

# The Azoth Meditation

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"Azoth of the Philosophers," Basil Valentine, *L'Azoth des Philosophes*, 1659. This restored and colored version copyright 1999 by Dennis William Hauck.

## The Azoth of the Philosophers Mandala

The “Azoth of the Philosophers” (shown on the previous page) is a meditative emblem attributed to German alchemist Basil Valentine. The original drawing dates from the early 1400s, but it was kept hidden from the eyes of the Church and shared only among alchemists for the next 200 years. It was not until 1659 – at the height of the Renaissance – that the Azoth emblem finally appeared in a book published in Paris called *L’Azoth des Philosophes* (“The Azoth of the Philosophers”). The text of that book was based on an earlier work published in 1626 without the drawing. Also attributed to Valentine, it was titled *Azoth, ou le Moyen de faire l’Or caché des Philosophes* (“Azoth, or the Way to the Hidden Gold of the Philosophers”).

It is not surprising the original Azoth drawing was kept secret. The emblem is actually an alchemical mandala used to transform consciousness by working through the operations of alchemy. The goal was to achieve divine perfection and union with God. Such spiritual practices were not allowed outside the Church, and several alchemists – most notably Giordano Bruno<sup>i</sup> – were burnt at the stake even for suggesting that people could experience the Divine through private prayer and meditation in their own chambers.

The word “Azoth” is an alchemical term first used in the ancient writings of Zosimos, Mary the Jewess, and Jābir ibn Hayyān (Geber). It refers to the universal agent of transformation, which is capable of reducing anything to its primordial state and then perfecting it. The term is derived from the Arabic word for mercury (*al-zā'būq*).

The first two letters in the word relate to the letters at the beginning and end of the three languages used by scholars of the time: Latin (A-Z), Greek (alpha-omega), and Hebrew (aleph-tau). The connotation is that the Azoth contains and controls both the beginning and end of the Great Work – not just the chaotic First Matter at the beginning of the Work but also its perfected essence (the Philosopher’s Stone) at the end.

The circle at the center of the drawing contains the face of a bearded alchemist at the beginning of the Work (the alpha point). Like looking into a mirror, this is where the alchemist focuses attention to begin the meditation. From this self-

reflective point, the alchemist begins the inner work and continues around the mandala through the spiritual operations depicted in the seven numbered circles. At the end of meditation (the omega point), the alchemist returns to the central circle, but this time focuses on the face contained within the downward pointing triangle.

The downward-pointing triangle superimposed over the face of the alchemist is the cipher for the Water element, which is used here as a symbol of divine grace pouring down from Above. Within the boundary of the triangle one can see the face of God, and the drawing clearly implies that the face of God and the face of the alchemist become one at the end of the Work. Unfortunately, ideas like that were considered blasphemy punishable by death in the Middle Ages. It was not until the late Renaissance, when the concept of the divine nature of man began to circulate openly, that the Azoth drawing could finally be published.

### **Symbolgy of the Azoth Drawing**

Working with the Azoth in meditation is very straightforward, but first one needs to understand the complicated layout and meaning of the symbols used. In Figure 3, the mandala shows the schematized body of the alchemist shown in perfect balance the Four Elements, as depicted by his outstretched arms and legs. His feet protrude from behind the central emblem, one foot on Earth and the other in Water. In his right hand is a torch of Fire and in his left hand a feather symbolizing Air.

The alchemist also stands balanced between the masculine and feminine powers in the background. He is the offspring of the sacred marriage between Sol, the archetypal Sun King seated on a lion on a hill to his right, and Luna, the archetypal Moon Queen seated on a great fish to his left. "Its father is the Sun," says the Emerald Tablet, "its mother the Moon." <sup>ii</sup>

The jovial, extroverted Sun King holds a scepter and a shield indicating his authority and strength over the rational, visible world, but the fiery dragon of the rejected contents of his unconscious waits in a cave beneath him ready to attack should he grow too arrogant.

