

# Resolving the Pairs of Opposites

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[Presentation to the Southern Conference, Coptic Fellowship International,  
Johnson City, TN, April 13, 2003]

## Introduction

### Pairs of Opposites

The people in this room are male or female. There are two sex chromosomes, X and Y, and two hemispheres in the brain. The growth of cells is controlled by DNA whose structure is a double helix.

A magnet has a north and south pole. Electrical charges are positive and negative. At a subatomic level we have protons and electrons, hadrons and leptons.

We talk about sickness and health, mania and depression, social and antisocial behavior, good and evil, righteousness and sin, salvation and damnation. Spiritual teachers contrast asceticism and worldliness, enlightenment versus ignorance. We speak of freedom versus slavery. We experience love or hatred. We are either too hot or too cold.

The economy goes through cycles of expansion and recession. Most economic cycles are caused by imbalance between supply and demand, but the book of *Genesis* reported a weather-related cycle:

Behold, there come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt: And there shall arise after them seven years of famine... and the famine shall consume the land... it *shall be* very grievous.<sup>1</sup>

### Nature of Opposites

We live in a world governed by opposites and the tension between them. But what is the nature of opposites, and what do they mean for us? Again we can turn to *Genesis*:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth... and divided the light from the darkness... And God said, Let us make man in our image... male and female he created them.<sup>2</sup>

The unmanifest Godhead is completely unified, but it is unknown and unknowable. Manifestation requires contrast: you can't see a white object against a white background. The 19th-century French occultist Éliphas Lévi commented that

To make light visible God had only to postulate shadow.<sup>3</sup>

And in her book *Initiation*, novelist Elizabeth Haich says:

Nothing can ever be manifested and made recognizable, unless its opposite—its complementary half—is simultaneously present.<sup>4</sup>

## Kabbalah

The tension between pairs of opposites is represented well by the esoteric system known as the Kabbalah. The Kabbalah is of Jewish origin, but it now forms a major element in the western mystery tradition.

Central to Kabbalistic teaching is a diagram called the Tree of Life [Transparency]. The Tree consists of 10 or 11 spheres—known as *sephiroth*—with connecting lines. The sephiroth represent divine potencies, levels of consciousness, or types of experience.

The descent of divine force from the Godhead is represented by a path through the sephiroth from first manifest, *Kether* (usually translated as “the Crown”), all the way down to *Malkuth* (the “Kingdom”), the world of everyday experience. The spiritual path and the ascent of consciousness are represented by an ascending path through the sephiroth.

The Greeks regarded spirit and matter as the ultimate pair of opposites, and these are represented by *Kether* and *Malkuth*.

In addition to this “vertical” pair of opposites, the Kabbalah allows us to study horizontal pairs of opposites that have important psychological importance.

The sephiroth, or spheres, on the Tree of Life are arranged in three vertical columns, or pillars. The spheres on the right- and left-hand pillars represent pairs of opposites, while those on the middle pillar represent the equilibrium between them.

The three sephiroth on the right-hand pillar express positive forces. *Chokmah* (usually, but somewhat inadequately translated as “Wisdom”), *Chesed* (“Mercy”), and *Netzach* (“Victory” or “Eternity”). Those on the left-hand pillar express negative forces. *Binah* (“Understanding”), *Geburah* (“Judgment”), and *Hod* (“Splendor”). These English translations do not capture the real meaning of the sephiroth, and it is best to use the original Hebrew names.

Let us examine the three pairs of opposites in turn.

### **Chokmah and Binah**

Chokmah and Binah are the first pair of opposites. Chokmah is the primal masculine energy, representing creative potency. Binah is the primal feminine energy, representing receptivity, and containment. Binah and Chokmah are rather like the Chinese Yin and Yang. Binah receives and molds the raw energy sent out by Chokmah. Without Chokmah’s energy nothing would manifest, but without Binah’s form-making capability the energy would be wasted, like a candle in infinite space?

A good example of the tension between Chokmah and Binah is scientists’ quest for thermonuclear power generation. We know from the hydrogen bomb that thermonuclear reactions generate immense power, but we have yet to develop technology to contain and utilize its force for nonmilitary purposes. When we do so we shall have an unlimited supply of inexpensive, clean energy.

### **Chesed and Geburah**

Chesed and Geburah are the second pair of opposites. Chesed represents expansive generosity—what the Bible calls “lovingkindness”—while Geburah represents justice and severity. In its generosity, Chesed would give away the store, but it is restrained by Geburah’s sense of “enough is enough.” Geburah’s aggression is softened by Chesed’s compassion.

Chesed and Geburah stand for pacifism versus militarism. Peace activists are motivated by high ideals, but sometimes they have unrealistic expectations of the effectiveness of moral pressure on tyrants and rogue regimes. Opposed to them—and currently dominating US foreign policy—are the hawks who believe that all problems can be solved by force and who may be indifferent to the cost of human suffering and international respect.

## **Netzach and Hod**

Netzach and Hod form the third pair of opposites. Netzach represents ambitious and unrestrained optimism, while Hod represents cautious deliberation. Netzach sets out to conquer the world, climb the highest mountain, express every human drive. Hod advises caution and careful planning, and warns of what might go wrong.

