SACRED CODES

L. CARUANA

EXCERPT:

PART VII:
CONSECRATING
THE WORK

CHAPTERS 26 - 28

SACRED CODES – VOLUME I

SACRED CODES

THE FORGOTTEN PRINCIPLES OF PAINTING
REVIVED BY VISIONARY ART

VOLUME 1
THE DRAWING STAGE

He who has only experience
knows that a thing is so, but not why it is so,
whereas the artist knows the why and the wherefore.
This is why a master craftsman in any trade
is more highly esteemed, is considered to know more,
and therefore to be wiser than an artisan,
because he understands the reason for what is done.
Aristotle, *Metaphysics*[1]

L. CARUANA
AD SACRUM – TOWARD THE SACRED

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Artist, author and lecturer, Laurence Caruana's multifaceted works explore the interplay of myth, visions and dreams while integrating views from different sacred traditions. Born in Toronto Canada of Maltese descent, he is a graduate of *The University of Toronto* (B.A. Hons. Philosophy) and also studied painting at *die Akademie der bildenden Künste* in Vienna before assisting Prof. Ernst Fuchs in his studios in Monaco and Castillon, where he learned classical techniques of painting in the traditional manner of master to apprentice.

For years, the artist led an itinerant existence, living variously in Malta, Vienna, Munich and Monaco while travelling extensively through Asia, Europe and Central America to explore sacred sites, study art techniques and enrich his passion for different cultural iconographies. With his French wife he settled in Paris, alternating between a studio in the Bastille quarter and a farmhouse in the Bourgogne region of France. In 2012, he co-founded the Vienna Academy of Visionary Art, where he serves as director.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR:

The First Manifesto of Visionary Art (2000)
The Hidden Passion: A Novel of the Gnostic Christ
    Based on the Nag Hammadi Texts (2007)
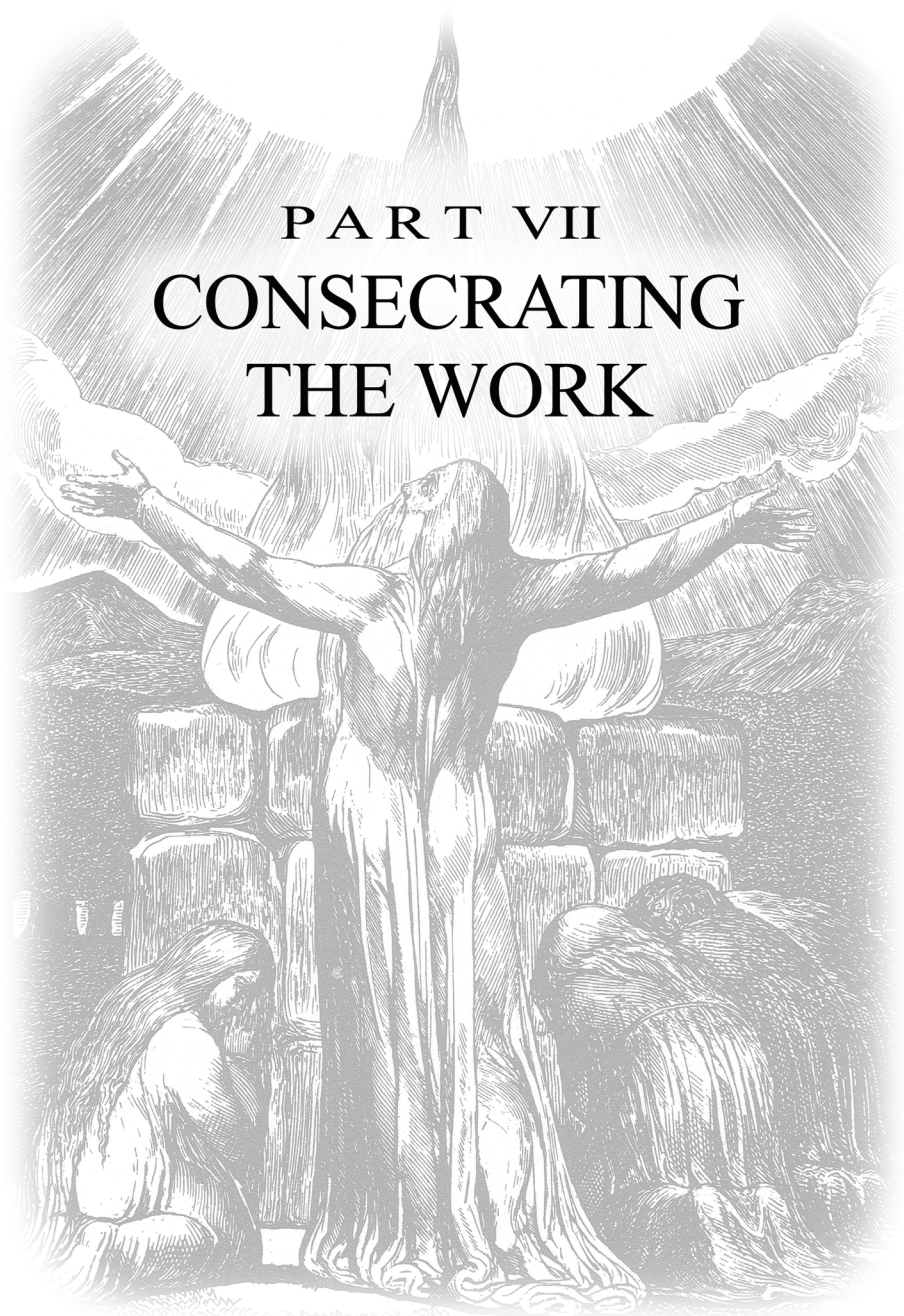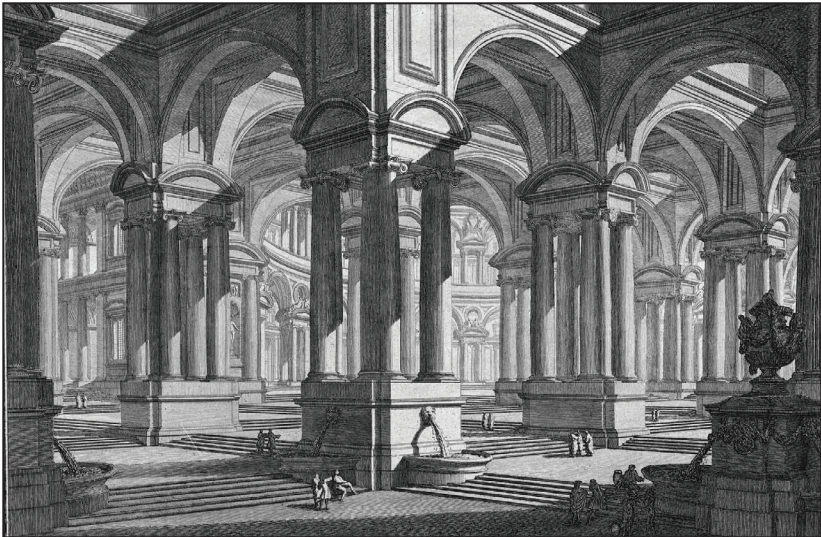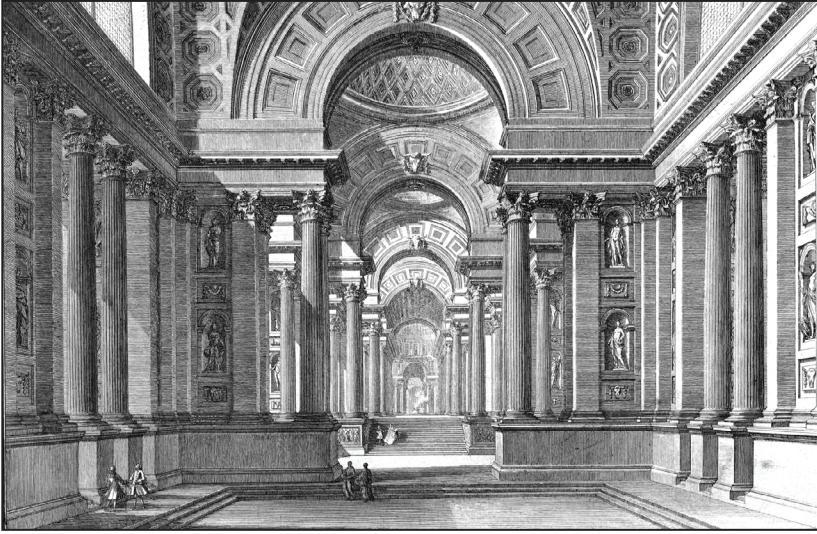*Enter Through the Image: The Ancient Image Language*
    of Myth, Art & Dreams (2009)

CONTENTS

TO
PROF. ERNST FUCHS
My Father in Art, Eternal

PART VII
CONSECRATING THE WORK

Giovanni Battista Piranesi: *Ancient Temples* c. 1750

CHAPTER XXVI
VISIONARY SEEING

I. To Share in Divine Sight

In my visions and dreams, I have often entered a vast architectural space which may best be described (using a phrase from Ernst Fuchs) as 'the Hall of the Simultaneousness of All Images'. Like the Hall of Eternity in Raphael's fresco, it has long corridors, well-lit by natural sunlight, and is crowned by a vast dome – its coffered ceiling converging to a circular *oculus* at the summit. Like the interiors of Piranesi, Giger or Escher, it has halls of stairs leading infinitely in all directions, and archways opening like portals to other vast halls with distant passages and corridors. The *Rotunda* of the Pantheon, the *Grande Galerie* of the Louvre, and the *Vestibül* of the Kunsthistorisches Museum – all these places seem to somehow recall this place in my memory, where countless images line the walls, inviting our contemplation.

In this sacred space, the art of all epochs and locales are displayed, almost at random, with little regard for author or chronology. Indeed, our Western obsession for historicity and the cult of the artist seems sorely out of place here, as does our entire manner of *looking at* pictures – admired as *objets d'art* or priceless masterpieces. In this place, the images invite a different kind of seeing, which I can only describe as Visionary.

In Visionary Seeing, the painting becomes a transformational experience for artist and viewer alike. As we enter 'the Hall of the Simultaneousness of All Images', a more timeless experience awaits, an eye-opening transfiguration, as we openly engage the Sacred with our gaze. At first, certain peculiarities in the painting may draw our eye towards it. Regardless of the intended meaning, what matters is the potential for holding our regard and 'entrancing' us with its magic. That enchantment fixes our eye until the painting becomes a doorway or portal: our 'en-trance' into another world.

To fall into a painting... to immerse ourselves in its vision until we become wholly engaged by its life-changing power – this is regarded in our own culture as sheer madness. Yet, Ancient and Eastern cultures have practised a similar form of engagement for centuries, if not millennia. We are thrown, once more, against the age-old division between the Humanist and Hieratic traditions – a division which Visionary art may eventually unite and transcend.

In the Hieratic tradition, a painted image or sculpture may possess beauty and grace, and its artist be regarded with high esteem. But, the image is directed towards a much different end. It is not regarded as 'a work of Art' but *a vehicle* of the Sacred. At times, the artist may innovate and invent a different style, but *the proto-type*, the perfectly proportioned pattern of the original, the authentic and 'first' Divine Image, is always to be venerated and respected. Like the scribe or copyist, who must always respect the original transmission of the Divine Word, the case of the artist is no different: Sacred Codes have been transmitted for generations to ensure the holy purpose of the work.

As this volume reaches its conclusion, I must admit that it has reached greater proportions than originally intended. So many, it seems, are the Sacred Codes forgotten by our culture, that I have gone on at great length in my attempt to revive them. And yet, there remains one more task which neither author nor reader may neglect: the transmission of Sacred Codes for the Consecration of the work.

By investigating ancient methods of meditation and image-creation, I hope to show how our present works of art may be engaged once more in a more holy manner. From ancient Egypt, onward to Greece, India and Tibet, the work was so constructed as to invite a *higher* way of seeing, where the in-dwelling deity opens our eye to Divine Vision. The deity within not only *appears* before our steadfast gaze, but alters our perception inexorably. The greatest benediction, for the seer, is *to be seen* by the deity, and acknowledged as the one who has entered into its holy Presence.

To share in Divine Sight becomes *an act of consecration*. With our tears, we baptize the work, cleansing our vision to behold the true source of vision. The cultures of old possessed this archaic knowledge, and we may revive it, the moment we are prepared to engage the work with a heart open and true, a soul ready for sacrifice, and a mind focussed on the Sacred.

II. The Egyptian Mysteries

A hieroglyphic text inscribed on a doorjamb at the Temple of Edfu warns the Egyptian priests: "*Do not reveal what you see in any secret matter in the sanctuaries.*"[1] And indeed, the Egyptian Mysteries were always guarded in great secrecy, never to be written down. Even pilgrims were warned not to reveal what they saw 'upon pain of death.'

The most explicit account we have of the Egyptian Mystery rites comes to us rather late in that culture's history, from the Roman author Apuleius

who describes his initiation into the cult of Isis during the Ptolemaic period. The High Priest warned him that, *"The rites of initiation approximate to a voluntary death from which there is only a precarious hope of resurrection."* Still, through the grace of the goddess Isis, the initiate is *"...in a sense, born again."*[2]

After ten days of fasting, Apuleius was purified in the public baths, sprinkled with holy water and invested with white linen before being brought to the inner recesses of the sanctuary. There, he received the final revelation, which he describes with the words: *"I approached the very gates of death and set one foot on Proserpine's threshold,* [i.e. the Netherworld] *yet was permitted to return, rapt through all the elements. At midnight, I saw the sun shining as if it were noon; I entered the presence of the gods of the underworld and the gods of the upper world, stood near and worshipped them."*[3]

From this fascinating account we may gather that Apuleius was ritually conducted on journey – via the sacraments, the music and sacred imagery – into the afterlife realms (*"I approached the very gates of death"*) which included a 'visionary ascent' through the planetary spheres (*"I... was permitted to return, rapt through all the elements"*) encountering both demonic and angelic beings ("*I entered the presence of the gods of the underworld and the gods of the upper world"*) until he finally gazed upon a sacred statue – a profound experience that constituted, for him, a divine revelation ("*I entered the presence of the gods... stood near and worshipped them."*)

For those who practice Visionary Art today, the art and texts of ancient Egypt are as relevant now as they were three thousand years ago. But – what knowledge remains of their initiatory rites? By what means did the ancient priests access visions of the afterworld? And – even more important for the Visionary artist – by what means did they access the Hieratic style for their art?

The closing strophes of *The Am Duat* describe that sacred text as *"...the excellent guide, the secret writing of the Netherworld, which is not known by any person, save a few."*[4] Whoever they were, and by what means they accessed these visions, their knowledge granted them 'initiation into the Mysteries of the Netherworld.'

This latter expression comes from the *Litany of Re*, where the king is greeted by the gods as one *"...who knows the initiation into the mysteries of the Netherworld, for you are one who has penetrated into their sacredness."*[5] In order to guide their king, the ancient priesthood had also learned 'to enter and leave the Netherworld.' *During their lifetimes*, they had gained a rare glimpse into the Beyond.

Another fascinating text, discovered in 1919, concerns Petosiris, the 4th century BCE High Priest of Thoth at Hermopolis. On his tomb inscription, Petosiris is described as *"The High Priest... who enters into the holy of holies* [i.e., the innermost *naos*, and...] *sees the god in his shrine."*[6] Clearly, Petosiris had achieved a visionary state that gave him a direct experience of the Sacred.

III. Shamanic Wisdom in the Pyramid Texts

One of the more interesting studies written in the last ten years is Jeremy Naydler's *Shamanic Wisdom in the Pyramid Texts*. As a scholar, Naydler notes that traditional Egyptologists feel *"ill at ease"*[7] with mystical interpretations of Egyptian lore. Nevertheless, modern Egyptologists can no longer ignore the abundance of ancient testimony regarding visionary experience. Recent scholars like Erik Hornung and Jan Assmann have also broken that long-standing taboo and written at length about the visionary and mystical nature of Egyptian religion.

In his book on their 'shamanic wisdom,' Naydler performs a detailed analysis of the Egyptian Pyramid Texts – the 228 Spells inscribed on the walls of the Pyramid of Unas (or Wenis) some 4,500 years ago. The Pyramid Texts, it should be noted, are the earliest sacred texts (from *any* culture) that have come down to us intact. Hieroglyphically inscribed on the walls of the Pharaoh's tomb, they describe his Vision Journey through the *Duat* (or Netherworld) where the pharaoh must overcome many demonic foes before ascending to the gods.

The Pyramid Texts date back to the Old Kingdom (c. 2705 – 2180 BCE). During the millennium that followed, fragments of the so-called Coffin Texts emerged during the Middle Kingdom (c. 1987 – 1640 BCE). Inscribed on the sarcophagi of kings, these contain more spells (much like the Pyramid Texts) for the protection of the king as he ascends skyward (like a bird) and is transformed (like a scarab) to become one with the gods. The most important text to emerge during this period, *The Book of the Two Ways*, is the first 'map' of the Netherworld, with a lake of fire dividing the water route from the land route.

More fascinating still are the numerous 'Books of the Dead' from the New Kingdom (c. 1640 – 1530 BCE). Now we enter the Valley of the Kings and find inscribed on the Pharaoh's tombs many essential sacred texts: *The Am Duat, The Book of Gates, The Book of Caverns* and more – all richly illustrated with enigmatic images as yet undeciphered. Typically in these visionary journeys, the initiate joins Re's solar barque on its nocturnal passage through the twelve gates of the Netherworld, overcoming foes at each threshold, before its judgement at Osiris' throne and final deification at sunrise.

Wending our way back to the Pyramid Texts, Naydler's entire thesis is that these books have been interpreted exclusively as 'funerary texts' describing the king's *afterlife* journey. Instead, they should also be viewed as *mystical visions* of the other world, experienced by the king and priesthood *during this life,* to prepare the initiate for the afterworld journey: *"Beyond the funerary rites and cult of the dead, there also existed the possibility of certain individuals entering into a more conscious relationship with the spirit realm, bridging the gap between worlds in an altered state of consciousness."*[8]

Naydler calls the spiritual experience in the Pyramid Texts a state of *"Visionary Mysticism"* which *"...entailed direct experience of the spirit world through states of consciousness in which the soul left the body in an ecstatic flight, to encounter ancestors, gods, and spirits, to experience an inner rebirth."*[9]

Fig. 26.1 - King Unus' Tomb with the Pyramid Texts Inscribed on the Walls

Although there is no narrative structure *per se* to the Pyramid Texts, the spells are so integrated into the architecture of King Unas' tomb (Fig. 26.1) that they may be read – moving outward from the sarcophagus chamber and antechamber to the entrance corridor – as a visionary sequence describing the king's symbolic death and eventual rebirth involving his ascension and ultimate union with the divine.

