

# The Path of Initiation: The Integration of Psychological and Spiritual Development in Western Esoteric Thought

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**Abstract:** This paper examines, from an emic stance, a strand of Western esoteric wisdom that offers a particular perspective on psycho-spiritual development in relation to spiritual emergence, the mutually interdependent evolution of consciousness and substance, and the functional role of human incarnation within our planetary life. The writings of Alice A. Bailey (1880-1949) and Lucille Cedercrans (1921-1984) serve as significant reference points in this effort. These teachings hold an integral view of human development in which a person's awareness and self-identification progress from polarization in physical matter and sensation through progressively subtler gradients of emotional and mental experience, culminating in "The Path of Initiation," a phase of psychological and spiritual expansions into deepening levels of transcendent, supramental consciousness and functioning. The esoteric teachings described here portray this path descriptively rather than prescriptively, and have significant parallels to Sri Aurobindo's Integral vision. Both consider human life in form to be a vital and necessary phase within the larger cosmic evolution of consciousness and matter, and both are frameworks that expansively embrace the significance of the Divine as both immanent and transcendent presence. The important issue of epistemological methodology and the testing of esoteric assertions is also considered.

**Key words:** Alice A. Bailey, initiation, integral consciousness, integral philosophy, integral yoga, Lucille Cedercrans, neo-theosophy, path of initiation, perennial philosophy, psycho-spiritual development, science of impression, spiritual emergence, the ageless wisdom, western esotericism, western esoteric wisdom.

## Introduction

Western esoteric thought and practice, though not extensively represented in the circles of integral scholarship, hold pertinent ideas that can enrich the discourse on several subjects of interest to the integral community. This article focuses on a Western esoteric perspective regarding one such issue: the relationship between the healthy and adaptive development of the human personality, as understood in mainstream psychological terms, and the emergence within

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that personality of spiritual experience and transpersonal perception. Furthermore, human psycho-spiritual development is viewed in the context of a much larger picture. Western esotericism has long held what is now called a “re-enchanted” and hologramatic view of the Cosmos, seeing it as a living, consciousness-endowed Being of which humanity is one integrated and intelligent organ. This hologramatic vision, now gaining currency among several integral thinkers (Tarnas, 2006, Elgin, 2009; Swimme & Tucker, 2011), sees humanity’s collective expansions of consciousness as one aspect of an evolutionary process through which the Cosmos Itself expands Its capacity to know and reflect upon Itself.

## Western Esotericism in Context

Broadly considered, the term esoteric—derived from the Greek root *eso* for *inner* or *hidden*—relates to the philosophical position that all aspects of external, phenomenological reality are an effect and reflection of a deeper and essential order that is causal to phenomenal appearance. For the seeker, this essential nature holds the meaning behind all manifest appearances, and is amenable to investigation through particular modes of contemplative inquiry, the pursuit of which provides pathways to expanded understanding, self-actualization, and fulfillment. In relationship to religion, Jones (2012) situates esotericism “as the hidden side of any institutionalized religious tradition” (p. 16). She goes on to state that Western esoteric movements ...

... have existed much like an underground stream throughout Western history, surfacing in distinct places and times, but with similar principles and practices. A few examples to illustrate the breadth of esotericism include: Essenes, Greek Mystery Cults, Pythagoreanism, Kaballah, Sufism, Theosophy, Freemasonry, Anthroposophy, Rosicrucianism, Alchemy, Hermeticism, and groups following specific teachers.... (p. 17)

The strand of contemporary Western esoteric thought that I present here, though beyond facile classification, has been categorized by some as Neo-Theosophy (Hendon, 2005), a living continuation of work exemplified most notably by Alice A. Bailey (1880-1949) and to a lesser extent, Lucile Cedercrans (1921-1984). Other teachers have advanced this path, and are active today. As a group, they consider their efforts to be phased facets of an ongoing revelation of wisdom concerning humanity’s place and role in both planetary and cosmic affairs. A telling characteristic of these teachings, which will become apparent as we proceed, is that they synthesize spiritual insights from both Eastern and Western traditions, and relate them to a Perennial core. While Bailey (British) and Cedercrans (American) never had personal contact with one another, both found it important to categorize their teachings as *Wisdom*, which Bailey (1922) distinguishes from factual knowledge as follows: “Wisdom is the science of the spirit, just as knowledge is the science of matter. Knowledge is separative and objective, whilst wisdom is synthetic and subjective” (p. 11).

