

Practice of Concentration

“Be well grounded in theory before you attempt to practice” is an alchemical maxim, and since our work in this Section is really a phase of alchemy, we shall do well to heed the admonition. Since the revival of interest in the Ageless Wisdom hundreds of books about concentration have been published, but it is surprising how vague many of them seem to be concerning a matter which is surely of great importance — just what concentration is, and what force it seeks to control.

Our first care shall be to get this clear. We shall begin with some specific examples, rather than with definitions, because we believe this method will make it easier for you to see the principle at work in the various instances.

Up in the Catskills a little stream flows down the mountain side. A child could wade from bank to bank without any difficulty. Here in New York the water from that same stream and others like it rushes from the nozzle of a fire-hose with enough force to knock a man down.

A chemist puts a solution in a retort and boils it. Thus he makes the solution stronger, and calls it a concentrated extract. In much the same way metals are said to be concentrated from ore. The ore is put into crucibles, heat is applied, and the pure metal is separated from the dross.

A general brings up battalion after battalion from various parts of his army and masses their strength against a single sector of the enemy’s line. The newspapers tell us that he has concentrated his forces at that point.

In each of the foregoing instances something has been made stronger or purer by massing its component parts in a smaller area than they occupied before. The soldiers are brought closer together. The metal scattered through the ore is fused into a single ingot. The chemist’s work of distillation crowds the molecules of his solution in close formation. The water pouring from the fire-hose combines the forces of several little streams.

Concentration, then, may be defined as the packing together of units of force. This definition includes all the examples we have given, because the units, whether they be metals, molecules, drops of water or soldiers, are all built up from the One Power which you studied in the first lesson of Section A. Every kind of concentration on the physical plane is a condensation of the force of electrons, a packing together of units of electro-magnetic force.

When this fact is taken into consideration, it becomes evident that some so-called definitions of concentration must be incorrect. It is impossible to “concentrate attention,” because attention is only a name for one of the mind’s ways of acting — the way, in fact, whereby we effect the particular kind of energy mass-formation which we are now beginning to study. The act of attention is the means which enables us to concentrate, but that act is not what we should regard as the subject of the operation, any more than a chemist’s crucible or retort is the thing worked upon in the examples mentioned above.

That we misuse language when we speak of concentrating our minds may not be so apparent, for it is true that our practice enables us to intensify the strength of what William James used to call “mind-stuff.” Yet we prefer not to run counter to accepted use of terms unless that use can be shown to be wholly wrong, and this cannot be said of the modern psychological use of the word “mind.” Modern psychologists do not think of that word as denoting a substance, nor do they regard mind as a special kind of energy. For them “mind” means the sum-total of the conscious states of an individual, and this is not what we shall be occupied with in our practice.

Yet there is no particular difficulty in finding out just what it is that we shall learn to concentrate. We have seen that all physical substances are modes of One Thing. So, too, are all other substances, or if you prefer, forces. The One Thing is the Astral Light of Eliphas Levi, the Prana of the Hindus, the Ruach of the Qabalists.

Swami Vivekananda, you remember, says that Prana is the energy manifested in all modes of force, from thought-force down to the lowest physical activities. When Qabalists say that the Rauch in man includes the powers of all the Sephiroth from Chesed to Yesod, they also identify Ruach with the force which takes form as thought. Some Qabalists attribute to the six Sephiroth just mentioned the following states of mind:

Sephirah	State of Mind
CHESED	Memory
GEBURAH	The Personal “Will”
TIPHARETH	Imagination
NETZACH	Desire
HOD	Reason
YESOD	The Subconscious

Thus Ruach is the Qabalistic designation for that in us which takes form as thought, for the specific activities of the One Thing which are classified as mental states. Ruach is thus the Hebrew equivalent of the Sanskrit term Chitta, which is variously translated as “the thinking principle,” “mind-stuff,” or “the psychic nature.”

The reason for comparing Ruach with Chitta thus early in our study is that one of the best text-books on the practice of concentration is a Hindu work, the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. Here are three translations of the second sentence in that book:

a. Concentration is the hindering of the modifications of the thinking principle. b. Yoga is restraining the mind-stuff (Chitta) from taking various forms (Vrittis). c. Union, spiritual consciousness, is gained through control of the versatile psychic nature.