The melancholy, introverted Moon Queen holds the reins to a great fish, symbolizing her acceptance and connection to those same unconscious forces that threaten the King. Behind her is a chaff of wheat, which stands for her relationship to fertility and growth. The bow and arrow she cradles in her left arm symbolize the wounds of the heart and body she accepts as part of her existence, for feminine consciousness accepts the world as it is, with all its pain and suffering.

In simplest terms, the King and Queen represent the raw materials of our experience – thoughts and feelings – with which the alchemist works. The King symbolizes the power of thought and willpower, which are characteristics of spirit. The Queen stands for the influence of feelings and emotions, which make up the chaotic energy of the soul. Their marriage produces a new intuitive state of consciousness that Egyptian alchemists referred to as “Intelligence of the Heart.”

Between the legs of the alchemist at the level of the root chakra is the Cubic Stone, which is labeled *Corpus* (meaning “body”). The five stars surrounding it indicate that the physical body has a hidden Fifth Element or Quintessence whose “inherent strength is perfected if it is turned into Earth” according to the Emerald Tablet. Where the head of the alchemist should be, there is a depiction of the winged solar disk, which symbolizes the ascended essence or personal Quintessence manifested through the operations of spiritual alchemy.

Touching the wings of the Quintessence are a salamander engulfed in flames on the left side of the drawing and a standing bird on the right. Below the salamander is the inscription *Anima* (Soul); below the bird is the inscription *Spiritus* (Spirit). The salamander, a symbol of soul, is attracted to the blazing heat of the Sun, while the white bird, a symbol of spirit, is attracted to the coolness of the Moon. This is a visualization of the fundamental duality of energies that drive the universe. It is similar in meaning to the Tai Chi symbol, which represents the interplay of the feminine yin and masculine yang energies

*Spiritus*, *Anima*, and *Corpus* (Spirit, Soul, and Body) form a large inverted triangle that stands behind the central emblem of the alchemist. Together they symbolize the Three Essentials, the triad of hidden forces within any created thing – the celestial archetypes that the alchemists called Sulfur, Mercury, and Salt.

## Climbing the Ladder of the Planets

One continues the preparatory work with the Azoth mandala by moving through each of the alchemical operations depicted. The star-shaped pattern that makes up the body of the alchemist represents the Quintessence within – what Paracelsus called the “star in man” – the secret alchemical process going on in all souls. It is the same process behind the evolution of the *Anima Mundi* or soul of the universe.

### Saturn

The first ray in this inner star is the black ray labeled number one and pointing to the Corpus Stone. It represents the beginning of the Ladder of the Planets and is marked by the cipher that stands for both the metal lead and the planet Saturn. This is the archetypal situation at the beginning of the Great Work. The square symbol for Salt is also shown in the first ray, which indicates the Work begins in the unredeemed matter of an imperfect incarnation. It could represent any substance that needs to be perfected.

Movement through the Azoth is clockwise, and between each step on this Planetary Ladder is a series of circles that show how to proceed to the next step or transform the current situation. These are the operations of alchemy.

The first circle shows a black crow perching on top of a skull. Next to the first circle (between the first and second rays) is the Latin word *Visita*, which means to visit or start a journey. Black crows are symbols of the initial Black Phase (the *Nigredo*) of alchemy, during which the subject of transformation is purified by breaking it down into its essential ingredients.

The scene in the circle represents the first operation of Calcination, which works with the element Fire to burn away dross and reveal hidden essences. The word “Calcination,” and such related words as “calcify” and “calcium,” are from the Latin root *calx*, which means limestone or bone. To calcine something is to burn it until it turns chalky white, reduce it to ashes, or cremate it. The skull in the first circle is the classic symbol of Calcination.

This first operation involves the destruction of ego and our attachments to material possessions. It is usually a natural humbling process as one grows older. But for the spiritual alchemist, this is an immediate and deliberate surrender of one's inherent hubris that proceeds by igniting the fire of intense introspection and self-evaluation and eliminating all that is false.