Bailey labels her work *The Ageless Wisdom* throughout the body of her writings, and Cedercrans uses simply *The Wisdom* as shorthand for the more complete but unwieldy *New Thought-form Presentation of The Wisdom* (Cedercrans, 2007, p. 1137). For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to them in aggregate as Wisdom or Wisdom teachings. Both authors were inspired by a level of perceptual understanding attained through contemplative training and

discipline, and considered the transmission of any teachings coming through them to be an important responsibility in service to humanity. Their aim was to make these Wisdom teachings and related supportive practices available initially to esoterically inclined students, while also contributing to the long-term emergence of a greatly expanded human consciousness and a more humane civilization. While these decidedly metaphysical teachings are detailed and specific, even technical at times, they are offered to students not as doctrine, but as hypotheses for consideration and rigorous personal inquiry through contemplative examination and practical application. Admittedly, many esoteric tenets may seem outlandish to thoughtful people in the context of our decidedly non-metaphysical thought-climate, so considerations of epistemology are important in this discussion. One methodology for the intuitive registration, interpretation, and testing of tenets within these teachings is referred to as “the science of impression,” which I will return to later.

While expansions of consciousness and spiritual development affect and involve what is commonly considered to be the personality, different transpersonal thinkers have argued that spiritual awakening is quasi-independent of personality development, some proposing that it *parallels*, and others that it *intersects* directly, with personality development. An important element of this discussion is necessarily a definition of personality, and how it relates to “spiritual” aspects of personhood; the interface between psychological and spiritual development has historically been one of the major areas of inquiry and disagreement in transpersonal discourse (Wilber, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 2000; Rothberg & Kelly, 1998; Grof and Grof, 1998; Washburn, 1998). Beyond philosophical considerations, the matter has immediate and even clinical consequence when one considers the life-difficulties of people experiencing spiritual emergence or spiritual emergency (Assagioli, 1989; Cortright, 1997; Raucher, 1999).

## Human Development in the Wisdom Teachings

Wisdom teachings define the personality as that portion of the total human entity which comprises its form or appearance aspect, a three-fold instrument—mental-emotional-physical—which serves as a vehicle of experience and expression for an essential and transcendent aspect of personhood, the Soul. Of note here is that Western esotericism defines Soul as the unit of consciousness that indwells and underlies all forms (not only human forms), and further, that consciousness itself, in a larger context, results from the dynamic energetic interplay between the two Great Poles of All Being: Spirit and Matter (Bailey, 1936; Cedercrans, 1993). These three elements—Spirit, Consciousness, and Matter—comprise a Causal Triad or “Three-in-One” from which all existence emanates, and which underlies all forms as they evolve. Further, this principle demonstrates hologrammatically at all levels of being (for example, in the three-fold personality). It is a corollary of the Principle of Polarity in which Spirit (Purpose, Will, Unmanifest Source) is the positive pole, Matter (Substance, Form, Intelligent Response to Purpose) is the negative pole, and the cohering field of attraction between these is variously described (depending on context) as Soul, Love-Wisdom, or Consciousness—interesting equivalencies that take on resonance through contemplation. As stated, this Causal Triad is reflected, through the Law of Correspondence, in the three-fold human personality on its own level. Mind is the positive pole, the physical nature is the negative pole, and the astral or emotional-feeling nature is the interplay of attraction between the poles. This foundational

principle and the Law of Correspondence warrant a much fuller elaboration, but this brief introduction will have to suffice at this point in the article.

Bailey and Cedercrans posit a framework of human evolutionary development—both collective and individual—in which the Soul progressively moves through an initiatory pathway, first gaining a degree of competence and mastery within its materially identified form nature (personality) and then gaining increasing awareness of Itself as Consciousness (indwelt in turn by Spirit) operating within the material form. A fully Soul-infused personality (demonstrating what several traditions identify as a state of *enlightenment*) is capable of consciously serving and cooperating with an intuited cosmic evolutionary scheme. The outer evolution in form then unfolds in conscious alignment with subtle laws at a causal level, that which David Bohm, the esoterically trained physicist, called the *Implicate Order* (Bohm, 1980). The Wisdom teachings refer to this same concept as the Divine Plan. I find both terminologies for this idea useful in that an integral approach benefits from the synthesis of scientific and religious perspectives.

This line of Ageless Wisdom thought has a number of interesting parallels to Aurobindo's ideas on integral human development and potentials for human expansion into consciousness of a supramental existence (McDermott, 1987). These parallels are likely apparent to readers familiar with Aurobindo's work, however, they are not the focus of this paper. Rather, my intent is to convey several core concepts from these Western esoteric wisdom teachings related to the evolution of human consciousness, psychological health, the Path of Initiation, and the potential relevance of these ideas within integral thought and scholarship.

## **Initiation: Culmination of the Human Journey**

The Path of Initiation refers specifically to the latter portion of the human evolutionary cycle wherein a person moves through several thresholds and expansions of subjective experience, proceeding incrementally from a relative ignorance of the subtle spiritual planes into their direct apprehension and therefore increasing appreciation of their actual existence and significance. Beyond perceptual expansions, an initiate increasingly develops abilities to work subjectively with energy for the benefit of others in a manner consistent with the implicate order. Bailey and Cedercrans discuss five discreet initiations on this path, each marking a specific expansion, starting with a birth of soul consciousness within the heart (First Initiation) and culminating at that point at which a human soul steps off the wheel of samsara and the karmic necessity of further incarnation, attaining the capacity and status designated Master of Wisdom (Fifth Initiation). The journey does not end there, but Bailey (1922) states that attempts to portray succeeding initiations are somewhat futile given the limitations of language and our current lack of experiential context. Before elaborating on the five major initiations that we can somewhat relate to, it will be helpful to situate this culminating phase of initiation within a larger framework of Western esoteric ideas on human evolutionary development. The following highly simplified schematic is adapted as a synthetic overview from various works of Bailey (1922, 1936, 1942), Cedercrans (1993, 1995), and other Wisdom-related material available in trainings but not in the public domain.

