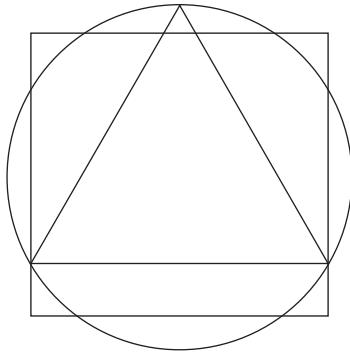


THE WAY OF THE FOUR ELEMENTS

THE WAY OF THE
FOUR ELEMENTS
A Second Manual
of Occult Training



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CONTENTS

<i>INTRODUCTION</i>	ix
Sources of the tradition	xii
How to use this book	xiv
A note on magic	xvi
CHAPTER ONE: Beginning the journey	1
Ritual of the equinox or solstice	2
Symbolism of the elements	2
Emblems of the elements	3
Attuning to the macrocosm	3
Attuning to the microcosm	4
Awakening the inner senses	5
Scrying the elements	6
Elemental magic	7
Making and consecrating the elemental working tools	8
Making a fluid condenser	10
CHAPTER TWO: Spring: The work of air	11
Spring Equinox ceremony	11
Symbolism of air	13

The emblem of air	14
Attuning to the macrocosm: Air	15
Attuning to the microcosm: Air	17
Awakening the inner senses: Air	18
Scrying the element of air	19
Elemental magic of air	23
Table of color symbolism	25
Preparing and consecrating the Book of Air	26
CHAPTER THREE: Summer: The work of fire	31
Summer Solstice ceremony	31
Symbolism of fire	33
The emblem of fire	34
Attuning to the macrocosm: Fire	35
Attuning to the microcosm: Fire	36
Awakening the inner senses: Fire	37
Scrying the element of fire	38
Elemental magic of fire	43
Preparing and consecrating the Wand of Fire	45
CHAPTER FOUR: Autumn: The work of water	49
Autumn Equinox ceremony	49
Symbolism of water	51
The emblem of water	52
Attuning to the macrocosm: Water	53
Attuning to the microcosm: Water	55
Awakening the inner senses: Water	56
Scrying the element of water	57
Elemental magic of water	61
Preparing and consecrating the Cup of Water	64
CHAPTER FIVE: Winter: The work of earth	67
Winter Solstice ceremony	67
Symbolism of earth	69
The emblem of earth	70
Attuning to the macrocosm: Earth	72
Attuning to the microcosm: Earth	73
Awakening the inner senses: Earth	74
Scrying the element of earth	75

Elemental magic of earth	80
Preparing and consecrating the Pentacle of Earth	82
CHAPTER SIX: The work of the temple	85
Temple institution ceremony	89
Temple reception ceremony	92
Temple opening ceremony	93
Temple closing ceremony	96
Spring Equinox ceremony	99
Summer Solstice ceremony	101
Autumn Equinox ceremony	104
Winter Solstice ceremony	107
<i>APPENDIX 1: Practices of the Golden Section Fellowship</i>	111
The Sphere of Protection	111
Discursive meditation	114
Lodge ceremonies	117
<i>APPENDIX 2: Using this book with other occult systems</i>	123
Related traditions	123
Unrelated traditions	127
<i>RESOURCES</i>	131
<i>INDEX</i>	133

INTRODUCTION

The path of wisdom leads through the four elements. This is one of the great themes of the occult traditions of the Western world. In ancient times, philosophers contemplated the cycles of nature, and came to see a fourfold rhythm throughout the interwoven realms of matter, life, and mind. They took familiar images from the world known by the senses—earth, water, air, and fire—and used them as emblems for the four stations of that rhythm. For more than 2000 years, from the time of the Presocratic philosophers to the rise of modern scientific materialism, people across the Western world used the four elements as a template to make sense of themselves and their world. Even those scientists who mock the old tradition of the four elements make use of it in their scientific work every day. After all, what are solids, liquids, gases, and energy, the four building blocks of the cosmos according to modern science, but another restatement of the same immemorial pattern?

To understand the way that this same pattern is applied in the book you are now reading, it will be helpful to understand the meanings of certain words. One of them is “occultism.” It comes from a Latin word meaning “hidden.” Back in the Renaissance, students of the hidden powers of the human mind and of spiritual teachings forbidden by the dogmatic religious bureaucracies of the time took to calling their

subjects of study “occult philosophy,” that is, “hidden philosophy.” Later, in the nineteenth century, that phrase got rounded off to give us the world “occultism.” Then and now, occultism is the study of consciousness and its powers, of all those aspects of the universe that have more in common with mind than with matter, and of certain sets of traditional practices and philosophies that open the way to direct personal experience of spiritual realities.

