

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

Lesson 1

Welcome to the Companions of the Stone study course. As an associate member of our order, you have the right to work with this course as a free benefit of your membership, as well as the responsibility to learn the material presented and incorporate it into your own life.

In this first lesson we will deal with many things that on one level are matters of practical routine, but which also will lay the groundwork for everything you will do while working on the course.

Like the tradition from which it derives, this course is intended to be experienced, not merely studied in an intellectual way. A large part of the material we'll be covering will involve doing practical exercises. To do these, and to get as much as possible from them, you'll need to provide yourself with certain things.

First among these is a suitable place to practice. Many of the old books in this tradition assume that the student can go to great extremes in this connection; fortunately, this isn't necessary, as disused castles and desert hermitages are in short supply nowadays. A private room, not too brightly lit, where you can be undisturbed for half an hour at a time, is quite sufficient. It should have enough open floor space to allow you to walk in a circle without bumping into furniture.

You'll also need a chair with a straight back -- a folding chair is suitable for this. Some other things can be obtained from the school supplies section of the local drugstore: a three-ring binder for these lessons; a ruler; a pair of compasses (the sort used in geometry classes, with a pencil clipped to one side, will do); a set of colored pencils (the more colors the better) and a blank book or journal for your magical record.

Two other things, however, may take a visit to a specialist bookstore. The first is a copy of The Mystical Qabalah, by Dion Fortune. The Qabalah is the core symbolic system of the Western esoteric tradition as it has come down to us, and Fortune's book, despite certain flaws, is the best modern introduction to

it. Readings from this book will be assigned in future lessons. Some people feel that The Mystical Qabalah is outdated, because they find certain ideas antiquated or foolish. The major texts of Western esotericism, however, have been written over a period of about twenty-five centuries, while Fortune's book was written just a bit over half a century ago. Learning to see behind the veil of a text that is almost contemporary can be good practice for learning to see beyond the outward forms of texts that are much older, and written from points of view that are far more unfamiliar.

The second item is an appropriate Tarot deck. You will need to make sure you have a Tarot deck that is suitable to the course. For any esoteric work you're doing outside of this course, you're free to use any deck you prefer, but for the purposes of the correspondence course we ask you to use one of the following: the deck designed by A. E. Waite (often known as the Rider, or Rider-Waite, or Waite-Smith deck); the Universal Waite deck, a version of the above re-colored by Mary Hanson-Roberts; the Magickal Tarot; The Thoth Tarot; the Gareth Knight Tarot; the Servants of the Light Tarot; the Golden Dawn Tarot; or the Golden Dawn Ritual Tarot. The work in these lessons will require you to use a Tarot deck with the symbolism appropriate to the tradition we teach, and the decks listed here contain the proper symbolism in the proper form.

If you already own one of the decks listed above, and are comfortable working with it, you're set. If not, the most important thing to do is to find and use whichever one of these decks you feel the most comfortable with. Go to an occult bookstore that offers sample decks for the customer to look at and handle. Examine the appropriate decks one by one and select the deck that you would prefer to work with. If you dislike all of them, choose the one you dislike the least. If at all possible, you should use the same deck throughout the course, so keep this in mind when you make your choice.

Once you have your cards, you'll need to store them in some place where they will stay clean, dry, and undisturbed. If you want to wrap them in a cloth, or keep them in a bag or box, feel free, but a bureau drawer full of soft clothing will do just as well. It's also best not to allow another person to handle your cards, and you should never lend them to anyone.

The next step is to familiarize yourself with the cards. Even if you've used your deck for years, do the following exercise and try to look at your cards with new eyes. Each day, set aside five to ten minutes to spend working with your deck. Look at each card in turn, going through the deck as you would leaf through a photo album. Take a moment to absorb the image on

each card, and then go on to the next. Record the practice in your journal, including anything you may have noticed or learned. Don't go on to do divinations yet; that will come later. Simply look through your cards each day.

Drawing the Tree of Life

If you have had any previous contact with the Western esoteric tradition, you will probably have encountered the diagram known as the Tree of Life. The ten Sephiroth (the word is Hebrew, the traditional language of Qabalah, and means "numerations" or, more figuratively, "spheres") and the twenty-two paths of this diagram form a map or system of coordinates for the universe and the human soul alike -- that is, in the traditional terms, of the macrocosm (great world) and microcosm (little world).