To prepare him for this visionary journey, the king is first bathed, anointed, clothed in linen and offered bread and water (compare this to Apuleius' initiation above) – each time accompanied by the sacramental invocation, *"O Osiris, the King, take the Eye of Horus."* (Utt 82 – 171)

In a visionary passage from Spell 93, Horus himself presents his eye to the king with the words, *"I have come and I bring to you Horus' own Eyes; seize them and join them to yourself... Horus has offered them... so that they may guide this king to the firmament, to Horus, to the sky, to the great god."* (Utt 93) And Spell 167 exhorts him, *"O Osiris, the King, open your eyes that you may see with them."* (Utt 167)[10]

Throughout the Pyramid Texts, the king is identified with Osiris, the god of death and resurrection. As Osiris, he acquires the well-known "Wedjat Eye" which Horus lost in his battle with Seth (death) and, once regained, was offered to the dead Osiris to restore him to life. Numerous stunning examples of the Wedjat Eye (Fig. 26.2) have been found adorning the dead: cast in gold, inset with precious gems, and forged in their beautiful Hieratic Style. The Eye of Horus is clearly an image of that eye which gazes *into the Beyond*, the visionary eye which looks *beyond death and rebirth*, to see *as the gods see*. It is the Divine Eye.

Fig. 26.2 - Jewelled Pectoral of the Wedjat Eye
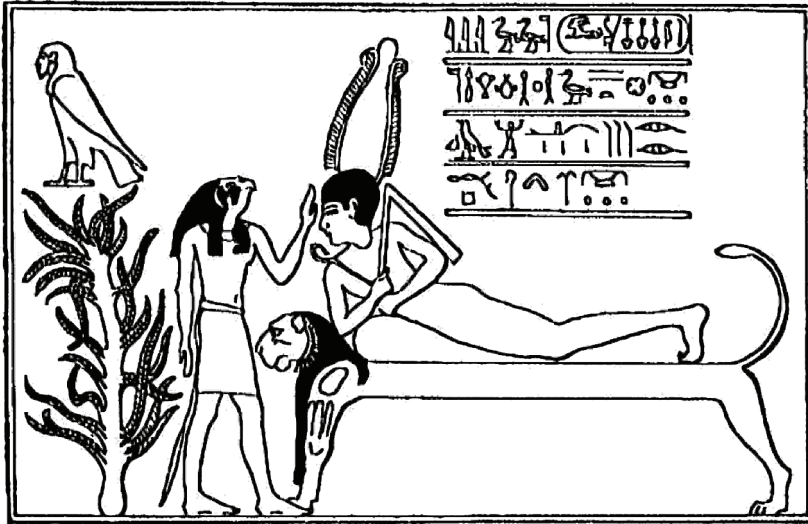
Fig. 26.3 - Relief from the Temple of Dendera:
A Horus-headed Priest Awakens the Initiate King

Having acquired the Divine Eye, the Pyramid Texts then relate the king's visionary journey: he undergoes a 'solar rebirth,' being identified and united with both Horus the falcon and Re the sun. As Horus, he 'ascends' like a falcon; as Re, he is 'reborn' like the rising sun. This is revealed explicitly in a visionary passage from Spell 368: *"O Osiris, this is Horus in your embrace, and he protects you. He has become akh through you, in your identity of the akhet from which the sun emerges."*[11]

As Naydler explains, *"Through the embrace, he* [the king as Osiris] *becomes a shining spirit (akh)... The Egyptian word akhet is usually translated as 'horizon' because this is where the sun first shines each morning, but it is also, in a religious sense, the place of spiritual transfiguration."*[12] And he elaborates, *"From the akhet, the king rises as an akh, an inwardly illumined, 'solarized' being (utt 216-217)."*[13]

It is through his union with the divine triad (Osiris-Horus-Re) that the king's spirit (*akh*) is illuminated and transfigured; he joins with the immortals. And yet, we must not forget that all of this *is a vision*. His union with the divine and entrance into immortality transpires during a brief moment of illumination. Once the transfiguring moment expires, the king returns to his more mundane existence.

This is made explicit in yet another spell, where the king is reminded: *"Awake! Turn yourself about! ... O King raise yourself up to me, betake yourself to me, do not be far from me... I give you the Eye of Horus, I have allotted it to you, may it belong to you."* (Spell 223) As Naydler notes, Spell 223 is *"...concerned with awakening the king from what would appear to be a trancelike state, and ensuring the return of his spirit into his body."*[14] On a nearby page, the author reproduces a relief from the Temple of Dendera (Fig. 26.3) where we behold a Horus-headed priest awakening the initiate king.[15]

Most importantly, the king is reminded of the Eye of Horus, which has been allotted to him during his visionary experience, and which he will retain afterward, as an eye-opening portal into the afterworld dimension. Through his initiatory death and rebirth, accompanied by an illuminating transfiguration, the king has acquired the Divine Eye.

IV. The Egyptian Priesthood

Certain statues of the priests, carved in black alabaster, have come down to us – their eyes opened wide with mysterious knowledge and insight. Contemplating one such statue, the French Egyptologist Serge Sauneron wondered about *"...the vexing riddle of their faces. What thoughts were once concealed behind these serene features, what spectacles were beheld by these large, open eyes that will never flash again with life?"*[16]

In his study *The Priests of Ancient Egypt*, Sauneron notes the strict regimen maintained by these hierophants. To maintain ritual purity they were shorn of all hair, circumcised, bathed twice a day, wore only fine linen and (while in office) abstained from sex and ate no meat. Their induction into the priesthood required nothing less than an 'initiation into the Mysteries of the Netherworld.'

One rare account of a priestly initiation has come down to us, mentioning the neophyte's baptismal cleansing, his anointing with oil and his investment with a linen garment: *"I was presented before the god... I was introduced into the horizon of heaven* [the akhet]*... I emerged from Nun (the primordial waters) and I was purified of what ill had been in me; I removed my clothing and ointments... I advanced before the god in the holy of holies* [the innermost naos]*, filled with fear before his power."*[17]

Aside from the ritual preparation (compare with Unas and Apuleius), the young priest experienced a transformation and 'solarization' of his *akh* (shining spirit). Like the sun which, at the beginning of time, emerged from Nun's primordial waters, he too 'emerges from Nun' as one illuminated and newly-born. What is more, he was 'introduced into the horizon of heaven' – that is, *into the akhet*, the place of spiritual transformation and illumination. In this visionary state, he 'advanced before the god in the holy of holies' and gazed upon the sacred image 'filled with fear before his power.'

In his study *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, Jan Assmann suggests that *"Initiation into the temples and cults of Egypt anticipated and prefigured the ultimate initiation into the mysteries of the realm of the dead."*[18] In other words, during his priestly initiation, the novice underwent a visionary death and rebirth, so as to prepare him for his priestly function as psychopomp and guide of the deceased through the Duat: *"During his lifetime, a priest experienced his introduction into the mysterious cultic presence of the divine as a sort of foretaste of his postmortem introduction to Osiris."*[19]

Assmann finds evidence of this in an Egyptian text called The Hymn to the Nocturnal Sun: *"...The mysteries of the Netherworld, an initiation in the mysteries of the realm of the dead ...mysteries that absolutely no one knows for the treatment of the transfigured dead ...You* [the god] *do this, without letting any man see, aside from the one who is truly your intimate and a lector priest."*[20] As such, only the lector priest (i.e. the *kheri heb* [*xry hbt*] who

reads the Books of the Afterlife during the entombment) is initiated into the Mysteries of the Netherworld.

It is for this reason that certain priests were called those who *"open the doors of heaven."*[21] One such priest was Chaeremon of Alexandria, a learnèd *hierogrammateis* (Greek for *kheri heb* or Lector priest) from the Temple of Serapis, with its famed Library of Alexandria. All of his writings – *On Hieroglyphs, On Egyptian Astrology,* and *A History of Egypt* – were lost (...no doubt, when early Christians razed the library to the ground). But, fragments of his works describing the Egyptian priests were preserved by Porphyry (the famed disciple of Plotinus). Through Porphyry, Chaeremon offers us a fascinating glimpse into the daily life of Egyptian priests from the late Ptolemaic period.

Like monks in later Buddhist and Christian monasteries, the lives of Egyptian priests were regulated into periods of worship, study and meditation. The priests *"...divided the night into the observation of the celestial bodies, and sometimes devoted a part of it to offices of purification; and they distributed the day into the worship of the Gods, according to which they celebrated them with hymns thrice or four times... The rest of their time they devoted to arithmetical and geometrical speculations, always labouring to effect something, and to make some new discovery."*[22]

The sacred geometry underlying the construction of temples, pyramids and statuary attests to the precision of their 'arithmetical and geometrical speculations,' as do the astronomical orientation of these places to 'the observation of the celestial bodies.' But Egyptian science was not pursued for its own sake; this learning kept the Pharaoh's land in accord with *Maat* – the divine order. Their eyes were ever-turned towards the contemplation of 'the higher': *"These* [priests]*, having relinquished every other employment and human labours, gave up the whole of their life to the contemplation and worship of divine natures and to divine inspiration."*[23]

When we wander through Egyptian temples today, admiring the many niches with sculpted images and *bas reliefs*, we should not be surprised to discover that the statues were the main focus of the priesthood's contemplation: *"They chose temples, as the places in which they might philosophize. For to dwell with the statues of the Gods is a thing allied to the whole desire, by which the soul tends to the contemplation of their divinities."*[24]

However, we are misled if we think that the word 'contemplation' means a 'thoughtful observation' or 'philosophical reflection' on lofty and abstract ideas. As we shall see later in this chapter, the philosophical interpretation of the word *theoria* (contemplation) was introduced by Plato. In its primary meaning, *theoria* meant 'to see' and 'gaze deeply' upon a sacred image – especially a statue of a god.

That the priests 'contemplated the sacred images' with a prolonged gaze is brought out more explicitly in another passage: *"They devoted their whole life to contemplation and vision of things divine. By vision, they achieve honour... They practised controlling their gaze, so that if they chose they did not blink."*[25]
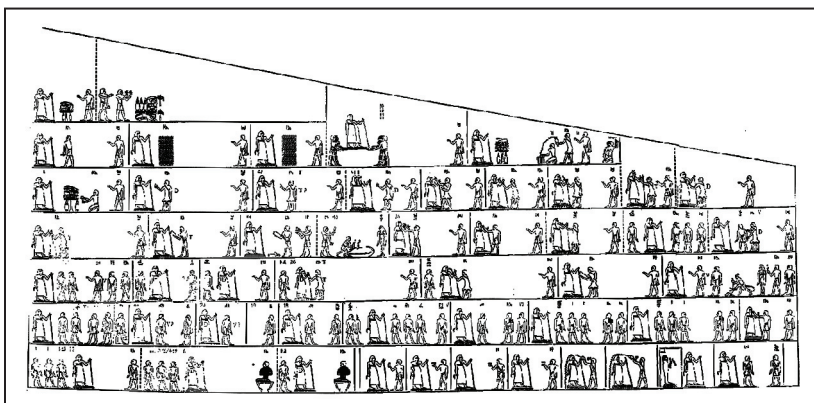
Fig. 26.4 - The Opening of the Eye and Mouth Ritual from Rekhmire's Chapel

Here, we have direct evidence of a kind of Visionary Seeing practiced by the Egyptian priests. As they contemplated the statues – oft times in a visionary state – they 'practised controlling their gaze' into a prolonged, open-eye meditation upon the sacred image. Through this *fixed regard*, the deity within the statue emerged.

V. The Hieratic Style of Egyptian Statuary

In Thebes, the mortuary chapel of Rekhmire offers us a rare glimpse into the visionary inspiration behind Egypt's unique sculptural style. The vizier Rekhmire was both the High Priest of Heliopolis and a high ranking official under Tuthmosis III. On one wall of his richly-decorated chapel (he was buried elsewhere), we have the most complete portrayal of the Opening of the Eyes and Mouth ceremony. This ritual extends from the Old Kingdom right through to the final Ptolemaic period. In it, Egyptian priests consecrate a sacred statue or sarcophagus through a complex theurgic rite involving amulets, an adze and a serpent-headed blade.

The rear chamber of Rekhmire's chapel portrays fifty-one of the seventy-five known steps of the Opening of the Eyes and Mouth, thus being one of the oldest and most complete representations extant (Fig. 26.4). As the ceremony begins, a number of specialized priests (lector priest, imy-khent priest) enter the ceremonial space around the statue and utter the words, *"I enter to see him."*[26] The face of the statue, at this stage, is generic in form, lacking specific traits. The priests must first 'see' these traits and render them onto the statue.

With water and 'smoking incense' (interpret that as you will...) they purify the space (called 'the gold mansion') while invoking the Eye of Horus. E.g.: *"Take the water that is in the red eyes of Horus."*[27]

The next scene (episode 9 at Rekhmire – Fig. 26.5, over) depicts 'The Conception of the Statue.' A new priest enters, called 'the Sem priest.' This
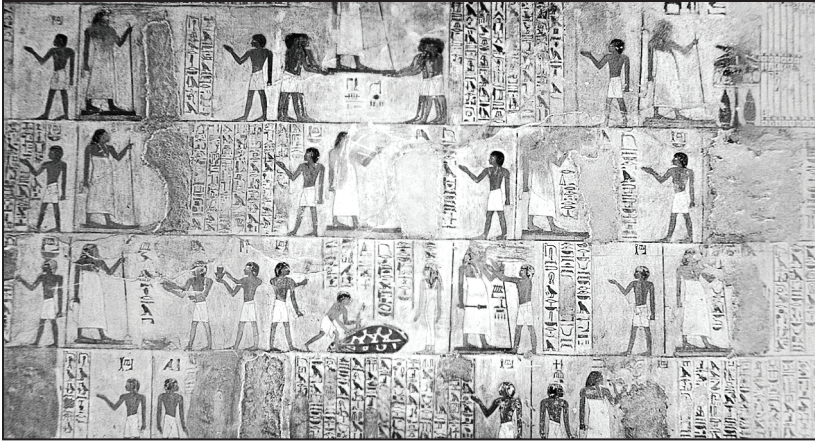
Fig. 26.5 - Rekhmire's Chapel: Episodes 9 and 10
of the Opening of the Eye and Mouth Ritual

rather unique seer, as we shall soon discover, is already in a trance state. The hieroglyphic script accompanying the scene describes the rite as follows: (I have italicized key phrases):

Seclusion in the Gold Mansion: *resting by the Sem priest*
Speech of the Sem priest seated facing it
Words spoken: 'he has struck me'
The Imy-is to stand behind it
Words spoken *'he has outlined me'*
The Imy-is – speech four times
Words spoken by the Imy-is 'My father my father' four times
Waking the sleep of the Sem priest.[28]

We shall elucidate this scene momentarily. In the next part (episode 10), the Sem priest says to the Imy-khent priest: *"I have seen my father in his every outline."* And the Imy-khent priest says in turn to the Sem priest: *"I have seen my father in his every outline."* Next (episode 11) the Sem priest says to the sculptors: *"Mark my father for me... Create, for my father, for me – the divine form, make a likeness of him for me."* As the sculptors render the features of the statue, they say together with the Sem and Lector priests: *"Who are those who approach my father? Who is it striking my father? Who is it forcing his head? ... Who protects those who are to strike your father?"*[29]

The act of rendering the sacred image puts the sculptors in grave danger. The Sem and Lector priests intervene, saying, *"I am Horus and Seth. I do not allow you to make the head shine for my father."* So, the carvers finish their work, but the image is not yet complete; the priests must still 'make the head shine' by performing the theurgic rite of the Opening of the Eye and Mouth.

The Sem priest removes his 'qeni-matting robe' and dons a leopard skin, saying to the statue: *"I have marked your eye for you, your ba-spirit (to be) in it."* All the priests then go outside and oversee the sacrifice of a bull. Its

Fig. 26.6 - Tomb of Renni at El Kab 18th Dynasty
Showing the Tekenu (Sem Priest) as a Bundled Man Sitting Upright on a Sled

foreleg is offered to the statue with the words: *"Receive the foreleg, the eye of Horus."* Thus begins the long section for the Opening of the Eye and Mouth. The priests touch the statue's mouth and eyes with a variety of different knives, saying: *"Horus has opened your mouth for you, he opens your eyes for you."* The priests do this, *"so that he may walk and speak with his body before the great Nine Gods in the great mansion."* The ritual concludes with more purifications. Then, the statue is carried to a shrine within the chapel, garlanded and incensed.[30]

As this ancient account makes clear, the unique seer called the Sem priest first *had a vision* of the divine features ('I enter to see him') and then communicated *its distinct style and shape* to the others ('I have seen my father in his every outline'). Only then does he call upon the sculptors *to render the sacred shapes* ('Mark my father for me... – the divine form, make a likeness of him for me'). But the sacred image is not yet *activated* ('make the head shine') until the Eye and Mouth are opened.

How does the Sem priest receive the vision? In a fascinating paper called 'A Rite of Passage: The Enigmatic Tekenu in Ancient Egyptian Funerary Ritual,' Greg Reeder analyzes a number of tomb engravings involving the mysterious *tekenu* figure. This shadowy figure appears as a bundled man on a sled, pulled along by priests during the funerary procession. Sometimes he lies in a foetal position (the pre-dynastic burial position - Fig. 26.7, over), and sometimes he sits upright (Fig. 26.6) with the sack cowled round his head. Some Egyptologists thought that the *tekenu* was a slave sacrificed during the ceremony.[31]

But, this same *tekenu* figure appears in Rekhmire's Chapel, and Reeder is now able to identify *the tekenu as the Sem priest*. In Episode 9 (quoted above), he first appears head down, bundled in his sack (*'resting by the Sem*
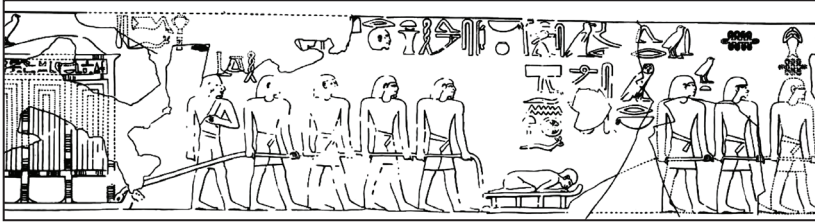
Fig. 26.7 - Theban Tomb of the Fan-bearer Montuhirkhepeshef
Showing the Tekenu (Sem Priest) as a Bundled Man Lying on a Sled

priest') and next appears sitting upward on a lion-footed couch, still bundled and wrapped in the manner of Osiris ('*waking the sleep of the Sem priest'*). Between his sleeping and waking, he receives 'the outline' of the sacred image.[32]

In Reeder's words: *"Here is revealed the metamorphosis of the tekenu... It is the Sem priest who is awakened from his trance... The Sem states that he was 'asleep' but had visited the deceased in the otherworld... As the tekenu he is transported to the tomb wrapped in a shroud to help facilitate his 'death' so that he can be transported to the other world. Thus having visited the spirit world, the Sem was imbued with powers which enabled him to perform the succeeding 'Opening of the Mouth' ceremony for the deceased."*[33]

Not only did the trance give him power to perform the succeeding ceremony, it also allowed him 'to see' and 'to outline' the 'divine form' which 'makes the head shine.' Through his Netherworld journey, the Sem priest was able *to see the hieratically-stylized features* that, once they were carved on the statue and consecrated, thus activated it as a vehicle for the divine.

