

THE CYCLES OF CHAOS: DECONSTRUCTING INITIATION

There appears to be some misunderstanding over what exactly the term 'initiation' means. Occasionally one bumps into people on the scene who term themselves as 'initiates' and seem to consider themselves somehow 'above' the rest of humanity. Particularly irritating are the self-styled 'initiates' who let drop teasing bits of obscure information and then refuse to explain any further because their audience are not 'initiates'. The term itself seems to crop up in a wide variety of contexts - people speak of being 'initiated' into groups, onto a particular path, or of initiating themselves. Some hold that 'initiation' is only valid if the person who confers it is part of a genuine tradition, others that it doesn't matter either way.

Dictionary definitions of initiation allude to the act of beginning, or of setting in motion, or entry into something. One way to explain initiation is to say that it is a threshold of change which we may experience at different times in our lives, as we grow and develop. The key to initiation is recognising that we have reached such a turning point, and are aware of being in a period of transition between our past and our future. The conscious awareness of entering a transitional state allows us to perhaps, discard behavioural/emotional patterns which will be no longer valid for the 'new' circumstances, and consciously take up new ones.

What magical books often fail to emphasise is that initiation is a process. It doesn't just happen once, but can occur many times throughout an individual's life, and that it has peaks (initiatory crises), troughs (black depression or the 'dark night of the soul') and plateaus (where nothing much seems to be going on). becoming aware of your own cycles of change, and how to weather them, is a core part of any developmental process or approach to magical practice.

In 'shamanic' societies the first stage of the initiation process is often marked by a period of personal crises and a 'call' towards starting the shamanic journey. Apart from youthful rebellion, most of us are quite happy to remain within the conceptual and philosophical boundaries of 'Consensus Reality' (the everyday world). For an individual beginning on the initiatory journey, the crisis may come as a powerful vision, dreams, or a deep (and often disturbing) feeling to find out what is beyond the limits of normal life. It can often come as a result of a powerful spiritual, religious or political experience, or as a growing existential discontent with life. Our sense of being a stable self is reinforced by the "walls" of the social world in which we participate - yet our sense of uniqueness resides in the cracks of those same walls. Initiation is a process which takes us "over the wall" into the unexplored territories of the possibilities which we have only half-glimpsed.

This first crisis is often an unpleasant experience, as we begin to question and become dissatisfied with all that we have previously held dear - work, relationships, ethical values, family life can all be disrupted as the individual becomes increasingly consumed by the desire to 'journey'. The internal summons may be consciously quashed or resisted, and it is not unknown

for individuals in tribal societies to refuse 'the call' to shamanic training - no small thing, as it may lead to further crises and even death.

One very common experience of people who feel the summons in our society is an overpowering sense of urgency to either become 'enlightened' or to change the world in accordance with emerging visions. This can lead to people becoming 'addicted' to spiritual paths, wherein the energy that may have been formerly channeled into work or relationships is directed towards taking up spiritual practices and becoming immersed in 'spiritual' belief systems. The 'newly awakened' individual can be (unintentionally) as boring and tiresome as anyone who has seized on a messianic belief system, whether it be politics, religion, or spirituality. It is often difficult, at this stage in the cycle, to understand the reaction of family, friends and others who may not be sympathetic to one's new-found direction or changes in lifestyle. Often, some of the more dubious cults such as the Moonies take advantage of this stage by convincing young converts that "true friends" etc, would not hinder them in taking up their new life, and that anyone who does not approve, is therefore not a 'true friend'. There are a wide variety of cults which do well in terms of converts from young people who are in a period of transition (such as when leaving home for the first time) and who are attracted to a belief/value system that assuages their uncertainties about the world.

Another of the problems often experienced by those feeling the summons to journey is a terrible sense of isolation or alienation from one's fellows - the inevitable result of moving to the edge of one's culture. Thus excitement at the adventure is often tinged with regret and loss of stability or unconscious participation with one's former world. Once you have begun the process of disentanglement from the everyday world, it is hard not to feel a certain nostalgia for the lost former life in which everything was (seemingly) clear-cut and stable, with no ambiguities or uncertainties.

A common response to the summons to departure is the journey into the wilderness - of moving away from one's fellows and the stability of consensual reality. A proto-shaman is likely to physically journey into the wilderness, away from the security of tribal reality, and though this is possible for some Westerners, the constraints of modern living usually mean that for us, this wandering in the waste is enacted on the plane of ideas, values and beliefs, wherein we look deeply within and around ourselves and question everything, perhaps drawing away from social relations as well. Deliberate isolation from one's fellows is a powerful way of loosening the sense of having fixed values and beliefs, and social deprivation mechanisms turn up in a wide variety of magical cultures.

