

William Quan Judge, 'THEOSOPHICAL SYMBOLISM'

The Path, May, 1886, pp. 51-55

The number 7 has, ever since the Theosophical Society was founded November 17th, 1875, played a prominent part in all its affairs, and, as usual, the symbols which particularly relate or pertain to the Society are in number, seven. They are: first the seal of the Society; second, the serpent biting his tail; third, the gnostic cross near the serpent's head; fourth, the interlaced triangles; fifth, the *crux ansata* in the centre; sixth, the pin of the Society, composed of a *crux ansata* entwined by a serpent, forming together T.S.; and seventh, OM the sacred Vedic word.

The seal of the Society contains all of the symbols enumerated, excepting *aum*, and is the synthesis of them. It, in fact, expresses what the Society is itself, and contains, or ought to, in symbolic form, the doctrines which many of its members adhere to.

A symbol to be properly so called, must be contained in the idea or ideas which it is intended to represent. As a symbol of a house could never be the prow of a boat, or the wing of a bird, but must be contained somewhere in the form of the house itself; that is, it must be an actual part chosen to represent or stand for the whole. It need not be the whole, but may be a lower form or species used as the representative of a higher of the same kind. The word is derived from the Greek words meaning *to throw with*, that is to throw together. To be a just and correct symbol, it should be such as that the moment it is seen by one versed in symbolism, its meaning and application become easily apparent. The Egyptians adopted to represent the soul passing back to its source, after the trial in the Hall of Two Truths, a winged globe, for a globe is a symbol of either the Supreme Soul or a portion of it, and the wings were added to represent its life and flight to the upper spheres. In another branch of their symbology they represented justice by a scale which gives a just balance; while even there in the Hall of Two Truths, they reverted again to the other mode and symbolized the man being weighed by justice, in the form of his heart over against the feather of truth in the opposite pan of the scales.

There is one very curious hieroglyph of the Egyptians which deserves some study by those of curious mind. Here we will merely point it out, remarking that there is a mine of great value in the Egyptian method of picturing their ideas of the macrocosm. In one of the numerous papyri now in the British Museum, there is a picture of a globe being held up by a beetle by means of his head and two fore legs, while he is standing upon a sort of pedestal which has certain divisions, looking on the whole, like a section of an hour glass crossed by horizontal lines that project from each side. This pedestal represents stability; but what does the whole mean or shadow forth? Those who can follow up suggestions should direct their thoughts to the relation which the Sun bears to the earth in its orbital revolution.

To proceed with our analysis: The second symbol is, the serpent biting his tail. This is wisdom, and eternity. It is eternity, because that has neither beginning nor end and therefore the ring is formed by the serpent swallowing his tail. There is an old hermetic symbol similar to this, in which the circle is formed by two serpents interlaced and each swallowing the tail of the other one. No doubt the symbolism in that is, in respect to the duality of the manifested All, and hence, two serpents inextricably entwined.

Furthermore, the scales of the reptiles form the figures of facettes or diamonds, which shadow forth the illimitable diversity of the aspects of wisdom or truth. This is not due to any want of coherence or congruity in truth itself, but solely to the diverse views which each individual takes of the one Truth. These reflecting facettes are the beings composing the macrocosm: each one has developed himself only to a certain degree, and therefore can only appreciate and reflect that amount of

wisdom which has fallen to his lot. As he passes again and again through the form of men, he slowly develops other various powers of appreciating more truth, and so at the last may become one with the whole — the perfect man, able to know and to feel completely his union with all. This is when he has acquired the highest Yoga. So in our experience and in history and ethnology we find individuals, nations and races, whose want of responsiveness to certain ideas, and others whose power to grasp them, can only be explained by the doctrines of Reincarnation and Karma. If those doctrines are not accepted, there is no escape from a blank negation.

It is not necessary to express the duality of the Supreme Soul by two serpents, because in the third component part of the Seal, elsewhere, that is symbolized by the interlaced triangles. One of these is white, that one with the point uppermost, and the other is black with its apex directed downward. They are intertwined because the dual nature of the Supreme, while in manifestation, is not separate in its parts. Each atom of matter, so called, has also its atom of spirit. This is what the *Bhagavad-Gita* (1) denominates Purusha and Prakriti, and Krishna there says that he is at once Purusha and Prakriti, he is alike the very best and the very worst of man. These triangles also mean, “the manifested universe.” It is one of the oldest and most beautiful of symbols, and can be discovered among all nations, not only those now inhabiting the earth, but also in the monuments, carvings and other remains of the great races who have left us the gigantic structures now silent as far as the voice of man is concerned, but resounding with speech for those who care to listen. They seem to be full of ideas turned into stone.

