

# **The Levels of The Tree of Life**

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## Introduction

The Tree of Life is the fundamental tool of the Kabbalistic system, originated in the Jewish mystical tradition, and applied almost universally in western mysticism. It is the fundamental diagram, mandala, of almost all the western mystical techniques.

Therefore, it is inevitable that the Tree of Life, and the Kabbalah related to it, has spawned a great deal of misinformation, nonsense, esoteric bullshit, and related tomfoolery and fraudulence. To many people, there is no such thing as a "practical Kabbalah", instead the Kabbalah and Tree are used almost exclusively as a tool for mental masturbation of the worst kind, getting caught up in games of numbers and symbols. This is akin to having all of the fundamental hardware needed to build a supercomputer, and then proceeding to use that hardware to play at building blocks. Worse still, its as if many who do just that proceed to consider themselves "computer experts".

The Kabbalah is useless if it is not practical. If you dedicate forty or fifty years of your life studying all the positions on the tree of life, Kabbalistic correspondences, deriving Kabbalistic numbers from words and comparing them to each other, reading about the Sephiroth, comparing the symbolism of the Kabbalah to that of Astrology, or Alchemy, or the I Ching or what-have-you, but you never actually bother to apply the Kabbalistic symbolism in your life by striving to apply the Kabbalah in your meditation practice or spiritual progression, you have succeeded in nothing more than acquiring a great deal of knowledge and wasting your time.

## The Secret of the Sephiroth

The Tree of life is based around ten Sephiroth, or spheres, which progress upwards from Malkuth (the material world), to Kether (the world of pure creation). They are one way of understanding the different dimensions or levels that exist in this universe. These are spiritual levels, to which all human beings can ascend, but most choose not to. Within the symbolism of each Sephiroth there are keys to understanding each progressive stage on the spiritual journey, of reaching from the level you are currently on, to the next one on the path of awakening.

This brief work is not an introduction to the Kabbalah, it assumes you already have some familiarity with the tree of life, and understand how it is structured. To gain this basic understanding I strongly recommend the study of the following books:

*777 and Other Qabalistic Writings*, Aleister Crowley

*The Chicken Qabalah of Rabbi Lamed Ben Clifford*, Lon Milo Duquette

*The Mystical Qabalah*, Dion Fortune

*A Garden of Pomegranates*, Israel Regardie

This current small work will look at the spheres and explain the significance of how each sphere relates to the mystic journey.

## The Qlippoth

Beneath the tree of life are the Qlippoth, the "empty shells". This is the realm below the human realm, which Buddhists call the worlds of hungry ghosts, animals, and demons. Although there are human beings at this level, they are those who are spiritually dead, empty, or broken. In Buddhist understanding they are destined for rebirth as something less than a human being.

## Malkuth

Malkuth is the lowest Sephira. It is the realm of pure matter. Of the earth. Most of humanity only functions on this level, occasionally dropping to the level of the Qlippoth.

The fundamental spiritual experience that is possible on this level is that of having a glimpse of one's higher functioning, the higher self, which may be interpreted as some kind of divine force, if one is not aware that this is in fact the force of one's own awakened consciousness. It is this experience, one all human beings have at least once and usually more often in a lifetime, that propels some people to begin a spiritual journey.

But not everyone who has this experience will in fact begin that journey. Why not? It is because of inertia. It is not enough to have these "glimpses", one must be at least capable of realizing that there is a way to move beyond mere glimpses and into a journey. One must also be willing to take this journey. These are both very difficult. The central feature of existing on the level of Malkuth is that of need. No one whose consciousness is situated in Malkuth is capable of feeling complete, indeed when masters like Gurdjieff said that most men are actually not men, but robots, or less than fully human, they were referring to this level of existing.

The spiritual act on this level of existence is that of expressing your need; consciously expressing a desire to find a spiritual path. When you do this, it is inevitable that you will find your way to a teacher, master, or school which will at least be capable of allowing you to move to the next level of awareness, that of the Sephira Yesod, through initiation.

## Yesod

The sphere of Yesod is the level of the initiate. It is through initiation to a school or teacher (guru), that one may reach this level of awareness. The central experience of this level is that of beginning the spiritual path, and of seeing the functioning of existence. This is the level at which one must approach the study of symbolism, in general but also specifically that of the path you are taking, of the school you are working with. This is the level of the zealous student, where you must lay the foundations of knowledge.