Those who have had little contact with esoteric thought may find this idea unfamiliar at first. Perhaps one of the easiest ways to begin to grasp this idea of macrocosm and microcosm is to treat the Tree as a map of the structure of consciousness, since in one sense we can say that consciousness, or the "sphere of sensation," is like a magic mirror that reflects the world. But there is also the deeper sense in which this is true because consciousness is the stuff of both microcosm and macrocosm.

Those who have studied the subject in the past may recognize this diagram of the Tree of Life as one of the key borrowings from the Jewish esoteric and mystical tradition called Qabalah. Although this diagram, and much lore associated with it, was adapted outside the Jewish world during the Renaissance, it was not taken over because it was new and different, but because it was new and familiar: many of the concepts, images, and structures were already well known to non-Jewish esotericists; in fact, very similar maps of the structure of existence could already be found in eastern Asia by the time that they first became well known in Europe.

Nowadays the Tree of Life is used by a great many different schools and systems of magic; few, however, are aware of the geometric plan that underlies the diagram, and which derives from ancient traditions of sacred geometry and mathematics central to Western esotericism. The following exercise will help you to begin exploring this aspect of the tradition. To do it, you'll need paper, a ruler and compasses, and a pencil.

1. Draw vertical straight line on the paper (in diagram 1, this is the line ADGJK).
2. With the compasses set at any convenient width, placing the

sharp point near the top end of the line (A) to locate the center, draw a semicircle (BDC).

3. Keeping the compasses at the same width, move the center to the point where the semicircle crosses the vertical line (D). and draw a full circle around this point (circle ABEGFC).

4. Now repeat this operation twice more, tracing each new circle around the point where the before it crosses the central line (G and J). The result should look as shown in Diagram 1.

5. Finally, set the compasses to a smaller width, and trace a small circle around each point marked with a letter except point D. These circles are the spheres or Sephiroth (numerations) of the Tree of Life.

If you wish, you can go on to erase the larger circles, and then connect the Sephiroth with Paths, as shown in Diagram 2. For this lesson, however, this isn't necessary. The focus here is the geometrical relationship between the Sephiroth and the process by which they are generated.

These relationships and this process have an extensive symbolism, and a wealth of meaning. For this lesson, however, simply work on drawing the Tree in this way a number of times (at least five) without trying to work up any conceptual or verbal interpretation.

Exercises

One of the things that sets the Hermetic tradition most sharply apart from the mainstream Western religions, especially in their popular forms, is its insistence on practical work. In most faiths, it is enough merely to accept some set of propositions about the supernatural, and perhaps follow some rules about how to behave. This rather simple approach to the world beyond the realm of the senses probably has much to do with the popularity of these faiths, but it is not, ultimately, satisfactory. Learning to experience and work with the hidden side of reality is a skill, much as learning to deal with the world of meaning behind marks on paper is a skill. Few people who wanted to learn to ride a bicycle would be satisfied with a set of instructions that insisted that all a bicyclist needed to do is to lead a good life and believe in the existence of two-wheeled vehicles. Yet a very similar approach is taken by many people to issues that are among the most important that any human being can encounter.

Ethical questions do have an important place in this work, and

in lessons to come we will cover the main elements of the Hermetic approach to ethics. This does not involve learning lists of things to do and things not to do, however. Here, as elsewhere, the Hermetic approach takes as its basis personal experience and understanding. Our goal, when dealing with ethical issues, will be to challenge you to find out what right and wrong mean to you -- and then to put your discoveries to the test in your own life.

According to the Hermetic tradition, **faith and a rule-keeping morality are not enough.** Without personal experience of the hidden side of existence, in fact, they can be all but meaningless. Because of this, Hermetic teachings (and this course, which is an introduction to them) tend to focus mainly on ways of attaining and assessing such experience.

For this reason, we wish to begin right away with practical work. By doing this work, you will prepare yourself to deal more effectively with the theoretical aspects of the teaching that will be presented in the lessons that follow.