The first version is from an old edition of the Sutras, now out of print, published in Bombay by the Theosophical Society. The second is that of the Swami Vivekananda. The third is that of Charles Johnston, whose translation of Patanjali we prefer to either of the others. In this particular instance, however, “control” seems to be a weaker verb than “hindering” or “restraint,” because it does not make quite so evident the fact that the thinking principle is governed by right use of the principle of limitation, by checking and circumscribing its activity.

Precisely this limitation or checking is what always accomplishes any sort of concentration. Whenever you decrease the area wherein some force operates you increase the intensity and purity of that force. Sunlight passing through a window gives a pleasant sensation of warmth. Pack the

same light-rays together by passing them through a convex lens, and they will burn your hand. In like manner, we intensify the force of the Ruach by limiting the range of its activity.

You have learned something about the Qabalistic meaning of the noun רוח, Ruach in The First Year Course. Now that we know this term designates what we are going to concentrate, we need to make ourselves thoroughly acquainted with its esoteric interpretation.

The first letter, ך, was once a crude picture of the human face which symbolized the synthesis of the five senses, because the head and face contain organs of every sense. The letter also refers to the brain-centers in the front part of the head, these being the organs of mental activity relating particularly to the functions of the conscious, or objective, mind. Thus the first letter of Ruach indicates that this term designates a force which is directly connected with sensation and with waking consciousness.

Among the heavenly bodies the letter ך corresponds to the sun. It is the symbol of solar light and heat, the sign of the fundamental mode in which the cosmic life-force becomes available for human use.

The value of knowing this is that it will make all our exercises in concentration more definite. We shall always feel that we are learning how to direct a real force, and we shall think of that force as being one with whose effects we have been familiar all of our lives. What we are setting out to control is not a nebulous abstraction, neither is it some new, strange, uncanny power hidden away somewhere within us. It is sunshine, the radiant energy of the nucleus of this world system. On this account the basic test of alchemy, The Emerald Table, calls the Great Work the "Operation of the Sun."

We are sadly mistaken if we think that this force is either good or evil. Furthermore, skill in concentration will not make us good, neither will it make us bad. Many writers on the subject, Patanjali among them, complicate the matter by injecting ethical considerations into their books. The truth is that one may gain great skill in the art of controlling the mental modifications of the Astral Light and still be a very selfish, even a criminal, person. There is no mysterious law which keeps a bad man from learning how to concentrate; any more than there is a law which prevents him from

learning how to wire a house for electric light. The solar force is not benefic nor malefic in itself. The same sunlight which makes plants grow in a garden kills a man lost in the desert.

Hence Qabalists assign a pair of opposites to the letter ך – ZRO (=277), fruitfulness, seed, sperm, and ShMMH (=385), devastation, desolation, sterility. Reduce the values of these words, and you will see that the first reduction is 16 and the final reduction 7. This means that fruitfulness and desolation are identical except in outward aspect. They are opposite but complementary aspects of a single cause-in-action.

Finally, the path of the letter ך is that of the Collective Intelligence. This is the path of the synthesis of the planetary light-rays in solar force. The adjective “collective” is KLLI (90), and you will do well to give considerable thought to the meanings suggested by the letter-sequence of this word.

Note that its numeration, 90, identifies it with the letter Tzaddi, to which the faculty of meditation is assigned. Lack of space forbids any attempt to explain these details, even if the rule in teaching occultism did not require that the pupil must be left to find out as much as possible for himself. Here are the sign-posts. Your part is to find out where they lead.

Summing up all this (and it is just the beginning of what might be written concerning the letter ך), we find that the first letter of the Hebrew name for the thinking principle indicates that this force is:

1. The particular modification of the cosmic life-force which brain-cells transform into sensations and their interpretation by the waking consciousness;
2. A physical force with which we are all familiar, none other than sunlight;
3. A force which is neither good nor evil, promoting fruitfulness and growth, or causing devastation and sterility according to the way in which it is used;
4. A force which is the synthesis of all forces, even as Prana is said by Swami Vivekananda to be “the sum-total of all cosmic energies.”