The pitfall one may encounter on this level is that of laziness, of failing to apply one's new understanding toward a disciplined practice. Knowledge without practice will lead nowhere. All of the "armchair Kabbalists" are symptomatic of being stuck at this level of consciousness. When you are given the tools, given a technique by your master, you must then move on to work with that technique, not just play with it in your mind.

One of the principle elements of that practice is that of self-inquiry, analyzing your preconceptions and ideas about your "self", with the help of the new awareness and symbolic working tools you have been given. In this way you may begin to chisel at the rough stone that is your self and chip away the false exteriors you have built up from a lifetime of conditioning, of being given assumptions. If one can begin

to drop one's assumptions about himself, life, and the divine, you have completed half the journey of Yesod.

The second half is consistent and regular practice of meditation technique, energetic techniques that will allow you to release these same blocks and self-imposed attachments. The result of this work will very promptly be able to lead you to intentionally experiencing a divine consciousness, which leads you to the level of Hod.

## **Hod**

The sphere of Hod is the level of ecstasy. At this dimension, one is capable of experiencing the "vision" or experience of ecstatic bliss, one of the first signs of success in meditation practice.

Meditation techniques begin at the levels of Malkuth and Yesod. In these levels, they are little more than catharsis, a way to release the attachments of assumptions, hurt, pain, fear, etc. that one keeps within one's self. When enough of these have been released (though by no means completely), one will reach the level of being able to feel the divine around them, something that one has unknowingly longed for during most of one's life.

This is manifested within one's self as a feeling of bliss, of intense joy. Meditation practice at this level becomes a means to experiencing a freedom that is incomparable.

The dangers of this level involve becoming attached to that selfsame bliss. While the bliss itself is a wonderful experience, desiring that bliss as a "goal" in meditation destroys the purpose of meditative work, namely to practice free of attachment or desire. One must enjoy the experience of bliss without trying to force its appearance or cling to it when it arrives.

If one fails to act free of this attachment, what will happen is an inevitable falling back to a lower level of awareness. Many initiates react to this by a form of lying to themselves, trying to artificially generate or feel that bliss when it is no longer there. It is your own fear of losing the bliss that leads to its loss, and once it is lost your own desire leads you away from truth and true experience and into falsehood. Then you are trapped.

The challenge of this level is in maintaining and upholding truthfulness. This is fundamental. Truth is one of the basic virtues of the mystical work, and it begins by being truthful to your self. One must practice truth at this level above all. This is done by rejecting any impulse to try to create a false meditation experience, and accept whatever experience comes naturally, whether it is bliss or not. In consistently practicing and holding to truth, one may avoid attachment to lower impulses. Only then can you move forward.

## **Netzach**

After the level of bliss one may rise to Netzach, which is sometimes called the sphere of victory. It is thus named because it represents the culmination of the work of an initiate.

The fundamental spiritual experience of this level is "vision" of egolessness. When a student begins practicing meditation, at the level of what the Tree of Life calls Malkuth, the goal of "just being" without distraction or sinking into unconsciousness seems impossibly distant. Many students who are new to meditation have related to me, and indeed it was my own experience at that level before initiation, that to

attempt to meditate meant many long hours of difficult struggle occasionally rewarded by a few seconds of peace. This is natural at the level of a beginner.

After initiation, the shaktipat or initiatory energy granted by a guru will result in an unlocking of one's awareness, moving you in the Kabbalistic symbolism to the level of Yesod. Here a radical transformation already takes place, and a student with good natural potential can immediately begin tapping into this energy to assist their own discipline and efforts in meditation. Other students with less natural potential may take longer, but in time will also develop this ability by fostering devotion and connection to their master, and if they diligently practice the techniques of their school. Now instead of meditation seeming like a hopelessly overcast sky with a tiny glimpse of clarity, the experience is more like witnessing a cloud-filled sky with patches of openness.

The bliss experienced at the level of Hod is actually part of a purification process, crystallizing that shaktipat energy with one's own inherent enlightened quality. The sensation of bliss is not the goal of meditation, it is only a side effect, and can be dangerous if one becomes attached or addicted to that feeling.

If one does not, however, the stage of bliss will lead one to the level the Kabbalists classify as Netzach, where one may now begin to clearly experience prolonged states of egolessness. This is very different than actual enlightenment. One is not yet free of attachment, or even connected to their individuality or higher self. However, one is now able to clearly experience awareness of the existence of that higher self. At this level, you do not need to "believe" that there is a higher part of you, instead you will be able to clearly experience moments of connection to that higher part.