The statue's eyes were open.

From the preceding, it becomes clear that certain Egyptian priests were adept at entering into visionary states. This began during their initiation into the priesthood, and extended to the ceremonies performed for seeing, sculpting and activating their sacred statues and sarcophagi. Typically, such a trance state involved a visionary journey through the Netherworld, instigated through a death-and-rebirth experience. The statues, ritually rendered in this fashion, bore the marks and signs of the Hieratic Style. Other priests, dwelling in the temples, practiced a form of open-eye meditation ('controlling their gaze') upon these statues. All these activities aided the priests in *seeing,* like the Pharaoh, with the Wedjat – the Divine Eye.

VI. Ancient Greece

One of the most popular feasts of Classical Greece were the Eleusinian Mysteries celebrating Demeter and her daughter Persephone (also called *Koré* – 'the maiden'). Pilgrims throughout the land were invited to Athens to celebrate these initiatory rites, which dramatized Persephone's abduction by Hades, her descent to the underworld while her mother Demeter mourned, and her eventual return to the land of the living. Those who participated in the Mysteries were granted immortality in the afterlife, due to the initiatory vision.

Sophocles extolled the Mysteries with the words, *"Thrice blessed are those mortals who have seen these rites and thus enter Hades: for them alone there is life, but for the others all is misery."*[34] And Pindar added, *"Blessed is he who, seeing these things, goes beneath the earth; he knows the end of life, and he knows the god-given beginning."*[35]

Although the actual events of the rites are shrouded in mystery, we know that the ten day ceremony began with a procession, as the sacred images (*hiera*) were brought to the temple (the *Eleusinion* at the base of the Acropolis) by priests (*hierophantes*) and initiates (*mustés, epoptés*) waving myrtle branches. Those called the 'initiates' (*mustés*) were undergoing their first initiation, while those called 'the watchers' (*epoptés)* had already been initiated once, and would now witness 'the higher mysteries.'[36]

After a day of fasting, all the celebrants drank a special brew (the *kykeon* – interpret that as you will) and the next day they entered the great hall (the *telesterion*) which was plunged into darkness. The greatest moment of initiation (*teleté*) began when the hierophants opened the door to an inner central chamber (the *anaktoron*) and the initiates, chanting sacred hymns, entered it to 'see' (*theorein*) and experience a moment of revelation (*epoptika*).

Alas, what was actually seen and witnessed remains unknown. The revelation (*epoptika*) was so powerful, it seems, that no one dared break the vow of silence and actually reveal it in writing. Whatever vision may have befallen the initiates – it granted them knowledge of eternal life.

For us, the key to this entire mystery lies in the verb *theorein* ('to see') from whence the word *theoria* ('to contemplate') is derived. The initiates 'saw' and literally 'contemplated' the mysteries. The Greek word *theorein* combines both the word for god (*theos*) and the word for sight (*thea*). As Andrea Wilson Nightingale notes, *"Ever since antiquity, people have debated whether the word* 'theoria' *derives from* theos *(god) or* thea *(sight, spectacle).... 'sacred spectating' captures this dual signification."*[37]

In her book, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in its Cultural Context*, Nightingale performs an extended exegesis on the word *theoria* and what it meant to the ancient Greeks. We today use the word 'contemplation' (*theoria*) to refer to a 'thoughtful observation' or 'philosophical reflection' on lofty and abstract ideas. This is the legacy of Plato and Aristotle, eventually inherited by Christianity. But, in its primordial sense, *theoria* meant 'the sacred vision' witnessed by an initiate at the climax of their pilgrimage to a religious festival, such as the Mysteries of Eleusis.

"In the classical period," Nightingale writes, *"theoria took the form of pilgrimages to oracles and religious festivals... At its centre was the act of seeing, generally focused on a sacred object or spectacle. Indeed, the theoros* [the beholder or contemplator] *at a religious festival or sanctuary witnessed objects and events that were sacralized by way of rituals: the viewer entered into a 'ritualized visuality' in which secular modes of viewing were screened out by religious rites and practices. This sacralized mode of spectating was a central element in traditional theoria, and offered a powerful model for the philosophic notion of 'seeing' divine truths."*[38]

In short, the initiates at Eleusis were 'theorizing' the Mystery: they were 'contemplating' it in the sense of *envisioning the sacred*. This was no ordinary sight, but a very special form of seeing which included a direct gaze upon the

Sacred. Nightingale calls this Visionary Seeing a *'ritualized visuality'* and a *'sacralized mode of spectating.'*

By that same token, the *theoros* is the contemplator, the one who beholds the divine vision. In Nightingale's words, *"the theoros 'sees' a divine revelation that transforms his soul."*[39] And she goes on to say that, *"The theoros witnessed objects and events that were sacralized by way of ritual structures and ceremonies, and was thus invited to engage in a distinct kind of seeing. First of all, the theoros enters a sacred space – a 'liminal site in which the viewer enters the god's world and likewise the deity intrudes directly into the viewer's world in a highly ritualized context.' In this space, the theoroi participates in ritual activities that bring about a certain mode of seeing."*[40]

The practice of *theoria*, of contemplating sacred images, was not unique to Classical Greece. As we have already seen, the ancient Egyptian priesthood also '*chose temples as a place to contemplate their divinities.'* (Chaeremon's words, as conveyed by Porphyry). This contemplation was also a ritualized form of visionary seeing which accessed the Divine directly.

For the ancient Greeks, the object of *theoria* – the object 'seen' at the climax of a pilgrimage to a sacred festival – was an *agalma*. *"In the classical period,"* Nightingale explains, *"the word agalma referred exclusively to the statues and images of the gods."*[41] The Greeks had many words for 'image,' such as *eikon* or *eidolon*. But an *agalma* (plural: *agalmata*) was specifically a *sacred* image. By definition, it evoked the Sacred: *"As Vernant observes in his discussion of agalmata and divine images, the purpose of such an image 'is to establish real contact with the world beyond, to actualize it, to make it present, and thereby to participate intimately in the divine.'"*[42]

As such, to *theorize* an *agalma* – to contemplate a sacred image – was to enter fully into the presence of the gods. This unique experience was granted to all *mustés* (initiates) who participated in the theurgic rites of the Mystery religions.

However, by the time we get to Plato, we find that this status is only reserved for philosophers – and that they are contemplating those higher invisibles which Plato called the *eidé* or archetypes. Through a penetrating analysis, Nightingale demonstrates how *"the model of theoria at religious festivals offered Plato a way to structure and describe the new discipline of theoretical philosophy."*[43]

The result was to replace the *agalmata* – the sacred images contemplated by all initiates of the Mysteries – with the *eidé*, the higher and unseen forms contemplated only by philosophers: *"Plato... takes pains to explicate this new kind of 'seeing.' First of all, he claims, the objects of true knowledge are metaphysical entities called eidé, a term which is generally translated as 'Forms.' "*[44] *"A philosopher who gazes upon the Forms contemplates divinity, an act replete with wonder and reverence."*[45]

During the Italian Renaissance, artists recognized that the Platonic forms were 'invisible' to, what Michelangelo called, *"...weak and wavering eyes... not fixed on things above."*[46] But in his poems, the great sculptor reminded us that the artist, in his quest for 'the Idea of Beauty' could ascend in his visions to the higher spheres: *"This Idea alone lifts my eyes to those high visions / Which I set myself to carve and paint here below."*[47]

In this sense, the artist's pursuit is informed by the *eidé*, particularly by Beauty, Harmony and Unity, as invisible shapes and forms that permeate his work. Through extended contemplation (*theoria*), these invisible forms may momentarily become visible. Any stylized shape, made harmonious through geometrically perfect measures, may reveal the hidden *eidé* or archetype, which the Renaissance writer Giovanni Pietro Bellori referred to as 'the Ideal'.

In 1664, Bellori made a speech at the Accademia di San Luca in Rome – a speech so highly valued that it was published in 1672 as *L'idea del pittore, dello scultore, e dell'architetto* (The Idea of the Painter, Sculptor and Architect). Noting that Renaissance art had fallen into decline after the death of Michelangelo, Bellori criticized the brutal naturalism of Caravaggio while upholding the idealistic art of Carracci and his school.

Bellori went to great lengths to cite the Hermetic and Neo-Platonic texts which revolutionized Florentine art in the late 1400's, when Ficino translated the Hermetica and the works of Plato, Plotinus, Iamblichus and Proclus at the behest of Lorenzo the Magnificent. The divine unity, Bellori wrote, reflected upon itself to create all the forms of Nature. Those above the lunar sphere, as Ideas (the Platonic *eidé*) possess unchanging eternal beauty, while those below are subject to change; their beauty lacks harmony and proportion.

For this reason, *"the noble painters and sculptors imitating that first maker, also form in their minds an example of superior beauty, and in beholding it they emend nature with faultless color or line. This Idea... is revealed to us and enters the marble and the canvases."*[48]

For Bellori, the artist must rise above the sublunar sphere and 'emend nature' to capture the true form, the Idea and 'ideal' of beauty. In a state of theoric vision, the artist beholds the higher form, and renders it in the stylistically altered shape that truly ennobles and transfigures it.

VII. *Darśan* & the Conception of the Hindu Image

A pilgrimage, in Sanskrit, is a *tirtha-yatra* – literally a journey (*tirtha*) to a ford or crossing place (*yatra*), where one *crosses over* into another realm of experience. Just as the pilgrimage requires many steps and unexpected mishaps, so does the creation of the sacred image for *darśan* require many complex steps for the craftsman, which involve at least three phases: Conception, Consecration and Meditation.

In her book *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, Diana L. Eck notes that *"Darśan means 'seeing.' In the Hindu ritual tradition, it refers especially to religious seeing, or the visual perception of the sacred."*[49] And she adds, *"One might say that this 'sacred perception', which is the ability to truly see the divine image, is given to the devotee, just as Arjuna is given the eyes with which to see Krishna in the theophany described in the Bhagavad Gita"*[50] – a theophany which we have already quoted in our first chapter.

In the first step of 'Conception', the artisan must first formulate a clear image of the deity in his mind before commencing the work. The process requires both intense concentration *and* visualization.

As Diane Eck observes: *"The śilpin* [sculptor]*, before beginning a new work, undergoes a ritual purification and prays that he may successfully bring to form the divine image."*[51] She describes this process in precise terms: *"Entering into a state of concentration by means of yoga, the śilpin* [sculptor] *is to visualize the completed image in the mind's eye."*[52]

Since sculptors created sacred works, the act of creation was, itself, consecrated. If he felled a tree for his materials, the artisan should first, the *Bṛhat Saṃhitā* (57.10-11) says, ask pardon to the spirits residing in the tree, and propitiate them with offerings. Indeed, before the work commenced, the artisan should bless his tools with incense, flowers and unhusked rice.[53]

In his massive two-volume work, *The Art of Indian Asia*, Heinrich Zimmer also describes the Hindu sculptor's visualization methods: *"The night before commencing a new work, the image maker is to pray: 'O thou Lord of all gods, teach me in dreams how to carry out the whole of the work that I have in mind.'"*[54]

He prays like this, Zimmer explains, because *"an Indian image is, properly, an outward vessel corresponding precisely to the inner vision of the divinity."*[55] Indeed, *"the sacred image grows out of the inner vision,"*[56] Zimmer writes in *Artistic Form and Yoga in the Sacred Images of India*. Describing the unique stylization of Hindu figures, he remarks, *"In the fundamental aspects of its style, the sacred image is subject to the laws of the inner vision."*[57]

As such, the unique stylization of the Hindu sculpture is not so much a *cultural* style as it is a *vision-inspired* style – which we have described here by the word 'Hieratic'.

Hence, the Aesthetics of the *Śukranītisāra* conclude: *"Let the imager establish images in temples, by meditation on the deities who are the objects of his devotion. And for the successful achievement of this yoga, the lineaments of the images are described in books, which are to be dwelt upon in detail. By no other means [...] is it possible to be absorbed in contemplation, as by this meditation on the making of images."*[58]

VIII. The Hindu Image: Consecration & Meditation

According to an instructional text On Building a Vishnu Temple, the *Hayaśirṣa-pañcarātra*: *"The divinity draws near willingly – if images are beautiful."*[59] Just as the ancient Greeks and Egyptians developed complex theurgic rites for the consecration (*telestikē*) of their statues, so did the priests and craftsmen of India.

"When an image is completed," Diane Eck remembers, *"there are special rites of consecration which take place, for the most part, in a specially consecrated booth outside the temple itself. First, the image is purified with a variety of ritually pure substances, such as darbha grass, honey, and ghee. Then by a ritual called nyāsa, literally the 'touching', various deities are established in different parts of the image: Brahma in the chest, Indra in the hand, Surya in the eyes,"*[60] etc.

As in ancient Egypt, the final act of consecration includes the 'instillation of breath' and 'the opening of the eyes': *"Finally, prāṇa the 'breathlife' is infused into the image in the central rite called prāṇapratiṣṭā, 'establishing the breathlife'. The infusion of the prāṇa ordinarily takes the form of a mantra: 'O Vishnu, approach this image and wake it up with thy embodiment of knowledge and divine energies, which are concentrated in this image.' The eyes of the image, which to this point have been sealed with a thick coat of honey and ghee, are now 'opened' by the brahmin priest, who removes the coating with a golden needle."*[61] Elsewhere, Eck writes, *"the eyes were ritually opened with a golden needle or with the final stroke of a paintbrush."*[62]

In 'The Secret Life of Statues' Angela Voss writes:

"In both Egyptian and Greek traditions, the most significant moment of the statue's creation, the moment of animation, was that of the painting in or inserting the eyes – and again it is Hinduism that preserves this in the ritual of darsan. 'Not only must the gods keep their eyes open', writes Diana Eck, 'but so must we, in order to make contact with them, to reap their blessings, and to know their secrets.' This was the moment of consecration, the 'making sacred', the point at which the god entered the image and it became operative in the world, able to meet the gaze of the onlookers."[63]

Once it is consecrated, the statue henceforth becomes an *arcāvatāra* – an *image-incarnation* of the deity. What this means is that the infinite form of the deity has now acquired *mūrti* or *definite form*, with well-defined contours and limits. What is more, the emblems and hand gestures (*mudra*) give the statue a definite resemblance to the deity, making it a *pratima* or *likeness*. It is the divine proportions and stylistic likeness that make the image 'beautiful' and a wonder to behold.[64]

The subsequent act of Contemplation and worship (*pūjā*) involves many ritual gestures, but at its heart is the act of seeing – *darśan*. At first, the devotee may approach the sacred image with the *upacāras* or 'honourary offerings' in hand, such as fresh leaves, sandalwood paste, incense or betel nuts, and place them on the altar – though the most auspicious offering is the five-wicked oil lamp (*āratī*), which is circled before the deity while hymns are sung and handbells rung.[65]

To show her devotion (*bhakti*), the worshipper may 'touch' (*sparśa*) the statue in various places with her hands, then touch herself to instill the deity's presence within (*nyāsa*).[66]

But, *"the central act of Hindu worship,"* Eck reminds us, *"is to stand in the presence of the deity and to behold the image with one's own eyes, to see and be seen by the deity. Darśan is sometimes translated as the 'auspicious sight' of the divine [...] Beholding the image is an act of worship, and through the eyes one gains the blessings of the divine."*[67]

The act of *darśan* or 'sacred seeing', though it is still practiced today, has a more ancient meaning. *"In Vedic India,"* Eck writes, *"the 'seers' were called ṛṣis. In their hymns, collected in the Rg Veda, 'to see' often means 'a mystical, supernatural beholding' or 'visionary experiencing.'"*[68]

IX. *Ekāgratā* – Concentration on a Fixed Point

Some sacred texts describe this unique form of Contemplation as *ekāgratā – the 'one-pointed' meditation on an image*. In an extended passage, Diane L. Eck describes the *ekāgratā* meditation:

"The image is primarily a focus for concentration [...It] is a kind of yantra, literally a 'device' for harnessing the eye and mind so that the one-pointedness of thought (ekāgratā), which is fundamental to meditation, can be attained. The image is a support for meditation."[69]

She then goes on to cite the *Vishnu Saṁhitā*, a ritual text for worshipping statues of Vishnu (Fig. 26.8): *"Without form, how can God be meditated upon? If (He is) without any form, where will the mind fix itself? When there is nothing for the mind to attach itself to, it will slip away from meditation or will glide into a state of slumber. Therefore the wise will meditate on some form, remembering, however, that the form is a superimposition and not a reality."*[70]

In *Artistic Form and Yoga in the Sacred Images of India,* Heinrich Zimmer also describes the *ekāgratā* meditation, which is a vital part of the *prāṇapratiṣṭā* (instillation of breath) into the statue, achieved through the flower offering (*puśpānjali*):

"Upon entering, the worshiper casts aside any possible disruptive influences from the heavenly sphere by staring straight ahead, unblinking, so that his gaze is like that of the gods [...]. Any distractions lurking in the earthly sphere he drives away by striking the ground three times with his heel. [...] Then follows an act of concentrated meditation (ekāgrada-dhyāna) that, guided in the inner visions by a series of spoken formulas and syllables (dhyāna-mantras), constructs the image of the god's essential nature from the feet to the head and back again. This act of inner worship is to precede every external one."[71]

Zimmer then cites a passage from the Sāktānanda-taranginī: *"After seeing the Ista-devata* [tutelary deity] *in one's heart, one should establish Her in the image, picture, vessel or yantra and then worship her."*[72]

As such, one must concentrate, first, on the *inner image* of the deity, and then project it or instill this into the sculpture. One concentrates on the inner image and sees it through 'inward vision', which is manifestly different from 'outward vision'.

The difference is that one can 'see unity' with the aid of inward vision, while outward vision has great difficulties with this task. *"If our* [physical] *eye actually expects to deal with the multitude of things in its field of vision,"* Zimmer writes, *"it has to roam about, to rove back and forth."*[73]

But, *"How different is our inward vision!"*[74] Zimmer exclaims. *"With equal intensity and without showing favour, our inner eye must illuminate everything gathered before it."*[75] And he adds, *"This particular type of visualization fills up the entire field of view,"* so that *"the mind's focus is directed at the whole as the sum of its parts* [...] *with a clear focus on a single point."*[76] Our focus expands until all the parts are seen *"with equal sharpness"*[77] and the figure stands *"totally motionless"*[78] while being *"sealed in tranquility."*[79]

Having achieved this stupendous inner vision, the contemplative then projects it onto the statue through the flower offering. And so, meditating upon the stone image with the flower offering in his hands, the contemplative performs the ritual 'act of installation'.