The Soul, which exists on a plane of consciousness above the manifested world, projects a portion of itself into cyclical incarnation through a series of personality vehicles; this is done for

the sake of learning and gaining mastery of the manifested planes of existence over the course of numerous incarnations. One of the paradoxes of this process is that the incarnate fragment of the Soul's consciousness becomes merged and identified with the substance comprising the personalities it inhabits, forgetting its spiritual source. This is a consequence of the dense and miasmatic nature of the material planes as they have existed in their historical and current states of development. Indeed, one of the long-range purposes of evolution on our planet is to allow the influence of incarnating Souls to gradually lift and refine the substance through which they incarnate. Thus, there is actually a reciprocating benefit for both the consciousness and substance aspects of existence. The substantial form reflects back to the Soul, via its personality circumstances, the Soul's current state of consciousness and degree of mastery over its material expression. The Soul, through its consequent learning and mastery, refines and increases the vibratory frequency of the substance that lends it form, bringing it into closer harmony with spirit.

The origin of the descent of the human Soul into incarnation is portrayed through myth in an esoteric version of the Narcissus fable cited in a particular unpublished Wisdom training on intuitive healing. Narcissus, in this version, was "a young god" inhabiting the luminous planes above the three worlds of form and personality. He discovered a reflection of himself in the waters of substantial appearance—and found it irresistibly attractive; never had his individuality and luminosity been reflected back to him with such vivid detail. Leaning into this image to more fully appreciate it, he lost balance and fell headlong into it, becoming mired in increasingly dense layers of substance, which proved to be much more opaque and confining than he had perceived from above. Plummeting into a solid bounded corporeality, he felt lost, disoriented, and no longer in touch with his core of Light. He was now a stranger to himself within a strange land, with only the Sun far above and a hint of that Sun's reflection hidden deep within him as the reminder of a distant home.

Like the Biblical Eve, Narcissus' curiosity propelled his fall, but it was not a serpent's promise of attaining godhead that lured him, but rather attraction to a godhead that was already his but that he had not explicitly recognized till beholding it reflected in substance. On the long road home, this Prodigal Son will regain recognition of that Light at his core, which has always remained intact, waiting to illuminate his way. And throughout this journey of homecoming, Narcissus will increasingly impress his Soular luminosity on all those layers of reflective substance that had initially obscured his Light as they swallowed him.

From the vantage point of personality, many incarnations on this return journey are spent in what Bailey (1922) calls *The Hall of Ignorance*, during which awareness of an overshadowing Soul is completely occluded and learning occurs strictly through trial and error. During this multi-incarnational phase the transcendent part of soul remains largely abstracted on its own plane. Meanwhile, the personality (or more accurately, series of sequential personalities with a common core consciousness) undergoes ego formation and gradually learns to be effective in its worldly affairs through maturation and coordination of its physical, emotional, and mental components. These gains accumulate over many lifetimes, but each successive personality remains self-identified as a separated, finite being while gaining knowledge of the planes of appearance. A point arrives at which the incarnate consciousness gains skill and efficiency in absorbing life lessons from experience, and learning becomes increasingly deliberate and

systematic. Bailey calls this next phase *The Hall of Learning*; i.e., progress towards mastery of the form nature, though propelled by ego-identification and ego-driven agendas, moves beyond the phase of random trial and error.

Taken together, the incarnate Soul's sequential sojourns in the Halls of Ignorance and Learning involve retracing Its involutory steps, rather blindly at first, through the layers of substance into which Its consciousness descended. The steps progress in reverse order from the most to the least dense layers of its three-fold persona instruments. Evolution impels the Soul's focus on successive tasks of mastery involving first the physical body (survival-maintenance tasks), then the emotional body (relational tasks), and finally, the mental body (cognitive tasks). Our learning also involves developing in the environmental spheres associated with each of these respective bodies, for example, learning how to relate competently with peers in social and intellectual venues. The Wisdom teachings hold that all three planes comprising the "worlds of appearance" are substantial. The astral (emotional) and mental planes, though far subtler than dense physical matter, are composed of substance oscillating at much higher frequencies than the physical. However, like the physical matter these planes of mental and astral substance interpenetrate, these subtler fluidic substances occupy time and space in ways that unmanifested consciousness and spirit cannot. In conceptualizing the three planes of appearance, a helpful analogy is that dense physical matter itself comprises three interpenetrating states: dense, liquid, and gaseous. Gases easily dissolve in fluids, and fluids easily permeate denser matter.

