

Companions of the Stone Emerald Lodge No. 3

First Degree Lecture: On the Sphere of Sensation

1.

The term "Sphere of Sensation" occurs in several contexts in the Golden Dawn material. First, in the papers associated with the Portal grade, it is used to describe a sphere that surrounds the physical body. Most scrying, it is said, occurs within this sphere, which, like a magic mirror, reflects the greater cosmos – though adepts can extend rays from this sphere and so go out directly into the Macrocosm, both to perceive and to act. (The Sphere of Sensation, then, is a kind of interface between our awareness and the actual "mechanisms" by which things work.) The boundaries of this sphere can be stronger or weaker, and students are advised to strengthen these boundaries in various ways when dealing with people whose presence is otherwise taxing. Later, in the Tarot and Enochian papers given to Adepts of various sub-grades, there are detailed descriptions of the structure of the sphere of sensation, derived in large part from projecting the Tree of Life into the sphere in such a way that there are four (rather than two) side pillars, and a complex tracery of Paths (rather than the usual 22). This Sphere has to do with what might be called the Body of Adeptship, which is developed in part as the structures that constitute it are explored by various magical methods.

2.

This idea of the spherical body is quite ancient, and has two (or three) key manifestations. One, which appears in ribald form in Plato's *Symposium*, is the origin-myth which describes the primordial human body as having been spherical before it was split in two (as a punishment from the Gods for human transgressions). Another is the idea, which appears in Plato (the *Timaeus*) is well (and also in the Neoplatonists, and then of course recurs ever afterwards), that we have a kind of spiritual body, spherical in form, in which our souls dwell, and which serves as an intermediary between the soul and the physical body. In the older terminology, it is "spirit" between body and soul. In one sense this is part of the old metaphysical idea that anything that exists necessarily has a body or else, as North Wind says to Diamond, it could not be known. In another sense this has to do with the idea that, as the soul "descends" or emerges into manifestation, it accumulates bodies appropriate to the spheres through which it passes – or its subtle vehicle is modified by acquiring the properties of those spheres. Just how one conceives this process has some practical consequences.

3.

The ancients seem to have known (I mean, thought in terms of) basically one of these subtle bodies or vehicles or garments (treating the complications as various strata or accretions within it), though there was in certain circles a tendency to thing only in terms of soul and body, and it is possible to read Plotinus (for example) in a number of different ways on the subject. (What is sometimes seen as a key anti-esoteric development in the West was the official rejection of the tripartite scheme in favor of the soul/body scheme which Aquinas developed, not unreasonably, from the Aristotelian idea that the soul was the "form" or "idea" of the body. This need not have led to insurmountable difficulties, but for various reasons a Thomistic esotericism never, as far as I know, got around to being developed.) In recent times, however, the number of such bodies or vehicles has increased, and it is common nowadays to distinguish,

beyond the physical body, at least three others: which for convenience we can call an etheric body, an astral body, and a mental body. The general lore about the aura describes an "etheric" aura close to the body, an emotional aura at a somewhat greater distance, and an even larger auric sheath that reflects the state of the more abstract aspects of the person. In the Theosophical scheme, of course, there are seven of these bodies or vehicles. No prizes, as Gareth Knight remarks in another context, are offered for exceeding this number. In a sense the number of bodies is arbitrary -- as in a sense are the number of notes in a scale. What is not arbitrary is the string, and what happens when it is divided at one point or another.

4.

These bodies are not simply a matter of speculation, or (external) clairvoyant observation. They are objects of immediate experience. (Such experience does not necessarily require special exercises or attainments: it requires rather paying attention to, and reflecting on, the experiences of life.) First, the etheric body and its "skin" are often experienced in certain kinds of fever, or in the peculiar prodromal vulnerability that goes with certain kinds of colds, or in the alterations of spatial perception and body sense that go with other psycho-physical events. Again, the emotional vehicle is discernible in that substrate that shifts in certain intense but all too common (or all too uncommon) moods, in certain types of desire; its "skin," like all boundaries, is the defensive perimeter that marks activity and passivity, safety and danger. The cognitive/mental vehicle can be recognized in what General Semantics regards as the symbolic or linguistic sheath that constitutes the tools of cognition -- of perception and action in the cognitive world. Its "skin" is the boundary that distinguishes the known and handled from that which merely interacts with the known and handled. This is why the mental body is said to extend beyond the emotional, and so on. In the same way, the bodies of others manifest in these vehicles -- and there are those who have only some (or one) and not all of these vehicles. Jung pointed out that thinking that the thoughts and moods that go through one's head are one's own, and manifestations only of one's own activities, is like sitting in a clearing in the forest and looking at the passing animals and thinking, "I'm hopping that rabbit by, I'm making the breeze move those leaves," and so on. A mood that visits us may be the body of some being that lives only on the plane of the emotional world; a thought or concept that we entertain may be indeed only a visitor, and not a permanent resident. "What one in the rout of the fire-born moods has fallen away?"

5.

There are two kinds of practical consequences. Certain things, for example, can wound the surfaces of the vehicles (Fortune touches on this subject in *Psychic Self-Defense*) and thus make one vulnerable to intrusions of various sorts, and of course there are protections. Ginger, for example, can often strengthen the defensive perimeter of the etheric body enough to produce a palpable defense against the intrusions of "cold;" see also Butler's idea of the "orbicular wound". Similarly, the perimeters of the other bodies can be broken, and intrusions can gain a foothold. In the same way, however, the vehicles can be strengthened and purified, brought to their full capacities, so that they can serve as clear channels for the flow of life at all levels (from inmost to outermost, or highest to lowest, and vice versa). When one identifies with one component of oneself, one can suppose that it is enough to bring that vehicle into contact with the Light; especially this is true with the "higher" components, so that one ends up simply sloughing off the "lower". In our tradition, however, all the vehicles are to be brought to the Light. This is the special virtue of the theurgic art: to cleanse and strengthen the intermediate vehicles not only as vehicles of return, but of manifestation as well.