According to the Gandharva Tantra: *"Let him think of the identity between the image manifested within and the image without. Next, the energy of consciousness within should be taken* [...] *with the breath along the nostrils and infused into the handful of flowers. Thus, issuing with the breath, the Devata* [the inner image of the deity] *enters into the flowers. The Sādhaka* [devotee] *should then establish the Devata in the* [stone] *image by touching it with those flowers."*[80]

Through this theurgic act of touching the sculpture with the flowers, the stilled statue transforms into a beatific vision of the deity. No longer does the god appear in his limited form of lifeless stone, but expands into an unbounded apparition of divine proportions.

Fig. 26.8 - Standing Statue of Vishnu
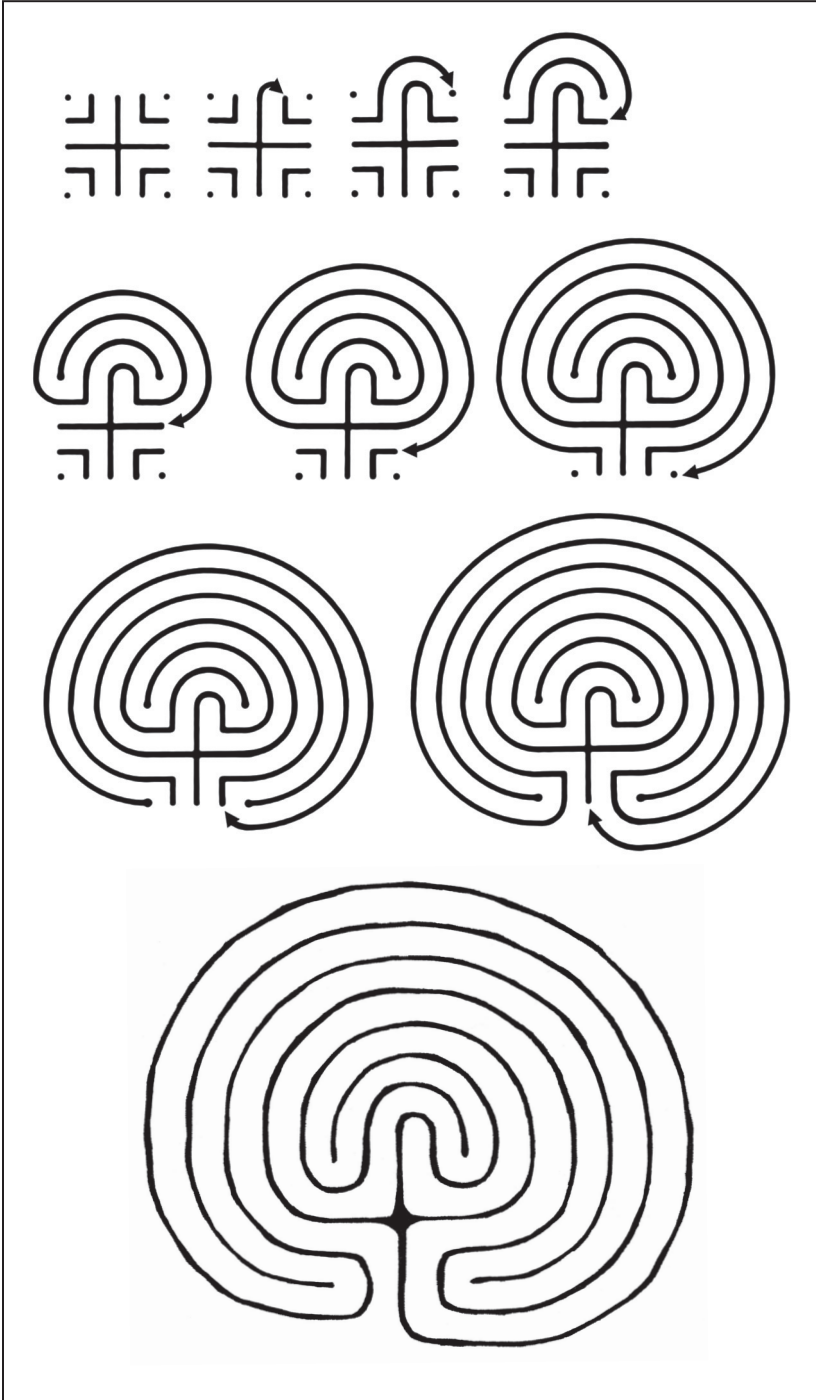
Fig. 27.2 - Expansion of a Minoan Pottery Glyph into the Labyrinth

CHAPTER XXVII
THEURGY
THE VISION JOURNEY
IN THE WEST

I. Theurgic Rites

The Minoan civilization has left us with many mysteries. Because we have no sacred texts to rely upon, the images alone must speak to us of their ancient worldview. Perhaps the best-known image from that Aegean civilization is the labyrinth. But Minoan pottery is also over-run with mysterious glyphs that, at first glance, seem indecipherable (Fig. 27.1). Nevertheless, with time we have learned to read some of these glyphs as mnemonic devices for re-constructing the fabled labyrinth. As the example opposite shows (Fig. 27.2), the second and third glyphs below may be expanded to create the Minoan labyrinth.
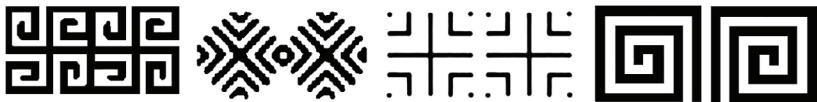
Fig. 27.1 - Minoan Pottery Glyphs

Their ritual purpose becomes clearer when we remember that spirals and other labyrinthine designs often appeared at the entrance to underground mortuary temples. If we interpret the Minoan labyrinth as an image of the afterworld, then we may be surprised to discover that the seven turnings in the labyrinth correspond to the seven visible planets in the heavens. More than that, the labyrinth may have served as a kind of *map* for the ascending soul to navigate its passage through the seven planetary realms – to ultimately arrive at the stilled eternal realm, symbolized by the centre of the labyrinth.

In this sense, the labyrinth and its associated glyphs served as an *aide-mémoire* for the dis-embodied soul to reconstruct and remember its afterlife passage through the planetary spheres. Although we have no proof of this, the sacred art of later civilizations – in both the East and West – attest to the fact that many such mnemonic devices existed, and they all served as carefully-constructed maps for the soul's passage through the post-mortem realms. This is particularly true of mandalas in the East, which we shall examine in the next chapter, and theurgic rites in the West, practiced around Alexandria in the first century of our own era.

The Greek word *theurgy* (from *theos,* 'divine' and *ergeia*, 'workings', hence 'divine workings') describes the ancient practice of invoking the gods through their earthly vehicles or statues – such as occurred during the Mysteries and other religious festivals. Beyond the rituals involved in consecrating a statue, a more contemplative practice evolved, wherein the theurgist ascended through the heavenly spheres to experience a momentary *henosis* or 'oneness' with the Divine source.

Several great theurgists have come down to us through time, such as Julian the Chaldaean and his son, Julian the Theurgist, who are credited with the creation of *The Chaldaean Oracles* (2nd century CE); the Neo-Platonist philosophers Numenius, Iamblichus and Proclus; as well as the 4th century Roman Emperor Julian, whose attempts to elevate Neo-Platonic Theurgy into the state religion earned him the title of Julian the Philosopher from his supporters, and Julian the Apostate from the church.

But the greatest theurgist to come down to us through time is, without a doubt, Hermes Trismegistus. In the Latin *Asclepius*, the thrice-great Hermes conducts a dialogue with Asclepius on the spiritual life of statues:

> *"Humanity persists in imitating divinity, representing gods in semblance of its own features..."*
> *"Are you talking about statues, Trismegistus?"*
> *"Statues, Asclepius, yes... I mean statues ensouled and conscious, filled with spirit."*[1]

During the consecration of a sacred image, the theurgist performed certain rites which 'activated' the statue – 'ensouling it' (*empsychis*) and 'filling it with spirit' (*enpneumatosis*). From that time forward, the statue was regarded as a sacred mirror of the Divine. This ancient view onto statues inspired endless debate among Neo-Platonic philosophers – some of whom refused to accept this more ancient, mythopoeic outlook within their rationalist worldview.

Plato (427 – 327 BCE) himself was, in part, responsible for this debate. Although the Athenian philosopher acknowledged the importance of the Mysteries, he upheld reason over rite. While accrediting Pythagoras, the Orphics and even the ancient Egyptians as the true source of wisdom, he introduced *dialectic* and *logos* as superior to *theurgy* and *agalmata*.

To put the Platonic legacy in proper perspective, we must remember that Plato himself wrote in the 3rd century BCE. Over the next six hundred years, his writings were copied, commented upon and re-interpreted – chiefly by Plotinus (204 – 270 CE), a brilliant 3rd century philosopher now called 'the father of Neo-Platonism.' Plotinus framed Plato's philosophy within the 'Emanationist' worldview, where all of creation descends from the One in ever-lower hypostases or levels of being, while remaining fundamentally unified at its core.

Plotinus' chief disciple was Porphyry (c. 234 – c. 305 CE), a prolific writer on many subjects. He wrote his master's biography (*On the Life of Plotinus*) and organized his writings into nine treatises (*The Enneads*). Like his teacher, Porphyry was a rationalist, and they both questioned the efficacy

of theurgic rites. Plotinus wrote the treatise *'Against the Gnostics'* and Porphyry penned *'The Letter to Anebo'* which called into question numerous theurgic practices.

Porphyry's greatest student was Iamblichus (c. 245 – c. 345 CE), a brilliant exponent of the Neo-Platonic philosophy who – contrary to his master – defended the value of statuary, ritual and myth. In one of his most well-known texts, he contends with his master Porphyry, refuting the *'Letter to Anebo'* line by line. This book, *On the Mysteries* (*De mysteriis*), becomes one of the best-known defences of theurgy, and offers some rare and valuable insights into those Mystery rites which were otherwise guarded in great silence.

Perhaps the last and greatest of the Neo-Platonic philosophers was Proclus (412 – 485 CE), a fifth century theologian, geometer and mathematician who eventually headed Plato's Academy in Athens. Like Iamblichus, he wrote a staunch defence of theurgy (*On the Sacred Art*), since he himself had been initiated into the Chaldaean, Orphic and Eleusinian Mysteries. Through these experiences, he reported visions of Hecate, Athena and the Great Goddess in her triple-form of Rhea, Demeter and Persephone.

The Hermetica, *The Chaldean Oracles,* and *The Gnostic Codices* also constitute important sources for theurgic practice. All of these emerged from Alexandria in the first century – that rich melting pot of Greek, Egyptian, Jewish and early Christian beliefs during Egypt's Ptolemaic period. *The Hermetica* (which combines the Greek *Corpus Hermeticum* and the Latin *Asclepius*) are like a last desperate attempt to preserve in Greek and Latin the lost Egyptian wisdom which could no longer be read in the hieroglyphs. *The Chaldean Oracles* perform a similar service for Babylonia ("Chaldea" in Greek), in the form of an ancient Mystery poem in Greek hexameters. Both of these late Hellenic works look back upon the demise of Egyptian and Babylonian culture with great regret, trying to at least *preserve* or even *revive* their lost philosophies.

The Gnostic Codices, which were discovered in Nag Hammadi Egypt in 1945, also combine Greek, Egyptian, Jewish and early Christian motifs to give us a rare glimpse into 'the Visionary Ascent' – a contemplative rite which (as we shall see by the end of this chapter) constitutes the highest form of theurgic practice.

The word *theurgia* is a Neo-Platonic invention, borrowed from the *Chaldean Oracles*. The word *theurgist* came to denote anyone who participated in the conception, creation and consecration of sacred images. In the past, this occurred through the combined efforts of hierophants (priests) and craftsmen. Today, the Visionary Artist is called upon to revive these ancient practices – to not only conceive and create a work of art, *but to consecrate it as sacred…*

II. Word against Image: the *Logos* & the *Agalmata*

In one passage from his *Letter to Anebo,* Porphyry wonders aloud how an all-powerful deity may be commanded to descend from above and enter its statue: *"It very much indeed perplexes me to understand how superior beings, when invoked* [through the rite of a statue's consecration]*, are commanded by those that invoke them."*[2]

In his rebuttal, Iamblichus elaborates a defence of theurgy that is founded upon the Neo-Platonic worldview: all things come from the One and, as such, are vehicles or reflections of its greatness:

"...The light of the gods shines while entirely separate from the objects illuminated, and, being firmly established in itself, makes its way through all existing things."[3]

Iamblichus then applies this unified worldview onto the animation of divine statues: *"Whether* [in the case of] *holy cities and regions, whether to certain temple-precincts or sacred images, the divine irradiation shines upon them all... This light is one and the same everywhere, and is not only present, undivided, with all things* [but...] *fills all things, as a cause, joins them together in itself, unites them everywhere with itself, and combines the ends with the beginnings. Who, then, that contemplates the visible image of the gods, thus united as one, will never have too much reverence."*[4]

As such, the act of consecration does not 'command' the divine spirit to enter the statue (this is the common misconception of 'magic' directed at theurgists). Rather, through the act of consecration (*telestikē*), the statue becomes a clear reflection or earthly vehicle to the pre-existing divine power that is everywhere. Such a divine reflection, as Iamblichus notes at the end, can only be seen and experienced during the subsequent step of *contemplation – theoria – 'Who, then, that contemplates the visible image of the gods, thus united as one, will never have too much reverence.'*

The debate between Iamblichus and his master Porphyry is the result of differing practices leading to the same experience of divine unity (*henosis*): Porphyry, as a rationalist philosopher, has ascended the heavenly spheres and experienced divinity through the thoughtful contemplation (*theoria*) of Plato's invisible concepts and forms (the *eidé*), while Iamblichus has done the same thing through the *more ancient mode* of contemplation (*theoria* as sacred spectating), based on theurgic rites and statuary (the *agalmata*).

"For it is not," Iamblichus writes, *"the concept that unites the theurgic priests to the gods: else what is there to hinder those who pursue philosophic speculation contemplatively, from having the theurgic union to the gods? ...On the other hand, it is the complete fulfilling of the arcane performances, the carrying of them through in a manner worthy of the gods and surpassing all conception, and likewise the power of the voiceless symbols which are perceived by the gods alone, that establish the Theurgic Union. Hence we do not effect these things by thinking."*[5]

Porphyry, while writing about the life of his master, says that Plotinus experienced *henosis* four times while in his presence, and that he himself experienced it once in his lifetime: *"To this God, I also declare, I Porphyry, that in my sixty-eighth year I too was once admitted and I entered into Union."*[6]

Contrast this to Iamblichus' description of the ways the different beings appear in a vision:

"In the Epoptic vision, the figures of the gods shine brilliantly; those of the archangels are awe-inspiring and yet gentle... those of the dæmons are alarming [and] *those of the archons are terrifying to the beholders."*[7]

Iamblichus goes on to say that, while *"demons present the appearance of smouldering fire,"*[8] the angels, by contrast, *"...are resplendent with light."*[9] Greater still is the appearance of the gods: *"The images of the gods glow with abundance of light,"*[10] he says. Indeed, so beautiful is the vision of the gods that *"...there flashes out from the gods Beauty which seems inconceivable, holding the beholders fixed with wonder, imparting to them an unutterable gladness, displaying itself to view with ineffable symmetry."*[11]

This same acuity of vision was experienced by Proclus, as his biographer Marinus recounts: *"The philosopher was cleansed by the Chaldean purification; then he* [Proclus] *held converse, as he himself mentions in one of his* [lost] *works, with the luminous apparitions of Hecate, which he saw with his own eyes."*[12]

While reading the debates between the Neo-Platonic philosophers, I have always had the clear impression that both achieved a mystical state of oneness (*henosis*). But, the new, more philosophical conception of *theoria* lead to a rare and, indeed, rarified encounter with the One as the source of all conceptual forms (*eidé*), while the more ancient practice of *theoria,* coupled with theurgy, led to overwhelming visions of the One, now as the source of a whole hierarchy of heavenly angels and less-than-heavenly demons.

Fig. 27.3 - The Emanations

III. *Sunthêmata:* Proclus on the Sacred Art

In his defence of theurgy, Iamblichus calls upon the more ancient worldview of 'the emanations', where the divine One shines its light into all things – from the luminous planets on high to the darkest and grossest matter below:

"But energy of the divine Fire itself shines forth spontaneously in all directions, and being both self-called and self-operating, is active in like manner through all things, those alike that impart [the divine fire – the planets] *and those that can receive it* [the elements]*."*[13] Indeed: *"Not only does it shine from without, and fill all things, but it likewise permeates all the elements, occupies the earth, and air and fire and water, and leaves nothing destitute of itself."*[14]

While the Divine Light shines through all things, the wise theurgist learned to distinguish its varying degrees of power and the assorted correspondences that result. More specifically, the One 'imparted' its divine fire to the seven luminaries in the heavens – Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, the Sun, Venus, Mercury and the Moon. And each of these, in turn, exerted its influence on 'those that can receive it' – all the images in the sublunary realm, composed of the four elements in the aether – Fire, Air, Water and Earth.
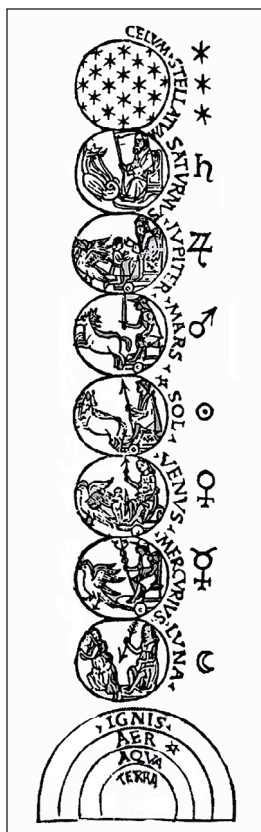
Theurgists brought together the higher and lower powers and, through contemplation, ritually united them – to create symbols of the Sacred:

"The theurgic art in many cases links together stones, plants, animals, aromatic substances, and other such things that are sacred, perfect and godlike, and then from all of these composes an integrated and pure receptacle [for the gods.] *One must select material that is akin to the gods, capable of harmonizing with the construction of the divine dwellings, the consecration of statues, and indeed for the performance of the sacrificial rites in general."*[15]

Proclus, the Neo-Platonic heir to Iamblichus, elaborated upon this worldview. In his text *'On the Sacred Art'*, he showed how all of creation moves, like by like, in accord with the higher powers. Alas, only fragmentary remains of his text have come down to us through time. *'On the Sacred Art'* begins by noting how, individually, each existing thing 'prays in accordance with the rank it occupies':

"How else could it be that the sunflower (hêliotropia) moves in accordance with the sun and the moonflower (selênotropia) with the moon, each, according to its ability, turning around with the luminaries of the world?"[16]

Observing the lotus flower, he remarks: *"Its petals are closed before the appearance of the sun's rays, but it gradually opens them as the sun begins to rise, unfolding them as it reaches its zenith and curling them up again as it descends. What then is the difference between the human manner of hymning the sun, by opening and closing the mouth and lips, and that of the lotus by opening and closing its petals?"*[17]

But even lowly things like stones may become vehicles for the divine emanations: *"For stones as well can be seen to be infused with the emanations of the luminaries, thus we see the rays of the sun reproduced in the golden rays of the sunstone (hêlitên)* [...while] *the moonstone (selênitên) changes both its markings and its patterns along with the moon."*[18]

Thus, a series of correspondences arises between all that is above and all that is below: *"There are seen to be on the earth,"* Proclus remarks, *"suns and moons in a terrestrial form; and in the heavens, all the plants, stones and animals, after a celestial manner."*[19] The philosopher ends with the stirring declaration, *"Thus, all things are full of gods."*[20]

In another text, the *Commentary on the Timaeus of Plato*, Proclus describes how each planet leaves its 'seal' or impression on objects from the lower world: *"For Nature... inserts in bodies the impressions of their alliance to the divinities. In some, indeed, inserting solar, but in others, lunar impressions; and in others again, the symbol of some other god."*[21]

Hence, although the divine One is present throughout the Chain of Being – linking all things into an orderly whole – a series of correspondences evolve between the various levels. These divine signs or tokens are called *sunthêmata* by the theurgists – a word sometimes translated as 'symbols' but usually more distinctly as 'signs' or 'sigils'.