The challenge of this level is that of being willing to now let go of the "false self", the personality. If at the level of Netzach one can see that one has a true individuality, one is not yet capable of existing on that level of the higher self. In fact, an initiate at this level will often feel he or she is unable to clearly know what that individuality is or wants. The comments I hear from students operating at this level are that they feel confident that they have a true will or higher self, but they don't know what that true will is. Or when they are faced with choices or situations, they cannot tell what it is they "really want" or "really should do" compared to what their "ego wants". In short, students at this level will claim that they are unable to differentiate between experiences that come from their false self and their true self.

The reality is slightly different. People at this level are not unable to differentiate; they are as of yet unwilling to differentiate. Although they may sincerely feel as if they can't tell what their "true will" is, the deeper truth of that feeling is caused by a fear of letting go of the "false self" and its desires.

People at lower levels go through life trying to force the world, god, or existence to work on "their terms". They set conditions for what they want, what they think will make them happy, how they think things "ought to be", and inevitably generate suffering for themselves when these various conditions do not come to pass. This is what can be called trying to make a deal with God, or trying to barter with life. You cannot force your personality's will on the world. This is the height of ego-based action. Nevertheless, most people try to do that very thing all the time!

The challenge of Netzach lies in generating the determination to let go of the conditions you wish to set on life, to let go of the "lesser will", and to determine to strive for communication with your higher self, the "true will". You can find this higher self, though intense dedication to the work of your spiritual practice. By letting go of what you believe to be your desires and conditions in life, you will be able to start listening, in other words communicating with the higher self, which speaks from the perspective of truth. To be clear, this higher self is not a separate entity, God, or an angel who will tell you what to do. Rather, it is best described as the "Voice in the Silence". It is the sense that can be developed when you reach this level, of what is true and natural at any moment. This is a sense like the physical senses, seeing or hearing, or like the mind, but at the higher level of unity with life and the present moment. As meditation involves nothing more than trying to let go of falsehood and just exist in the moment, it can lead you to develop this sense I call the "higher self", a sense that answers only the question of what you should do at that very moment, of how to be. This is a sense that all human beings are inherently born with, but it is a sense that

has atrophied in most people through lack of use. The discipline of meditation is exercise that allows one to restore that sense and the ability to use it.

When you reach the point of being able to listen to this "higher self", you can move to the level of Tiphareth, consistent communication with the "higher self". This is the beginning of adepthood, and it is only here that one has developed sufficiently in working with one's own inner self to make it even possible to begin experiencing the divine that exists beyond the limits of one's identity.

## **Tiphareth**

The sphere of Tiphareth represents the first level of Adepthood. Here you have resolved the crisis of your disconnection to your higher self, you are now connected and capable of communication, though you do not yet primarily associate yourself with that self.

At the level of Tiphareth, in other words, you can regularly "hear" or "sense" the idea of being in the moment, and the reality that there is a certain behaviour and action that is correct at any given moment. This is one part of what the Buddha meant by "Right speech, right action, etc".

The difference between Tiphareth and Netzach is that at the level of Netzach you are only attaining to periodic moments of clarity in hearing your higher self. An adept is capable through his meditation discipline of hearing his higher self, of sensing what is right action, at any moment, at will.

Now that you are in "communication" with that higher self, the first spiritual challenge of this level is that of being willing to obey the precepts of that self. It does you no good to be able to sense what is right action in the moment if you refuse to trust that sense or choose that action.

Thus, it is pride that is the main danger of this level. Jesus expressed it as "your will, not mine, be done". As you do not yet associate with the higher self, you may feel as though what the higher self directs you to do is not what you would actually "like" to do, but what you "have" to do. The key of this level is in sacrifice, being willing to surrender the will of your ego to the guidance of your true will.

If you are capable of doing this, and begin to practice it consistently, you will over time begin to understand that you are not, as you thought, your ego; that is, although you exist as an ego being at a lower level, you also exist as your true will at a higher level.