For many centuries now, occult traditions in the Western world have used the pattern of the four elements as a basic template for the process of initiation. Here we have another word that deserves a clear definition. What is initiation? The word literally means “beginning.” In occultism, an initiation is a set of experiences that introduces a student to a body of teaching and a set of practices. Most occult schools have more than one initiation, since in occultism—as in most other things—there are teachings and practices suitable for beginners, and others that are better suited for more experienced students. There are various ways of arranging the different degrees or grades of initiation, but many of these systems take their keynotes and their basic structure from the four elements, passing through an initiatory process that relates to each element in turn.

Yet the elements have another function in occultism. From ancient times the four elements have been assigned to the four seasons: air to spring, fire to summer, water to autumn, and earth to winter. These are reflected in the weather and the other expressions of natural forces in the temperate zones of the world during the seasonal cycle, but they have a deeper meaning, relating to certain flows of subtle influence connecting the Earth and the Sun during the cycle of the year. Many occult traditions include seasonal rituals, especially but not only on the solstices and equinoxes, to tap into those flows of influence and attune the mind and body of participants to the seasonal current.

In the past, these two things—the process of initiation and the celebration of the seasonal cycles—were very often combined into a single elegant pattern. In ancient Greece, for example, the initiation rituals of the Eleusinian Mysteries were always performed in the fall, close to the Autumn Equinox, while other mystery initiations had their own fixed points in the seasonal cycle. In traditional Japanese culture, similarly, certain initiation rituals practiced in the mountains were always done at specific points in the seasonal cycle: the Autumn Peak at Mount Omine in northeastern Japan is one such

initiatory experience that is still celebrated there today. For that matter, in the early centuries of Christianity it was standard practice for new converts to the faith to receive baptism, the Christian equivalent of initiation, on Easter morning after spending the season of Lent in preparation.

In most of the traditions of Western occultism, by contrast, the linkage between initiation and the cycle of the seasons fell into abeyance centuries ago and has not yet been revived. This book is one step toward that revival. It offers the reader a set of initiatory experiences linked to the four elements, in the traditional manner, and structures them so that they are practiced in harmony with the cycle of the seasons. It is designed so that it can be used by students of several occult traditions active today, but it was written specifically for one of these: the teachings of the Golden Section Fellowship.

The Golden Section Fellowship

Like the preceding volume in this series, *The Way of the Golden Section*, this book is an experiment. Most occult schools in the past used either correspondence study or in-person teaching to pass on the traditions and practices of occultism. These books, and several other volumes related to them, are meant to provide an open-source self-study program instead. As a student of these teachings, you don't need to submit your work to a mentor, or take classes taught by an instructor. The practices given here are self-correcting and will teach you through experience. By practicing them step by step over the course of the four seasons of the year, you complete a sequence of initiation. If you do this after first completing the work of *The Way of the Golden Section*, you advance to the second degree of the Golden Section Fellowship.

The Golden Section Fellowship is not an organization of the usual kind. It charges no dues and hands out no certificates. The qualifications for membership are simply your willingness to take on the challenge of following a specific course of occult training. You are not required to have taken up the work of the Fellowship in order to perform the work given in this book, and Appendix 2 gives suggestions for readers who want to use this book as a resource for study, practice, and initiation in some other tradition of Western occultism. If you have previously done the work in *The Way of the Golden Section*, however, and performed the self-initiation ritual given in it, you will find that

the material in this book adds considerably to what you learned in the course of that earlier experience.

Sources of the tradition

There are many different traditions, schools, and lineages in Western occultism. While no two of them have exactly the same teachings and practices to offer, most of them can trace the origins of the material they teach back through the years. There's much to be learned by following these threads of occult history back from teacher to teacher and from school to school. Students of this book also quite reasonably may want to know the sources of the material presented here. This is a complex matter, because I have learned from many teachers and schools over the years, and the lore and exercises I have woven together into this book's cycle of elemental workings come from many places.

The Holy Order of the Golden Dawn

Much of the material I have used in this book comes from one of the many offshoots of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the most famous occult order of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Founded in 1887 by William Wynn Westcott and Samuel Mathers, two British occultists who were both involved in many other occult societies of the time, the Golden Dawn went through many ups and downs, and finally broke apart in 1903 in a flurry of bitter political quarrels.