The Greeks already had a word for 'symbol' – *sumbolon*. But a *sunthema* was different; it was a divine token that, like hieroglyphs, immediately manifest the Sacred through its very shape and form; it bore upon its surface the marks or 'impressions' of its heavenly counterpart, and moved in accord with the higher powers. The art of the theurgists, like that of the later alchemists, was to understand 'the divine workings' (*theurgia*) and to

perform a series of operations that combined the divine signs (*sunthêmata*) so as to effect a complete transformation, and indeed, 'a perfection' of the material at hand.

During the statue's creation, the appropriate materials were brought together – alabaster, sandstone, gold, precious jewels, meteoric iron – and fused. During its consecration (- *telestikē* means both *'to consecrate'* and *'to make perfect'*), the work was ritually bathed, anointed, incensed and carried into the light of day, thus transforming it into a *sacred* image (*agalma*).

In one passage from 'On the Sacred Art' – the only passage where Proclus describes *theurgy* directly – he says:

"From these facts, the masters of the Sacred Art found the way to pay divine honours to the Higher Powers, by following what lay in front of their eyes... By mixing together many different things, they unified the emanations [to make] *a likeness of that Whole which exists before every thing else comes into being. And so they often constructed images* (agalmata) *and incenses from these mixtures, mingling the divided divine sigils* (sunthêmata) *into one."*[22]

In many Egyptian *bas reliefs,* we behold the Pharaoh offering incense to a divine statue, or leading it out of the temple in a sacred procession, to become irradiated by Ra's light. The Opening of the Eyes and Mouth ceremony (described last chapter), as well as the Eleusinian Mysteries, involve similar such offerings and purifications. While 'incense' was the principal means of consecrating a statue, Algis Uždavinys notes that other theurgic operations were possible: *"The statue (agalma) is regarded as a vessel and container for the divine powers that take up residence inside it. The awakening of these powers is sometimes achieved by the practice of putting* pharmaka *(remedies, drugs, herbs...) into hollow statues and thereby animating them."*[23]

Before his untimely death in 2010, the Lithuanian scholar Algis Uždavinys returned to many ancient texts neglected by time and re-discovered much of value in their pages. This is especially true of the Orphic, Pythagorean, Gnostic, Hermetic and Neo-Platonic writings which he grouped together under the heading of 'Emanationist' cosmologies, since they all share a common core: that the divine Unity unfolded into multiple levels of being (the 'emanations'); and that the fundamental aim of our existence is the return to our original state of oneness with the Divine (*henosis*). Hence, through *theoria* and theurgic rites, we may accomplish *"...the return of our souls to god* [as] *either a fusion with the divine (theokrasia), or a perfect union (henosis panteles)"*[24]

The consecration of a sacred statue, Uždavinys says, ultimately creates a portal for transcendence:

"Telestikē (the term is derived from the verb telein, to consecrate, to initiate, to make perfect) is not a kind of rustic sorcery (goēteia). Rather it is a means to share or participate in the creative energies of the gods by constructing and consecrating their material receptacles, their cultic vehicles, which then function as the anagogic tokens, as sumbola and sunthēmata (symbol and sign)."[25]

Regarding '*sumbola and sunthēmata'* he writes, *"The symbol (sumbolon, sunthema) is viewed as the central link between the divine realm and the human world."*[26] And: *"These images... function as 'windows of transcendence' irradiating divine power and grace."*[27]

IV. *Psychanodia* – The Soul Ascent

Theurgy was also called *Hieratike* – 'the Sacred Art.' Like alchemy, it was not only an attempt to re-enact 'the divine workings' (*theurgia*) through a series of ritual operations that 'combined the divine signs' (*sunthēmata*). Rather, a form of meditation was added to these ritual stages, making it a graduated ascent (*anagôgé*) in the mind of the contemplator. Such a 'soul ascent' was known as *psychanodia* in the ancient world.

At the foundation of the Emanationist philosophy, the soul recognizes its true nature: it has *proceeded* from the One (*proôdos*) and it will *return* to the One (*epistrophe*). This fundamental knowledge and remembrance (the *gnôsis*) constitutes our beginning, middle and end. Iamblichus described it as *"The issuing forth of all from the One, the returning again into the One, and the absolute rule of the One in everything."*[28]

Within this lifetime, we may gain knowledge of *the way* of return, through mystical experience. This was the purpose of the ancient Mystery rites, to ritually enact those steps (*theurgia*) and to witness (*theoria*) the self-unfolding of the One, in a moment of revelation (*epoptika*). By engraving those steps in our memory, *the way* of 'the soul's ascent' (*psychanodia*) could be remembered after death.

In some of the more amazing passages from *On the Mysteries* (*De mysteriis*), Iamblichus describes how the ancient Mystery rites, such as those at Eleusis, led to the soul's visionary ascent and union with the Divine:

"From these Performances it is plain, that what we are now discoursing about is the Safe Return of the Soul, for while contemplating the Blessed Spectacles, the soul exchanges one life for another, becomes linked to another energy, and rightly viewing the matter, it seems to be not even human, but is filled with the most blessed energy of the gods... Indeed, the upward way through the invocations effects for the priests a purifying of the passions, a release from the condition of generated life, and likewise a total union to the Divine First Cause."[29]

In another startling passage, he writes:

"By such a purpose, therefore, the gods being gracious and propitious, give forth light abundantly to the theurgists, both calling their souls upward into themselves, providing for them union to themselves in the Chorus, and accustoming them, while they are still in the body, to hold themselves aloof from corporeal things, and likewise to be led up to their own eternal and noetic First Cause."[30]

However, Iamblichus admits that the Visionary Ascent is not easily accomplished. Such a revelation *"...only arises rarely..."*[31] and is only *"...activated by the performance of the perfect sacrifice..."*[32] The priest or theurgist must time the ritual properly, enact the steps perfectly, and be in a sufficient state of purity both physically and mentally.

During the rite, the theurgist's mind must be fully focussed, and his hands faultlessly concentrated on the symbolic manipulations, so as to lead him toward a perfect attunement and oneness with the higher, divine Mind: *"It is the communion of a friendship based on like-mindedness and an indissoluble bond of unity that gives coherence to the performance of hieratic rites,"*[33] Iamblichus writes. But in the end, *"Ascent to the intelligible fire is granted to theurgists – a process which indeed must be proposed as the goal... of every theurgic operation."*[34]

V. The Soul Vehicle

The lower world, for the Neo-Platonists, is a 'place of generation' where our bodies, as material receptacles, constitute a kind of prison and corruption for the divinely-inspired soul:

"The human soul," Iamblichus writes, *"is held fast by a single form, and is obscured by the body on every side; and this condition* [is] *called the river of Forgetfulness or the water of Lethe, or 'ignorance' or 'madness' or 'bondage through excessive emotions'* [or being] *detained in a prison."*[35]

To rise up, through visions, to the higher spheres, the soul must free itself of the body. This 'out of body experience' however, is only temporary; and the soul soon finds itself back in the clasp of matter once more:

"*For when we become entirely soul and are outside of the body, and soaring on high with all the gods of the non-material realm, we occupy ourselves with sublime visions. Then again, we are bound in the oyster-like body and held fast under the dominion of matter, and are corporeal in feeling and aspiration."*[36]

For the soul to journey upward and away from the body, a vehicle (*ochêma*) was required. This is, perhaps, one of the most amazing ideas to arise within Neo-Platonism – the concept of the Soul Vehicle:

"All this kind of divination..." Iamblichus writes, *"is encompassed by one power which someone might call 'evoking the light.' This somehow illuminates the aether-like and luminous vehicle* [*aitherodes kai augoeides ochêma*] *surrounding the soul with divine light, from which vehicle the divine appearances, set in motion by the gods' will, take possession of the imaginative power in us."*[37]

In *Iamblichus and the Theory of the Vehicle of the Soul*, John F. Finamore explains that one of the chief purposes of the Soul Vehicle, during the visionary ascent, is to *"...act as the organ of sense-perception and imagination,"*[38] so that, once it is fully immersed in the divine light, the vehicle becomes *"...filled with divine images."*[39]

Proclus also wrote about this vehicle, which he described variously as a luminous vehicle (*augoeides ochêma*) or spiritual vehicle (*pneumatic ochêma*). More interesting still, he viewed the Soul Vehicle as spherical in form, though other geometric shapes were possible: *"Our vehicle is rendered spherical, and is moved circularly, when the soul is in a remarkable degree assimilated to the divine mind (nous)."*[40]

The Soul Vehicle is the instrument of higher perception in us. Being 'aether-like and luminous', it temporarily replaces the soul's material receptacle with an ethereal one (*aitherodes ochêma*) to rise up through the sub-lunar realms, and even with a luminous one (*augoeides ochêma*) to journey through the heavenly spheres. Indeed, the rays of divine light become the shafts through which the Soul Vehicle ascends and descends.

VI. The Gnostic Garment of Light

The Neo-Platonic Soul Vehicle resembles, to a remarkable degree, the Garment of Light described by the Gnostics. Like the luminous vehicle, the Garment of Light was needed to ascend through the planetary spheres. However, since the Gnostics perceived the lower guardians of heaven's

gates (the *Archons*) to be essentially malevolent, the Garment of Light also protected the soul during its other-worldly passage:

"The powers [Archons] *do not see those who are clothed in the perfect light, and consequently are not able to detain them. One will clothe himself in this light sacramentally in the union."*[41]

It was during the Gnostic rite of baptism that one underwent a visionary ascent and was granted the Garment of Light:

"And I delivered him to those who give robes – Yammon, Elasso, Amenai – and they covered him with a robe from the robes of the Light; and I delivered him to the baptizers, and they baptized him – Micheus, Michar, Mnesinous – and they immersed him in the spring of the Water of Life."[42]

The origin of the concept of the Garment of Light remains laden with mystery. According to one Gnostic text, it was Christ, during his first descent into the world, who put on the Garment of Light, which is composed of all the emanations, from the highest to the lowest: *"Afterwards the mother established her first-born son (...) And she gave to him a garment in which to accomplish all things. And in it were all bodies: the body of fire, and the body of water, and the body, of air and the body of earth, and the body of wind, and the body of angels, and the body of archangels, and the body of powers, and the body of mighty ones, and the body of gods, and the body of lords. In a word, within it were all bodies so that none could hinder him from going to the height or from going down to the abyss."*[43]

When we put on the Garment of Light, during the Gnostic baptism, we were, in essence, putting on an image of Christ, who is referred to in *The Gospel of Philip* as 'the living man': *"The living water is a body* [i.e. the baptismal water becomes a garment]. *It is necessary that we put on the living man.* [i.e. Christ as a garment]. *Therefore, when he is about to go down into the water, he unclothes himself, in order that he may put on the living man."*[44]

To protect himself from evil influences, the Gnostic wore the Garment of Light, both during the Visionary Ascent and during their afterlife voyage through the heavenly spheres. But, once it was acquired, the Gnostic was called upon to wear the garment all the time, so as to become a living image or manifestation of Christ in this world. Once more, in the words of the *Gospel of Philip*: *"You saw Christ, you became Christ."*[45]

But, important as it was, the luminous Soul Vehicle or Garment of Light was only one of the many *sunthêmata* required for the Soul Ascent.

VII. Maps of the Afterworld:
Reconstructing the Soul's Route to Salvation

The divine signs (*sunthêmata*) manipulated by the theurgist were not only images, but also sounds, gestures and scents – anything that would stimulate the memory of our true hidden state, as a particle of divine oneness. The *sunthêmata* included chants, mantras, mudras, vocalizations and hierarchies of names. Different kinds of incense stimulated different memory-cues in the mind. The visualized images were not only figurative, but geometric and numerical. All had the 'anagogic' function of lifting the initiate higher, through a series of graduated steps, to union with the Divine (*anagogia* means *'to elevate'*).
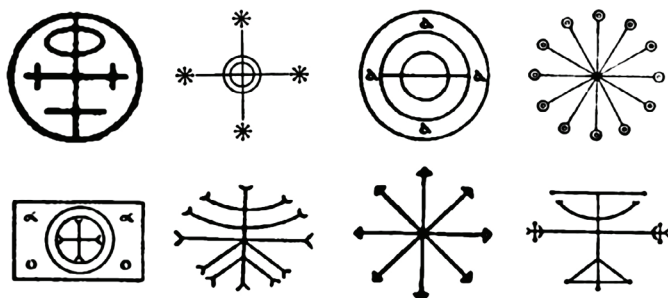
Fig. 27.4 - Gnostic Sigils from *The First and Second Books of IEOU (Jeu)*

Once again, we return to the researches of Algis Uždavinys. The theurgy of the Soul Ascent, he notes, occurred in stages. On the one hand, the theurgist ascended through the use of *"...chains of mantric names, the anagogic sounds of the sacred chants accompanied by inner visualizations and resulting in divine epiphanies,"* to which he adds, *"various divine numbers and geometric shapes, secret names (arrheta onomata) and material objects, all of them serving as theurgic tokens and means of elevation."*[46]

On the other hand, the theurgist also had to remember the deeper meaning of all these symbols. Describing the One as the 'noetic principle' – meaning the higher Mind (*Nous*) which 'thinks' (*noésis*) upon itself and thus 'thinks' *us* into being – he writes: *"Because of its noetic origins, the soul has an inborn (albeit temporarily forgotten) knowledge of these world-creating, world-ruling and, simultaneously, elevating names... When the essential hidden sunthema* [divine sign] *is remembered, re-awakened, and re-sounded, the soul, mythically speaking, returns... to its noetic and supra-noetic principle."*[47]

Thus, through the full enactment of the theurgic Soul Ascent, accompanied by meditation and contemplation, the soul experiences, in Uždavinys' words, *"...the One in its perennial contemplation of itself."*[48]
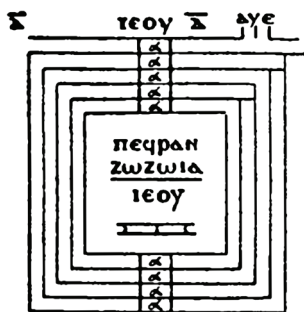
Fig. 27.5 - Diagram from
The First Book of IEOU (Jeu)

Many of the Gnostic *sunthêmata* have come down to us, and these include geometric sigils (also called 'seals' – Fig. 27.4) and elaborate names with long vowel sequences. Some of the Gnostic diagrams (Fig. 27.5) resemble Buddhist mandalas, and reveal thereby their deeper purpose – *as mnemonic devices.* Once the soul is freed from the body (whether in a visionary state or during the afterlife journey), it must *navigate* its passage through the post-mortem realm, which the Gnostics called the *aeons* and the Buddhists, the *bardos*. Gnostic sigils and Buddhist mandalas served the same purpose: as mental maps or road marks for reconstructing the soul's route to salvation.
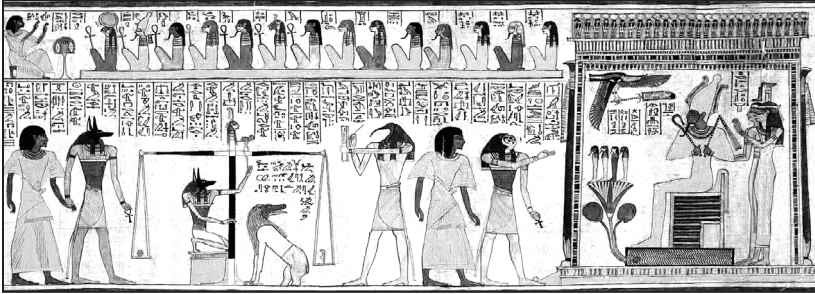
Fig. 27.6 - The Judgement Hall of Osiris

This idea is perennial and pervasive, found in the oldest texts of the Egyptians and Babylonians. Where the Egyptian *Books of the Afterlife* envisioned the soul journey as a *horizontal* boat-trip through the twelve gates of the Netherworld, the Sumerian myth of Inanna portrayed it, instead, as a *vertical* journey through the seven heavenly spheres.

The Egyptian *Book of Gates*, for example, depicts the afterlife journey as a passage through twelve distinct 'gates', one for each hour of the night. Accompanying Re on his solar barque, the soul encounters demons at each doorway, repelling them through a series of protective 'spells'. At the fifth hour (i.e. at the mid-point of the journey, in the very nadir of the Netherworld) the barque reaches the Judgement Hall of Osiris (Fig. 27.6). Here, each passenger's heart is weighed against Maat's 'feather of truth'. Only those *'who have magnified the forms of the god'*[49] pass beyond the fifth gate. On the morning horizon (*akhet*), they fuse with the sun, and are granted eternal life. As 'solarized' beings or stars, they join the eternal cycle of the cosmos.

Fig. 27.7 - Roll-out of Sumerian Cylinder Seals: *Inanna's Descent to the Underworld*

In the Sumerian myth of Inanna's *Descent to the Underworld* (Fig. 27.7), the Goddess 'from the Great Above' passes downward through seven gates – corresponding to the seven planetary doorways – and surrenders one of her garments or talismans at each gate until, naked, she enters 'the Great Below'. This ancient mythologem lies at the root of Salome's famous Dance of the Seven Veils.