That is an important secret of the Tree of Life. When I speak of "levels", I do not mean to say that they are in fact steps of some kind. They are co-extant. All the sephira exist at the same time and place, only at different dimensions. The revelation this brings is that all of us are animals, physical creations, ego-based entities, initiates, adepts and Buddhas, all the time, all at once. Thus there is no real difference between a being who is enlightened and a being who is not. Both exist as Buddhas, it is only that the enlightened being operates consciously at the higher levels, and the unenlightened being exists in the illusion that he does not.

## **Geburah**

The next sphere in the progression up the Tree of Life is Geburah, the sphere of force. This is the level of what some schools call a "higher adept". Once you are capable of understanding the unity between your higher and lower selves you will begin to manifest what the Tantrists call Siddhis, or powers. At the level of Tiphareth you are capable of uniting your consciousness to your higher self, or sense of the moment. The result of this is that you are now a "centered" being, or what Gurdjieff termed "crystallized" or "with a true soul". Instead of existing as merely a wavering uncertain collection of conditionings and reactions to



your experiences, you are now an individual with a true will, capable of true independent action in the moment, as opposed to mere reaction based on programming.

Due to this, an adept at this level will be capable of manifesting some abilities, understandings and energies that to someone on a lesser level would seem "supernatural". These are the Siddhis. Included in this is what eastern schools call the "opening of the third eye or celestial eye", the capability to sense deeply to the point of seemingly being able to read thoughts, sense other's emotions, easily tell if someone is lying or being truthful, or even apparently predict the future.

There are many other Siddhis or forms of manifestation, which will often depend upon the type of spiritual discipline one has practiced up to this point. Certain schools of Yogis are capable of incredible physical feats, as are the Taoist and Buddhist mystics of China who practice physical and energetic martial arts. The ability to work with Ki or the energy of life itself, may allow someone to seemingly cure illness or cause it. There are many other such "supernatural" powers, which are in fact not supernatural at all, but a manifestation of the true potential inherent in all human beings.

This all may sound difficult to believe. I do not ask you to believe it. On the contrary, you should not seek out spiritual practice with the hopes of being able to do such things. These Siddhis may also sound wonderful and highly desirable. But in reality these manifestations of power are the danger of the spiritual work at this level.

An adept who has manifested any such abilities must take great caution, toward himself and others. It is at this level that many dedicated students will betray their practice, teacher and school, believing that these trinkets of power will now provide them with happiness, fame, money, or the respect of others. Someone who acts this way will very quickly lose his centeredness, and fall down to acting from the level of ego.

It is important, when you have a gift (whether it seem magical or not, whether it be a Siddhi or not) to apply that gift with great awareness. At this level of awareness one is not yet capable of acting free of consequence, or Karma. Though your connection to your higher self lets you know what is right action for you, it is also easy to lose sight of that in light of the temptation to impress others, or a genuine wish to help others.

The key for an adept at this level is above all to put little attachment in Siddhis when they manifest and continue to develop their connection to their true will through meditation practice. Only when your true will is clear, in the moment, that you should take action, should you in fact make use of your abilities.

In many cases simply because you can do something does not mean you should. This includes the question of helping others. Simply because you can do something that would seem to help a person is not reason to do it; if a person is suffering, or confused, it is often the case that they must strive to help themselves. Offering them salvation from their problem is usually a way to cripple their ability to grow and liberate themselves. This is why most often the best way to help someone is to show them how they can progress within themselves. But foremost, it is important to develop and trust in the sense of the moment, it will guide you to know what is right action.

## **Chesed**

The sphere of Chesed is the sphere of the "exempt adept", the level where one has moved beyond the Siddhis and into a full communion with his true self. An adept at this level is now completely centred within themselves, and certain of right action. It is at this level that one is capable of sensing how that right action, the true will, is a force not limited to one's physical or ego bodies, but is instead a part of the totality of existence.

You cannot have "right action" for only yourself. For "right action" to exist it must mean that all of existence is a unity, flowing harmoniously and together. This vision of Unity is the central vision of the adept at this level. It is the vision of Love, and only a human being operating at this level is capable of

truly understanding the mystical meaning of that word. Love and Unity are synonymous within mysticism.

The work at this level is thus to strive to unite one's own centred being with the universal force, the Mystery. This is the force that has been called Brahma by Krishna, Nirvana by the Buddha, The Kingdom by Jesus.

