

The Great Arcanum

This is what Eliphas Levi says concerning the Great Arcanum:

“There exists a principle and a rigorous formula which is the Great Arcanum. Let the wise man seek it not, for he has already found it; let the vulgar seek for ever, they will never attain it. This universal arcanum, the crowning and eternal secret of supreme initiation, is represented in the Tarot by a young and naked girl who only touches the earth with one foot, who holds a magnetic rod in each hand, and appears to be running inside a crown which is supported by an angel, an eagle, a bull, and a lion. This figure is fundamentally analogous to the cherub of Ezekiel, and to the Indian symbol of Addhanari, corresponding to the Adonai of the prophet just mentioned. The comprehension of this figure is the key of all the occult sciences. The Great Magical Secret is represented by the lamp and poniard of Psyche, the apple of Eve, the fire stolen from heaven by Prometheus, and the burning sceptre of Lucifer, but also by the Cross of the Redeemer. It is the ring of Gyges, the Golden Fleece, the allegorical picture of Cebos, which is its most audacious demonstration. It is also represented by the lingam, for the Great Arcanum is connected with the mystery of universal generation, and by the serpent pierced with an arrow, with formed the seal of Cagliostro.

“The secret is the kingdom of the sage, the crown of the initiate, whom it renders the master of gold and of light, which are fundamentally the same thing. By its means he solves the problem of the quadrature of the circle, directs the perpetual motion, and possesses the philosopher’s stone. This great and indincible arcanum was never referred to even among adepts; it is essentially unexplainable in its nature, and is destruction both to those who divine it and those who reveal it.

“The Great Magical Secret is the secret of the direction of the Great Magical Agent; it depends upon an incommunicable axiom, and on an instrument which is the supreme and unique Athanor of the Hermetists of the highest grade. When the adepts in alchemy speak of a great and unique Athanor of which all can make use, which is within the grasp of all, which all men possess without knowing it, they allude to the philosophical and moral alchemy. A strong and resolute will can arrive in a short time at absolute independence, and we all possess the Athanor, the chemical instrument, by which that which is ethereal is separated from that which is gross, and the fixed is divided from the volatile. This instrument, complete as the world, and precise as mathematics themselves, is designated by the sages under the emblem of the Pentagram, the body of man and the absolute sign of human intelligence. The incommunicable axiom is kabbalistically enclosed in the four letters of the Tetragram, arranged in the following manner: in the letters of the words AZOTH and INRI kabbalistically written, and in the monogram of Christ as it is embroidered on the labarum, which Postel the Kabbalist interprets by the word Rota, from which the adepts have formed their Tarot.

“To understand the alternative or simultaneous proportion of the forces which produce equilibrium is to possess the first principle of the Great Magic Arcanum, which constitutes true human divinity. It is the science of fire; everywhere we find the enchanter who pierces the lion and leads the serpents – the lion is the celestial fire, and the serpents are the magnetic and electrical currents of the earth. It is to this great secret of the Magi that we must refer all the marvels of Hermetic Magic, which still declares in its traditions that the arcanum of the magnum opus consists in the government of fire.”

