas tree with lights as a symbol for the immortal soul garment that is able to evolve in you, a shining appearance that brings light, life and joy.