From the perspective of Wisdom teachings, a great many of the psychological difficulties experienced by individual personalities are related to developmental challenges characteristic of humanity's collective point of evolution. Bailey and Cedercrans have explicitly predicated much of their work on addressing a significant developmental threshold that, in their estimation, humanity is approaching. Both writers discuss at length how, taken on aggregate, humanity's collective consciousness has evolved from what was initially a primarily physical self-identification, or physical polarization, to a point that is now a primarily emotional in polarization, yet rapidly moving towards mental focus. A circumstantial corollary of this is a gradually emerging recognition in much of humanity of the need to relate and conduct our collective affairs less on the basis of emotional insularity and more in a manner consistent with reasoned discussion of mutual interests. Collectively, this is an ideal to which humanity aspires more than a point of realized accomplishment; yet educated public discourse is slowly illuminating the problems of emotionally charged separatism and its destructive corollaries: ignorance, fear, and greed. The turbulence of our times bears witness to this as a significant, and in many ways difficult, current transition. Our emotional nature, as it functions prior to regaining access to the Soul's broader perspective and all-encompassing compassion, is reactively enshrouded in existential anxieties consequent to identifying, falsely, as a separated ego. This profound problem ripples out to the manifold psychological challenges faced by many individuals today, and points to the potentials inherent in transpersonal (and some existential) approaches to psychotherapy.

Humanity's evolution towards mental polarization, while a necessary and positive step—in that reasoned understanding tempers emotional reactivity—is not free of potential difficulties either. The very nature of the mental plane is dualistic; mind apprehends some object of experience and creates a representation of it. The mind, prior to illumination by the Soul,

frequently succumbs to the dualistic illusion that its myriad representations are themselves reality. Thus, mind has capacity to be the “slayer of the real.” But it is also that aspect of the incarnate instrument through which “the great at-onement” may occur. When the mind is properly trained through contemplative practice it becomes the conduit by which impressions from the plane of Soul may be transmitted into the personality for absorption and transformation. This brings us to the developmental phase of spiritual emergence.

Spiritual awakening occurs after many incarnations in the preparatory phases of development just described. A point occurs in the maturation and integration of the physical-emotional-mental instrument at which the consciousness imprisoned within that form is able to invoke the transcendent, overshadowing Soul. Soul responds by lovingly, and with great patience, attempting to further awaken the imprisoned consciousness within the persona to its deeper indwelling identity. The Soul ultimately seeks to appropriate and fuse with its persona, becoming what Cedercrans calls a *Conscious Soul Incarnate* (1993, p. 514) for the sake of serving a higher purpose in the manifested worlds. Thus, the call to spiritual awakening that the personality experiences, is initiated by its indwelling Soul at a very specific point in their mutually interdependent development. The persona, however, still has its own momentum, and so the wake-up call is not always welcome or correctly appreciated and understood. Intimations of unboundedness can be very unsettling and disorienting to the ego—that part of consciousness that has completely merged with its form aspect. Here are the roots of the resistance and psychological confusion that many experience at this very critical juncture often referred to as spiritual emergence (Assagioli, 1989; Cortright, 1987; Raucher, 1999). Having a broader context for understanding this difficult phase can be very helpful for people going through it, and for those attempting to support them in constructive ways.

At some point, the persona consciousness musters enough will to resolve the conflicts and confusion attending spiritual emergence; it awakens to its innate aspirational nature, and begins to respond positively to the overshadowing Soul’s wake up call. The person enters into what Bailey calls *The Hall of Wisdom*, and from there, begins ascent through The Path of Initiation. Considered as a whole, this accelerated phase, often transpiring within relatively few incarnations compared to prior phases, is marked by a significant transition towards selfless motivation, expanded self-identification, expanded consciousness, and alignment of one’s sense of purpose to that of a greater Whole. Instead of responding to the evolutionary impulses of the Soul blindly and unconsciously, as was the case in the Halls of Ignorance and Learning, the persona now increasingly recognizes impressions emanating from Soul levels, and learns (though not without struggle) to consciously cooperate with them. The Path of Initiation is therefore marked by self-initiated discipline to overcome long-standing patterns of separatism, and the Soul-infused personality moves into what Wisdom teachings call conscious discipleship and occult obedience to one’s inner Self. This is not an easy phase of development by any means, but it is marked by an inspiring sense of clarity about one’s goals and ultimate direction despite the persistence and resistance of old, deeply ingrained habits. Again, having a conceptual map of these phases of rapid and often turbulent psychospiritual development is very helpful for people experiencing them.