The tension between Netzach and Hod is well represented by the stock market. During the 1990s, securities prices were driven up in a speculative buying frenzy, fueled by what Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan called “irrational exuberance.” People jumped on the bandwagon, swayed by media hype, overoptimistic profit forecasts, unreasonable market expectations, and disregard for historical precedents. But by 2000 the bubble had burst. Bad news, even rumors, triggered overreaction, panic selling and the collapse of market prices. We were in a Netzach (bull) market, but for some time now we have been in a Hod (bear) market.

## **Experiencing the Opposites**

The great strength of the Kabbalah as an esoteric system is the message that the pairs of opposites do not push into making choices in advance. For example, we are not required to choose between experiencing Netzach and Hod, or Chesed and Geburah. Rather, we should experience both, to feel and live their contrasting energies. Only then can we make a meaningful choice.

We may want to experience both opposites more than once. We do not experience summer and winter only once. We experience many summers and winters, along with their respective joys and pains.

This does not necessarily mean that we need to swing violently from one extreme to another. Rather, we can strive to produce a steady rhythm—a pattern of inbreathing and outbreathing—which offers a continuing spectrum of experience. The memory of summer enhances our appreciation winter, and vice versa. Certainly the memory of winter enhances our appreciation of spring, and that appreciation does not grow dim with increasing age.

## **Hegel**

The Tree of Life provides a model for possible resolution of the pairs of opposites, but we might protest that it only provides a static model. We need to examine how these tensions are played out dynamically, over time.

A good model of dynamic tension between opposites was proposed by the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who lived from 1770 to 1831. Hegel studied many things, ranging from the supremacy of the nation state to progress on the spiritual path.

His most lasting contribution was his dialectic theory of history [Transparency]. Hegel’s theory involved three factors, which he called thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Thesis represents a political, religious, philosophical, or social mind-set that is fashionable at a particular time. After it has held sway for a while, its polar opposite— antithesis—emerges as a possible alternative. Tension develops between them, and in due course the thesis is overthrown and antithesis achieved a dominant position.

To illustrate Hegelian dialectic let us return to the economy. In a typical economic expansion, confidence rises, credit is freely available, and demand increases for capital, raw materials, labor, and consumer products. Eventually, demand exceeds supply, putting upward pressure on prices. As inflation takes hold, confidence declines, lending agencies tighten credit, businesses contract, workers are laid off, and consumers buy less. After a period of recession, inflation pressures ease, and a new cycle starts over again.

Similarly, alternations occur between types of government, religious movements, schools of thought, and so forth.

Hegel saw history as an ongoing process of thesis and antithesis, each achieving dominance for a time, but eventually being replaced by something contrasting in its basic quality or premise.

However, Hegel also recognized that humankind learned from the process and, from time to time, would see the possibility of a new and innovative political, religious, philosophical, or social mind-set. This new mind-set would replace both alternatives that had previously competed with one another.

The creative solution, which drew upon the experience of both opposites, was what he called synthesis.

## **Resolving the Opposites**

Pairs of opposites can be resolved in a number of ways. One possibility is simply for one of the opposites to defeat the other: achieve complete and permanent victory. The struggle between good and evil is often characterized in this way, although we must be cautious in wishing victory on so-called “good.”

For example, the Puritan’s view of “good” would deny us many of the values we take for granted today. Victory for one of the opposites saddles the world with everything that is bad about the winning position and fails to preserve whatever might be good in the losing position.

Another possibility is for the opposites to neutralize one another, for a compromise or truce to be reached between the opposing forces. A coalition government would be a good example.

This is an attractive option in the short run. Each side realizes some of its goals and may be satisfied for a while. But, as we all know from history, truces do not last. The underlying conflict is not resolved. Eventually smoldering resentments push one or other of the opposing forces to resume the war. To settle for a truce is a wasted opportunity.

A third possibility is to look for some new, creative solution. The opposites are not just neutralized, but their mutual tension is turned into new possibility, new life. From the father and mother, a child is born. Certainly there are labor pains, but the child’s birth is an occasion of joy and celebration.

To return to the Kabbalah [Transparency], we saw that the the middle pillar is the pillar of equilibrium. The middle pillar stretches from Kether, at the top, to Malkuth, at the bottom. At its mid point lies the sephirah of Tiphareth—whose name appropriately means “Harmony” or “Beauty.” Here lies a clue as to how technological, economic, or political conflicts can be resolved.

In the vertical direction, we saw that spirit is represented by Kether, and matter by Malkuth. They are resolved, again, on the middle pillar: in the three sephiroth Daath (“Knowledge”), Tiphareth (“Harmony” or “Beauty”), and Yesod (“Foundation”).

Tiphareth, aided by Daath and Yesod, is the mediator between spirit and matter. It facilitates the flow of energy between Kether and Malkuth, between God and man. The Neoplatonists called this mediator the Logos, while the Hellenic Christians—including John the Evangelist—identified it with Jesus Christ.