The challenge of this level of being is the challenge of enlightenment. In the Tree of Life it is said that there is a veil, an abyss, that blocks the top three Sefhira (the Sefhira of enlightenment) from the Sefhira below. The act of enlightenment is "crossing the abyss". Up till this point the adept has progressed to his current state by dedicated practice of his spiritual discipline, and devotion to his school and guru. But these tools are of no use in the actual act of enlightenment.

Meditation, techniques, symbolism, all the teachings you may receive from a Master are not in fact ways to reach enlightenment. In reality, they are tools to prepare your individuality to reach a state where it is possible to achieve enlightenment. But in and of themselves they cannot get you there. You can practice meditation for a thousand lifetimes and not reach Nirvana.

The danger of this level is in the challenge of being able to surrender fully, to abandon the self for the purpose of uniting with the whole. However, this can not be done forcefully, or through any technique. An adept at this level may react with a kind of desperation, out of the ultimate desire, the desire for enlightenment itself. Thus, they will achieve an obsession, which will only draw them away from centeredness. Some adepts at this stage fall back to the level of ego, feeling that they must already have achieved enlightenment and are already masters. Others will try to give up and try to abandon their spiritual discipline completely out of frustration, though anyone who has reached this level cannot truly abandon their attainment. Both of these reactions are in fact forms of extreme attachment.

It is not possible to clearly express crossing the abyss in words, it can only be said as a guide that there is no means whatsoever of reaching enlightenment through any effort.

Only when you leave effort, does awakening occur.

## **Binah**

An adept who succeeds in the annihilation of self crosses the abyss, and becomes awakened. This is the level of Nirvana. At this level, one is attuned with the state of death, of annihilation. The Buddha is no longer an ego personality, as exists beneath the level of Tiphareth, nor is he a centred individual, as one exists between Tiphareth and the abyss.

Instead, one has merged with the ocean, the great water. Indeed, Binah is called "Mara, the great water". It is an ocean in which your drop has fallen, and become completely lost. At this state, you are nondifferent from any and all things.

The level of Binah is the level of what is also called the awakening to the valley of sorrow. It is the vision and spiritual experience of this level that one is connected to the profundity of all things, but also the emptiness and misery that exists in all beings. The experience is one of profound silence, and indeed the grace of silence is one of the experiences associated with this Sephiroth. This silence can be so overwhelming that it affects the new Buddha at all levels, and indeed many of those who become enlightened find themselves totally unable to communicate. Some, like Meher Baba, become silent for the rest of their lives.

In Buddhism, this level of enlightenment is what is called an Arhat. The Arhat chooses to keep to silence, to conceal his awakening or fails to communicate it. The vast majority of those who become awakened become Arhats. At this level of enlightenment, one is incapable of offering any teaching.

At this level of existence operating at this level or moving forward to the next is in one sense a simple matter of choice. One is now free, capable of moving in any direction that is wished. But so powerful is

the experience of Binah that many remain there. In most cases, a newly awakened person will either very quickly move to the level of Chokmah or they will remain at the level of Binah until near the end of their lives.

## **Chokmah**

The level of Chokmah is the level of the Bodhisattva, the teacher. The central experience of this level is that of expressing the divine in every action. One at this level is not just awakened, but has a living embodiment of enlightenment, projecting what my master, Osho, termed a "Buddhafield". Thus the term the Buddhists use for this level is Paranirvana. His very presence is a teaching, and in most cases he adds to this a "word"; that is, a new school and method to help others to do the work of awakening.

The Bodhisattva has moved beyond the deep oceanic state of the Arhat, simply through choice. It is a very little difference, but it means that the Bodhisattva is now capable of teaching, of transmitting what he has gained. It is said that what moves him is divine compassion; a result of experiencing the suffering of all beings.

There is very little more that can be said about this level of existence.

## **Kether**

Kether is the level of total dissolution into life. It is also termed Mahaparanirvana. Most masters do not achieve this state until very shortly before they leave their bodies, or just after. It is the state Osho called "beyond enlightenment".

I cannot make any further comment on this.

## **Conclusion**

With an understanding of the framework of the tree of life, and of these various spiritual states as I have described them to you, a working "practical Kabbalah" is now possible. Such a practice would consist of studying the Kabbalah and then understanding that each of the symbols corresponding to the different Sephira of the Tree of Life are symbols that act as keys for the instruction of these spiritual lessons. If you can be aware of your own challenges and progressions through the Tree of Life, it will be a great assistance to you in confronting the dangers and tasks required to reach each level of spiritual awakening.

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