## The Five Initiations

The following is a brief summary of the five major initiations as described by Bailey and Cedercrans in their respective works. Both writers make extensive use of Christian symbology and terminology, and this is especially apparent in the nomenclature used for the initiations. This needs to be contextualized within the framework of Western esotericism, and also within the cultural timeframes during which these writers were active. Most esoteric systems embrace a perennial stance regarding the major religious and spiritual traditions in the world, seeing them as similar in inspiration and essence even though clearly different in cultural expression and in the specifics of practice and emphasis. Western esotericism makes copious reference to concepts and practices from both Eastern and Western spirituality, and recognizes particular significance in the roots of Christianity. The Causal Triad referenced earlier in this paper is viewed as an essential expression of ideas common to both the Hindu and Christian Trinities (Shiva-Vishnu-Brahma / Father-Son-Holy Spirit). Further, as both Bailey and Cedercrans were active in the early to middle 20<sup>th</sup> Century, they were addressing students and readerships immersed in the civil-religious zeitgeist of those times. They also viewed the life of Jesus as a rich symbolic illustration of the phases of initiation they were describing. Western esoteric wisdom conceptualizes Jesus as an advanced human disciple whose approach to Christ Consciousness—the fully expressed potential of the Soul nature—demonstrates important lessons for all aspirants, though not in the orthodox Christian sense. Neither writer was an apologist for the distortions and abuses of institutional religion, which they clearly recognized and named (Bailey, 1948; Cedercrans, 1993).

In considering these initiations, note that it is the Soul who undergoes Initiation, not the personality, though ripples from the subtle transitions occurring on a higher plane impact the incarnate persona at some level of conscious registration. However, up until the Third Initiation, the persona may experience these significant transitions without consciously understanding or recognizing their full significance as initiations in the manner described here. Initiates of the First and Second degree often experience the impacts of these transitions without an articulated conceptual framework.

### The First Initiation: Birth of the Christ in the Heart

This is the point at which a person's Heart Center awakens to its initial intuitive perception that all of Life is One, and, as Cedercrans (1993) puts it, "brotherhood becomes... a fact in nature" (p. 8), at least in the realm of intuitive perception. The mind is not yet fully illuminated, despite this expansion in the heart, and so a person may still experience some degree of disconnect between these two centers of consciousness. Thus, cognition and behavior will still reveal residual doubts and not always reflect what the heart has come to recognize. Thus the First Initiation may mark something of a confusing psychological struggle between heart and mind.

The Wisdom teachings propose that humanity has entered into the proximal timeframe (the current century) wherein significant numbers of souls in incarnation will approach and undergo this First Initiation. This would, of course, signal the beginnings of a tremendous shift in the overall quality of human relationships and an increased capacity for mutual cooperation. Current events may seem to belie this possibility, yet the Wisdom teachings counsel us to look beneath



appearances and recognize with compassion the developmental challenges attending our state of collective transition, and what this may promise if we manage to focus on the potentials rather than the pitfalls of this difficult time.

### **The Second Initiation: Baptism and Consecration**

With the heart illuminated by a new awareness of universal love, the aspirant soon recognizes the degree to which his or her emotional life remains habituated to patterns rooted in fear and self-oriented desires and aversions. S/he therefore enters into a phase of dedication, spiritual discipline, and self-purification, seeking to resolve the paradoxical pull between several classic “pairs of opposites” that emerge at this juncture (for example, between altruism and self-orientation, inward spiritual development and worldly engagement, sexual intimacy and spiritual abstraction...). This parallels the period of temptations faced by Jesus in the gospel stories after his baptism by John. The pairs of opposites are not antithetical, as the concrete mind may believe. Rather they are points along a spectrum that need to be reconciled by intuitive perception. The aspirant focuses on an ideal of fully realized and mature Soul Consciousness (sometimes called Christ Consciousness) as seen deep within the self, and seeks to realize that ideal in lived expression, adopting some form of spiritual practice toward that end. Needless to say, struggles with and between the pairs of opposites cited here pose a significant psychological challenge that many spiritual practitioners grapple with for extended periods of time.

### **The Third Initiation: Transfiguration or Illumination**

This initiation equates, in the gospel account of Jesus’s life, to his Transfiguration on the Mount. To quote Cedercrans (1993), “This is the first major initiation in which the whole consciousness becomes illumined... with the Light of Logoic [Divine] Purpose” (p. 8). This is perhaps what other traditions refer to as the shift into an enlightened state, understanding that this is a new and significant beginning, but not an endpoint. A person approaching this initiation is in transition from what Wisdom teachings call probationary status into accepted discipleship among those Souls who have preceded him or her along this path. A growing sense of inclusion within a spiritual brotherhood, previously invisible, occasions a major shift in perspective towards identification with experiences vividly present in consciousness, yet beyond the individual self or evidence of outward appearance. The initiate of this degree increasingly intuitively perceives the causes behind the effects and currents of worldly events and perceives the manifold subtle energies underlying all form manifestations. S/he learns to work subjectively from the level of Soul awareness, often linked in group formation with other subjective workers, wielding spiritual energies as a positive influence in the psychological environment and in service to some aspect of the Divine Plan. This Initiate, working within an expanded range of consciousness, fully inhabits and works through a highly refined and disciplined Soul-mind-brain alignment, and a personality that is no longer dominated by ego-based delusions of separateness. S/he is fully dedicated to serving an intuited higher purpose, and works towards stimulating the expansion of human capacities within a discipline or area of life appropriate to his or her makeup and experience.

