

# INITIATION AND DEATH

By Tommy Westlund



*Visit the interior of the earth; through purification you will find the hidden stone.*

- V.I.T.R.I.O.L.

What really is or represents an initiation? Earlier I have come across terms like 'rebirth' and 'a new beginning' in countless variations, and though I still consider them to be a valid definition, other aspects have lately turned out to be of greater importance. Above all it is the aspect where initiation represents an intense death, which is both dramatic and physical - the alchemical *nigredo* state which in turn is the prerequisite for, and to render the forthcoming rebirth process possible. Like the Phoenix bird we must break down and incinerate our elements to ashes, for then to be able to rise up as adepts on the magical path. In alchemical terms we must find our *prima materia* and follow the apparently easy principles in V.I.T.R.I.O.L. and *Solve et coagula*. To die, however, is no easy process for most people, then it goes against our whole sense of being. It is my hope that this article will help those who have not gone through this death process yet, but who are on their way to doing that.

Further, I consider there to be a great vacuum in the descriptions of this death, and likewise what this death can mean and is experienced by the candidate, especially in the last century's occult popular literature. The emphasis is instead on the 'Light' and what comes both before and after, but this one-sided focusing and neglecting of the death process just tends to make them more unconscious, and thereby even more frightening. Quite often, they then surface as an unconscious, instinctive dislike for the tradition, system or Order in which one is working. Often the candidate therefore chooses to terminate the process and the work. It is my hope and wish

that the following sentences will be both strengthening and inspiring by showing that the dark night is perhaps the most important sign that the process really is working, when you least of all thinks it is.

### **The cyclic I A O principles**

When every functioning process of initiation includes many different phases, which I have in other articles termed the *I A O principles*, and which in themselves include 'death' and 'rebirth', it may seem strange here to put so great an emphasis on the death concept. It is, however, my opinion that this death is the primary aspect that the initiation process seeks to achieve and in different ways prepare the candidate for. The experienced death is the end product, and the entrance into the next level, of a series of lesser death and rebirth experiences, the so-called I A O cycles.

Often one is thus able to see these processes in a 3 way divided phase, termed the I A O principles. When something is being initiated, or started, one gets fulfilled with commitment, power, interest and lust. One tends to only project positive aspects on the work, tradition or Order. This phase is symbolized by the goddess Isis, the mighty mother, and viability literally bubbles and explodes around the subject. The similarity with being-in-love is great.

Sooner or later this phase passes into its total counterpart. Everything that earlier felt meaningful, stimulating and rewarding is then experienced as dull, meaningless and uninteresting. The positive projection is replaced with a negative projection, which can be directed both towards the tradition and the Order as a whole, and/or the Hierophant or other authorities within the temple. This phase is symbolized by the destroyer god Apophis, and is sometimes termed the *Dark Night of the Soul*. It is, however, important to remember, or to remind oneself, that this is a part of the initiation process. (Note though that there is a big difference between these Apophis phases, which constantly come and go in cycles, and the "Dark Night of the Soul". The latter concept is therefore described in more detail further on.)

During the Apophis phase it is common to experience tensions in one or more of the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual planes. The inner 'flow' can be viewed as restricted or restrained. Meditations and rituals no longer give the results one is used to, and even if pleasant results are experienced, it is fairly hard to stick to the experience or to motivate oneself to continue with the personal work. A general need for sleep can be experienced; again within one or more of the planes. Even if one considers to 'know' what one should do to be able to change the condition, one can't find the strength to start or keep up the personal work.

It is first with the confrontation and settlement with one's self, with one's un-, sub- and conscious projections and conceptions, that the entrance into the third phase can occur, symbolized by the dead and resurrected god Osiris. The entrance can also be experienced as, and compared with, a death and rebirth process, relieving and paradoxically life accepting. When one is thus able to create a personal synthesis one liberates oneself from at least some 'misconceptions' and 'self-delusions', and have the possibility to see processes, people and archetypes in a different light and context. A new and changed attitude towards the earlier experienced problems is being experienced; in the light from Osiris they may even not be considered as problems any more. A

sort of transcendence has occurred, which also brings one a step up (or down) the spiral and connects the phase with the following Isis phase. A zen koan illustrates this as follows: first the adept sees a tree (phase of Isis), then the tree is no longer seen since knowledge about the reality of illusions have been incorporated into the consciousness (the phase of Apophis), and finally the tree is seen again, when a deeper understanding of the reality and the personal illusions have been reached (the phase of Osiris).

The keywords to be able to go through these phases in particular, and the occult path in general, is without doubt patience and endurance. Personally, I have often found that it can be easier to shift glance and focus towards another system or tradition, thereby to temporarily 'forget' the things I thought I knew about the present system. When similar concepts are described from another symbol system, new light can fall upon the personal situation and the phase of Osiris can be initiated and experienced.