The recurrence of the numbers seven and twelve are due to the cosmological model of the Egyptians and Babylonians, which persisted from Ptolemy all the way through to the Middle Ages (Fig. 27.8). Seven was the number of visible planets in the heavens, which were envisioned as a series of blackened spheres-within-spheres, so that only the planetary spark was visible – like a doorway to the effulgence of light beyond it. Below the planets lay the 'sublunary' realm ('under the moon's sway'), which consisted of five more spheres-within-spheres – with the aetheric sphere outermost; fire and
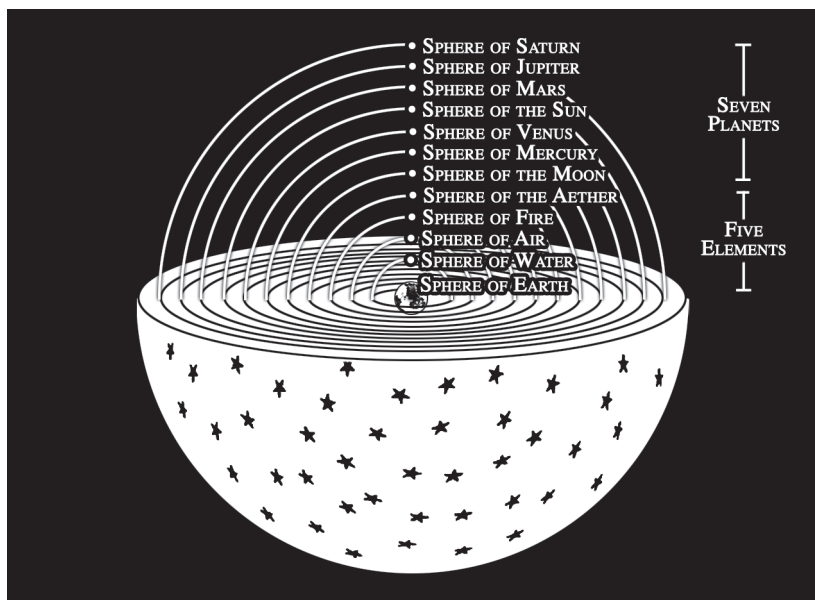
Fig. 27.8 - The Cosmos as Seven plus Five equals Twelve Spheres Within Spheres

air rising naturally to the next two spheres, and water and earth descending to the innermost spheres. Hence, the seven planets and five elements created a twelve-fold cosmos – a hierarchy of twelve realms varying in degrees of light and darkness, of spirit and matter, of order and chaos.

In the Gnostic and Hermetic texts, the soul's release from the five elements of the body and its ascent through the heavenly spheres is described in detail. Take, for example, this passage from the first book of *The Corpus Hermeticum*:

"First, in releasing the material body you give the body over to alteration, and the form that you used to have vanishes... Thence the human being [or soul] *rushes up through the cosmic framework, at the first zone* [the lunar sphere] *surrendering the energy of increase and decrease; at the second* [Mercury] *evil machination, a device now inactive; at the third* [Venus] *the illusion of longing, now inactive; at the fourth* [the Sun] *the ruler's arrogance, now feed of excess; at the fifth* [Mars] *unholy presumption and daring recklessness; at the sixth* [Jupiter] *the evil impulses that come from wealth, now inactive; and at the seventh zone* [Saturn] *the deceit that lies in ambush. And then, stripped of the effects of the cosmic framework, the human enters the region of the ogdoad* [the eighth heaven of the fixed stars]*; he has his own proper power, and along with the blessed, he hymns the father."*[50]

As this passage makes clear, certain qualities were associated with each planet. During her descent, Inanna surrendered a garment or talisman at each planetary doorway. In the Hermetic text, the ascending soul is '*stripped of the effects of the cosmic framework*' and surrenders a certain soul-quality as it rises. The Gnostics, meanwhile, emphasized the *negative* qualities associated with each planet, since they regarded it as an evil threshold-guardian or *Archon*.

According to the Gnostic view, when our soul first separated from the One and descended into dark matter, it 'put on' seven soul-garments – one 'passion of the soul' was granted by each threshold-guardian, leaving a distinct mark or seal on the soul. Descending further into matter, the soul also 'put on' the body – which was a dark material receptacle composed of the four elements in the aether. During its post-mortem ascent (and during a vision), the soul shed the earthly receptacle and attempted to surrender each of its soul garments – like a seal or talisman paid to the planetary Archon or guardian (whom they also called 'toll collectors').

What were the 'passions of the soul' associated with each planet? None of the Gnostic texts quite agreed on this point. In the above Hermetic text, the planetary character of each Greek god is evoked, giving us a clue. In general, the seven negative qualities associated with each Soul Garment may be listed as:

• Delusion – Saturn
• Envy – Jupiter
• Wrath – Mars
• Pride – the Sun
• Lust – Venus
• Greed – Mercury
• Inconstancy – the Moon

By associating further negative qualities with the elements (and their humours in the body), we may add five more:

• Fear – the Aether
• Strife – choleric Fire
• Dishonesty – sanguine Air
• Apathy – phlegmatic Water
• Depression – melancholy Earth

Following Plato, the theurgists saw the body as 'a prison' which holds us *'in bondage through excessive emotions'* (as Iamblichus says above). The Hermeticists had a more mitigated view onto the body (Nature, they said, was divine), while the Gnostics went to extremes (the only escape from this dark material world was to become ascetic or libertine). But all agreed that excess of emotion, or the surrendering of the soul to bodily passions, had a huge and negative impact on the visionary ascent.

For this reason, much preparation was needed, to cleanse the mind of negative thoughts and purge the body of negative feelings. In Gnosticism, a series of sacraments were developed, called the Mystery of the Five Seals. Like the other ancient Mysteries, the experiences at the heart of these initiatory rites were never revealed. But, their purpose was to prepare and cleanse the initiate before receiving the final revelation.

The Gnostic baptism was an ornate ritual that used visualizations and the Visionary Ascent to reveal the full extent of the afterlife journey. Through sacred names, vocalizations and sigils, it ritually engraved in the memory the

soul's way of salvation. We may basically reconstruct the Gnostic baptism*
as follows:

After a three-fold immersion in water (*baptism*) and a single unction
with oil (*chrism*) as well as ingesting a sacrament (*eucharist*), the initiate
began the Visionary Ascent (*resurrection*) by 'renouncing' the Archons of
the lower aeons (*renunciation*) and 'invoking' the Angels of the upper aeons
(*invocation*) through a series of names, vocalizations and sigils. To pass
beyond the Archons' planetary gateways, the initiate also had to visualize the
'stripping off' of its five bodily garments and seven soul garments.

Passing into the Upper Aeons, the initiate was then 'called' by their
spiritual name (*naming*) and their image was 'sealed' in the watery light of
the upper aeons (*sealing*). Thus, eternally clothed in their 'Garment of Light',
they experienced a momentary revelation, through union with the Divine (*the
Bridal Chamber*).

While many Gnostic gospels attest to the power and beauty of this
Mystery, others warn that the soul's passage to salvation is not easily attained.
In the *Apocalypse of Paul,* for example, the Archon of the fourth heaven
detains a soul, and brings forth witnesses to attest to its worldly corruption.
*"When the soul heard these things, it gazed downward in sorrow. And then it
gazed upward. It was cast down. The soul that was cast down went to a body
which had been prepared for it."*[51] Like the Neo-Platonists and Hermeticists
(who were much inspired by Plato's myth of Er), the Gnostics held the view
of *metempsychosis*, of the soul's cyclic rebirth in another body.

In *The Dialogue of the Saviour*, Christ describes the afterworld passage,
saying to his disciples:

*"When the time of dissolution arrives, the first power of darkness will
come upon you. Do not be afraid! ...If you are afraid of what is about to come
upon you, it will engulf you. For there is not one among them who will spare
you or show you mercy. But, look upon the* [Archon]*, since you have mastered
every word on earth. ...The crossing place is fearful, but you, with a single
mind, will pass it by!"*[52]

Throughout the ancient world, sacred texts and rituals were designed
to help lead the initiate through their visionary experience. Incense and
sacraments; visualizations and vocalizations; mantras and mudras – all these
sunthêmata were ritually deployed to instill in the initiate a deep remembering
of *the way* through the visionary afterlife. Leaving the body and ascending the
heavenly spheres, the soul received the *gnôsis* of its true nature, witnessing
its origin in the One.

But we must not forget that – it was the ancient hieratic works of art, like
statues and icons, which momentarily transformed the theurgic experience
into a divine revelation. The sacred images were not only 'aesthetically-
pleasing' to the eye, but active channels of divine energy which had been
ritually consecrated and activated. Through theurgy and *theoria*, the Visionary
art of old had that tremendous power.

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* For a literary reconstruction of the Gnostic Baptism ritual, see Chapter 11 of my novel
The Hidden Passion: A Novel of the Gnostic Christ Based on the Nag Hammadi Texts (2007)
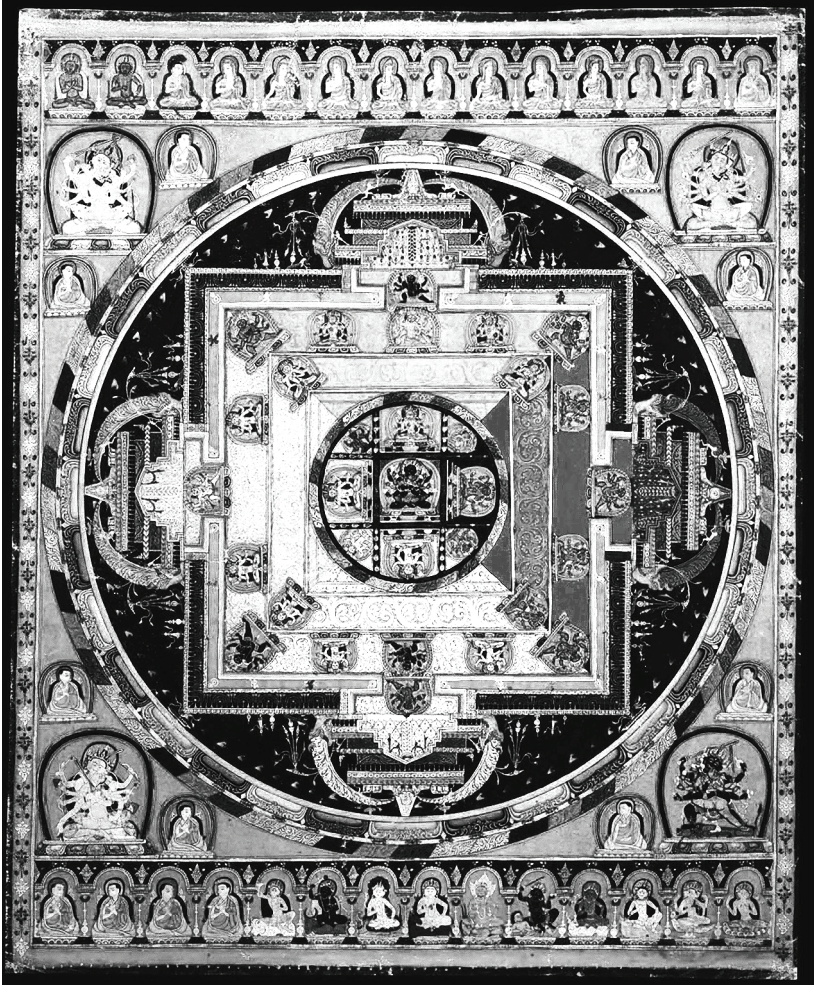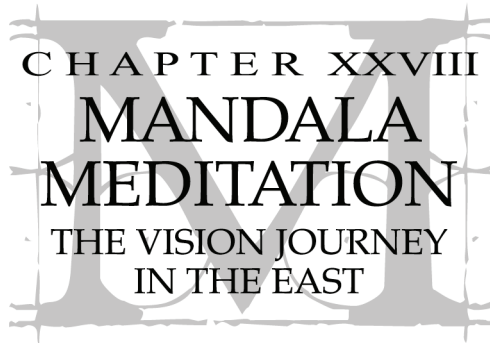
Fig. 28.1 - Thangka of the Guhyasamānja Mandala

CHAPTER XXVIII
MANDALA MEDITATION
THE VISION JOURNEY
IN THE EAST

I. Mandala Meditation:
The Generation & Completion Stages

In February of 2014, during the Winter Trimester at The Vienna Academy of Visionary Art, Vera Atlantia and Kuba Ambrose initiated the students and teachers into a collective project: the creation of a Padmasambhava Mandala. Over the course of the next twelve weeks, we chanted, prayed and meditated while mixing paints and rendering figures on the four-sided design. Thanks to Timea Tallian, who had studied Thangka painting under Master Lopon Sangay Rinchen of the Trongsa monastery in Bhutan, we gained a deeper respect for their sacred traditions, learning how to pray while mixing the paints, and consecrating the final work with a mantra inscribed on the back.

All of this encouraged me to finally fulfill a life-long dream – of better understanding Thangka painting, and immersing myself into its contemplative practice. It was particularly Mandala meditation that absorbed my interest, with its *sādhana* visualizations upon a chosen *yidam* or meditation deity. As I immersed myself deeper in the subject, Andrew Stewart crossed my path. Our long discussions confirmed to me that Mandala Meditation is essentially linked to the Afterlife journey. I am forever grateful to Vera, Kuba, Timea and Andrew for introducing and initiating me to this revered art form.
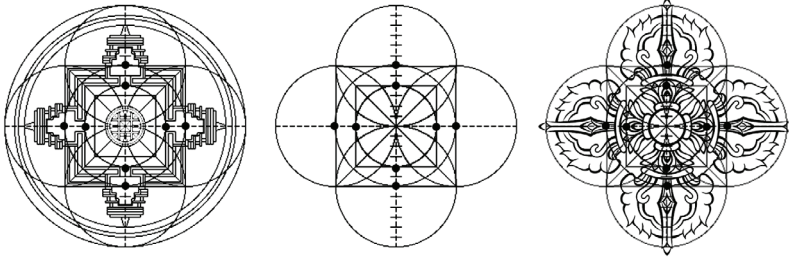
Fig. 28.2 - Geometric Construction of the Mandala and Vajra Diamond-Thunderbolt

In its deepest sense, the *mandala* is a cosmogram of the inner and outer worlds. At one and the same time, this design offers us a map of the mind's inner workings and a reconstruction of the entire cosmos. More than that, it is a clear manifestation of the enlightened mind, and an image of the world made perfect and true – transformed into the heavenly kingdom.

At the very centre of the mandala is the Tantric deity – an image of the yogini, bodhisattva or Buddha who is nothing less than the one true source of all these appearances. Made of clear transparent light, the mandala is an emanation of the enlightening mind at the centre, and all the figures at different levels are varying aspects of its own multiform appearance, whose essence and origin are one.

The Tibetan word for mandala – *dykil-'khor* – means, literally, 'that which encircles a centre.' As we can see in Fig. 28.2, a mandala is constructed through the intersection of six circles around a centre – one inner 8 x 8 squared circle and five more 12 x 12 circles: one inner squared and four outer ones on its circumference. The inner walls of the palace follow the 8 x 8 measures of the inner squared circle, while the outer walls follow the 12 x 12 measures of the main squared circle. Finally, the mandala's three protective rings follow the outer limits of the four outer circles (24 measures).

The principle form of Buddhism practiced in Tibet is Vajrayana Buddhism, which uses the four-pronged *vajra* or *dorje* (meaning 'diamond-thunderbolt') as its main emblem. The vajra is constructed through *the same basic geometry* as the mandala, and becomes in this way a symbolic reminder or microcosmic reflection of the whole. As a kind of sigil or *aide-mémoire*, its basic shape aids the contemplator in mentally reconstructing the mandala's four-fold architecture.

Traditionally, a Tantric practitioner must be initiated by a master through the rite of 'empowerment' (*wongkur* in Tibetan, from the Sanskrit *abhiṣeka* meaning consecration, sprinkling or baptism). This two stage process begins with the *Generation* stage (*utpattikrama* or *bskyed rim*, also called the creation or causal stage), where the mandala's Wrathful and Peaceful Deities are successively visualized, separate from each other and separate from one's self. After this comes the *Completion* stage (*nispanna-krama, sampanna-krama* or *rdzogs rim*, also called the realization or fruition stage), where the adept transcends the illusory separation and fuses (*samadhi*) with all the deities, particularly the Meditation Deity (*yidam*) at the centre of the mandala.

In some rites of empowerment, a painted mandala (or *thangka*) is used as a meditative support; in others, a more temporary sand mandala is ritually created and destroyed. Then again, the entire mandala may become an elaborate mental construct that is memorized by the practitioner and projected – onto their own body or that of their consort. Different texts (*sutras*) from different traditions offer different visualizations (*sādhanas*) – each with its own cosmology, deities and mandalas.

We are interested in the form of Tantra called *Anuttarayoga* ('unsurpassable union'). The *Anuttarayoga Tantra* uses the mandala initiation (or 'rite of empowerment') to recognize one's true Buddha-nature, as reflected by the image of the enlightened deity at the centre. Many steps (called 'purifications') are required to cleanse awareness of the concepts and feelings hindering this realization. The images of Wrathful and Peaceful Deities gradually transform the subtle energies at their root, so the experience of enlightenment may be attained.

There are three main types of mandala initiation. The 'Father Tantras', which include the *Guhyasamānja* and *Yamātaka* mandalas, emphasize 'method' (*upaya*) and 'compassion' (*karuna*) as an active and compelling way to transform one's wrath and anger. Meanwhile the 'Mother Tantras', which include the *Hevajra* and *Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa* mandalas, emphasize 'wisdom' (*prajna*) as a more peaceful and passive way to transform one's longing and desire. Finally, the non-dual approach, as exemplified by the *Kālachakra* mandala, pursues both these paths equally. The central Meditation Deity often depicts a male and female figure as sexually united in *yab-yum* to symbolize this union.

One of the greatest Western expounders of Tibetan Buddhism is the American scholar Alexander Berzin. After graduating from Harvard with a doctorate in Sanskrit and Chinese, he lived in Dharamsala for twenty-nine years, studying under masters like Tsenzhab Serkong Rinpoche. In his *Introduction the Kalachakra Initiation*, Berzin describes the intensity and transformative power of *sadhana* – the visualization practice:

"From beginning to end, attending a Kalachakra initiation involves visualization. ...Visualization practice, however, involves sights, sounds, fragrances, tastes, physical sensations, mental feelings such as joy, and senses of who and where we are, what is around us and what is happening. ...It is a process of complete transformation, involving equally the mind, heart, feelings, sense of identity and spatial orientation.

During the visualizations, we try to feel that our spiritual master and ourselves are actually Buddha-figures, where we are is actually a mandala, and what we picture occurring is actually happening."[1]

The *Kalachakra Sutra* ('Teachings on the Wheels or Cycles of Time') constructs an elaborate mandala to ritually initiate monks into a deeper awareness of mind, body and the cosmos. From the outside, the mandala's four-sided, five-storey palace may be viewed as a physical map of the cosmos, with the planets revolving around the central axis of Mount Meru. But, from the inside, it is a diagram of the body's subtle energy system, where the red and white 'seeds' or 'drops' (*bindu*) from different psychic 'winds' (*prana*)

flow through the three main channels of the subtle body, gathering at the five main focal points (*chakras*). The adept must master an understanding of the mandala on all these levels.