INITIATORY SICKNESS

In shamanic cultures, the summons to journey is often heralded by a so-called 'initiatory sickness', which can either come upon an individual suddenly, or creep slowly upon them as a progressive behavioural change. Western observers have labelled this state as a form of 'divine madness', or evidence of psychopathology. In the past, anthropologists & psychologists have labelled shamans as schizophrenic, psychotic, or epileptic. More recently, western enthusiasts of

shamanism (and anti-psychiatry) have reversed this process of labelling and asserted that people labelled as schizophrenic, psychotic or epileptic are proto-shamans. Current trends in the study of shamanism now recognise the former position to be ethnocentric - that researchers have judging shamanic behaviour by western standards. The onset of initiatory sickness in tribal culture is recognised as a difficult, but potentially useful developmental process. Part of the problem here is that western philosophy has developed the idea of 'ordinary consciousness', of which anything beyond this range is pathological, be it shamanic, mystical, or drug-induced.

Fortunately for us, this narrow view is being rapidly undermined.

Individuals undergoing the initiatory sickness do sometimes appear to suffer from fits and 'strange' behaviour, but there is an increasing recognition that it is a mistake to sweepingly attach western psychiatric labels onto them (so that they can be explained away). Shamans may go through a period of readjustment, but research shows that they tend to become the most healthy people in their tribes, functioning very well as leaders and healers.

Transitional states showing similar features to the initiatory sickness have been identified in other cultures' mystical and magical practices, which western researchers are beginning to study, as practices from other cultures gain popularity in the west. Hopefully someone will get around to looking at the initiatory crises of home-grown contemporary technicians of the sacred.

In westernised societies however, it is becoming less easy to judge who is undergoing an initiatory sickness, since many people are now able to purchase their occult and spiritual views in the burgeoning new age, fin de siècle decadence and designer occult markets. Information and communication systems have worn away the structures that once marked the walls of consensus reality and so our choices about how we present ourselves are broader. For this reason it is becoming important to assess occultists over time to discover whether their presented image is real, or purchased from the new age bazarre.

DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

St. John of the Cross, a Christian mystic, wrote of this experience as "(it)...puts the sensory spiritual appetites to sleep, deadens them, and deprives them of the ability to find pleasure in anything. It binds the imagination, and impedes it from doing any good discursive work. It makes the memory cease, the intellect become dark and unable to understand anything, and hence it causes the will to become arid and constrained, and all the faculties empty and useless. And over this hangs a dense and burdensome cloud, which afflicts the soul, and keeps it withdrawn from God".

When entering the 'Dark Night' one is overcome by the sense of spiritual dryness and depression. The idea, expressed in some quarters, that all such experiences are to be avoided in favour of a peaceful life, shows up the superficiality of so much of contemporary living. The Dark Night is a way of bringing the soul to stillness, so that a deep psychic transformation may take place. In the Western Esoteric Tradition, this experience is reflected in the Tarot card 'The Moon' and is the 'hump' in an individual's spiritual development where any early benefits of

meditation, pathworking or disciplines appear to cease, and there is an urge to abandon such practices and return to 'everyday' life. This kind of 'hump' which must be passed through can be discerned in different areas of experience, and is often experienced by students on degree courses and anybody who is undergoing a new learning process which involves marked life changes as well. In this respect, it is important to remember Ramsay Duke's observation in Thundersqueak, that much of our future magical work is laid down during periods of depression or the "Dark Night."

MACRO & MICRO-INITIATIONS

For the purposes of this essay we will make a distinction between two kinds of Initiatory Experience - Macroscopic and Microscopic. Macroscopic Initiations are characterised by the type of major life shifts discussed above. The key to understanding these states is the feeling that they 'sweep upon us', rather than being an act of willed intent. Very often, they relate to trauma of various kinds in our life - good examples being the collapse of a long-term relationship, the irretrievable 'crash' of a business, or dealing with the possibility that one has AIDS. These experiences are global, which is to say, they affect us at a very core level of our being, and tend to send shock waves into every aspect of our lives.

Microscopic Initiations are more specific in their action, and we can best illustrate this experience with an example that recently happened to Kalki. "I hate number-crunching. Really - columns of figures are something I try to avoid if possible, to the extent that, during my schooldays, days when I had a double-period of maths were favourites for being 'off sick'." "When I did statistics as part of my Psychology Degree, I was interested in a kind of abstract way, but found the piles of computer printout I was expected to do things with, horrific. Later in life, I had to do some accounting now and again, but only if threatened at point-blank range. My current job however, does require a good deal of number-crunching, and quite a bit of accounting- argh! A few days before writing this essay, I was sitting morosely at the computer, tapping in figures, when the thought suddenly struck me I'd like to go on an Accounting Course! That this thought was at odds with my well-nurtured avoidance pattern to such things didn't strike me until a few hours later - suddenly I'm interested in doing something that I have consistently loathed for over half my life!