Each of these three first initiations represents a quantum leap in consciousness beyond prior states, and while at least some aspects of these first three are no doubt relatable in terms of the

reader's frame of reference, descriptions of the latter two may well seem abstruse and speculative.

### **The Fourth Initiation: The Crucifixion**

As the name suggests, The Fourth Initiation is analogous to the gospel story of Jesus' sacrifice of his life in form, and by extension, into a state of freedom from the constraints of form and an expanded identification with The One Life—to an extent beyond that achieved in the Third Initiation. In highly esoteric terms, the causal body, the subtle sheath of the individual Soul itself, is sacrificed, as it is no longer necessary. The unit of consciousness previously held within that subtle sheath now stands in direct relationship to its Monad, its still subtler spiritual core (Bailey, 1922). In more human terms, personal karma has been resolved and birth within the worlds of appearance is now motivated entirely by considerations of service to The Divine Plan/Implicate Order.

### **The Fifth Initiation: The Ascension**

To quote Cedercrans (1993, p. 9) "This initiation is so advanced that very little can be said about it. It is freedom from, and mastery of, the three planes of human endeavor: the physical, astral-emotional and mental. The individual is released from the wheel of rebirth, and if he does incarnate again, it is only in times of crisis, for the guidance of Humanity." From one perspective, a significant difference between the Fourth and Fifth Initiations is that the Fifth marks a soul's emergence as an Ascended Master, one of the Inner Plane Teachers who, as a group, function collectively as the Heart Center of Planetary Life and guide Humanity, the Planetary Throat Center, in its evolution. Such information, of course, only becomes meaningful through contemplation.

### **Assertions Surrounding "The Masters"**

The prior references to Masters in this article requires some explanation, as assertions about the existence of such Masters, and about the nature of their relationship to students has proved to be one of the most controversial aspects surrounding several expressions of Western esotericism. Controversy and skepticism surrounded Blavatsky's references to their existence in *The Secret Doctrine* (Blavatsky, 1977) and continues today. The fact that Blavatsky, Gurdjieff, Bailey, Cedercrans, and additional contemporary (if less well known) teachers in this lineage have at times referred to, claimed inspiration from, or even asserted contact with such Masters has subjected these writers to criticism and doubt, especially in academic circles. This is understandable, and perhaps even necessarily so, as the existence of Masters who remain hidden and function on subjective planes of consciousness is beyond common human capacities for verification. Further, an assertion that a student's perception of such Masters may emerge at some future point in development through training and application of esoteric practices may understandably provoke skepticism and suspicions of self-deception and elitism. For this reason, it is important to devote a few paragraphs to considerations of epistemology and methods of inquiry in the Western esoteric practices under consideration.

The gist of the epistemological stance in these Wisdom teachings, which I will elaborate below, is that all assertions put forth must be regarded as hypotheses proposed for open-minded consideration and for rigorous inquiry by suitable and appropriate means; as all the aforementioned writers themselves insist, nothing is to be accepted on blind faith, least of all because of an alleged authority behind any assertion. These standards hold true for any assertions regarding the existence of Masters or their supposed role in offering these teachings.

## Epistemology and Testing Precepts of the Wisdom Teachings

One hallmark of Western esotericism is its comprehensive scope as an essentialist, all-encompassing philosophy, traits that tend to render it suspect and unfashionable in an academic environment influenced by post-modern critiques of essentialism. The volume names of Blavatsky's (1977) *The Secret Doctrine*, (*Cosmogogenesis* and *Anthropogenesis*, first published in 1888) speak to the breadth of knowledge that Western esotericism seeks to address. Bailey's output of 24 volumes encompasses a gamut equally broad and ambitious in scope, as suggested by some of the titles: *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, *Initiation Human and Solar*, *Esoteric Psychology*, and *Discipleship in The New Age*. For Bailey, there was no possibility of side-stepping controversy concerning "The Masters," as she openly stated that the majority of her output was the work of one Master for whom she (and Blavatsky) both served as an amanuensis—a contact and connection through which the Master's message could reach a broader audience. The means by which this particular Master, known as both Djwahl Kuhl (or D.K.) and *The Tibetan*, imparted material to Bailey is documented in her *The Unfinished Autobiography* (Bailey, 1951), and a very similar process is also described in Cedercran's (2007) teachings as the "Science of Impression" (p. 497), which I will describe shortly.