In the aftermath of the breakup, several leading members founded orders of their own. One of them, the well-known Christian occultist Arthur Edward Waite, called his offshoot the Holy Order of the Golden Dawn, and kept it going with a few breaks and a name change or two until his death in 1942. Among the other members of the Holy Order were Charles Williams, the occult novelist; Evelyn Underhill, the famous writer on Christian mysticism; and Pamela Coleman Smith, the artist who created the most famous of all modern tarot decks, the Rider-Waite deck.

In 1939, Waite was visited by an American occultist, Dr. Juliet Ashley, who was going home to the United States after a stay in Switzerland studying Jungian psychology. According to her account, Waite gave her a charter for an American branch of the Holy Order of the Golden Dawn, which she founded in 1942 in Philadelphia. Waite had made substantial changes to the original Golden Dawn rituals, and Ashley

proceeded to do the same, reworking the practices and teachings to fit her own distinctive spiritual vision.

Ashley was deeply involved in the busy world of mid-twentieth-century American occultism, and she also had considerable talent as a teacher, organizer, and ritualist. Thus it was hardly a surprise that she ended up as the head of two other small occult organizations—the Ancient Order of Druids in America (AODA) and the Order of Spiritual Alchemy (OSA). Later in her life, when she relocated to Boulder, Colorado, she became an associate of the Gnostic bishop and teacher Matthew Shaw, better known by his pen name Rhodonn Starrus. Starrus joined all of Ashley’s orders and worked his way up to the highest degree of initiation in each, and Ashley in turn became a bishop in his Universal Gnostic Church and an initiate of the Order of Modern Essenes, another organization Starrus headed.

In the second half of the twentieth century, as interest in traditional Western occultism waned, all these orders and organizations ended up being staffed and run by the same handful of people. That was when my teacher John Gilbert got involved. He studied with Juliet Ashley and Rhodonn Starrus, was initiated into all of the traditions they preserved, and gradually moved into a leadership position as the older members aged and died. By the time I went looking for a nearly forgotten Druid order called the Ancient Order of Druids in America, following up clues from a book I’d found in a used book store in Seattle, John was the effective head of the entire group of traditions. It was from him that I received my initiations and consecrations in 2003 and 2004.

Several of these organizations are active again as I write these words, and I hope to see the others revived in the years ahead. Certain aspects of the work of the Holy Order of the Golden Dawn, however, were very well suited to the project of an open-source self-study program in classic Western occultism, and I drew on them extensively for the project of this book. Some of the other material I received at the same time from John’s other orders and traditions also found a place in the system presented here.

Other sources

Perhaps half of the material in this book thus comes from the material I received from John Gilbert in the course of my training with him. The rest comes from much of a lifetime of study and practice in several

different branches of Western occultism. Nearly 30 years before I met John Gilbert and began studying the material he taught, in my teen years I found my way to occultism, the one alternative to fashionable atheism and equally fashionable mainstream religion that made sense to me. At that time, books on occultism that included anything useful on actual practice were few and far between, but I gathered what I could and worked with it.

One of the first genuinely helpful guides to practice I found was a paperback, *Techniques of High Magic* by Francis King and Stephen Skinner, which I bought in a Seattle department store in the last days of 1976. A few years later I was able to buy copies of two slim but exceptionally useful little books by Gareth Knight, *Occult Exercises and Practices* and *The Practice of Ritual Magic*. Those were the foundations of my personal occult training for years, until I finally scraped together the money to assemble a library of classic occult texts—and even after I had more to work with, the exercises and insights I got from those three volumes gave me an invaluable basis for my later studies. While I have not copied material directly from them, readers who know these books will doubtless recognize their influence.

Later on, in 1994, I enrolled in the correspondence course offered by the Order of Bards Ovates and Druids (OBOD), then as now the world's largest Druid order. The first of the three divisions of the course, the Bardic Grade, involved a great deal of work with the four elements. Here again, I have not copied material directly from the course, but the experience of working with the OBOD material unquestionably shaped my understanding of the elements and of inner work with them. Working through the same course several more times later on—an exercise I recommend to anyone who takes an occult correspondence course—also taught me how the same exercises repeated at intervals can reveal different aspects of a teaching, and played a significant role in helping me to see the possibilities in going through a cycle of elemental initiations more than once.

How to use this book

The Way of the Four Elements is intended for students of occultism who have learned the basic practices of the occult path and are ready to go further—to build on the foundation that their initial work has established. It is not a book for complete beginners. If you have

already worked through the material in the previous book, *The Way of the Golden Section*, you are ready to proceed with the material in this book. A summary of the Golden Section practices that are used in this book is included in Appendix 1 for reference. Alternatively, if you have completed another course of basic training in Western occultism, you may be prepared to work with the material in this book. Suggestions on how to do this are given in Appendix 2.