The triangles thus combined form in the interior space, a six sided plane figure. This is the manifested world. Six is the number of the world, and 666 is the great mystery which is related to the symbol. St. John talks of this number. Around the six-sided centre are the six triangles projecting into the spiritual world, and touching the enclosed serpent of wisdom. In an old book, this is made by the great head of the Lord rising above the horizon of the ocean of matter, with the arms just raised so that they make the upper half of the triangle. This is the “long face,” or *macroscopos*, as it is called. As it rises slowly and majestically, the placid water below reflects it in reverse, and thus makes the whole double triangle. The lower one is dark and forbidding in its aspect, but at the same time the upper part of the darker one is itself light, for it is formed by the majestic head of this Adam Kadmon. Thus they shade into one another. And this is a perfect symbolism, for it clearly figures the way in which day shades into night, and evil into good. In ourselves we find both, or as the Christian St. Paul says, the natural and spiritual man are always together warring against each other, so that what we would do we cannot, and what we desire not to be guilty of, the darker half of man compels us to do. But ink and paper fails us in the task of trying to elucidate this great symbol. Go to Hermes, to St. John, the *Caballah*, the Hindu books, wherever you please, and there will you find the seven times seven meanings of the interlaced triangles.

OM is the Sacred Vedic syllable: let us repeat it with a thought directed to its true meaning.(2)

Within the small circle, placed upon the serpent, is a cross with its ends turned back. This is called the Gnostic Cross. It signifies evolution, among other ideas, for the turning back of its ends is caused by the revolving of the two diameters of the circle. The vertical diameter is the spirit moving down and bisecting the horizontal. This completed, the revolution round the great circle commences, and that motion is represented in the symbol by the ends turned back. In Chapter III of *Bhagavad-Gita* Krishna says: “he who in this life does not cause this cycle, thus already revolved, to continue revolving lives to no purpose, a life of sin, indulging his senses.” That is, we must assist the great wheel of evolution and not oppose it; we must try to help in the great work of returning to the source from whence we came, and constantly endeavor to convert lower nature into higher, not only that of ourselves, but also of our fellow men and of the whole animated world.

This cross is also the symbol of the Hindu Chakka, or discus, of Vishnu. In the *Mahabharata* is described the conflict between the Asuras and Devas, for the possession of the vase of Amreeta which had been churned with infinite trouble, from the ocean, and which the Asuras desired to take for themselves. The conflict began when *Rahu*, an Asura, assuming the form of a Deva, began drinking the ambrosia. In this case the Amreeta was spiritual wisdom, material existence, immortality, and also magic power. The deceit of *Rahu* was discovered before he had swallowed, and then the battle began.

In the midst of this dreadful hurry and confusion of the fight, *Nar* and *Narayan* entered the field together. *Narayan* beholding a celestial bow in the hands of *Nar*, it reminded him of his Chakka, the destroyer of the Asuras. The faithful weapon, ready at the mind's call, flew down from heaven and with direct and refulgent speed, beautiful, yet terrible to behold. And being arrived, glowing like the sacrificial flame, and spreading terror around, *Narayan* with his right arm formed like the elephantine trunk, hurled forth the ponderous orb, the speedy messenger and glorious ruin of hostile towns, who, raging like the final all destroying fire, shot bounding with desolating force, killing thousands of the Asuras in his rapid flight, burning and involving, like the lambent flame, and cutting down all that would oppose him. Anon he climbeth the heavens from whence he came. (Mahabharata, Book I, Ch. 15.)

Ezekiel, of the Jews, saw this wheel, when he was among the captives by the river Chebar in Chaldea. In a vision he saw the four beasts and the man of the Apocalypse, and with them "for each of the four faces," was a wheel, of the colour of a beryl; it was "as a wheel within a wheel," and they went wherever the living creatures went, "for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels." All of this appeared terrible to him, for he says: "And when they went I heard a noise like the noise of great waters, like the voice of the Almighty, a noise of tumult like the noise of a host."

There are many other meanings concealed in this symbol, as in all the others.

In the center of the interlaced triangles is placed the *Crux ansata*. This is also extremely ancient. In the old Egyptian papyri it is frequently found. It signifies life. As Isis stands before the candidate, or the soul, upon his entry, she holds in one hand this cross, while he holds up his hand that he may not look upon her face. In another there is a winged figure, whose wings are attached to the arms, and in each hand is held the same cross. Among other things we find here the horizontal and vertical diameters once more, but conjoined with the circle placed on top. This is the same as the old astrological sign for Venus. But in the seal, its chief and most important meaning is *the regenerated man*. Here in the centre, after passing the different degrees and cycles, both spirit and matter are united in the intelligent regenerated man, who stands in the middle knowing all things in the manifested universe. He has triumphed over death and holds the cross of life.

The last theosophical symbol is the pin of the Society, adopted early in its history but not used much. It is the cross we have just been considering, entwined in such a way by a serpent, that the combination makes T S as a monogram.

The foregoing is not exhaustive. Every symbol should have seven meanings of principal value, and out of every one of those we have been considering can be drawn that number of significations. Intelligent study of them will be beneficial, for when a consistent symbol, embodying many ideas is found and meditated upon, the thought or view of the symbol brings up each idea at once before the mind.

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(1) *Bagavad-Gita*, ch. 13; id. ch. 10.

(2) *The Path*, No. I, p. 24.