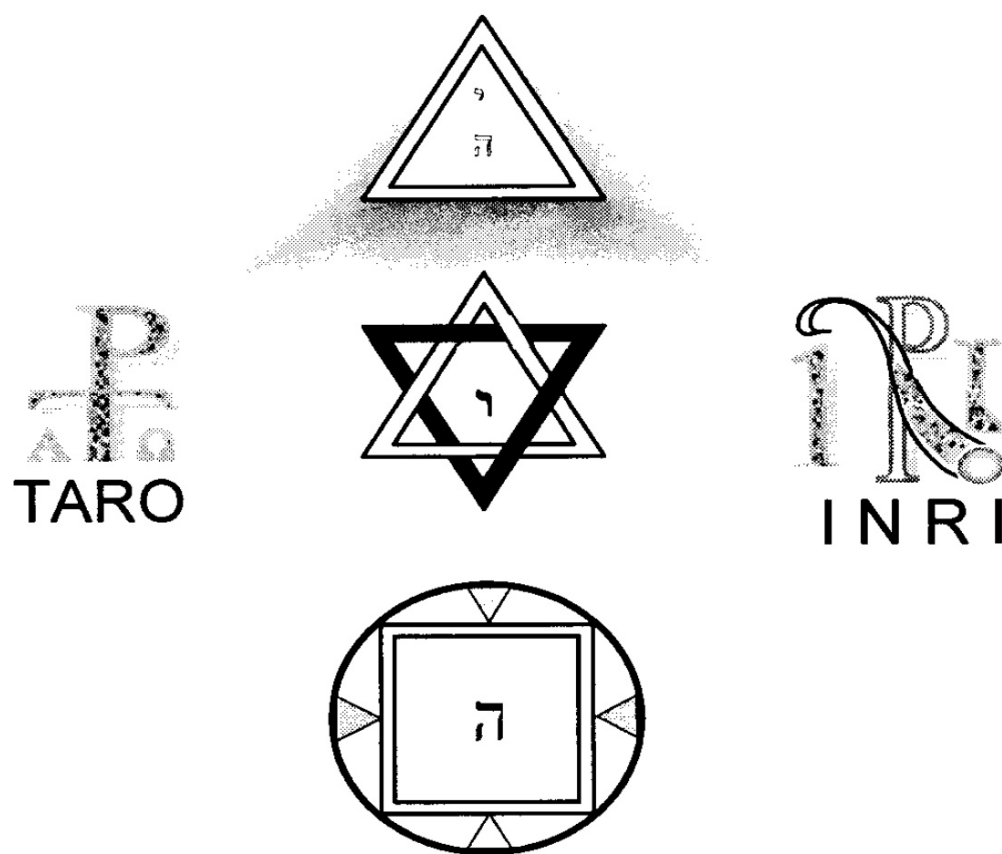


Figure 8A

Thus far Eliphas Levi, and at first reading it may seem to you that he has left nothing to say. Has he not declared that the Great Arcanum is incommunicable – that it is destruction for him who divines or reveals it? How then may we dare to venture in explaining it?

Well, you have had occasion before this to learn that our French magus, writing for a world that he rightly judged as having few who would in his day understand him, veiled his actual meaning in subtleties of language, after the fashion of adepts in every age. We do not pretend to be able to tell you the Great Arcanum, but we can do something in the way of lifting Levi's veil of words, and perhaps a little something, too, to bring you a step or two nearer to the discovery of the Great Secret.

First of all, the Great Arcanum is twofold. It is a principle, and it is also a formula. A principle is a source, or something from which other things proceed. In physics it is a fundamental energy or substance. In metaphysics it is a fundamental truth or postulate. The Great Arcanum is a principle in both senses. It is an actual or real energy. It is also a fundamental, archetypal idea.

This idea, wherein real energy or working power resides, exists, or comes into manifestation, as a formula. A formula is a fixed, prescribed, arranged method by which something is said or done. And when Levi says the Great Arcanum is a “rigorous formula” he is referring to the exactitude and severity of the order of manifestation by means of which the power of the Originating Idea or Principle comes into manifestation, or exists.

The wise man has no need of seeking it, for the wise man, as Levi uses the term, is one who has found this principle and formula. The vulgar, that is, the general run of human beings in any age, cannot find it, because their seeking is invariable in the wrong place. Moreover, even if they should happen to look in the right direction, it remains true that they would not attain it. For it is absolutely true that no man ever attains this secret, because he already possesses it. What happens is that its meaning dawns upon him. Aladdin, says the Eastern tale, had the magic lamp for some days before he learned its secret. And that story of the Wonderful Lamp is only another variation of the allegory of the Great Arcanum, to be added to those enumerated by Levi in our quotation.

When he describes the 21st Key of the Tarot as a glyph of the Great Arcanum, Levi is perfectly correct, but he might have chosen any of the major trumps for the same purpose, because each of them has this “crowning and eternal secret of supreme initiation” for its central theme. A little farther on in this lesson we shall consider another of the major trumps from this point-of-view. But let us continue with our interpretation of Levi.

“This secret is the kingdom of the sage,” our Qabalist tells us, “the crown of the initiate.” Look at your diagram of the Tree of Life. The “King” is MLK, Melek, the Divine Name of Malkuth. The “crown” is Kether. And the Great Arcanum has to do with the identity of the two Sephiroth, indicated by the doctrine that “Malkuth is in Kether, and Kether is in Malkuth.” But the

kinghood of the sage who possesses the great Arcanum is more than this metaphysical realization of the identity between the opposite extremes of the Tree of Life. It is a practical secret, which makes the true sage really dominant in his world, which makes its conditions subject to the Will expressed in all his thoughts and words and acts. Here we deal with no figure of speech at all. Whoever has made sufficient progress in the study of occult science to be able to understand this lesson knows that the affairs of this world are truly directed by an “invisible government.” Those who sit in the high places of external authority are only so many puppets, working out (in ways which often puzzle, and often, too, distress us) the details of the Cosmic Plan. The invisible hierarchy of adepts and masters are the real governors of this plane and its affairs, and their rule is through the application of the principle and formula with which we are not concerned.