The work of elemental initiation covered in the pages ahead will take you a full year to complete. During each of the four seasons of that year, you'll be working with the element traditionally assigned to that part of the yearly cycle—air in spring, fire in summer, water in autumn, and earth in winter. There's no fixed starting point to the sequence: you can begin with any one of the four elements by starting at whatever season begins next. For example, if you first open this book in late summer, you can start the work at the Autumn Equinox with the element of water, and proceed through the year from there.

It's normal for a course of study like this one to include both theory and practice. I have followed that basic division here. In terms of study, the pages that follow present a set of symbols and teachings relating to the elements. These are drawn from the Druid Revival tradition, and are similar but not identical to the correspondences assigned to the elements in some other occult traditions. Several suggestions for reading and study during each season are also given to help readers expand their knowledge of the physical and metaphysical dimensions of each of the four elements.

In terms of practice, the pages that follow set out a sequence of classic occult practices, including exercises for awakening the etheric senses, developing astral clairvoyance through the use of the focused imagination, and directing the subtle influences of the elements to transform your consciousness and your life. As the final step in each elemental sequence, you will prepare and consecrate the working tool of the element: the Book of Air, the Wand of Fire, the Cup of Water, and the Pentacle of Earth. This will set a seal on that stage of the initiatory work you have performed, and provide a material anchor for the subtle influences you have awakened in yourself.

There is quite a bit of material to cover as you explore each of the elements. Thus it's important to get started as soon as the season begins, and not put things off until later! Each of the seasons of the year is 13 weeks long, and those 13 weeks will go by much more quickly

than you expect. The ritual of the solstice or equinox that starts the sequence should be done within 48 hours of the actual moment of the solstice or equinox, which you can easily find online or in any almanac or astrological ephemeris. Thereafter, you will find that making room in your schedule at least twice a week to carry out the practices is essential if you want to receive the full benefit of the elemental initiation. The chapter “Beginning the journey” summarizes the work ahead of you, but you will find that reading each chapter in advance is also useful so that you know what you need to do before you get to work.

Once you have finished the yearlong course of training, you can set it aside and go on to other things, using the skills and insights you have achieved during your encounters with the elements. If you want to get the most out of the material in this book, however, plan on doing the whole sequence more than once. One of the secrets of magical training is that you learn more the second time through any course of study and practice than you did the first time, and you can expect to learn even more the third time. You can finish up one cycle of elemental work using this book and then go directly on to a second cycle, or if you prefer, you can do something else for a few years and then come back to the work of this book. Four complete cycles of the work are recommended if you want to get as much as possible out of the material presented here.

A note on magic

These days a great many people confuse magic with occultism. That is a little like confusing organic chemistry with chemistry, or Chinese history with history. Occultism is a very broad field of study, dealing with all the many ways that human beings interact with the hidden side of existence; magic is much more specific, and mages—practitioners of magic—need to study and practice a great many things beyond the basic principles and disciplines of occultism. To put it another way, every mage is an occultist, but not every occultist is a mage.

Magic was defined by the great English occultist Dion Fortune as the art and science of causing a change in consciousness in accordance with will. Like the rest of occultism, it has nothing to do with superstition or devil worship. Like other forms of occultism, it uses symbols of various kinds in order to tap into the hidden powers of the mind and the universe. It requires a great deal of study, practice, and plain hard work to master.

This book is not intended to teach you magic. The Golden Section Fellowship training is meant to give you a solid general grounding in occultism, not the more specific training needed to get you started as an apprentice mage; its goals are the attainment of wisdom, revelation, and enlightenment, not the ability to cause changes in consciousness in accordance with will. On the other hand, this book does teach certain simple but effective techniques of elemental magic. These have been selected because they are well suited to students who have studied and practiced the basic elements of occultism, and because most of us can use a little help from the hidden side of things now and again. The techniques given here assume that you have already learned and practiced the technique of affirmation covered in *The Way of the Golden Section*; please refer to that section of the book before you perform any of the magical methods included here.

If you decide on reflection that you want to focus your efforts more specifically on magic as such, the training in this book and *The Way of the Golden Section* will give you a solid grounding in the occult theory and practice that underlies magic. Two of my other books, *The Druid Magic Handbook* and *The Dolmen Arch*, provide instruction in a system of magic that starts with the same basic practices the Golden Section Fellowship practices, and you may find them useful.