### Jupiter

The second ray in the star of the Azoth points toward the King, and the operation here is directed toward masculine consciousness. This is the second rung on the Ladder of the Planets and is marked with the symbol that stands for both the metal tin and the planet Jupiter.

The second circle depicts the operation of Dissolution and shows the black crow watching itself dissolve before its own eyes to reveal its white or purer part. Reflecting back from the pool of Dissolution is the white image of the Soul Bird, which is exposed during this operation. This is still the Black Phase of alchemy, as the process of purification continues. In the outer ring next to the circle of Dissolution is the word *Interiora*, meaning the operation takes place in the innermost parts.

Dissolution represents a breaking down of the artificial structures of the psyche by total immersion in the unconscious, the rejected part of consciousness. Within the alchemist, the dissolving emotional energy known as the "Waters of Dissolution" can take the form of dreams, voices, visions, and strange feelings which reveal a less ordered and irrational world existing simultaneously with everyday life. During Dissolution, the conscious mind lets go of control to allow the surfacing of buried material and bound-up energy.

### Mars

The third ray of the Azoth points toward the torch of Fire and is marked with the cipher signifying both the metal iron and the planet Mars. This ray is also marked with a smaller symbol denoting Sulfur. Iron and sulfur come together chemically in Vitriol or sulfuric acid, the aggressive and biting liquid fire of the alchemists.

The third circle shows the operation of Separation in which the black, earthbound Soul Bird splits into two white birds that retrieve the saved remains of the first two operations. This is the first coming together of soul and spirit, and the newly acquired elevation of consciousness allows discernment of what is worthy of being saved. Above this circle is written *Terrae*, which means “of the earth” and refers to the spiritual essences being separated out from the polluted dregs of one’s everyday personality.

### The Sun

The fourth ray of the Azoth points to the area at the top of the drawing where the right wing of the Quintessence touches the salamander wallowing in flames. The ray is marked with the single symbol for both gold and the Sun.

The fourth circle depicts the twin birds of soul and spirit leaving the earth together, lifting a five-spiked crown (the Fifth Element or Quintessence recovered from the preceding operations). At this point in the Work, only the purest and most genuine parts of the substance to be transformed remain in the vessel. The goal of the Conjunction is to recombine these saved elements into a whole new physical incarnation. “Its nurse is the Earth” is what the Emerald Tablet says of this stage.<sup>iii</sup> Above this circle is inscribed the word *Rectificando*, meaning “by rectification” or setting things right, and the wings of the Quintessence spread over this operation as if to bless it.

The alchemists often referred to the Conjunction as the “Marriage of the Sun and Moon,” which symbolized the two opposing ways of knowing or experiencing the world. After this Marriage in the Mind, the initiate experiences the birth of intuitive insight, which produces a sense of reality superior to either thought or feeling alone. As can be seen in the Azoth drawing, Conjunction is really a turning point from working with the first three operations Below (in matter) and working with the last three operations Above (in spirit).

### Venus

The fifth ray of the Azoth points to the area where the left wing of the Quintessence touches the standing bird of Spirit. The ray is marked with the single symbol for both copper and Venus.

The fifth circle is under the inscription *Invenies*, which means “you will discover.” This is the operation of Fermentation in which the unexpected mystic substance forms, the ambrosia of the gods, which represents the first lasting solidification of the conjoining of soul and spirit. The circle shows the Soul and Spirit birds nesting in a tree, brooding over their Egg, waiting for the mystical birth to occur.

Fermentation is the introduction of new life into the Child of Conjunction to completely change its characteristics, to completely raise it to a whole new level of being. The Emerald Tablet tells us to leave the earthly realm by the fire of imagination, “gently and with great Ingenuity,” into a state that sets one’s soul afire with higher passion.<sup>iv</sup>

Like natural fermentation, spiritual Fermentation is a two-stepped process that begins with Putrefaction, which in which the matter is allowed first to rot and decompose and then to ferment or come alive again in spirit. In his *Chemisches Lustgaertlein* (1625), alchemist Daniel Stolcius describes the importance of this uncomfortable phase: “Destruction brings about the Death of the material. But the spirit renews, like before, the Life. Provided that the seed is putrefied in the right soil – otherwise all labor, work, and art will be in vain.”