Literally, too, the sages are masters of gold and light. (Notice, too, how Levi anticipated modern scientific ideas about matter.) They have at their command practically limitless resources, and nothing could be farther from the truth than the idea that the poorer a man is the better occultist he is. The wise, to be sure are not burdened with a weight of personal possessions, but no person at all familiar with the innumerable him, as to the workings of the occult hierarchy, which are to be found here and there in the literature which they have inspired or sponsored, can doubt that they always have enough actual material wealth to carry out any undertaking with which they are concerned.

Yet, because Levi’s writing conforms to the occult rule of “a meaning within a meaning” it may also be understood to refer to the mastery of the powers which Qabalah associates with Tiphareth, the sphere of the sun or alchemical gold. Thus we may know that knowledge of the Great Magical Secret makes the sages masters of the Intelligence of the Mediating Influence. That particular kind of intelligence is identified in Qabalistic psychology as Imagination, and Tiphareth, as the seat of Imagination, is called BN, Ben, the Son. For imagination is actually the personal expression of the original creative power of the One Life, and in nothing is the truth that man is the son of God so perfectly demonstrated as in the fact that the dominant images in each human mind set the pattern for the world in which each man lives.

Levi goes on to tell us that the Great Magical Secret enables its possessor to solve the problem of the quadrature of the circle. He does not refer to the mathematical problem. What he means is the very same thing that is meant by the words of the Lord's Prayer, "as in heaven, so on earth." For the symbol of heaven, or the world of archetypal ideas, is the circle, and the square is the symbol of the physical world wherein those ideas are actualized. This metaphysical "squaring of the circle" is also what is symbolized by the square and compass of the Masonic fraternity. It is the bringing into actual, concrete expression to the physical plane of the hidden potencies of the archetypal world.

The accomplishment of this result is the Great Work, and it is rightly described as the direction of the perpetual motion. Read Levi's words carefully and you will see that he says nothing whatever to justify the belief that one can make a perpetual motion machine. He only declares that the sage 'directs the perpetual motion,' the eternal self-activity of the Limitless Life.

Finally, he tells us that the sage who knows the Great Secret "possesses the philosopher's stone." We have referred to this 'stone' in other lessons. You will remember that it is named ABN, Ehben, in Hebrew. Jesus, who spoke Aramaic, said, "What is this then that is written, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner?" Thus he quoted from Psalm 118: 22, and went on to identify this stone with the stone of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, mentioned in Daniel 2:35.

The "builders" rejected the stone because they were the line of theologians who developed the monotheism of Israel, with its conception of a far-away God. But the very word אבן is itself a glyph for the Great Arcanum. This it is because it combines in one word the names אב, Father, and בן, Son. And the most open and audacious declaration of the Great Arcanum ever given, in spite of what Levi says about the allegorical picture of Cebes, is to be found in three sentences of Jesus: "I and the Father are one. He who hath seen me hath seen the Father. The things that I do shall ye do also, and greater things shall ye do, because I go unto the Father."

Yet even these words cannot reveal the Great Secret to any man. Rather must their meaning be forever veiled from those who have not come into possession of that Arcanum. For this is truly an indicible arcanum.

“Indicible” and “incommunicable” must be understood in their most literal sense in this connection. The secret is one that cannot be told. Its nature is such that it cannot possibly be imparted. It is not that people know and will or dare not tell. It is that those who know find no means for transmitting their knowledge. And Levi is particularly explicit upon this point.

He says, furthermore, that the Great Arcanum is destruction both to those who divine it and those who reveal it. Here is an echo of Jesus’ teaching about the Stone. Jesus declared, ‘Whosoever shall fall upon that stone shall be broken; but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder.’ We would have you ponder long and earnestly upon these words. Yet ponder them without fear. True it is that the Great Secret is “destruction.” And in this aspect it is symbolized by the 16th major trump of the Tarot. But not only is it the destruction of all false notions of personality. In itself, essentially, it is a secret of destruction, of the dissolution of forms, of the disintegration of matter. And on this account the Hindu teaching which so wonderfully parallels the Western occultism gives us to understand that the final liberation of the Yogi is brought about by the destruction or transforming aspect of the Life-Power personified as Shiva.

