

To the North are Diamonds, to the South Spades, to the East Hearts and to the West Clubs, running inwards to the centre from the two to the Ace. The first question was to decide the meaning of the four suits, and at once the four elements of Fire, Earth, Water and Air suggested themselves together with the four faculties of the human mind, Intuition, Sensation, Feeling and Intellect. But which belonged to which? It was at once obvious that Spades belonged to Earth and Hearts to Feeling. Sensation is the avenue whereby we receive our impressions of material things, and so this was accorded to Earth and Spades. Feeling is a passive, feminine faculty, not usually well developed in men; we talk about 'feminine intuition' but as a rule we generally mean feminine feeling - a certain sensitivity to emotional values, to psychological 'atmospheres' and feeling-situations where men are apt to be 'slow in the uptake.' It was thus decided to place Hearts and Feeling under the feminine element of Water - that passive substance that always yields but can never be defeated. Opposite Hearts we have Clubs, and it was not at once easy to decide whether Fire or Air should be called the opposite of Water. Fire and Water are hostile, but Air and Water are creative, for in the beginning 'the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters,' and, 'except a man be born of water and of the spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.' It was therefore decided to make the figure harmonious instead of hostile, regarding the four suits as compliments rather than opposites. Thus as Air complements Water being the active agent which shaped the passive substance into the forms of waves. Thought or Intellect, as Air, was put opposite Feeling, as Water. Feeling is passive but Intellect - a masculine quality - is active and often aggressive, and so belongs appropriately to clubs. Intuition and Fire remain to be classed with Diamonds, for intuition is the spiritual faculty which complements Sensation, the sensual or material faculty. Fire is not hostile to Earth, but its lightness (in both senses) complements the soil's darkness and heaviness. To Buddhist philosophers the diamond (vajra) is the symbol of spiritual consciousness because of its strength and luminous clarity. It has been said that 'a diamond is a piece of coal which has stuck to its job,' being that which results from intense fire working upon black carbon. Therefore the four suits are understood as follows:

**Diamonds (Fire & Intuition) - Spades (Earth & Sensation)
Hearts (Water & Feeling) - Clubs (Air & Intellect)**

But what about the rest of the figure? We see that there is a progression of numbers and court cards from the extremity of each arm of the cross to the centre - four ways of approach to the Divinity as present represented by a question mark as He is unknown. Corresponding to the four faculties, the Hindus devised four kinds of yoga for awakening man's understanding of his union with Brahman, the Self of the Universe: karma yoga, the way of Action, Bhakti yoga, the way of Devotion, gnana yoga, the way of Intellect, and raja yoga, the way of developing the higher faculties of Intuition. But it will be seen that in our figure each path is of a like pattern, running:

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Knave Queen King Ace

The Progression shows, among other things, each stage of man's path to supreme Enlightenment from the child and the primitive to the sage. From 2 to 10 the path seems to be going backwards, as will shortly be apparent, because it often seems that civilized man is further from spirituality than the child and the primitive. Actually this is not true, for in the parable of the Prodigal Son it is the prodigal for whom the fatted calf is slain and not the faithful son, for one has to be divided from union with the Father before one can truly appreciate it. To adapt a line of Kipling's, 'He does not know Union who only Union knows.'

We begin with the 2, for with every one of the four faculties the first thing of which we are aware, the very foundation of our experience, is the difference between that which we call our self and that which is not the self, between the thing which we call 'I' and the outer universe. This is the first of all the pairs of opposites of which life is composed, the subjective and the objective. But these two things do not exist in our consciousness without a third factor, namely the relationship between them, which is shown by the 3. That relationship may be attraction or repulsion, of love or fear, or of balance between the two which is called indifference. Without trinity, duality has no more meaning than man and woman without child, and unless there is a relationship between ourselves and the universe we can have no consciousness of our existence - indeed, we could not even exist. To some things in the universe we react with love or attraction, and to others with fear or repulsion, and this is as natural as that fire should make us warm and ice make us cold.

But here the difficulties begin, because man does not stop with that basic reaction to life. It is not just that he likes some things and dislikes others; he has also decided feelings about the state of liking and disliking, and so from 3 we proceed to 4. This stage marks the beginning of self-consciousness and civilization, for man becomes attached to loving or liking and wishes to have about him only those things in the universe which arouse attraction. At the same time he becomes afraid of fear because it makes him ashamed, being a menace to his pride and self-esteem. But this does not get rid of his fear; it only adds one fear on top of another. Thus as soon as man becomes self-conscious and self-esteeming and fully aware of his reactions to things, he starts trying to interfere with the processes of his soul. And this is called civilization. He is not content to be the primitive who just loves and fears things without shame, thinking no more about it. He must now control his reactions and shape them in accordance with some preconceived pattern of character development. Fear must not exist in his vocabulary and so-called 'love' must be cultivated under such names as ambition and happiness. But this interference with the natural processes of the soul (psychologists call it repression) removes us further and further from basic realities, precipitating us into a sort of tail chasing procedure. Like dogs trying to catch their tails, cats running after their own shadows and lunatics trying to lift themselves up by their own belts, men try to make themselves what they think they ought to be - a form of self-deception which receives rude shocks when the surface of civilization is removed. This regression from basic realities is represented by the cards from 4 to 10, the latter being the point where man has completely forgotten his union with life, where his self-consciousness has reached the stage of utter isolation and where he is hopelessly bewildered by what the Chinese call 'the ten thousand things' - or the manifold and apparently separate and chaotic objects and events of the universe.