This simple I A O dividing into three phases can of course be applied to completely different aspects than those having to do with the occult. What often is the distinguishing feature is, however, that they are present and living processes in cycles; they thus do not stop when one reaches the phase of Osiris for the first time.

Within the occult path these cycles are culminated in the meeting with the *Guardian of the Threshold*. The guardian can be said to summarize all the fear, apprehension and repressed processes that have not been accepted or dealt with, and constitute the hindrance between oneself and ones *Holy Guardian Angel*. It is here that the great or real death-experience occurs, what the Egyptians called the 'death in life'. It is prominently distinguished from the earlier death phases, both in strength and significance. I will return to this in more detail further on.

### **Several lives during a number of years**

Is it possible to pinpoint what an initiation seeks to accomplish? Well, one answer is that the initiation seeks to compress a lifetime of experiences into a period of time as short as perhaps a decade, and in extension a number of incarnations into one and the same lifetime. Of primary aspect here is thus, that the candidate experiences processes, subjective and objective, which leads beyond a mere casual knowledge and understanding (one can read in information and understand it in a rational way, but it is first when it is being experienced and giving full expression to, that the knowledge is being transformed into an understanding wisdom) to a significant deeper understanding, which automatically means an important transformation for the person in question.

With this view of the process it is as infantile to believe that the journey is self-sustaining as that it is an easy and amusing trip. It includes, and must include, both inspiring experiences and comfortable 'enlightened' moments yet also pain and grief, then it is foremost from these latter stages that we grow as individuals and gradually are able to raise up as adepts, with the power and belief in ourselves from the former stages.

### **To give up is not the same as to surrender**

Regardless which tradition and symbol system underlies the individual initiation process, all the candidate's layers of consciousness are being bombarded during the same time. This occurs with

the symbolism that the tradition or society is using, which is thus intended to both assist and force the experiences and changes that need to be experienced and take place. The symbolism thus serves primarily the purpose of appealing to the rational and intuitive mind and acting as a bait for the present and forthcoming work, and secondary, in a longer perspective, that from an unconscious level act as a ground, from which one is able to raise up when the death phase has occurred. This can be compared with the process that sometimes represents the crossing of the *abyss* (the pathless passing from Chesed to Binah on the Tree of Life, through the veil of Isis). The test that must be accomplished is to there give up all the knowledge one has learned so far during the journey, for the benefit of a considerably deeper understanding of the same. In other words it can be described as understanding that what one has experienced thus far and seen as a map of oneself and reality (or perhaps even interpreted *as reality*) in the best of cases it is a map of a map of reality. To be able to continue the progress one has to realize the form or labyrinth that one has used to get there, and give it up. The more this form has meant, the harder it accordingly is to give up the same.

The great challenge here is thus to give up what one believed to be real for something deeper or truer within oneself, without surrendering the process. Many are those who have lost faith in their own path during these stages, and as a result of this experienced everything they had been through, experienced and felt during the journey was a meaningless delusion. To continue the work can therefore be experienced as even more self-deceit, and the rational solution is to abandon the process and shift sight, focus and concentration towards completely different areas in life. It is here of greatest importance to somewhere, deep within oneself, try to remember the wisdom and symbolism one has participated in, and to figure out how this can be applied to the personal process, which regardless of what one thinks or believes, is anything but stopped.

### **Guardian angels and demons**

One of the mystical experiences of Malkuth (the lowest sephira on the Tree of Life) is the vision of one's Holy Guardian Angel. This vision thus comes very early in the work, and is among other things intended as a source of inspiration and a leading star. Not in the least it indicates that one is on the right track. My experience is that there is a neglected backside of this experience, the vision of one's shadow or demon. When the former is generally consciously experienced (in psychological terms it can be compared with the first contacts between the conscious self or 'I' and the Higher Self) the latter usually occurs on an unconscious level (the self's contact/conflict with the shadow). Some get so frightened by this experience that they immediately distance themselves from the work that has led them there. For many others the conscious and positive experience of the guardian angel is considered stronger or more important, whereby the work can continue for some more time.

When these visions have occurred, conscious or unconscious, the candidate tends to project the experiences on the environment. The positive experience is thus often projected on the tradition as a whole or on one or more authorities within the same in particular (for example the Temple Hierophant). The negative experience tends to be projected outwards on either other traditions or societies, or members and friends that one finds being blind or ignorant in different ways. Thus one strengthens oneself by creating an outer enemy, and the common for these enemies is that they do not follow the "true" or "right" way, obey the right god, have the right moral, etc. These

tendencies are fairly easy to observe in the world as a whole, but are at least as real within the groups and individuals who consider themselves to be on the way towards total self-awareness. In the occult world the so-called 'white' and 'black' societies or groups have through all ages used such projections on each other. The group or tradition one belongs to is then "always" considered to be the one who really understands the way things are and have access to the real power and wisdom (regardless if this is considered to come from God or Satan, the higher consciousness or the unconsciousness, the light or the dark, etc.), while the other side is blinded by their own light respective darkness, and is quite or total lost.