This process appears most clearly in the making of wine. First, the grapes are “sacrificed” or crushed to release their essences in the juice. Then, Putrefaction begins as the juice is allowed to decompose and rot. Next, a white layer of digesting bacteria arises that begins the process of Fermentation. This phase is also sometimes marked by a waxy substance the alchemists called the Ferment and an oily film known as the Peacock’s Tail. Finally, the new life force “conquers” the original identity of the grape juice and supplants it with a new and higher presence or life. This higher presence releases during the next operation (Distillation), which produces the true Spirit of Wine (its alcohol), which contains the purified essence of grapes.

This process is the death of the Child of Conjunction that will eventually result in its resurrection to a new level of being. Out of the blackness of the alchemist’s despair (Putrefaction) comes a brilliant display of colors and meaningful visions (the Peacock’s Tail.) Fermentation can be achieved through various activities that include intense prayer, desire for mystical union, breakdown of the personality,

transpersonal therapy, psychedelic drugs, and deep meditation. Personal Fermentation is living inspiration from something totally beyond oneself.

## Mercury

The Azoth's sixth ray points to the feather, symbol of Air and indicating the process of spiritualization. This ray is usually colored indigo, although it is shown as white or light gray. The ray is marked with the cipher for the metal Mercury (Quicksilver) and the planet Mercury, as well as an identical smaller symbol indicating the heavenly principle of Mercury.

Distillation is the sixth of the major operations in alchemy, and it is represented in the sixth circle by a unicorn lying on the ground in front of a rose bush. According to legend, the unicorn runs tirelessly from pursuers but lies meekly on the ground when approached by a virgin. The virgin is the purified matter at hand, which has returned to a state of innocence and potential. Above the circle is the word *Occultum*, meaning secret or hidden, since the essences at the beginning of this stage are invisible.

Distillation is a key process on all levels of alchemy. It involves releasing volatile essences from their prison in matter and condensing them in a purified form. Repeated Distillation produces an extremely concentrated solution the alchemists called the "Mother of the Stone." In a kind of Distillation known as sublimation, the vapors condense directly into solid powder at the top of the distilling apparatus and remain "fixed" there. The Emerald Tablet describes distillation as: "It rises from Earth to Heaven and descends again to Earth."<sup>v</sup>

On the personal level, distillation is the agitation and sublimation of psychic forces is necessary to ensure that no impurities from the inflated ego or deeply submerged id are incorporated into the next and final stage. Personal Distillation consists of a variety of introspective techniques that raise the content of the psyche to the highest level possible, free from sentimentality and emotions, cut off even from one's personal identity. Distillation is the purification of the unborn Self – all that one truly is and can be. In society, the Distillation experience is expressed as science and objective experimentation.

## The Moon

The seventh ray of the Azoth points to the realm of the Queen and contains the symbol that stands for both the metal silver and the Moon. It is at the feminine level of soul where masculine consciousness is transformed.

The seventh circle shows an androgynous youth emerging from an open grave, with the Latin word *Lapidem*, meaning “the Stone,” on the outer ring next to it. This is the operation of Coagulation, in which the fermented Child of Conjunction fuses with the sublimated spiritual presence released during Distillation. The resurrection of the soul is accomplished by bringing together only the purest essences of one’s body and soul into the light of meditation. In other words, Coagulation incarnates and releases the *Ultima Materia* of the soul that the Emerald Tablet described as the “Glory of the Whole Universe.” At this stage, the alchemists felt they were working with the “new” or resurrected Salt.