On reflection, the dynamics of this event are easy to examine - my new job requires a lot of number-crunching & accounting. Since I have a vested interest in doing the job efficiently, this will require overcoming my 'avoidance' boundaries which have kept me back from being 'good at' working with figures. However, the actual practice of getting to grips with book-keeping will be made much easier if I am actually interested in the task, than doing it because I've been told I have to do it.

This new-found interest I would liken to a small flame - symbolised by the Ace of Wands in the Tarot. If (out of inertia or Fear - of which more later) I do not pursue the desire to get to grips with accounting, it will most likely burn out, and an opportunity for self-modification will have been lost (actually, by writing all this I have ensured that my colleagues will apply peer pressure

- heat - and unmercifully hassle me so that I have no option but to get into number-crunching). Just as with a Macroscopic Initiation, I have hit a threshold of change - a crossroads."

Recognition that one is suddenly standing at a crossroads is the key to all initiations, be they Macro, or Microscopic. Once you have recognised that you are at such a point in your life, a simple formula can be immensely helpful. It's as easy as A PIE.

ASSESS

Stop. Stay where you are, and assess your situation. Know that you are standing on the crossroads. Examine all possibilities for future action. There will always be at least three paths - possibly more. If you can't see more than one, then look until you do. What possible futures can you jump into? Use any technique that will gather information - options lists, divinatory techniques, dream-oracles, asking your favourite deity or HGA. Often, just doing nothing and being receptive to what's happening is good enough. Be Vulnerable to the forces of Change.

PLAN

Once you have chosen a course of action - Plan what you need to do. What resources do you need? These can be material, magical, financial, and perhaps most importantly - the assistance of other people - in terms of skills, support, and friendship. Often you will find that much of what you need is already at hand. Be prepared to carry things through.

IMPLEMENT

And now the hardest task of all - do it. Often, fear will intervene at this stage. Be prepared to look at your motivations for not taking things forward. Fear in our society is a taboo. Inertia and laziness sometimes become the outward expression of fears that one does not really want to be acknowledged. Be prepared to use the mantra "Follow things Through!" Each step made gives more momentum for the next. Each barrier breached brings a rush of pleasure and freedom.

EVALUATE

This is the stage of assimilation - not merely the fact of writing up your magical record, but being able to look back at your course through the initiation and realise how the process worked for you and how you dealt with it. Are there any important lessons here? The Tantric term for assimilation is Samarasa - making knowledge flesh. Assimilating experience into the appropriate Self, until it becomes embedded and Natural. This again relates to a three- stage learning process: Can't do it; Can do it; It comes naturally.

GETTING THE FEAR

As hinted earlier, another key to understanding initiatory experiences is that they bring with them varying degrees of Fear. This is fairly explicit in accounts of Macroscopic Initiations, especially when individuals do not know what is going on. This is also true when anything that we have invested a good deal of emotional commitment and self-esteem is directly threatened or

removed suddenly - ranging from emotional patterns to major aspects of life such as career, partner, or dominant self-image. Especially if circumstances are such that we can do little about what is happening. And the character of Macroscopic initiations does seem to require that our current repertoire of coping strategies are rendered useless. If nothing seems to work, then it might be better to do nothing. But by this we do not mean lapsing into inertia, but assessing the situation and making it an opportunity for change and adaptation.

Fear is very much a bodily gnosis - it tends to reinforce any mental/emotional patterns that serve to keep change at bay. It tends to get channeled into a variety of defence mechanisms, which, while they are not in themselves dysfunctional, can be inappropriate. Fear is basically an excitatory state - the fight/flight reflex of the autonomic nervous system kicking into gear. In psychological studies of disaster victims, adult reactions vary according to the phase of the disaster. These can be broadly divided into five phases:

- a) Pre-Impact Phase: The reaction here is characterised by underactivity and the development of anxiety symptoms.
- b) Warning Phase: The reaction here is one of overactivity.
- c) Impact: The reaction at this point tends to be that of bewilderment, confusion or hysteria.
- d) Turmoil-Recoil Phase: The reaction tends to be that of emotional expression relating to the immediate past.
- e) Post-Trauma Phase: Characterised by reconstructive activity combined with elements of anger and resentment.