These 'black' or 'dark' groups thus tend to shift the symbolism and focus all conscious power on the shadow or demon, while the vision of the guardian angel is repressed to an unconscious level. In this way the unconsciousness rules and controls as much in these cases as in the earlier ones.

The more work one is doing to get a conscious and clear contact with any of these opposites, the more inevitable the approaching meeting with the other side gets. This meeting tends to escalate during the I A O principles, and sooner or later results in the "Dark Night of the Soul" and the encounter with the Guardian of the Threshold, and then this stage has to be passed to attain Tiphareth or Solar consciousness. In the classical Abra-Melin operation, in which the practitioner endeavors to attain complete contact and conversation with his/her holy guardian angel in just six months, this pleasant contact is thereby followed with again being alone and invoking the dark forces within and without oneself, thus to be able to meet, accept and integrate the 'reverse of the coin'. As in the profane world, even occult strong lights cast big shadows.

### **The Dark Night of the Soul**

The more times the I A O principles are being experienced, the closer one gets to the inevitable and frightened condition termed the Dark Night of the Soul. During the Apophis phases one is able to get a taste of what this condition is about, but the difference is so extreme and gigantic that it is very hard to believe or accept that this is a part of the process. The night can be experienced as a vacuum where everything, with emphasis on *everything*, that has been experienced and felt as meaningful the day before now has totally lost its meaning. There is no light anywhere, nothing that draws, nothing that interests, and nothing that means anything. It is as meaningless to die as go on living (living is perhaps not a fitting description here though), and the longer the night proceeds, the more convinced one gets that the condition will never change. It is like being a zombie that mechanically tries to maintain some aspects of its life, where fear has replaced lust and will. In psychological terms it may be compared with turning Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs upside down, and where you before worked with the need of self-actualization and transcendence you suddenly find yourself working with the most basic physiological needs.

A great difference between this condition and the earlier Apophis phase is also to the degree and extent in which the world around oneself is affected. There is thus not only a subjective process (which in that case could be explained away and neglected) but also an objective process. This can manifest as that one gets robbed or beaten up, loses the work or apartment, gets involved in a physical accident (car crash, fall, etc.) or different diseases, or that relationships or important relations suddenly and abruptly end, often with fights and hard emotions involved. It is as if one's

whole environment and world is seeing to it that one can't run away or escape from seeking up the inmost of the soul, the stinking and rotting ash that one under no circumstances wants to have any further contact with. The more one tries to escape from the process in this state (with the help of imaginary interests, drugs, travels, etc.), the more the feeling of total meaninglessness gnaws from the inmost to the outmost of one's being, until it is as meaningless to continue escaping as it is to stop and also give up. For this is a battle that never can be won through escape or violence, regardless of how these manifest, then both sides of the fight is oneself. The temptation to use different forms of violence should further not be underestimated, then one finally is ready to do whatever it takes to stop the pressure that is destroying oneself. Things one "normally" should never consider can in these conditions not only be thinkable but also sadistically inspiring. The process is here projected on the environment then it hurts too much to understand that all the effort and work in getting to know oneself, the world and the reality (or whatever motif one may have or have had) has brought forth this crisis.

All one wants to do when present in the night is to change the void within and without oneself for something that brings back substance to the life again. The problem, however, is that if this succeeds, it is an escape, for the goal here is to explore this void, and to crystallize the same. First when that has been accomplished is one able to slowly start rising up without escaping from oneself, and without falling back down into the maelstrom.

This crystallizing is further something one has to understand and realize by oneself, even though one's whole being screams out after help from the environment. A symbolical description shall here try to illustrate this. In my own experience of this stage I could see myself walking on a mountain hill, exposed to the weather forces, which literally threatened me and tried to blow me off the mountain. All my energy thus went in desperately trying to hold on to the narrow hill, and I neither saw nor cared whether I moved forwards or backwards. At those moments when the wind increased to hurricane strength around me, I searched for and didn't want anything more than to be comforted by a close friend, so that I not only could avoid falling headless out from the precipice, but also get a respite from the internal and external pressure that was crushing my being. However, every such attempt to drag someone else in and more or less desperately holding on to that person, only resulted in that I shortly thereafter was exposed to an even heavier storm and I felt even more alone than before. I experienced how my condition frightened certain people in my environment, and the help they tried to give me rather nearly crushed me even more. After more sorrow and grief I experienced and understood the insight that I couldn't put the responsibility on someone else, when that in itself implied an escape from myself and the process that was mine to handle and endure. Returning to visual symbolism I understood the difference between getting support and clinging on to my environment, and where the latter became an escapist behaviour the former was able to assist me when the wind was at its peak. I thus shifted focus from the environment to my inmost being, and the frightening void that filled it. By doing this, the void could be investigated and become better understood, and little by little crystallized.