Coming now to the second letter of Ruach, which is ך, we learn from its name, Nail, that Ruach must be supposed to include the connective or conjunctive quality suggested by the nail symbol. We must also remember that the old pictograph represented a hook on which something is hung. Thus in addition to the ideas about Ruach derived from the letter ך, we learn from ך that the thinking principle whose modifications we are going to limit is a power which joins something together, as nails join boards, and a power which holds something suspended, as a hook holds an overcoat.

This is perfectly correct, because Ruach is the connecting medium between all expressions of the Life-Power. The mistake we are continually making is the supposition that the thinking principle is something inside of us, in our skulls, when in reality it is a force flowing through us which at the same time connects us with every other mode of existence, with stars and stones as truly as with men and animals.

Ruach is also like the hook which holds up your overcoat because it is the support of personality. Your whole personal life is a combination of mental states preceding from the activity of this thinking principle.

The function assigned by Qabalists to the letter ך is hearing, (415) שמעה. By metathesis the same letters spell מעשה, work, action, employment, the function assigned to Lamed. If you will refer to the Tarot card corresponding to ך, you will see that the Hierophant is instructing two kneeling figures. He represents the voice of the Higher Self, which instructs both the conscious and subconscious modes of human mentality when they keep silence and listen.

In order to enter that silence, in order to become aware of the bond existing between ourselves and the rest of the cosmos, in order to be instructed in the principles of the Great Work, we must learn to listen; and as one cannot listen attentively at the same time that he is talking, so is it impossible to hear the Inner Voice until the unvoiced speech of personal thinking is silenced.

This is the control of the psychic nature which we seek when we practice concentration. The limitation we impose on the thinking principle is the limitation of silence. To this fact the last of the four ancient occult maxims (BE SILENT) refers, as well as to control of the spoken word.

Observe that there is a subtle Qabalistic correspondence between the first two letters of RVCh, Ruach. ך is the sign of the sun. ך has a particular correspondence to the sixth Sephirah, TIPHARETH, the sphere of the sun. Furthermore, as the letter of יהוה which is attributed to Microprosopus (the Lesser Countenance, or SON, including the Sephiroth from Chesed to Yesod), ך is itself a symbol of the psychic nature, Ruach, inasmuch as Ruach comprises these same six Sephiroth, as was said at the beginning of this lesson.

We are well aware that these intricacies of the Qabalah are rather terrifying at first, but we cannot too earnestly counsel you to study them until you have really made them your own. This one example of the way in which many details of the Secret Wisdom may be summed up by a single letter is itself an exercise in concentration. When the sight or thought of ך makes you think of all that we have written in the last two pages, you will have made a step in the direction of that unification of consciousness which is the real object of this work. As all things are from One on the Path of Descent, so all things are absorbed into that One as we progress along the Path of Return. Hence, you see, these details of correspondence and cross-correspondence are by no means so far removed from the main subject of these lessons as may appear at a first reading. When you set yourself to incorporating them into your brain-cells, instead of being content to remember that they are written down somewhere in these lessons, you are actually practicing concentration.

On, the final letter of Ruach, means, as you know, a field or a fence. The primitive pictograph represented a hedge enclosing a field set apart for cultivation. This is a direct reference to the underlying principle of limitation which is applied in every concentration exercise.

The function assigned to ך is speech, and speech is the externalization of mental states through the medium of sound. Thus mastery of words plays a prominent part in exercises for developing skill in concentration. This mastery begins in very simple ways. He who would become adept in concentration must think of language as a field to be cultivated with utmost care. He must learn to say what he means, and must be careful to mean what he says.

Here in America this advice is sadly needed. Nowhere in the world is language more abused. One need not be a pedant or a precisionist in order to use speech aright; but whoever wishes to succeed in practical occultism must address himself to the study of the dictionary. The spectacle of an aspirant sitting down to concentrate on the tip of his nose when his daily misuse of language makes two-thirds of his thought almost unintelligible is one which brings a weary smile to the lips of Those who Know. It may not seem to be “very occult” to look up words in a dictionary, but when one realizes that every misused word weakens the force of one’s thinking, when one knows that slipshod speech wastes mental force, the desirability of the dictionary habit becomes almost painfully evident.