We do not believe that Levi’s remarks about the Athanor will give readers of these pages very much trouble. His meaning is plain. The Athanor, or chemical instrument, is the human body. This is the tool wherewith we are able to demonstrate our knowledge of the Great Arcanum. Hence the Ageless Wisdom, teaching reincarnation, declares that its purpose is liberation. We come into bodies again and again until at last we learn the secret which makes their rebirth needless. How foolish, then, to neglect or misuse our bodies! How impossible to find liberation until we learn that the body is indispensable thereto it is ridiculous to suppose that the goal is to become bodyless, especially when we remember the plain teaching which pervades the New Testament! Liberation from the necessity for rebirth is attained when one is so perfectly adapted to cosmic law that one has learned how to make an indestructible body. The last enemy to be overcome is death we are told, and if this means anything, it means that the completion of the Great Work brings a man into the control of natural forces that he is the master of the occult forces of disintegration which now bring his earthly body to the grave.

The diagram which we reproduce from Levi needs explanation for students of these pages. It is plainly derived from the Tree of Life. The white triangle top, enclosing the letters YOD and HEH, refers to the supernal Triad. The Hexagram in the middle indicates six Sephiroth which are referred to the VAU of IHVH and the circle at the bottom, enclosing a square, is Malkuth, מלכות, its meaning is the same meaning which is repeated over again in the Tree of Life. That is: Every apparent separate aspect of the One Life includes all the rest.

Consciousness of this, as distinguished from the outline conveyed by the words, is the Great Arcanum. Consciousness cannot be communicated. It seems, indeed to be preposterous to the great majority of human beings, and even you, who have spent much time ripening yourself, may find more of sound than of sense in the words.

We have said that every major trump symbolizes an aspect of this consciousness, so that Levi is correct in describing the 21st Key as a synthesis of the Great Arcanum. But there is another trump which to us has had particular significance from this point-of-view because it is connected with the path on the Tree of Life named “Intelligence of the Secret of All Spiritual Activities.”

The Hebrew name for this path, סוד הפעולות has been dealt with in other lessons, but there are other aspects of its meaning with which we shall now deal. It will be well for you to reread, before going on with this lesson what has been written concerning הפעולות in Lesson 6 of Section C.

In that lesson we have said that the Secret of All Spiritual Activities is the secret of the Word made flesh. The eighth Tarot Key shows the nature of the law whereby this comes to pass. The Word or Thought, formulated by the intellect, or self-consciousness, passes into the subconscious plans of mental activity, and this results in a modification of the subconsciousness, represented in the 8th Key by the sign of the Holy Spirit (∞) over the head of the woman.

One of the essential meanings of that sign is that the various pairs of opposites in the illusive world of actuality which affects our senses are all produced by a single cause. In other words, this sign stands for the idea that the manifested universe is the expression of One Power, which produces

opposite forms of expression. It is the contradiction of the various dualistic interpretations which see the world as something developed from, or the playground of, two contending forces.

The intellectual perception of the unity of causation is the beginning of the gradual change in consciousness which leads from bondage to freedom. So long as we are enmeshed in the net of dualism (however subtly stated) we are in bondage to the pairs of opposites. But when we perceive clearly that whatever happens is the outworking of the potentialities of a single cause, we have taken the first step on the Way to Freedom.

The noun דבר, Word, which corresponds by Gematria to הפעולות, begins with the letter Daleth, symbol of Venus, and so referable to the emotional nature, since the sphere of Venus is Netzach, the sphere of Desire. This is important, as showing that the beginning of every Word or Thought is a feeling.

“As below, so above.” The Creative Logos, the Word or Thought which calls the cosmos into existence must begin as feeling also. Pure Spirit, which the Qabalists call No-Thing, or AIN, transcends all the states which we call mental, yet every sage tells us that Pure Spirit is Pure Consciousness. But Pure Consciousness as it is prior to self-manifestation cannot be consciousness of anything, or consciousness of any relation. Feeling, or self-awareness, therefore, is the only mode of consciousness which is conceivable at this point. And as Judge Troward has said, in *The Creative Process in the Individual*, this initial feeling must be that of being alive.