But, most of all, the mandala is a visual support for the Vision Journey. Its basic geometrical shape and many-armed deities all serve as *mnemonic devices* – as elaborate memory cues for remembering and navigating the soul's passage through the visionary realms, particularly the after-death passage through the *bardo* realms.

II. The Three Bodies, Worlds and Bardos

In Tantric practice, the Buddha reflects differing aspects of our true nature. One key to understanding mandala meditation is the *trikaya* doctrine, meaning literally the 'three bodies'. The *Nirmāṇakāya* (*Emanation Body*) describes our earthly, physical nature, which the Buddha manifest to us in Body. We experience this through our own body, and our perception of other bodily incarnations of the Buddha, such as bodhisattvas and gurus. The *Sambhokāya* (*Bliss body*) describes our true spiritual nature, as fully-enlightened beings, which the Buddha manifest to us through Speech. All appearances of the Buddha, in the form of spoken *mantras*, performed *mudras* or painted *thangkas*, fall into this category. The *Dharmakāya* (*Truth body*) describes our absolute nature, as a limitless ocean of 'no-self', which the Buddha manifest to us through Mind. This is the 'clear light mind' of enlightened bliss.

Following the *trikaya* doctrine, there are three principal levels of existence: the *Kamadhatu* or Desire World, where all beings are trapped in the 'gross' realm of the senses, due to desire (*kama*); the *Rupadhatu* or Form World where, freed of desire (*kama*), all the deities have 'subtle' energy bodies (*rupa*) and sense organs of light; and the *Arupadhatu* or Formless World where beings have no form whatsoever (*arupa*) and exist in pure, clear consciousness.

These three aspects of ourselves are reflected back to us during the vision journey or afterlife journey, which also has a three-fold structure. In the *Bardo Thodol* or *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the visionary journey through three of the afterlife realms (*bardos*) is described in detail. Immediately after death, during the first to third day, one may journey directly into the *Chikhai bardo* which, like the *Dharmakāya*, is a limitless ocean of 'no-self' – the Buddha's clear light mind.

Unprepared for this overwhelming experience, the vision journey shifts during the third to seventh day to the *Chonyid bardo*, where one reaps all the benefits of good deeds (*karma*) sewn over many life times. Now, Peaceful Deities appear, as a reflection of our true spiritual nature – the *Sambhokāya* (*Bliss body*) manifestation of ourselves as fully-enlightened beings.

From the eighth day onward, the journey darkens into the *Sidpa bardo*, where the karmic reflections of our own evil inclinations appear as Wrathful Deities. Fearful and confused, the mind seeks re-birth in another body, and so the *Nirmāṇakāya* (*Emanation Body*) appears as our next earthly, physical refuge.

While the text of the *Bardo Thodol* is read aloud to the deceased, in the hopes of orienting the disembodied consciousness through the post-mortem *bardo* realms; other Tantric texts, such as the *Guhyasamānja Sutra,* offer visualizations and Vision Journeys to adepts *during this life*, in the hopes of orienting consciousness through the *bardos* of their own subtle energies, as personified by the various Peaceful and Wrathful Deities.

III. The Guhyasamānja Visualization

Guhyasamānja means literally *'the Secret Assembly'.* Anyone who has read a Gnostic or Alchemical text will not be surprised by the language of the *Guhyasamānja Sadhana,* which fascinates and confuses at the same time. Images of sex and death intermingle with sacred invocations, veiling literal instructions in metaphor and, at times, leading the initiate into labyrinthine passages of visionary wonder, terror and fear.

First, we must orient ourselves spatially within the mandala, before reading the sadhana to visualize the meditative journey. With the aid of the *Guhyasamānja Akṣobbyavajra* mandala, we may contemplate the *Guhyasamānja* initiation, as an examples of the Vision Journey in the East.

After a series of opening prayers, including one to *"the single eye that has directly seen,"*[2] the *Guhyasamānja Sadhana* evokes the mandala's creation in the form of a myth: *"Within a state of Voidness comes a PAM..."*[3] – this divine seed-syllable erupts like the sun from a lotus, while a wheel appears spinning at its centre. The mandala spreads its petals in all directions, and at the centre, the main Meditation Deity says, *"I arise as Vajradhara... with three faces – white, black and red – and six arms... My consort is white* [Sparsavajra, also called] *Vajradhatu Ishvari, with three faces – white, black and red – and six arms... We embrace each other* [as] *father and mother."*[4] (Fig. 28.7)

The first thing we notice about the *Akṣobbyavajra* (Tibetan: *Mi bskyod pa*) version of the *Guhyasamānja* mandala (Fig. 28.3) is its unique shape and the geometric disposition of its figures.[5] Thirty-two principle deities are arranged onto its flat orthographic projection of a five-storey palace with four gates, surrounded by a protective circle. The inner central circle is divided into nine parts (resembling a 'magic square'). At its centre appears Vajradhara, in the form of Akshobhya, embracing his consort Sparsavajra in the *yab-yum* position. (Hence, Vajradhara embracing Sparsavajra count as two of the 'thirty-two deities' even though there are only 'thirty-one' places or 'seats' in the mandala).

Through their joining (*yab-yum*), the divine pair expands outward in eight directions. First orthogonally, in the four cardinal directions (east, south, west and north – the eastern gate is always at the bottom of mandalas) and then diagonally, in the four inter-cardinal directions (south-east, south-west, north-west and north-east). Ultimately, the divine pair expands outward into all thirty-two deities, the surrounding palace and its protective circle.

Occupying the four cardinal seats are Vairochana, Ratnasambhava, Amitabha and Amoghasiddhi who, together with Akshobhya in the centre, make up the *Five Meditation Buddhas* (or *Dhyani Buddhas* - Fig. 28.6).
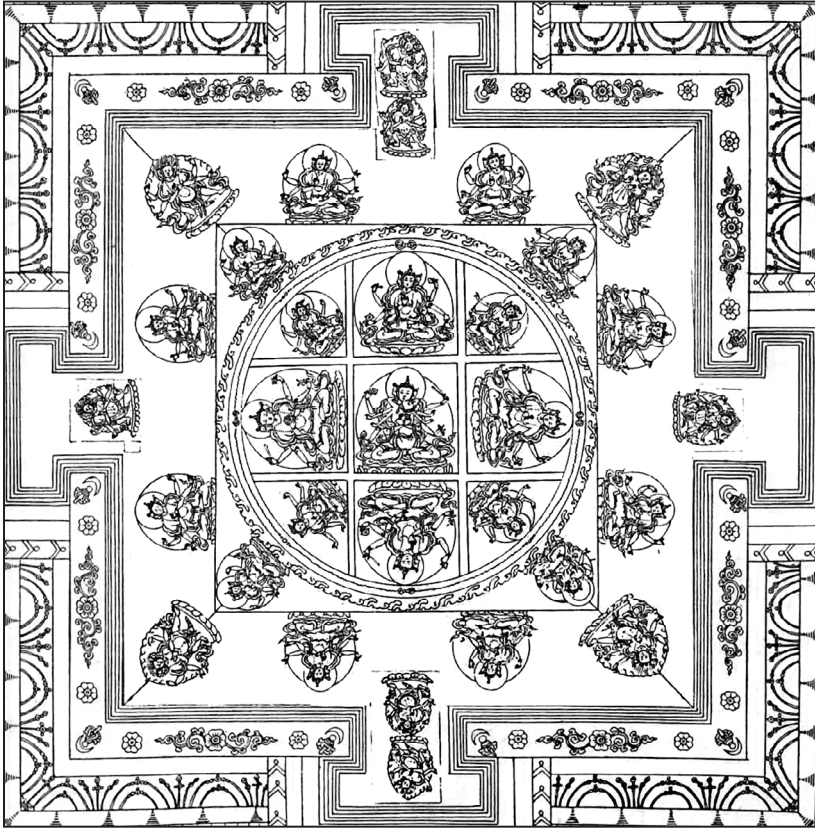
Fig. 28.3 - Central Section of the Guhyasamānja Akṣobbyavajra Mandala
Showing the Palace Interior Without Gateways and Protective Rings

The four inter-cardinal seats, together with their diagonal extensions into the corners of the square one level below, constitute the seats of *"...the eight goddesses* [who] *have their hair half tied up in a knot... They are extremely voluptuous, smiling and slender, beautified with such charming features as slanting eyes glancing to the side. In the prime of their youth, they enjoy the pleasures of the five desirable sensory objects."*[6]

So, sitting in the circle's four inter-cardinal seats are the goddesses Lochana, Mamaki, Pandaravasin and Tara. And moving outward to the corners of the small square, we find Rupavajra, Sabdavajra, Gandhavajra and Rasavajra. These eight are traditionally called the Eight Offering Goddesses (*Astapujadevi*), of which five are the consorts (*prajna*) of the *Five Meditation Buddhas*. Lochana is the consort of Vairochana; Mamaki goes with Akshobhya; Pandaravasin with Amitabha; and Tara with Amoghasiddhi. Sparsavajra, who appears in the centre, takes the form Vajradhatvishvari when she becomes the consort of Ratnasambhava.

On exterior sides of the inner square, flanking the entrance gates, are eight Bodhisattvas, called the *Ashtamahabodhisattva* or Eight Great Bodhisattvas. They are Maitreya and Kshitigarbha (east door), Vajrapani and Khagarbha (also called Akasagarbha) (south door), Lokeshvara (also called Avalokitesvara) and Manjushri (west door), Sarvanivarana-viskambhini and Samantabhadra (north door).

Finally, on the outer edges of the mandala, the Ten Wrathful Deities appear: four stand at the centre of each doorway, four appear in the corners of the palace, and two more occupy the zenith and nadir, just outside the top and bottom doorways.

The four cardinal doorways are guarded by Yamantakrit in the east; Prajnantakrit in the south; Hayagriva in the west; and Vighnantakrit in the north. Meanwhile, in the south-east corner stands Achala; in the south-west is Takkiraja; in the north-west is Niladanda and in the north-east is Mahabala. At the zenith above stands Ushnisha-chakravartin, and in the nadir below appears Sumbharaja.

In all, then, Vajradhara appears as thirty-two deities:

• The Meditation Deity Vajradhara with his consort Sparsavajra – at the centre
• The Five Meditation Buddhas – at the centre and four cardinal points
• The Eight Offering Goddesses – at the eight inter-cardinal points
• The Eight Great Bodhisattvas – two on each side of the inner square
• The Ten Wrathful Deities – four at the doors; four in the corners, one above and one below

IV. Wrathful Deities: The Protective Outer Circle

When we read the text of the *Guhyasamānja Sadhana,* Vajradhara appears first at the centre, in the embrace of his consort Sparsavajra. But, from there, the mandala is visualized *from the outside in*. The first deities to emerge from their tantric union (*yab-yum*) are the Ten Wrathful Deities on the periphery, with Aksobhya at the centre (as a form of Vajradhara). Vajradhara proclaims:

"Rays of light from the concentration being at my heart – with us in union as mother and father – bring forth Akshobhya surrounded by the ten wrathful ones."[7]

Their purpose is protective, to guard the space from any disruptive element:

"...From the wrathful ones and the daggers, blazing vajra fire and light is emitted in the ten directions, burning and disintegrating all interferers and evil ones of samsara.

TAKKI HUM JAH – beyond the wrathful one is an iron vajra fence.
TAKKI HUM JAH – beyond this is a fence of water.
TAKKI HUM JAH – beyond this is a fence of wind."[8]
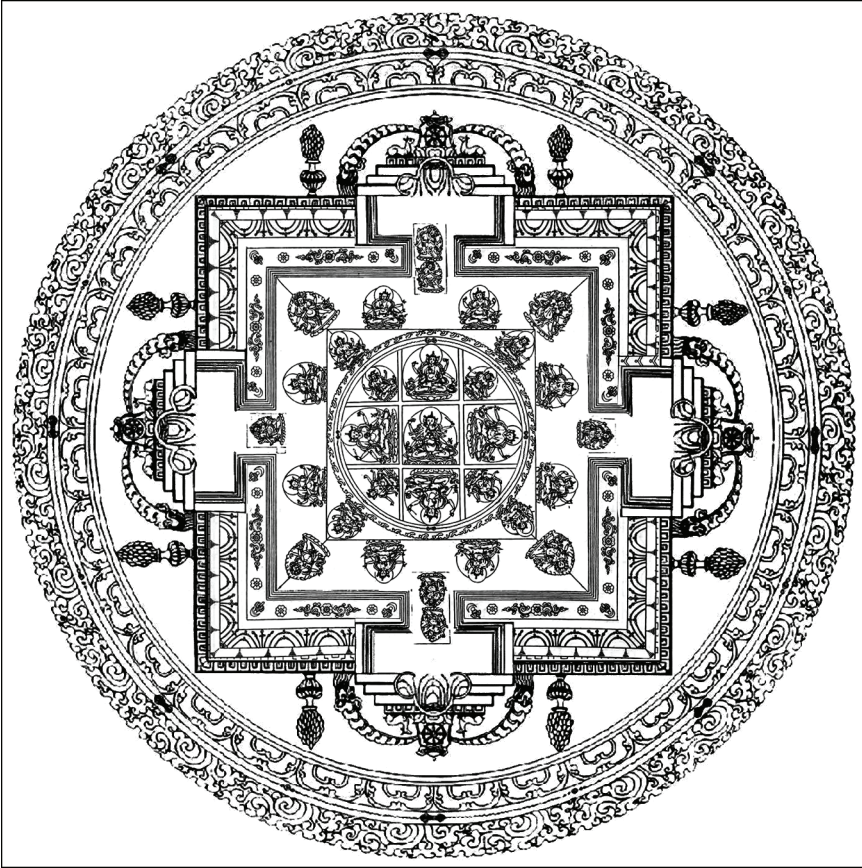
Fig. 28.4 - The Entire Guhyasamānja Akṣobbyavajra Mandala (as handed
down by Mar-pa of Lhobrag) including the Gateways and Protective Rings

With the utterance of these three seed-syllables, three rings on the
periphery of the mandala emerge (Fig. 28.4). The outermost one, which
moves thirty-two times through the colours of white (space), yellow (earth),
red (fire), green (wind) and blue (water), is the 'fence of water and wind', as
can be seen in its dynamic swirling shapes. Within this is the narrow ring of
sixteen vajra thunderbolts, the 'iron vajra fence'. The innermost ring consists
of a lotus with thirty-two petals – the original lotus that appeared from the
sound PAM at the beginning.

Since we are to visualize the mandala as a whole, we must keep our eye
focused *on the centre*. But, the first thing that happens, during the *sadhana*
visualization, is that our vision expands *to the outermost periphery*. At first,
this 'vision of the whole' may frighten and distract us. And so, through calm
meditation on a fixed point, we learn to see and visualize the outermost
boundary as a stable, fixed shape, free of 'all interferers'. According to the

Guhyasamānja Sadhana, the vajra thunderbolts in the hands of the Ten Wrathful Deities transform into vajra-hooks and daggers, which seize and transfix any 'interferer' until *"...they become unwavering and unmoving in their body, speech and mind."*[9]

Once the outermost shape has become fixed, it also becomes a kind of vehicle for our vision journey. As with Proclus and the Neo-Platonists, the Soul Vehicle here *is circular or spherical* in shape, and *fills the imagination* with heavenly images. If we wish, we could imagine this shape, from centre to periphery, as a device that mirrors the Divine Eye.

V. Dissolutions & the Different Types of Experience

But there is more going on during this visualization. The Vision Journey, we should not forget, is actually a journey through the afterlife *bardo* realms. As the *Guhyasamānja Sadhana* unfolds, we find that we are journeying ever further, *during this life,* through the visionary experience *of death* which, in Tantric Buddhism, is experienced as *a series of dissolutions*.

As consciousness separates from the body, it experiences that dissolution through a series of visions. These may take the form of specific memory-images (*vāsanās*) of past events, which are memory-imprints from one's karmic past. But, at their root, these memory-images are fundamentally illusory, since different 'types of experience' have led to their creation. In order to recognize these memory-images as 'fabrications' (*saṅkhāras*), the initiate must go down to their core, and become fully aware of the different 'types of experience' that gave rise to them in the first place.[10] These different categories or 'types of experience' include:

• The five elements, that consciousness experiences as the physical body
• The five bodily senses through which consciousness senses the world
• The five 'sense-objects' or faculties that create the mental categories of sensation
• The five *skandhas* or 'aggregates' that create the mental categories for conceptualizing the world
• The five *kleshas* or 'passions' that drive consciousness to experience the world
• The five *jñānas* or wisdoms that liberate us from these experiences.

We shall examine these in detail later on. As the visualization of the mandala progresses, we visualize each of the deities *as personifying one 'type of experience'* (i.e. as symbolic of one element, sense, sense-object, aggregate or passion). But that only 'generates' awareness of the categories. It is typical of the *Generation* stage to successively visualize the Wrathful and Peaceful Deities, one after the other, in the attempt to recognize *each* type of experience and dissolve it *individually*.

But during the *Completion* stage, all these categories or types of experience must be recognized as illusory and transcended completely. In a single moment, *all* the deities are dissolved *simultaneously*, once we fuse (*samadhi*) with their source – with the Meditation Deity (*yidam*) at the centre of the mandala.

This deity, who is a mirror of ourselves, has generated the entire mandala from the sacred seed syllable PAM. But as the first lines of the *Guhyasamānja Sadhana* remind us:

"In the sense that the nature, causes and results of all phenomena are all three void of existing inherently by their own definition, everything becomes void. Within a state of Voidness comes a PAM..."[11] From the outset, the mandala and all its deities are said to be illusory constructs arising from the formless world (or 'state of Voidness') of the clear light mind.

In this sense, each of the Peaceful and Wrathful Deities is visualized, in order for us to become aware of the different categories generating those illusions. Each deity 'removes an obstacle' that is blocking our awareness from its true state of being, which is the Buddha-state of infinite bliss. One by one, they free consciousness of an element, sense, sense-object, aggregate or passion – each of which forms a part of our illusion-creating faculties. As veil after veil is removed, we become increasingly aware of, what Alexander Berzin calls, *"our not-yet-happening enlightenment, our individual enlightenment which has not yet happened."*[12] In truth, we *are* enlightened – we *are* the Enlightened Buddha at the centre of the mandala – but we have not realized this *yet*.

VI. Visualizing the Celestial Palace & Peaceful Deities

And so, the Vision Journey into the mandala takes on a deeper level of meaning. Thus far we have visualized Vajradhara at the centre of the circle, the Ten Wrathful Deities, and the outermost rings – as a 'safe' space for our consciousness to witness its own inner workings.

The *Sadhana* then creates the celestial palace through a series of mantras-within-mantras, each producing geometric shapes-within-shapes, accompanied by specific elements and colours. In all, four mandalas are created: a blue bow-shaped wind mandala, a red triangular fire mandala, a white circular water mandala and a yellow square earth mandala (recall Fig. 28.2). *"These four mandalas merge into one and transform... into a square celestial mansion with four doorways. Its jeweled walls going all around have five layers."*[13]

Through this visualization, the inner space of the mind has now taken on a recognizable shape. Although a variety of shapes were considered, the square ultimately emerged as the simplest delineation of space within 'the circle in the void'. Viewed from above, the square is actually a four-sided pyramid, with five levels ascending to the central shrine on top.