If any adepts survived the destruction of the mythical Atlantis, then it was surely that they were active during the Pre-Impact phase and had prudently departed before everyone else became hysterical during the Warning phase. The ability to do so is one of the characteristics of a survivor. Taken perhaps as an (extreme) example, these phases can offer some useful lessons in facing both macro and micro initiations. Interestingly, studies suggest that children show remarkable resilience to disasters. Where problems do occur, they are usually a reflection of the parents' hysteria or psychopathology. The elderly, in contrast, are said to fare least well. This is due to the fact that they suffer a "high sense of deprivation". This means that they perceive their lives' work to have been damaged and feel that they will be unable to make good their losses. The elderly are also more likely to die within twelve months of disaster and this has been attributed to mental and physical illnesses brought about by the experience of grief, separation and loss.

The main lesson, as we can see, is to remain aware of what is going on around you, and don't freeze up. From a practical point of view it is therefore important to gain some understanding of the mechanisms underlying our perception of hazard. These can provide some clues to maintaining awareness.

Our senses provide us with the signals from which we determine levels of risk. Unfortunately, these signals are made more complex by the way in which we think, and other pressures.

Sensory stimulation occurs against progressively less personal backdrops. These can be classified as our Behavioural environment (the space we occupy at any one point); Perceptual environment (the extent of our senses); Operational environment (the space we move through in a day and night), and the Geographical environment we are moving through. Studies indicate that socio-economic factors such as age, occupation, and education have little effect on the accuracy of people's perception of risk. Experience and accuracy of perception appear to be linked. But research suggests that many people are unwilling to draw logical conclusions from their own experience, and therefore tend to underestimate risk.

If we are familiar with the cycles of the initiatory process, and apply the A PIE formula above, then we can use any fear which arises effectively. By deconstructing Fear, we can reconfigure it (when appropriate) into pleasurable excitement, which can be used to fuel movement over a threshold rather than reinforcing patterns which keep it at bay.

RELAX INTO FEAR

Again, this is a very old concept. There is a Tantric idea that you can reorient yourself to life so that you are sufficiently open to the avenues of possibilities each moment of living offers, experiencing the world from a condition of 'receptive wonder'. Related to this is the idea of 'Meeting the Guru'. Not so much meeting a little old wizened mystic at a bus stop in Hackney, but knowing that any life event can be the 'guru' - teacher, that can spin you sideways into Gnosis and Illumination. Even in the Guru-besotted Indian subcontinent, there is a story concerning the legendary tantric guru Dattatreya, in which a Prince seeking instruction asks Dattatreya who his Guru's were. To the dismay of the royal aspirant, Dattatreya irreverently points at a number of natural objects such as stones, plants and trees.

There is a similar idea encapsulated within the classical image of the great god Pan. An early depiction of Pan shows him hurling himself (with intent to rape) upon a young goatherd. This image calls to mind the relationship between fear and desire, repulsion and eroticism. Aeneas Tacitus's *Polioketika*, contains several accounts of the effects of Panic-terror as a sudden, and unpredictable condition. Philippe Borgeaud, in his book, *The Cult of Pan in Ancient Greece* makes the point that Pan 'typically attacks a model of order and disrupts it'. One of the underlying themes in the classical mythos of Pan is the possibility of creative derangement, of moving from one state to another. Whether this state is one of madness or divine-led inspiration depends on which side of the threshold you view it from. The threat of Pan is ever-present, and he can leap on you anytime, any place - as William Burroughs says: the sudden realisation that everything is alive and significant. (*Dead City Radio*). The Greek word Pan means "all" or "everything", and this suggests that the Panic is the moment when the size of our experience overwhelms us.

Relaxation into Fear allows self-modification. Here, Fear is not a weakness, but a strength. Allowing yourself to be Vulnerable to the forces of Change, particularly the possibility of surprises. Often, the onset of a crossroads experience throws us into mental entropy - the mental confusion which Pan brings, which pushes us back into bodily sensation. This is a good

time to still the mind and attend to sensations - loose the bonds of the Past and quiet the mental chaos of 'what ifs' and 'buts' - cease fantasy projections and sink into bodily sensation. Transform fear into wonder and prepare for new possibilities. Transform fear into fuel, and examine those patterns which maintained your thresholds. This can become an ecstatic process - the original meaning of ecstasy is "away from stillness", which indicates some measure of agitation. Again, a key to this process is the ability to be 'loose' and relaxed. Holding yourself rigid impedes the possibility of entering into new experiences.