Opening and Closing

One very simple but very important practice, the omission of which has caused quite a bit of trouble, is the use of opening and closing gestures. In the Companions of the Stone, we use a simple set of gestures that can be performed easily under most circumstances without drawing undue attention.

The opening gesture begins with the hands placed together, palm to palm at about chest level, held at an angle of about 45 degrees. Next, the hands are opened, as though they were a book; the palms face you. Third, the hands are separated and turned slightly so that the palms are facing each other, at a distance of about ten inches. Your gaze should move past your hands into the space between and beyond them, and you should at this point formulate the intention that your inner faculties are opening.

The closing gesture has the same steps, but in the reverse order. The hands, held apart but palm to palm, are rotated until both palms face you. They are then brought together, edge to edge, palms still facing you, as though you were supporting an open book on your hands. Finally, they are snapped together, as though you were snapping a book shut, with the firm intention of closing down your inner faculties. This last movement has a percussive quality; if you can actually get your hands to clap, so much the better. The opening should be performed at the beginning of an exercise; the closing at the end.

Relaxation

Systematic relaxation is nowadays widely taught, and it is quite likely that you have already encountered it. It is a very useful skill to have, whether or not one has any esoteric interests. Furthermore, as with many skills, some mastery is better than none at all. The most important thing is to get started.

One method involves lying down on a flat, hard (or at least firm) surface, and trying to become as limp as possible. Then, beginning with one end or extremity of the body (your scalp, say, or the fingers of one hand), tighten one small segment of your musculature for a moment, until you are sure that it is in fact tight. Then release the tension. Repeat this systematically from that point through all the others, until you have done this with your whole body. Then go back and find the locations where tension has re-emerged, and go through the whole process again. This is almost never something one learns to do completely on the first try; do not worry about achieving complete relaxation at first. Just give this a few minutes.

When it is clear that you have become more relaxed, then go on to the sitting or standing exercise.

Another, very different, approach involves sitting in a comfortable, padded chair, or on a sofa, and taking three sharp breaths one after another and, on the last breath, allowing oneself to fall backwards. While the first method can eventually bring about a very complete relaxation, it can be time-consuming, especially if one has never done anything of the sort. The second method is more rough and ready, but produces a very satisfactory general relaxation.

People differ. You may wish to try both methods, or you may already have a method that works for you. Feel free to experiment, but do not forget the goal, which is to achieve a greater degree of relaxation, and greater awareness of the state of one's body.

Attention

Although esoteric systems are notorious for their complexity, all their elaborate apparatus is in an important sense unnecessary, or beside the point -- ideally, at least. It is in the space between the ideal and the actual that the systems flourish; it is the general (though not universal) human inability to do things the simple and direct way that makes them necessary.

The following exercise is a concrete example of that idea. From one perspective, it is one of the basic five-finger exercises of the esotericist. From another perspective (some would say an impossibly optimistic one!), it is the only thing one needs to know or do. All other means, exercises, teachings and devices are for those who cannot do this exercise as it should be done.

From a certain point of view, again, this exercise is the key to the development of the magical will. That description, though, can be either helpful or confusing depending on how one thinks of "will". Esoterically understood, will is not exactly a matter of effortful striving; nor is the cultivation of will a matter of building up some distended, flaming, throbbing mental faculty that imposes itself on all and sundry like some big, over-familiar dog. Developed will is effortless, simple, almost unconscious, and effective without needing a lot of fuss. The same thing is true of concentration. Effective concentration is not a matter of gripping one thing tightly, but of simply letting everything else go, as though you scooped up a handful of sand and rocks from the bottom of a stream, and let the water carry away everything but the one pebble you wanted.

This exercise should be done if possible at the same time every

day, or at the same time in your daily cycle -- for example, just after waking, or just before dinner. At the beginning of your work on this lesson, you should not do it for more than five minutes; by the end, you should be doing it for at least ten, but certainly not more than twenty, minutes at a time.

The exercise itself, as we have said, is simple: Stand, or sit, without moving, for the period of the exercise. Alternate standing and sitting: that is, on one day stand for the allotted time; on the next day sit; on the next day stand, and so on.

Before beginning the exercise, practice relaxation, either as your main relaxation practice for the day, or as a brief "warm-up". When you are doing the exercise, do not try to do nothing, or think nothing, or feel nothing -- but at the same time do not let yourself follow any thoughts or feelings that lead you away from being aware that you are sitting or standing (as the case may be). Instead, simply attend to the sensations of being in your physical body.