On the spiritual level, Coagulation is first sensed as a new confidence that is beyond all things, though some people experience it as a Second Body of golden coalesced light, a permanent vehicle of consciousness that embodies the highest aspirations and evolution of mind. Coagulation incarnates and releases the *Ultima Materia* of the soul – what Paracelsus named the “Astral Body” – which the alchemists also referred to as Philosopher’s Stone. Using this magical Stone, the alchemists believed they could exist on all levels of reality.

There are deeper secrets contained in the Azoth drawing that are only revealed through deeper contemplation of the image. Although it shows only seven operations, there is another eighth step concealed in the mandala. This secret is suggested by the fact that while there are eight circles depicting corresponding to operations, only seven rays are labeled.

There is also a problem with the order of the planets from the Ladder of Planets. The positions for Venus and the Sun have been switched around, and that has thrown off the correct order of planets on the alchemist’s left side, thereby losing the logical pattern of the preceding steps. This is examined more closely in the following meditation.

## The Azoth Meditation

Begin your meditation by entering a relaxed and open state of consciousness while staring directly at the face in the center of the mandala. Many alchemists have actually replaced the central image with a small round mirror to facilitate this introspective process. While staring at the center of the mandala, try to incorporate into your peripheral view all the alchemical images of King and Queen, Spirit and Soul that are present. Go slowly and intuitively and try to feel a sense of increased meaning and inspiration, as you begin your journey through the operations.

First look at each ray in order, beginning with the black ray of Calcination. Observe the symbols on the ray and its position on the "Star in Man." Then move your attention clockwise to the circle explaining the operation to be performed here. Look at the scene depicted and try to get a feeling of actually being in the scene and witnessing what it depicts. Continue this way all around the mandala until you reach the final operation of Coagulation that shows the androgynous youth emerging from the grave. This is a clue for you to do the same in your meditation with the mandala.

Sit back now and stare at the whole drawing and try to break free of the salted person you have become. In other words, free yourself from the dead grave of the flat, square picture in which you have buried your consciousness in this meditation. Let your attention be free and see where it lands. In almost every case, you will be drawn to the black ray at position one, which points to the Cubic Stone. This is the Salt or unpurified matter at the beginning of the Work, as well as the new Salt or Stone at the end of the Work.

Further meditation on the meaning of this "eighth" ray leads you directly above this ray to the crowning sphere of Conjunction. This is the operation that works with Earth to manifest the new Salt in material reality. It is also the turning point between the Below and the Above. In other words, the operation associated with the hidden eighth step is Conjunction. It is the beginning and end of the Work. Some alchemists felt so strongly about this

that they actually changed the entire process to show the final step of transformation depicted by gold and the Sun in ray number four instead of ray number seven. In any drawings based on Basil Valentine's version that appeared in his *Azoth des Philosophes* (1659), the Sun and its metal are shown in this Ray of Conjunction instead of in the final Ray of Coagulation.

This is an overwhelming confirmation of the importance of the ancient alchemical principle known as the Law of the Octaves. Just as the seven first notes in the musical scale lead to an eighth note that is a repetition of the first at a higher level of vibration, so do the seven operations of alchemy lead to a return to the realm of matter at a higher frequency of consciousness.

Stated differently, the goal of alchemy is not to remain in the realm of spirit, as it is in all the Abrahamic religions. Like Buddhist and Taoist doctrine, the goal is to become purified in the realm of spirit and then return to the earth as seeds of spirit. The Great Work of alchemy is nothing less than the "consecration of the Whole Universe" as the Emerald Tablet states. It is the coagulation of spirit in matter, the full awakening of the Cosmic Quintessence – the hidden spark of light and consciousness that carries humankind's true identity but is trapped in matter. That can only be accomplished by a second Conjunction, a Sacred Marriage between Soul and Spirit that takes place on the cross of matter in the real world.

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Dennis William Hauck, *The Emerald Tablet: Alchemy for Personal Transformation* (New York: Penguin Arcana, 1999), 45.