### **The Guardian of the Threshold**

However, to be able to reach that point in a process like this, one must, apart from the above-mentioned total depression, endure the meeting with the Guardian of the Threshold. These meetings are generally speaking, considerably more than just one, can sometimes be what initiates

the dark night, and sometimes be what stops the headlong fall and brings some kind of ground under the feet. The Guardian can be said to summarize all the fears, misgivings and repressed processes one neither wants, nor is able to acknowledge nor accept in oneself, and the meeting can therefore be experienced as both very frightening and surprising. As in the dark night of the soul, the guardian is able to disturb the objective environment - the subjective limits are thus again overstepped. As the Guardian is a personal creation (which also hints at the key to overcome it), every individual person's guardian and the form it takes, and the meeting with the same, is highly unique. Personally, I got very surprised by how objective and real my guardian's form was, but also that it, to such a degree, played on the symbolism in the tradition I have been following for many years. It is my belief, however, that a detailed account of these meetings serves no purpose, then the risk is that one creates an image of what one believes to be the guardian and thereby limit the personal experience of the same. When the meeting surely occurs it is so intense that it, generally speaking, leaves one in no doubt about what has happened - inasmuch as one doesn't get so scared that one turns ones back towards the whole work.

The meeting with the guardian tends to occur during a period of perhaps three to nine to eighteen months (again much depending on individual behaviour and preferences). During this period of time one is still present in the dark night, which gradually contains both gleams of light and of hope, first just a few, then more and more, which indicates the approaching of a Golden Dawn. Parallel with one's encounters with the guardian ones contact with the Holy Guardian Angel (higher Self, etc.) can be intensified, and one can literally experience being thrown between the light and the darkness, between hope and despair. Many times one is able to believe that one has passed through the night and entered the dawn, only to find oneself the next second in the darkened night again.

This phase can be made easier by some isolation from the outside world. This is without doubt a very tough and hard time that is being experienced, and if one at the same time has social requirements to fulfill, work or studies to concentrate on, family to care and tend for, etc., together with everything else that makes up a "normal" life, the pressure upon the hermetic vessel inside which the process is being carried out, might be so intense that the vessel literally cracks. Our society, no surprise, is obviously not constructed to make this process easier, but it can be a great advantage to, in what extent it is possible, to limit the world in pace with the intensifying process. Note, however, that the intensity of the work is not constant; periods of strong heat can be followed by periods of recovery before it is time again to increase the pressure in the vessel. Further, if too much intensity and heat is being produced during the meeting in particular or during night in general, the risk is that one literally burns out. Again it is of great importance to pay attention to both body and soul, and seek to adjust the outer circumstances according to the inner process.

If one doesn't endure the meeting with the guardian one gets to, in best cases, start again from scratch in this present life. In the cases where this is not possible, the remaining life becomes an escape from oneself, where the internal processes constantly are being projected outwards. This condition can without exaggerating be described as being a slave under ones shadow.

## A Golden Dawn

In the dark night of the soul everything one has ever experienced or believed in is being reassessed; relations, ones place in the world, from the smallest and most insignificant to the greatest and most important. All personal work has thus led towards destroying those masks and delusions one has used towards oneself and the environment, and the work that gradually follows is to build oneself up again, as a person who has encountered death in life and been reborn. The turning point can occur after one has succeeded in cantering oneself and ones process in the personal universe, and thereby both find and constitute the centre of the world as the world navel, the *axis mundi*. It is from that point that the reconstruction and rebuilding of the world, the universe and the following processes occur. One has visited and found the interior of the Earth, and by purification found the Grail, which is brought back to the world again.

The first insinuations that the process is about to leave the night are often that the candidate dares to look forward again. By getting to know parts of oneself that earlier were unthinkable to exist, this conscious light can assist in the appearance of and seeing the light in the tunnel as well and thereby aid a new self-confidence. The delicate challenge is then to create and form oneself again, and to (preferably) not repeat the patterns that were discovered during the night. Returning to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, one gets here to, step by step, build a new foundation for ones complete being, the basis of which the following work rests upon and starts from. As most things in life have been re-evaluated during the process and during the night, the task here is to dare these changes to manifest themselves in one's life. In different ways one can seek to combine the extremes that take the form of spirit and matter which have fought their battle in the different layers of consciousness, and on the basis of this wisdom that comes from a deep, intuitive and experienced understanding, work towards *spiritualizing the body and materializing the spirit*. By doing this, the work is also raised up a level towards the ambitious creating of the Stone of the Wise and the attainment of True Wisdom, Summum Bonum.

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