Accuracy and variety in the use of ordinary words is but a preliminary to the mastery of speech aimed at by occultism. Besides the sound combinations defined in our lexicons there are special words which are truly magical. One such is the Tetragrammaton, יהוה. Another is the ancient mystery name, IAO. Yet another is the noun L.V.X. The Hindus have many of these words of power, and they have a great number of books describing methods for using such words in concentration. This science is called mantrayoga. Variations of it are practiced throughout the Orient by devotees of different faiths. The Sufis, Mohammedan mystics, often use the sentence Hua allahu alazi lailaha Hua, “He is God, and there is no other God than He,” for this purpose, and the spread of the Theosophical movement has made Western occult students familiar with Aum Mani Padmi Hum, “O the Jewel in the Lotus.”

The books of the practical Qabalah contain a great deal of information along the same lines. It was to Moses’ proficiency in mantrayoga that St. Stephen referred when he said the great lawgiver was “mighty in words and deeds.” The Greek verb λέγει, “he speaks”, is a technical mystery-term identical with the Sanskrit mantra.

Moses, of course, received his knowledge of this subject in the course of his initiation into the Egyptian mysteries. St. Stephen, indeed, implied as much in the passage just quoted, for he said this, “Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians.” Egyptian magic abounds in references to the occult use of sound. Most Egyptologists try to explain the Egyptian use of “words of power” as being a superstition rooted in the false belief that there is a mysterious connection between a man’s name and his

personality, so that there must be a connection between the secret name of a god and his powers. Without entering into any discussion as to whether or not the said belief is altogether without foundation in fact, let us say that when rightly pronounced, the Egyptian chekau, “words of power,” are just as effective as ever they were.

Not a few Hebrew divine names are simply rearrangements of Egyptian originals. Among them is this very word Ruach which we are studying now. The ך in רוח is pronounced almost like O, and thus רוח is simply a metathesis of the Egyptian god-name of the god Horus, and there is a close correspondence between esoteric Egyptian conceptions of this god and the Qabalistic teaching concerning Ruach.

Among the Hebrew words of power are the divine and angelic names attributed to the Sephiroth. The full effect of these words is not secured unless they be intoned according to the musical cadences represented by the sequence of the letters. The name Ehieh, for example, gives the tonal sequence:

(Letters)	א	ה	י	ה
	A	H	I	H
(Notes)	E	C	F	C

Keys to the intonation of these names will be given in the lessons to come. The fundamentals will be found in the lesson on color and sound in The First Year Course. Let us warn you, however, against rash experimentation with these names. When you begin the practical exercises of this section you will have ample opportunity to find out for yourself that these are really “words of power.” Attempts at unguided pioneering in this field of experimentation will be likely to teach you by bitter experience that the proverb about a little knowledge is only too true. It is unwise to be in too much of a hurry to utilize the high-tension currents of the Astral Light.

The letter Ch is also attributed to the path named Intelligence of the House of Influence (867=) בית השפּע. “Thence are drawn the arcana and the concealed meanings which repose in the shadow thereof,” says the Qabalistic commentary. Whenever a technical term employed by the Sages of Israel includes the letter ח we may know that the word has some

reference to drawing forth knowledge hidden in the subconscious, to the elucidation of mysteries, to the bringing to concealed meanings to the surface.

“Intelligence of the House of Influence” means “Consciousness of that wherein influence dwells.” The word “influence suggests flowing force, or a current of energy which fills a receptacle. Recall in this connection the words of Eliphas Levi concerning the Astral Light. “We are, in fact, saturated with this light and continually project it to make room for more: by this projection the personal atmosphere is created.” The state of consciousness represented by this path is also that in which we realize that every mode of existence is but a temporary abode of flowing forces.