This is the moment of crisis in human evolution. Man becomes acutely aware of his unhappiness and insufficiency, and realises, appropriately enough, that he is a Knave. What is he to do about it? Look at the next card, the Queen - the feminine, passive principle - and if you look carefully at the card you will see that each of the four Queens holds an open flower. The Knaves hold swords, spears and daggers, emblems of their hostility to the life from which they have so estranged themselves, but the flower which is open to sun and rain alike is the symbol of acceptance. The Knave has estranged himself from life by his pride and false morality, by fighting the natural processes of the soul and trying to make out that he is greater than he is. ('Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit to his stature!') But the Queen accepts those processes, both the love and the fear and all the other opposites by which those feelings are aroused - life and death, pleasure and pain, good and evil. She knows that man must accept all the aspects of life if he is to be happy, and that if he would see the god in himself he must not deny the demon. 'Demon' runs the Hermetic aphorism, 'est deus inversus' - the demon is a god upside-down. Therefore the Queen stands for that acceptance and spiritual love which, like His sun, God 'maketh to shine upon both the just and the unjust.' As yet, however, this acceptance is incomplete, for the Queen is only the female or passive aspect of acceptance. The complete union and harmony with life which is the goal of all these four paths is not simply a quietistic state of spiritual *laissez-faire* in which man just allows life to live him. That is, indeed, a step on the way, but the very idea of allowing life to live you, of submitting to your destiny, to the will of God, or whatever it may be called, still implies a distinction between yourself and life, nature or God.

When this distinction is overcome there is no longer any question of yourself being ruled by life and destiny or of yourself ruling your life and destiny; the problem of fate or free will then disappears, for the ruler and the ruled are united, and you do not know whether you are living life or whether life is living you. It is as if two dancers were dancing together in such perfect accord that the lead of one and the response of the other were one and the same movement, as if action and passivity became a single act. In our figure this is symbolized by the King. In their hands the Kings hold swords and axes like the Knaves; in fact, the Kings are Knaves but with this difference: that the Knaves are compelled to be Knaves and cannot help themselves, whereas the Kings are free to be Knaves. This is the difference between the man who is moral (who fights the dark side of life) because he fears evil, and the man who is moral because he knows he is perfectly free to be immoral. In the stage of the Queen we discover our freedom to be moral instead of our compulsion. For when you feel that you are free to be as evil as you like you will find the idea rather tedious.

Thus in the Queen and the King we have the free, royal pair, symbols of spiritual liberty - liberty to love and to fear, to fight and the yield, to resist and to accept and - yes - to be free and to be compelled, for

freedom is not absolutely free unless it is also free to be bound! Therefore the combination of these two is represented in the Ace, symbol of the union between oneself and life which arises from this complete acceptance of life. Here the four paths meet, but an uncomfortable empty space is left in the middle of the cross and something seems to be needed to tie the whole figure together - shall we say to make it holy? We have reduced the many, represented by the 2, to the One, represented by the Ace, but the Buddhist problem asks, 'When the many are reduced to the One, to what shall the One be reduced?' For as the figure stands it would seem that there is a difference between the many and the One, that in going along the path from the 2 to the Ace you have actually acquired something which you did not have before. Spirituality, however, is not acquired; it is only realized, because union with life is something we have all the time even though we do not know it. Our seeming loss of union in the civilized, self-conscious world is only apparent, only something which occurs in Time but not in Eternity. From the standpoint of Eternity, every stage in the path is both beginning and end and middle; there is neither coming nor going, gain nor loss, ignorance nor enlightenment.

What shall we put in the middle? I think we have forgotten a card - the one we usually leave in the box. What about the Joker?

A profane symbol? Not at all. For the joke about the whole thing is that, wherever we stand on the paths, we are really at the Goal - only we do not know it. It is like looking all over the house for your keys only to find that you are carrying them in your hand, whereat you sit down and laugh at yourself.

But the Joker makes an appropriate centre for another reason: in games he is allowed to represent any other card in the pack. So also in this figure he is the 2 and the Ace and all that lies in between - Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending . . . the first and the last.

Indeed, as Chesterton said, there is a closer connection between 'cosmic' and 'comic' than the mere similarity of the words!

Alan Watts as archived at
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