This, indeed, is Qabalistically shown in the letters of the word אִין, inasmuch as the first, A, is the symbol of Ruach, or Life-Breath, the second, I, a symbol of potential humanity (because I=“hand”), and the third, N, by its name, Nun, (taken as a verb), a symbol of the potency of growth. That which is אִין, No-Thing, is nevertheless that which has for its primary self-awareness or feeling, the feeling which is subsequently developed as actual Life (A), as actual humanity (I), and as actual development (N).

It is this primary feeling of the No-Thing which is represented by the first letter of דבר. That feeling is rationalized into the self-conscious awareness indicated by the letter B. For no sooner does Spirit feel itself alive than it

must also experience a further modification of consciousness, described by Troward in the book above-mentioned as follows:

“Then to feel alive it must be conscious, and to be conscious it must have something to be conscious of; therefore the contemplation of itself as standing related to something which is not its own originating self in propria persona is a necessity of the case; and consequently the Self-contemplation of Spirit can only proceed by its viewing itself as related to something standing out from itself, just as we must stand at a proper distance to see a picture – in fact the very word ‘existence’ means ‘standing out’. Thus things are called into existence or ‘outstandingness’ by a power which itself does not stand out, and whose presence is therefore indicated by the word ‘subsistence.’”

Yet this outstanding is illusive, because there is really no “outside” into which the omnipresent Spirit may project itself. Hence a Gnostic writer is careful to say that the “Noughtness emanates, but does not really emanate” the cosmos. Qabalists, too, are careful to say that the ten Sephiroth, or “emanations” begin by the concentration of the Limitless Light in and upon itself. Time and Space are therefore labels for relations existing between the points of the Life-Power’s self-expression within the boundless Presence of its own subsistence. The relative is not a projection from the Absolute. Neither is it to be understood as a development of the Absolute. More accurately is it described as an apparent self-limitation of the Life-Power which happens within the boundless area” is an alogical (as distinguished from “illogical”) expression. The limitations of language are such that words will not serve to formulate a logical statement of this first stage of the creative process. But because THAT which eternally does so manifest itself to itself is the central reality of your experience, you may, by maintaining a mental attitude of receptivity, receive from that Source of Pure Knowing a confirmation of this teaching which will carry your consciousness beyond the limitations of words.

The last letter of דבר, as you know, is the letter of the Sun, and here it typifies the third stage of the creative process, in which the Life-Power completes its expression of its feeling of Life in the establishment of a systemic center of activity. That center may be the nucleus of the miniature solar system of electrons composing an atom. It may be the central sun of a universe of solar systems. But whether the scale be large or small, the

quality of consciousness manifested is always the same. It is the consciousness of relative centrality, the consciousness of being a center of positive, self-directed energy.

The three stages of creative activity represented by the letters of DBR, the Word, are therefore as follows:

D: The simple feeling of being alive.

B: The consciousness of that life as finding expression in specific, existing or “outstanding” activities.

R: The consciousness that whether the range of those activities be relatively great or small, the Life is the directive center of the whole system.

The reproduction of the Life-Power’s own consciousness of this creative process in a personal center is what makes a man an adept, a master and a magus. The words we have used to indicate that consciousness are more than inadequate, but we believe that they are words which will point the way for you.

Thus, although the Great Arcanum is incommunicable, we may do something to indicate the way to be followed in order to come into possession of it. We may also make known the fact that the psychical and physical transformations which make a human being able to receive this knowledge from within are those which happen according to the law symbolized by the 8th Tarot Key. By the study of its symbolism, by the contemplation of the position of its path upon the Tree of Life, by the earnest demand that its deeper meaning be made known to you, you will establish the state of receptivity which makes possible the influx of the higher wisdom from superconsciousness.

In addition to this practice, you will probable find it to your advantage to read, ponder, and develop in your times of meditation the following extracts from the Chaldean Oracles.

Attributed by the ancients to the magi, these Oracles are sometimes called the Oracles of Zoroaster, but theirs is the spirit of Egyptian Neo-Platonism, rather than that of Persian dualism. This is made clear in the first of these fragments. No complete version of the Oracles has come down to us. These

fragments are mostly quotations given by various Greek writers of Neo-Platonism. They are taken from Volume 6 of the Collectanea Hermetica. The translation is by “Sapere Aude,” which is, I believe, the Rosicrucian motto of Dr. W. Wynn Westcott.