Each of the books that Bailey composed, allegedly under impress from D.K., is now published with a front matter article called "Extract from a Statement by the Tibetan," first published in 1934. This extract explicitly addresses the attitude with which the reader/student may most constructively approach the material in these works. The following is an excerpt from that statement:

The books that I have written are sent out with no claim for their acceptance. They may, or may not, be correct, true and useful. It is for you to ascertain their truth by right practice and by the exercise of the intuition. Neither I nor A.A.B. is the least interested in having them acclaimed as inspired writings, or in having anyone speak of them (with bated breath) as being the work of one of the Masters.... If the teaching conveyed calls forth a response from the illumined mind of the worker in the world, and brings a flashing forth of his intuition, then let that teaching be accepted. But not otherwise. If the statements meet with eventual corroboration, or are deemed true under the test of the Law of Correspondences, then that is well and good. But should this not be so, let not the student accept what is said. (Bailey, 1951, p. x)

Exhortations such as this appear frequently throughout the Wisdom literature of Bailey, Cedercrans, and their successors. Different methods for corroboration of the teachings are mentioned which I will address briefly here.

The test of intuition is commonly cited, and D.K./Bailey (1950) devote the better part of one of their books, *Glamour A World Problem* to both the exacting definition of this faculty and methods for cultivating it as a fine-tuned instrument to penetrate through and dispel the distortions of perception connoted by the term *glamour*. One of the few books that Bailey claimed to author on her own, tellingly entitled *From Intellect to Intuition* (Bailey, 1932), considers intuition to be the soul's capacity for direct apprehension of a truth conveyed to the persona in waking brain consciousness. This is seen as a different kind of knowing and an evolutionary advance beyond intellectual apprehension or the conceptual representation of ideas, which is a strictly mental process. Cedercrans (1993) also provides a practical working definition of intuition:

Accept as Truth only that which you comprehend with both the heart and mind. There is within the basic structure of the inner, subjective man (the combined head and heart) a built-in intuitive response mechanism which has been placed there by the Soul. This is not the built-in emotional response mechanism, but rather a higher correspondence of that, which is responsible for the inner guidance known and experienced by many. It does not speak to you in either voice or formulated thought, but produces a response of instantaneous inner knowing which supersedes thought. (p. 24)

Use of the Law of Correspondence, also mentioned as a technique of inquiry and corroboration for assertions in these teachings, refers to the Hermetic principle, "as above, so below; as below, so above." Per *The Kyballion* (Three Initiates, 1912), a concise tome of esoteric precepts, "...this principle embodies the truth that there is always a Correspondence between the laws and phenomena of the various planes of Being and Life" (p. 28). A tangible example is found in the nature of musical octaves, in which the same notes recur throughout all octaves, only at differing, though mathematically related, frequency registers. Thus, musical scales may be viewed as symbolizing (and tangibly reflecting in sound) the multiple layers and planes of existence. As another example, I earlier referred to the fact that the three bodies of the personality (mental-emotional-physical) may be considered to correspond (on the planes of appearance) to the principles of the Causal Triad found at the very core of existence (Spirit-Consciousness-Matter). By extension, a student may use the Law of Correspondence to test assertions pertaining to subtle phenomena by carefully examining potential parallels within his or her lived experience on the sensible and intelligible planes of appearance.

I will conclude my remarks on epistemological methodology within these Wisdom teachings by elaborating on "the science of impression." This is the contemplative means by which a practitioner, in meditation, opens a channel of perceptual receptivity to phenomena (perhaps noumena would be a more appropriate term) that are necessarily very hard to describe in language because they are of an extremely subtle, non-conceptual nature. These impressions also carry a distinctive energetic quality that a student may learn to associate with the Soul operating on Its native plane. While it is vital to achieve a steadiness of concentration that allows one to consciously register subtle impressions from the plane of Soul, this is only the first phase of the total process. A second and vitally important phase involves stepping down and appropriately translating these subtle impressions into meaningful symbolic form that can be comprehended by the mind and, upon due consideration, acted upon by the integrated personality (for it is in

practical applicability that the true value and validity of a “spiritual” realization is best tested). This stepping down and translation process is difficult and requires practice.

The impressions received, though subtle, are discernible, carrying a distinct but implicitly sensed meaning. Translating or interpreting these impressions into symbolic form, whether linguistic or pictographic, is necessarily influenced by the specific frames of reference with which the personality is familiar. There is ample opportunity for some distortion in this translation, and it takes time and experience to master it. There is also a reasonable allowance for variations in the interpretive responses of different people to the same overshadowing impress. This recognition leads to an epistemological stance within the Wisdom teachings that accounts for and acknowledges as necessary diverse expressions of a particular archetype or subtle truth as it enters the consciousness of different personalities. One may reasonably ask how two people may reliably recognize that their diverse conceptual interpretations are in fact related to the same overshadowing input. This is the point at which intuition must be allowed to trump an over-reliance on the concrete intellect; rigorous attention to subjective experience over time helps the sincere student to refine and hone the application of intuition to increasing degrees of precision. While empirically objective proof of such progress may not be possible, the subjective feedback a student receives from life experience over time is.