It is not merely by chance that four-sided pyramids have been used in the sacred architecture of all cultures. The circle describes the dome of the heavens, while the square defines the four cardinal directions of earthly space. These rise up, in the shape of four triangles, which co-align and unite at their summit. The pyramid is so archetypal in shape that it becomes the *'templum'* or template for all sacred space. It is the shape, *par excellence*, for our memory palace.

When considered as a Soul Vehicle, the pyramidal shape takes on a new meaning, since the human figure in a lotus position will naturally assume just such a three-dimensional shape. The *Guhyasamānja Sadhana* hints at this realization when it says, mysteriously: *"This excellent pure mansion... has its inside clearly visible when looking from the outside, and its outside clearly visible when looking from the inside."*[14]

In the next stage of the visualization, the original joining (*yab-yum*) of Vajradhara with Sparsavajra is repeated (Fig. 28.7). From their union emerges the Five Meditation Buddhas, the Eight Offering Goddesses and the Eight Great Bodhisattvas – all disposed in their appropriate places on the cardinal and inter-cardinal points of the celestial mansion.

But, no sooner do they appear in the celestial mansion than Vajradhara visualizes them again, this time as appearing on different points of his body (*kaya*). The Five Meditation Buddhas and their consorts appear on his five chakra points, while the five Offering Goddesses appear at his sense faculties. This section ends with a passage entitled *"Meditation on taking Death into the Path of Dharmakāya."*[15] In a single recitation, all thirty-two deities are named, then visualized as *"deities on my body"*[16] and, one by one, they *"...dissolve into clear light."*[17]

The *Dharmakāya,* it is to be recalled, is our '*Truth body*', our absolute nature as a limitless ocean of 'no-self'. In this section, the initiate is invited to realize their true nature, as an 'already-enlightened being'. We are called upon to experience this vision as a *death and transformation*, entering directly into the *Chikhai bardo* – a limitless ocean of enlightened bliss, the Buddha's true state of clear light mind.

To do this, we must visualize the thirty-two deities as successively removing all the obstacles to enlightenment – the elements, senses, sense-objects, aggregates and passions that generate illusory existence – each dissolved one by one.

But, rather than ending here, the *Guhyasamānja Sadhana* continues with two more sections entitled *"Meditation on taking the Intermediate State* [i.e. Bardo] *into the Path of Sambhokāya* [the bliss body]" and *"Meditation on taking Rebirth into the Path of Nirmanakāya* [the emanation body]."*[18]

Now, Vajradhara visualizes his body as transforming, part by part and piece by piece, into the architecture of the celestial palace: *"The front, back, right and left sides of my body are the four corners of the mandala."*[19] Having achieved this total identification of the body with the celestial mansion, a much more detailed process of identification begins. Step by step, with the enunciation of a seed-syllable, one 'type of experience' is associated with a Peaceful Deity located in the body-palace.

The Generation stage of the *Guhyasamānja Sadhana*, in its three stages, comes to resemble the three-stage *Bardo Thodol*, which portrays the after-death journey as, first of all, the immediate entry into the clear light mind (experiencing the limitless *Dharmakāya* 'truth body' in the *Chikhai bardo*), followed by an intermediate stage of spiritual existence (experiencing the

Sambhokāya 'bliss body' in the *Chonyid bardo*), and concluding with our rebirth due to fear and longing (putting on the *Nirmanakāya* 'emanation body' in the *Sidpa bardo*).

Alexander Berzin has noted that, after we go into the clear light mind in the first section of the *Guhyasamānja Sadhana*, a sudden 'reversal' occurs in the second and third sections: *"First of all, the dissolution process is going into the clear light. But then, you have the reversal process of coming out of the clear light, with the attainment of a bardo body* [the *Sambhokāya* 'bliss body'] *...and with attaining a rebirth body* [the *Nirmanakāya* 'emanation body'].*"*[20] Hence, the remaining sections of the *Guhyasamānja Sadhana* describe how we pass from potential enlightenment to earthly rebirth.

The text, as we have elucidated it so far, only describes the Generation stage of the visualization (indeed, only the first of three main parts). The subsequent Completion stage does not (normally) exist in print form, since one should be initiated into this stage through a master. However, we do know that the Completion stage involves a more complex visualization of the mandala as a diagram of the subtle energy system, where the red and white 'seeds' or 'drops' (*bindu*) from different psychic 'winds' (*prana*) flow through the subtle body's three main channels (the left *rasana* and right *lalana* entwined around the central *avadhuti* channel), to activate the five energy centres (the *base, gut, heart, throat and crown chakras*). The intonations of seed-syllables, the breathings, postures, mudras and resulting visualizations all play an important part of this process – and so one must be initiated by a master.

It is worthwhile, at this point, to go back to the Generation stage, with its dissolution of the thirty-two deities, and examine in detail how they remove all the obstacles to enlightenment.

VII. The After-death Journey

By meditating on the deities' dissolutions, we begin to gain a much clearer view onto the mandala as 'a map of the mind's inner workings' and, indeed, as a Vision Journey through the afterlife realms. During the dissolution process, and hence, *during death*, our consciousness experiences visions of the various elements, senses, sense-objects, aggregates and passions passing away one by one. This is because it is progressively being severed from each.

This begins with the body. During the agonies of death, element after element dissolves, causing consciousness to experience visions. In the Eight Stage Dissolution Process[21], this is described as follows:

1. Earth dissolves into water – hallucinations begin, like a mirage
2. Water dissolves into fire – vision grows hazy, like smoke
3. Fire dissolves into air – sparks erupt, small and intense, like fireflies
4. Air dissolves into space – the flickering of a flame grows still
5. Space dissolves into consciousness – a transparent bluish light emerges

At this point, the heart and brain have ceased all function, and the body is clinically dead. Consciousness survives the death of the body, and experiences the last three stages on a more 'subtle' level, as the appearance of white, red and black lights.

When consciousness first entered the body, during conception, the white *bodhichitta* drop from the father's sperm rose upward from the heart to the crown chakra, while the red *bodhichitta* drop from the mother's menstrual blood descended downward from the heart to the navel chakra. During death, the white and red drops return to the heart in a three stage process.

6. White drop returns to the heart – a radiant white light appears, 'like moonlight'
7. Red drop returns to the heart – a glowing red light appears, 'like sunlight'
8. The red and white drop re-unite – a radiant blackness emerges

The *Guhyasamānja Sadhana* allows the initiate to visualize the dissolution of the body's elements by associating each one with a different deity. But, more than that, a specific sense, sense-object, aggregate and passion is also associated with a particular deity. By generating the image of that deity and 'dissolving' it, we consciously move through the death process as, not only the dissolution of the body's five elements and three *bodhichitta* drops, but also *the dissolution of the mind's mental categories* – the senses, sense-objects, aggregates and passions that have generated all types of experience in the first place. The after-death journey is a visionary passage through the dis-embodied mind, and the mandala offers a map of its innermost workings.

During death, we witness this as the appearance of so many Peaceful and Wrathful Deities. As the *Bardo Thodol* expresses it: *"Thou wilt beget fear and be startled at the dazzling white light and wilt wish to flee from it."*[22] And so, one is taught the prayer:

"With every thought of fear or terror... may I recognize whatever visions appear, as the reflections of mine own consciousness... May I not fear the bands of Peaceful and Wrathful deities, mine own thought-forms."[23]

During the *Guhyasamānja* visualization, we prepare ourselves for the death journey. With full awareness, we attempt to *consciously* journey into the after-death world (the *bardos*) – and return with a clear knowledge of how to 'navigate' those post-mortem realms. With this new awareness, we may consciously enter the *Chikhai bardo* – and *remain there*, as a *Dharmakāya* or limitless ocean of enlightened bliss. Or, we may consciously enter the *Chonyid bardo*, to 'put on' our *Sambhokāya* – our 'bliss body' or 'vajra body', which is nothing less than an appearance of the Buddha, in the form of a bodhisattva or yogini seeking the compassionate enlightenment of all beings.

With a clear knowledge of our illusion-creating faculties, we can accomplish this. This occurs when each and every Peaceful or Wrathful Deity removes its 'obstacle' blocking our consciousness from its true state of enlightenment, the Buddha's clear light mind.

VIII. Dissolving the Mind's Mental Categories

In the *Guhyasamānja Sadhana* the initiate pronounces a seed-syllable (such as OM, AH, HUM) which 'names' or evokes a specific type of experience (a sense, sense-object, aggregate or passion), which then 'transforms' into a deity generated on a specific point on the body. A typical line from the text runs: *"At my navel is a LAM, the nature of my body's entire element of earth, which transforms into a white Lochana with an Akshobhya crowning his head."*[24]

Or: *"Between the crown of my head and my hairline is a white OM, the nature of my aggregate of form, which transforms into a white Vairochana with an Akshobhya crowning his head."*[25]

In the case of the elements, four of the Eight Offering Goddesses (located on the four inner inter-cardinal points) personifies one of them: earth as Lochana, water as Mamaki, fire as Pandaravasin, and wind as Tara. (Space, as Vajradhatvishvari, is not mentioned in the text).

In the case of the sense faculties, five of the Eight Great Bodhisattvas (located on the four sides of the small square) personifies one of them: the eyes as Kshitigarbhas, the ears as Vajrapanis, the nose as Khagarbha, the tongue as Lokeshvara and the body as Sarvanivarana-viskambhini.

With sense objects, five of the Eight Offering Goddesses (located at the centre and the four outer inter-cardinal points) personifies one of them: sight as Rupavajras, sound as Shabdavajras, smell as Gandhavajra, taste as Rasavajra and touch as Sparshavajra.

Last of all, the five aggregates (*skandhas*) have the Five Meditation Buddhas (in the centre and four cardinal points) to personify one of them: 'form' as Vairochana, 'recognition' as Amitabha, 'consciousness' as Akshobhya, 'feeling' as Ratnasambhava, and 'mental constructs' as Amoghasiddhi.[26]

Once the five aggregates are transformed into images of the Five Meditation Buddhas, they may be dissolved. One way of dissolving an aggregate is to transform its negative quality into a positive one. The Five Meditation Buddhas have this capacity because each one is associated with an element, sense faculty, sense object, aggregate and passion – *as well as a form of wisdom to liberate it.*

Fig. 28.5 - The Three Poisons

This brings us to a more detailed examination of the passions (*kleshas*), aggregates (*skandhas*) and wisdoms (*jñānas*) of the Five Meditation Buddhas.

The Five Passions (*kleshas*) lie at the root of all suffering. Initially they were considered to be three – the Three Poisons (*triviṣa*) of ignorance, attachment and aversion. These appear at the centre of the Wheel of Life mandala as the pig (ignorance), cock (attachment) and snake (aversion) (Fig. 28.5).

When expanded into five, through the addition of pride and envy, they became the Five Passions[27] (*kleśaviṣa*):

• Ignorance (delusion, deceit)
• Attachment (desire, passion, lust)
• Aversion (wrath, anger)
• Pride (arrogance, ego-centricity)
• Envy (jealousy, injustice)

It is both fascinating and disturbing how the Five Passions of Tantric Buddhism tally with the Seven Soul Garments of the Gnostics. If we translate ignorance, attachment and aversion into their more emotional forms of delusion, lust and wrath, then all five of the Buddhist Passions fall within the seven Soul Garments of the Gnostics: Inconstancy, Greed, Lust, Pride, Wrath, Envy and Delusion. Only the first two, Inconstancy and Greed, are missing.

The Five Passions (*kleshas*) lie at the root of our desire to experience the world. But, our experience is further interpreted through the Five Aggregates (*skandhas*), which are our mental constructs – the categories or ideas we use to conceptualize the world. A *skandha* is literally a 'bundle', and we use these conceptual categories to 'bundle together' our experiences into distinct notions, prejudices and ideas which, fundamentally, are illusory. In truth, the mental categories are nothing less than our 'illusion-creating faculties'. The Five Aggregates (*skandhas*) are:

• Form – the sensorial shape and impression left by an object
• Feeling – the pleasant or unpleasant sensation left by an object
• Recognition – the awareness of an object as separate and distinct
• Mental constructs – the words and categories associated with an object
• Consciousness – the simple awareness of the object

The only way we may free ourselves of the aggregates and their underlying passions is *to dissolve them in deeper forms of awareness*. Each of the Five Meditation Buddhas (Fig. 28.6) manifests a distinct *form* of wisdom, a different *way* of being aware. The Five Wisdoms are:

• Vairochana – Pure clear awareness (*Tathatā-jñāna*) of the unmanifest, beyond all forms and concepts
• Ratnasambhava – Equalizing awareness (*Samatā-jñāna*) of the sameness or commonality of all existence
• Amitabha – Discerning awareness (*Pratyavekṣaṇa-jñāna*) of the distinct uniqueness of all existence
• Amoghasiddhi – Active awareness (*Kṛty-anuṣṭhāna-jñāna*) of perfecting all beings through compassion
• Akshobhya – Mirror-like awareness (*Ādarśa-jñāna*) of reflecting all things without attachment

By meditating on each of these Buddhas, one passion and aggregate may be transformed into a deeper form of awareness. More than that, since an element, sense faculty and sense-object are also related to them – all of these may also be liberated in this way.

It is for this reason that the Five Meditation Buddhas appear in the middle of the mandala, as liberating sources of energy. Their five consorts, who are located on the four inter-cardinal points, bring them the five elements to be liberated. The same is true of the remaining Goddesses and Bodhisattvas, who bring them the five senses and sense-objects to be liberated.

As we visualize the *Guhyasamānja Sadhana,* the Five Meditation Buddhas[28] exercise their liberating power over each element, sense, sense-object, aggregate and passion:

• Through Vairochana's pure clear awareness (*Tathatā-jñāna*), water, eyes, sight, form, and ignorance (delusion) are dissolved.
• Through Ratnasambhava's equalizing awareness (*Samatā-jñāna*), earth, ear, sound, feeling, and pride are dissolved.
• Through Amitabha's discerning awareness (*Pratyavekṣaṇa-jñāna*), fire, nose, smell, recognition, and attachment (lust) are dissolved.
• Through Amoghasiddhi's active awareness (*Kṛty-anuṣṭhāna-jñāna*), wind, tongue, taste, mental constructs, and envy (jealousy) are dissolved.
• Through Akshobhya's mirror-like awareness (*Ādarśa-jñāna*), space, body, touch, consciousness, and aversion (wrath) are dissolved.

Although the initiate should visualize the deity as part of the mandala, they should also zoom in and visualize its figure in the finest detail. All the deities are given headdresses crowned with one of the Five Meditation Buddhas, to identify them as belonging to that Buddha's 'family' (*kula*). So, in the case of the Buddha Vairochana: his consort Locana, the offering goddess Rupavajra and the bodhisattva Khagarbha all wear crowns with his emblem, to show they belong to his family.

More than that, the mudras, emblems and ornaments of the many-armed deities also form complex mnemonic devices. During the visualization, the *Guhyasamānja Sadhana* announces:

"All the deities, from Vairochana through Samantabhadra, have jewel ornaments and garments... They sport a crown, jeweled earrings with an utpala flower above their ears and beautified with a hanging ribbon, a jewelled choker necklace, a pearl long hanging necklace, strands of jewels, bracelets, anklets, and a jewelled girdle-belt."[29]

Each ornament symbolizes a specific wisdom:

• Crown ornament – Mirror-like awareness
• Earrings – Discerning awareness
• Necklace – Equalizing awareness
• Bracelets and anklets – Pure clear awareness
• Girdle-belt – Active awareness

Fig. 28.6 - The Five Meditation (*Dhyani*) Buddhas - Top: Amitabha
Left: Ratnasambhava   Middle: Akshobhya   Right: Amoghasiddhi
Bottom: Vairochana

The same is true of the mudras, emblems and bone ornaments of the many-armed Wrathful Deities. This complex iconography creates intricate levels of association between the various gods and goddesses. Up to the very edges, the fractalline parts of the mandala reflect the whole, while the Meditation Deity at the centre brings them all into one accord.

Sitting on a white lotus in the splendour of the sun, Vajradhara embraces Sparsavajra, whose many attributes are a symbolic and symmetrical reflection of his own: the blue-toned skin, three faces and six hands which hold a variety of theurgic instruments. Each implement offers its own method or way for achieving enlightenment, because it is associated with one of the five Meditation Buddhas,[30] as follows:

• Wheel – Vairochana
• Jewel – Ratnasambhava
• Lotus – Amitabha
• Sword – Amoghasiddhi
• Thunderbolt and bell – Akshobhya

Fig. 28.7 - Vajradhara Embracing Sparsavajra

With a semi-peaceful, semi-wrathful expression on his face, Vajradhara wraps his arms around his consort, his crossed hands holding the thunderbolt and bell, as symbols of the union of *upaya* and *prajna* – of method and wisdom – the Father and Mother of the tantras. All in all, the mandala is a multi-leveled diagram of the mind, body and cosmos integrated as a whole – all to be recognized in their complex inter-relationships and ultimately transcended as illusion. The not-yet-happening enlightenment, once actual, plunges us into a limitless ocean of compassion and clear light.

Despite its complexity, the mandala's main purpose remains clear: it uses basic geometrical shapes and emblematic figures as mnemonic devices for memorizing the dynamic inter-relationship of the mind, body and cosmos. When we journey through the afterlife *bardos*, we are journeying, in essence, through our own karmic imprints and remaining thought-forms. The mandala and all its figures becomes an integrated structure or map for navigating that experience.

Indeed, during the second stage, when we enter the *Chonyid bardo* and attempt to 'put on' our *Sambhokāya* – our 'bliss body' or 'vajra body' – we are attempting to *mentally reconstruct a perfect body* – what is also called a 'diamond body'. With a profound knowledge of its inner workings, we are able to navigate, not just the *bardo* realms, but our every-day existence, as an active appearance or manifestation of the Buddha's five-fold wisdom.

In this sense, the 'diamond body' resembles the Gnostic 'Garment of Light'. Despite its initial resemblance to the theurgists' Soul Vehicle (which is spherical or geometrically-shaped), the Gnostic Garment of Light was more likely a human-shaped envelope with a twofold purpose: to 'protect' us by repelling negative influences, and to actively 'manifest' the light and wisdom of the enlightened saviour. Whether we 'put on' the Light Garment of Christ or the Diamond Body of the Buddha, we become an active source of love and wisdom, light and compassion.

Each image of a spiritual saviour, be that Christ, Quetzlcoatl, Vishnu or the Buddha, is intended as a mirror-image of our higher self. To see ourselves in that mirror, and become one with the reflection, is the eternal task of Visionary art. We consecrate the work, the moment that reflection becomes true.

END NOTES

A.T. = Author's Translation

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720