LOOSENING UP

So what can we do about rigidity? Here we come back to pragmatic techniques:

Bioenergetics, Vivation, Neuro-Linguistic Programming, Deconstructive exercises; Ritual & any magical technique aimed at shifts in Achievable Reality thresholds. Are these then preparatory exercises in opening up to the possibility of Initiation? Yes, and also - during a Crossroads point we can use selective techniques when in 'Chapel Perilous' as it were - as steps along the path: to hold the doorway open, to project goal-points; to plan our steps and to assimilate them.

We would draw your attention to the word 'selective' - again, much hangs on the appropriate use of distinct techniques. Techniques borrowed from NLP, Vivation or Bioenergetics can be particularly useful during initiatory periods, but it is important to remember that they are not designed from the viewpoint of a magical agenda. Similarly, orthodox magical techniques should be carefully selected. You could get up from reading this article, go into the next room and enact an 'initiation' ritual based on a mythic sequence, but myths are merely signposts - the enactment of mythic events is not necessarily the same as undergoing a trial as an Authentic experience. Mythic Initiations can however, provide a conceptual framework for approaching Experience - an awareness of the dynamics of that process - but they are not the same as living that process. So a symbolic ritual act of dismemberment that is Willed, may not be as powerful as dismemberment that is spontaneously experienced as a Crisis. Again, recognition that one is entering a significant crisis-point is possibly more useful than trying to force it to happen. If you recognise that you are entering a crossroads, then magical work can be done to maximise the change-potential of that crossroads.

So, the Initiatory Crossroads experience occurs, to a certain extent, outside our willed control - but what we do about it when it hits is in our hands - this relates to the Tantric concept of Kundalini, the serpent-power which is the dynamic power of existence. Opening yourself to experience, and then acting appropriately from that perspective is more productive than trying to artificially force it to happen.

A useful attitude is that of Sahaja, or spontaneity. This is the ability to relax from following rigid guidelines and act responsively to any situation which arises. A strength of the Chaos approach to magick is that the practitioner is rarely 'locked within' one dominant magical paradigm and so limited in scope for action. As some magical paradigms are better for specific tasks than others, it should be easier for a Chaos magician to find suitable techniques and approaches for emotional engineering and maximising the window of opportunity thrown up by initiatory

experiences.

THE CHAOS OF COMPLEXITY

The initiatory crisis serves to bring one point (often very forcefully) into awareness: that the world is fragile, and complex. The consensus reality of western consciousness is a very simplistic projection of linear consciousness. We become addicted to the "sameness" of experience, and as such, often have difficulty coping with novelty or change. We generate models that tend to explain the world in very simple ways and then mistake the map for the territory. Ian Malcolm, in Michael Crichton's Jurassic Park sums this up neatly:

...straight linearity, which we have come to take for granted in everything from physics to fiction, simply does not exist. Linearity is an artificial way of viewing the world. Real life isn't a series of interconnected events occurring one after the other like beads strung on a necklace. Life is actually a series of encounters in which one event may change those which follow in a wholly unpredictable, even devastating way.

As a consequence, crises often provoke habituated responses in people. There is a tendency to perform set movements, without actually observing the situation. Such set movements are often coping strategies, but the problem is of course, that strategies for dealing with one problem will not necessarily be appropriate for a new problem. Rather, they tend to aggravate the situation, causing further stress. Individuals who have become locked into habitual responses display a chronic "Adaptation" response to the onset of a crisis. In the first phase, they are apparently calm and inactive ("nothing can happen to me"). When the crisis breaks, they react with a bout of hyperactivity ("I can cope"), usually characterised by inadequate and inappropriate coping strategies. When it finally becomes apparent that they cannot cope, they tend to relapse into a "victim" stance ("why me?") whereon the problem becomes someone else's fault, and the link between the crisis and their own attitude to it is repressed.

Conversely, the key to the initiatory crisis is to say "yes" to what is happening. Rather, one gives the experience attention and discovers what is appropriate, and sheds that which is inappropriate. Magical lore has it that at each initiation, the magician must surrender something of himself, until there is nought remaining. This however, does not imply a renunciation of the world, nor a loss of effectiveness within it. The magician comes to recognise that there may be an abyss around every corner, and that even as one plunges into the depths, there is the possibility of soaring higher than ever afterwards, although this is not usually perceived to be the case during the "Dark Night."

It should be stressed that it is often difficult to judge the beginning and ending of an initiatory crisis. Such experiences may sweep down upon us suddenly (or so it seems), or may occur progressively. It does seem though, that able magicians come to know the peaks, troughs and plateaus of their own initiatory cycles, and may come to recognise (through personal omens etc) that a trial is coming upon them, and take steps to ensure that they can (if appropriate) brace themselves accordingly.