One technique of meditation used in the Wisdom teachings to hone the intuition, and involving the science of impression, is the use of *seed thoughts*. These are symbolic representations of ineffable truths in word or pictographic form, used as portals of proximal entry towards a deeper intuitive grasp of their underlying meanings. Seed thoughts serve to bring the substance of the three personality bodies into a state of receptivity to spiritual impress. For example, one basic seed thought is, “I stand receptive to the Wisdom of my Soul as it is stepped down to me in meditation.” The successful use of this technique requires some preliminary training so that the physical and emotional bodies may be held in wakeful quiescence. The mental body is likewise held in alert stillness, ready to receive subtle impressions related to the non-conceptual meaning underlying the articulated seed thought, which is held in tight focus without stressful striving. Continual repetition of the seed thought is not used (which, in any case, is more characteristic of mantra meditation, a very different process). In a state of still receptivity, subtle impressions of the tacit meaning of the seed thought emerge into the mind and brain, received in full waking consciousness. The seed thought is thus illuminated and expanded. Through periodic use of the same seed thought over time, the depth and richness of the down-flowing impressions can be amplified, and then tested through application in daily life.

Epistemologically, it is indeed through practical application that the veracity and validity of Wisdom teachings can be best ascertained. Writers such as Bailey and Cedercrans, who had advanced training in this science of impression, used it to receive and translate highly abstract meanings received through their Sources into conceptual form and language in order to communicate them (essentially the inverse process of seed-thought meditation). Cedercrans explicitly told students in her trainings (unpublished) that though she was impressed with very specific ideas through her meditative alignment to a Subtle Source, the words she used to clothe these meanings were of her own very deliberate choosing (though these choices were intuitively guided).

Nonetheless, a frequent refrain in the writings of both Bailey and Cedercrans is how inadequate, how approximate the words available to them are in conveying certain meanings. This serves to remind us that portrayals in language of the subtleties of spirit or of states of consciousness are necessarily imperfect maps; their meanings must ultimately be grasped via a combination of intuition and application. Seed thought meditation allows students to use the stepped down conceptual formulations received from their teachers to approach and enter into the subtle meanings behind the formulations. When students then receive their own inner guidance on their practice, and discover that implementing the guidance deepens their practice, confirmation is achieved.

And ultimately, all such guidance has one general purpose and direction: to help the student come into ever closer alignment and harmony, in thought, feeling, speech, and action, with the implicate order/Divine Plan. That such a Plan actually exists and has immediate relevance to the student's life and affairs is distinctly testable in both subjective and objective application. I would go so far as to assert that coming into alignment with this innate order—of Self and Cosmos—is the essential basis of achieving psycho-spiritual health and well-being.

It is perhaps paradoxical that Abstract Truth—implicit and formless meanings encountered in meditation as pure energy—must be somehow registered within the form nature and there be translated into conceptual form and actionable intelligence in order to transform the world. Western esoteric Wisdom, like Aurobindo's system of Integral Yoga, sees our current age as a distinct and vital opportunity for developing and applying techniques to bridge the incarnate and the transcendental in this pursuit. In recognizing this opportunity, we must be patient and maintain a long and compassionate view of the processes that shape evolution and human psycho-spiritual development, even as we intensify our commitment to these processes to help that development proceed.

## **Applicability of Concepts from These Wisdom Teachings**

As is the case with any spiritual or metaphysical pursuit, Western esoteric teachings attract a self-selecting group of students who find meaning and resonance within that particular articulation of wisdom. Nonetheless, I believe that some of the ideas in these teachings, particularly those discussed in this paper associated with psycho-spiritual development, have potential to prove useful to thinkers and students across the Integral Studies community.

Having Western esotericism's conceptual map for the collective psycho-spiritual development of humanity, even if considered conjectural, can provide perspective and new ways of relating to current events within a developmental framework. The broad, and far reaching vision of human development and evolution portrayed in these Wisdom teachings can provide a meaningful narrative context for considering human capacities, experiences, and levels of functioning across pre-egoic, egoic, and trans-egoic states of consciousness.

These Wisdom teachings portray a course of human development that addresses some of the questions within Integral discourse about the relationship between psychological and spiritual development, and shed some light on the enigmatic process known as spiritual emergence. For example, I have found the ideas discussed here regarding difficulties in the shift from emotional

to mental polarization and navigating “the pairs of opposites” very helpful in negotiating the terrain of my own experiences, and those of some of my students and clients in psychotherapy practice.

There is potential for cross-fertilization between schools of Integral inquiry that may use different vocabularies and frames of reference, yet still find common meanings beneath such differences. I think much might be gained, for example, for students of both Sri Aurobindo’s Integral Yoga and Western esoteric Wisdom teachings in exploring the points of commonality and difference in these approaches.

Finally, for students and practitioners of meditation in different schools, the descriptions of the various Initiations found in these Western esoteric teachings can shed light on the developmental processes they are experiencing. I believe that many readers of this article will relate in meaningful ways to the developmental progressions associated with at least one of the first three initiations. Having language and a conceptual framework for reflecting on where one is situated within the trajectory of human psycho-spiritual development can provide both perspective and fuel for productive aspiration and effort.

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