On the human level, the soul is our Logos, the Christ within us, the mediator between the divine spark, or monad, and the lower self, or personality. Our soul is threefold, consisting of an animal soul, corresponding to Yesod; a human soul, corresponding to Tiphareth; and a divine soul,

corresponding to Daath. We were not created with a fully functioning human soul, but over many lifetimes our human soul unfolds; and we approach the state of perfected humanity in Tiphareth.

To help us in our development toward perfection is the overshadowing divine soul, the Solar Angel, or what the Kabbalists call the Holy Guardian Angel. The Solar Angel is to the soul what the Christ was to the Master Jesus.

## The Fourth Ray

We have made much progress, but it remains to ask why we live in a world governed by pairs of opposites. A major part of the answer lies in the fact that humanity is ruled by the 4th ray of “Harmony through Conflict.” Most of you are probably familiar with the seven rays [Transparency], the divine emanations below the level of the trinity. Because we are on the 4th ray, our very nature is to be in conflict and to have tensions pulling us one way or another.

But the 4th ray is not just *Conflict* but *Harmony through Conflict*. We are supposed to learn from conflict: to discover how to transcend it; how to produce new harmony. Significantly, the 4th ray is the median of the seven rays.

The Tibetan Master, whose books were channeled by Alice Bailey, tells us that the pairs of opposites are primarily an expression of the duality of the astral plane: the plane of emotion and desire. But they must be resolved at a mental level. In his first book we read:

“The discriminative faculty of mind, which is the distinctive quality of humanity, (enables) him, through the balancing of the pairs of opposites, to reach his goal, and to find his way back to the source from whence he came.”<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, the Tibetan also reminds us that compassion “is essentially the right use of the pairs of opposites.”

## View from Above

To resolve the pairs of opposites, we must rise above emotion and desire, develop a mental focus, and express compassion. But what if we rise still further to the plane of intuition: the so-called buddhic plane? By intuition I do not mean the instinctual hunches that we sometimes experience. This is the intuition that transcends mind, the intuition that the Neoplatonists called *Gnosis*.

Viewing reality from the buddhic plane is like looking down on a maze from a balloon floating in the air above it. We see paths, patterns, and relationships that would not be apparent to people trying to find their way through the maze. We see distant points, past and future, as one.

From the vantage point of the buddhic plane we could view thesis and antithesis, not as separate states occurring one after the other, but as coexisting aspects of a larger whole—part of the synthesis into which they can be resolved. As the Taoists say, there is no good and bad, life and death, because all is One.

The opposites need not be seen as distinct experiences at different times of our lives, but as part of a larger synthesis in which all kinds of experience are simultaneously possible. Indeed we could see patterns yet to emerge, and synthesis that is attainable if we hold the right vision and make choices accordingly.

In some circles it has become something of a mantra to talk about “both/and,” instead of “either/or.” But, at ordinary levels of experience “both/and” is not possible. Traditional dialectic logic, attributed to the Greek philosopher Parmenides, who lived in the 5th century BCE, but more properly to Aristotle, is the appropriate logic in the everyday world.

However, we already know that a different kind of logic applies in quantum theory. The phenomenon of superposition allows contradictory states to exist together—both can

simultaneously be true. In the famous thought-experiment proposed by Erwin Schrödinger (1887–1961), the cat is both alive and dead until you look inside the box.

An analogous kind of superpositional logic applies at higher levels of consciousness—an inclusive logic that can allow pairs of opposites to coexist in mutual tension.

Perhaps we can now understand the Kabbalistic Tree of Life in a larger sense. Instead of regarding the Tree as a set of static possibilities, we can begin to see it as a view from the buddhic plane of all possible patterns and relationships—all possible pairs of opposites, and all possible modes of resolution.

An actual time sequence, a historical timeline, is a path through the sephiroth. It stops at the present moment, but it continues in alternative directions depending on the choices we make. From the buddhic level we can evaluate the impact of these alternatives, not so much on ourselves but on the group good. Buddhic consciousness knows no separation, no selfishness, no thought of individual gain at the expense of general loss.

The final question, of course, is how do we attain buddhic—intuitional—consciousness? The answer lies in esoteric work, and particularly in meditation. When we meditate we can hold the intent of transcending not only the mental plane but also the separative self. Most of us have glimpsed this level of consciousness; it is our challenge to develop it to a point where it becomes readily accessible.

If we can achieve this state, the pairs of opposites that pull us this way and that will no longer have power over us. We can bring synthesis, wholeness, and harmony into our individual and collective lives.

## The Seven Rays

- 1 Will or Power
- 2 Love-Wisdom
- 3 Active Intelligence
- 4 Harmony through Conflict
- 5 Concrete Science
- 6 Devotion or Idealism
- 7 Ceremonial Order

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<sup>1</sup> *Genesis*, 41:29-31.

<sup>2</sup> *Genesis*, 1: 1-28.

<sup>3</sup> Eliphas Levi. *Transcendental Magic*. (Transl: A. E. Waite). Samuel Weiser, 1896/1971, p.40.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Haich. *Initiation*. Seed Center, 1963/1974, p. 173.

<sup>5</sup> Alice A. Bailey. *Initiation Human and Solar*.

# Kabbalistic Tree of Life