To get at the deeper meaning of the letter $\aleph$, it will be well to study the seventh major trump of the Tarot. You may derive some benefit, also, from laying out the Tarot Keys corresponding to the letters of בית השפע. Simply place the cards in this order on a table, and see if they evoke any impressions from your inner consciousness. Do not try to make them tell you something. Let no sense of strain enter into this experiment. Simply look at the cards and wait. After a while, when you have quieted your thoughts a little, hints as to the hidden meaning of the path of $\aleph$ will begin to come to you. Note them down. Even when you do not seem to succeed very well in your efforts to make these bits of personal revelation articulate, you will find that they help you more than anything you can get from books or teachers.

We may now sum up all that we have learned about the Hebrew name for the thinking principle as follows:

1. Sunlight transformed by the brain into sensations, emotions and thoughts is the cause of the operation of this principle ($\aleph$).
2. This principle is the connecting medium which joins every human being to all the other things and creatures in the universe ($\aleph$).
3. It is a power which can be modified by means of mental imagery, and especially by mental imagery expressed in sound-vibrations ($\aleph$).

When we take these facts into consideration it becomes evident that whatever success we have in learning how to concentrate must have far-reaching consequences. The force we shall be working with does not belong to us. It is not locked up in our skulls, or coiled up like a snake at the base of our spines (even though a certain expression of this force is correctly, if somewhat fantastically, described in Hindu books as a fiery serpent coiled in the lowest center of the sympathetic nervous system.) In concentration we are utilizing the power which sends worlds whirling through space, the power which lights our homes, the power which drives trains through the subways, the power which endows human speech, as Eliphas Levi says, with a universal reverberation and success. We are using electricity, and the only reason we prefer to call in Ruach is that “electricity” means literally “the force generated by rubbing amber,” while רוח, besides being an older term, is one skillfully devised by its initiated inventors for the purpose of giving clues to the higher phases of the operation of this subtle force.

In working with such a force as this we need to use care. When we were busy putting on the finishing touches at our New York office, the janitor, with the best intentions in the world, tried to play electrician. We had a desk light which needed a longer cord in order to connect it with a wall-socket in another room. George knew the theory of wiring well enough, but he chose the wrong kind of a plug. When he tried to make the connection the result was a short-circuit which blew out the main fuse in the basement, darkened the building from top to bottom, kept George from getting his supper that evening, evoked an explosion of sulphurous comment from the overworked electrician sent out by the lighting company, and cost me two dollars to calm that person’s ruffled scientific sensibilities. The moral of this tale is: Don’t short-circuit the current we have established by forming this group of students.

Some readers of these pages may have advanced to a point far beyond the elementary instruction which will be given in this section. If they have, they will understand the force of this warning and will be the first to heed it. For they will realize that the Builders of the Adytum are making, link by link, what Levi calls the Magic Chain. We are not particularly fond of this

image, because it suggests bondage. What we are doing is rather more like connecting up the units of a living electric circuit. Whatever injures one of us puts more or less strain upon the rest.

No man lives unto himself. He who enters a group of students like this one needs particularly to remember this old truth. Of this you may be sure, if you are impatient to get on, your feeling is an infallible indication that you have need to go slowly. Remember that a magician should work as if he had all eternity in which to finish his operation. He should work that way because the emotional mood involved is in harmony with a fact of which we need continually to remind ourselves. Each of us is really immortal, and time does not bind immortals. We have all the time there is, and all eternity besides. We can well afford to make good each step as we go along. We cannot afford to do anything else. Thus we shall grow easily and almost imperceptibly, but surely, out of the seeming limitations of our present state of consciousness into the freedom of the consciousness beyond thought which is the goal of our work.

In the next lesson we shall explain the first steps in the special concentration exercises which have been prepared for the students in this section. Before that lesson, you will do well to make sure that the foundation you received in The First Year Course has been properly laid.