A good position for sitting -- it is, in fact, the usual position for seated meditation in this tradition -- is to sit in a straight-backed chair that allows you to have your feet flat on the floor, and your thighs parallel to the floor, so that your back is straight and your hands can rest on your thighs. Similarly, most people will find it best to stand with their feet parallel and as far apart as their hips or shoulders. You may find it useful to experiment with different variations on these positions, and to pay attention to the changes that such variations bring about. The experimentation, though, does not count as part of the exercise time unless you do not move for the whole allotted time you are trying out that particular position.

At this point, do not worry about whether you are relaxed or tense. If you find uncomfortable or intrusive tensions, you may relax them if you can do so without changing position. Don't, however, try to maintain a rigid immobility -- if nothing else, simply breathing will make your body move, and you will notice perhaps other movements as well.

Try always to bring your attention back to your body, without focusing on any particular part of it. Feel it as a unified whole, both in tactile (touch) and kinesthetic (the inner awareness of muscles and position) terms. Certain sensations may intrude: you may find yourself feeling discomfort, or restlessness, or itching, for example. Do not try to flinch away from these sensations, but attend to them calmly and easily, putting them in the context of all your other sensations.

Record the times and results of this exercise in your journal.

Daily Review

Every night, before you fall asleep, think back over the events of the day in reverse, as though you were watching a film running backwards. Start with the events that took place just before beginning the review, go to the events before those, and so on, back to what you did on waking up that morning. At this stage, do not try to judge or assess the things you remember. Just observe them. A reasonable amount of detail is appropriate, but the exercise should not take more than fifteen minutes or so. If you should fall asleep while doing the exercise, this is not a failure; your mind will have continued to go back over the day's activities while you slept.

In your magical record, note the approximate time at which you began this exercise, as well as how much of the day you reviewed before falling asleep.

The Magical Record

Throughout this course, you'll be keeping a magical record. This is a journal of your esoteric training, in which all of the practices and readings you do are noted down. Each entry should include the date, time, circumstances and results of your work, as well as any feelings or reactions you may have from doing it. Your magical record will become an important resource for your training; make a habit of writing up each piece of work as soon as possible after doing it.

The specific format is up to you, but using a standard format makes it much easier to keep such a record. Here is an example.

12 June 1993

6:30 AM: Practiced opening and closing. Vague effect, nothing definite.

7:15 AM: Went through Tarot deck after breakfast.

8:00 PM: Did the relaxation and attention exercises. Relaxation went fairly well. In the attention exercise, which I did standing, I wobbled all over the place and actually lost my balance at one point.

10:45 PM: Began review. Got as far as lunch, I think, then fell asleep.

To recapitulate, then, the activities for this lesson are as

follows:

First, to buy the necessary supplies.

Second, to become familiar with the process of drawing the Tree of Life.

Third, to begin examining the Tarot deck.

Fourth, to perform the relaxation and attention exercises daily.

Fifth, to perform the daily review on going to bed.

Sixth, to keep an account of your work in your magical record.

Diagram 1

Diagram 2

Test

Each of the lessons in this course will include a test, which should be sent in when you complete the lesson's work. This test will not be "graded" in the usual sense; rather, it is intended to help us track your progress through the course, and to provide us with information that we can use to help respond to your particular needs. Along with the test, we encourage you to write us concerning any questions or difficulties you may have with regard to the course work.

Since these tests are the only means we have to gauge your progress in this work, you should be aware that if we do not receive your responses to the tests, no further lessons will be mailed.

Your responses to this and all other tests should be typed or written legibly on one side of one or more sheets of white 8 1/2 x 11 paper. Please write your name and address on the upper right-hand corner of the first page.

Test for Lesson 1

- A. Copy out, from your magical record, your accounts of two practice sessions of the attention exercise.
- B. Write down any factors you may have noticed which help or hinder the various practices in this lesson.
- C. Construct a Tree of Life diagram using the method given in this lesson.

Please mail in your response to P.O. Box 95536, Seattle, WA 98145, and write Attn: Tutorial Committee on the envelope.