Your first care should be to find out whether you really know the Tree of Life. Can you draw it from memory? Can you place all the paths correctly, with their numbers, names and letters? Do you know the attributions to each letter? If not, you need to get busy right away. For the exercises you will have to do will not permit you to depend upon the lessons, or upon notes of any kind. If we say, "Picture the 27th Path," you don't want to be obliged to go through the whole Tree of Life until you come to it. You must know instantly that this is the path of Mars, that its name is Active or Exciting Intelligence, that the corresponding Hebrew letters of Peh, that its color is red, its note C, and its Tarot Key THE TOWER. The picture of THE TOWER should flash before your mental gaze like a picture thrown on a screen, unless you happen to be one of those people whose auditory images are stronger than their visual ones. If so, you will probably hear an inner voice describing the card in detail.

The point is that you should have the impression of the Tarot Key and of all that goes with it, all at once, and as a whole, just as when you see a red rose you do not get impressions piecemeal, but recognize the flower at a glance.

Provide yourself with a notebook in which to record the details of your experiments. We shall tell you in the next lesson just how to keep this record, and it should be understood now that not a little depends upon whether you attend to this important matter exactly as directed.

You will also need a string of wooden beads, and for certain symbolic reasons, the number of the beads should be 108. Get the beads and the string, which should be a strong one, and thread them yourself. On no account let anybody else do this for you, and say nothing to anybody about what you are doing, unless that person is one when you know to be a member of this class. Do not even show your beads to anybody, or leave them lying around where they will excite comment. String the beads rather loosely, in twelve groups of nine, with a good-sized knot between each group. Be sure to get wooden beads, and let them be plain ones, preferably black or dark indigo. (The color refers to the limiting power of Saturn, which is employed in all concentration exercises.)

All this will be more or less trouble. It is meant to be. In these days we have to devise new tests to take the place of those imposed in the older forms of initiation, and if you do not know by this time that the work of the Builders is a form of initiation you ought to stick a pin in yourself to find out whether you are really awake. If we do not explain the reasons for this particular set of directions, it is because we think most of the students in this section will be able to divine them. Those who aren't need practice in divination.

This string of beads is not for the purpose of helping you to count vain repetitions. It is intended to enable you to keep an accurate record of the "breaks" in your concentration practice. A "break" is what happens when attention wanders from the object selected for concentration. In the early stages of your practice you will find that the breaks will take you several times around the string. The day that you go just once around will be, as we used to say in a certain "very occult" society, "a marked one in your career." It will not be necessary for you to review the whole Tree of Life before the next lesson. Our work this year begins in Malkuth, and takes us upward

through the Tree. In the next lesson you will find specific exercises relating to the 32nd, 30th and 31st paths, and it may be well for you to confine your review work to those paths, their attributions, and the corresponding Tarot Keys.

We must not omit to say that it is not the object of this course of ten lessons to make you an adept in concentration at the end of ten weeks. In that time we hope to be able to explain something of the technique, and we expect that your preliminary experiments in this work will make some noticeable changes in your states of consciousness before the ten weeks are up. But it would be very unfair for us not to make it perfectly clear that this course is intended simply to tell you how to do something which will require months of practice before you gain any unusual degree of skill, and years of hard work before you attain to the higher grades of adeptship in concentration and meditation.

These instructions are given now, so that you may be able to enter into the practical work of the Builders as intelligently as possible. In some senses, every phase of that work is an exercise in concentration and meditation. And though the curriculum of the Builders of the Adytum is designed to be completed in four years, it must not be supposed that at the end of that time you will have become a perfect Yogi. What we do hope to bring about in the minds of our affiliates is an intelligent understanding of the principles and methods of the Ageless Wisdom, a synthesis of the esoteric doctrines and practices of the Orient and the Occident.

How soon any affiliate will develop the higher aspects of consciousness, how soon he will begin to exercise the powers of one who knows by the fruits of experimentation that he is truly “the depository of the power of God,” — these are questions which nobody can answer.

The most that we can do is to lay before you the specifications of the work. Whether you build quickly or slowly, well or ill, depends wholly upon yourself. It depends a good deal, too, upon the accuracy with which you follow these instructions, and upon the degree of patience that you exercise.

Not to frighten you, but to make you realize that you are beginning something which is difficult, and often discouraging, let me remind you that one of the Upanishads says that he who would succeed in controlling the mental phases of the Life-Power must have as much patience as would be required to dip up the ocean, drop by drop, with a blade of grass.