

The Elements of Magic

In the various disciplines that compose the Western Magical Tradition an understanding of the five elements is key. The elements: Earth, Air, Fire, Water and Spirit are present in every physical object in the material world. In terms of matter, they refer to the four states respectively: Solid, Gaseous, Plasma and Liquid. In a human being, the elements each refer to a distinctive force of personality or part of self. Spirit; being in an unusual relation to the previous four elements will be discussed in depth later. A wealth of correspondences has been built up around these five forces which help us understand what Rama Prasad has dubbed “nature’s finer forces” and allow us to relate in a meaningful way to the subtler forces of the universe. In this paper I propose to explore each element in turn and conclude with a discussion of the relationship between the elements.

Within the Western Magical Tradition it is common to start a circle casting in the East, which is the direction associated with the element Air. Thus we begin our journey in the East with this element. Air is the seat of the intellect and from this element we relate to human knowledge. In terms of the parts of self Air is the mind. In the Tattva system Air is referred to as Vayu and is symbolized by a blue circle. All our thoughts find root in this element, as well as inspiration, in terms of the powers of the magus, Air is the power to know.

Language finds its root in this element, and in this element we find the powers of communication and scholarship. Air is suggestive of boundaries, and is found in the infinite space in between two forms. It is in this association that the Sword or Athame is associated with the element, as the athame is a tool by which we inscribe boundaries and outline forms. Air is not however, the message but the messenger. Air is not the thought, it is the medium by which the idea is presented.

As I sat in meditation on the element I was greeted by a creature which emerged from the smoke of an extinguished candle. The Spirit was a Sylph, one of the elemental spirits of air. I greeted him and he spoke of the mysteries of the element:

We are the messengers, not the message
We are the thoughts you speak and those you keep in your mind,
We are the Truth you seek, and the lies you tell,
With the energy of air we communicate and obfuscate,
We are the liminal spaces in between,
The circle is the Sun at Dawn, the Light of knowledge that banishes ignorance
Ideas and Wisdom flowing,

It was then that I understood that air permeates much more than is associated at first glance. Air is found in the brush of a pen upon a page, whispering as we write and think, when we use reason and logic, when we reach for understanding. On the Tree of Life, the element Air is related to the energies of Hod.

Next we turn to the south and its element Fire. The Colors associated with Fire are Red, Orange, Gold and White. In the Tattva system fire is symbolized as a Red Triangle pointing towards the heavens. Fire is the Will, Fire is Passion. This element brings forth desire and drive which creates action. Where Air is the catalyst that brings the idea of change, fire is the transformative element that drives the change. The Power of the Magus associated with fire is the power to will. Fire brings the awareness of sensations. However, the heat of fire, when unchecked, burns more than is intended.

In one of my meditations on the element, I had the privilege of meeting a salamander, one of the elementals of fire. He crawled to my shoulder and began to whisper in my ear. As he did so I saw a man holding a sword which was shaped like a candle flame. He was raving in anger and if let loose he would destroy anything that got in the way of him and the target of his ire. His wrath was heedless of his family or the community around him; he was consumed by that passion. Soon after, the image changed, I saw the same man, holding the sword aloft as well. He was leading a ragged band whom I understood to be rebels. He was lamenting that some of them would die but knew in his heart that it was necessary to cull away the tyrant which ruled the land.

In this fashion Fire can be tied to the energies of Geburah on the Tree of Life. It is cleansing and purifying, burning away the dross and leaving the subject transformed. The Tool of Fire is the Wand, as the drive of fire causes action, it inspires growth, and that growth is symbolized by the tree that the wand represents.

Next when casting a circle we come to the west, the direction associated with the element Water. Water is the seat of the emotions, in terms of the parts of self, water is the heart. According to the Tattva system, the element is called Apas and its symbol is a silver crescent. From this element come the emotions, fleeting and easy to ignore or those emotions which are overwhelming in their depth. Water takes as its tool the cauldron, the receptacle of life, the womb from which life emerges. Water is also a transformative element, as water erodes the soil it carries it to a new place or alters its form. Where fire is the drive which sparks transformation, water is the dynamic nature of the change and from its fluid motion new forms are made possible.

Water is the intuition that arises from our subconscious. As Air carries the form of intelligence born of logic and rationality, Water carries what is referred to as occult intelligence. Water's intelligence is one born of experience, and like the element is processed subjectively and internally. In terms of the powers of the magus, water is the power to dare. In terms of the Tree of Life, the element of water is related to the energies of Netzach.

In one of my meditations on the element, I was swimming through the depths of the ocean with an undine, one of the water elemental spirits. As we swam hand in hand, she spoke:

We are the pulse of life within you
We are when you just know
We are the intuition that guides you
The depth of love
The despair you feel at its loss
Pride in your accomplishments
Embarrassment at your shortcomings
We are ever changing,
never the same from one moment to the next
yet our outward form stays
We can buoy you and hold you aloft like the surface of a pool,
We can move you gently and wash away your troubles like you would dirt
Or
We can be the storm that sweeps you up and gets you snared in the undertow
We can nourish like the rains or erode the ground you stand on.
This is the mystery of the human heart

The last quarter called when casting a circle is the north. North is the direction associated with the element Earth. Earth is the element of stability, growth, and forms. Earth is the synthesis of ideas into a concept; it is the stable foundation on which a relationship grows. Without the solid stage of Earth, the remaining elements are fleeting. Communicating ideas in objective relationships becomes impossible because the structure of an idea comes from this element. Earth in the Tattva system is symbolized by a golden square and is called Prithvi. The Tool of Earth is the Pentacle, a wooden disk which represents the synthesis of form.

The element earth is the solid grounding from which growth is possible. Earth is also linked to prosperity, fertility, health and well being. The Elemental spirits associated with Earth are the Gnomes. In the Tree of Life, the element Earth is associated with the energies of Chesed. In working with the Earth path-working, I noticed a key result in line with the energies of the element. I felt energized, vital, and grounded. All the scattered energies of my personal being had been returned to a unified whole and purposed. The metaphysical properties of the element earth revolve around such grounding. The ways of knowing involved with the element center around a form of deep knowing that comes with repeated exposure to the information and the synthesis of such knowledge into your being.

I have touched previously on how the energies of the different elements interact. To bring the ideas together in a few examples, let us look at the interplay of the elements in terms of a personal transformation. The Element Air carries a thought which brings to mind a personal change our subject wishes to make. The element Fire ignites the passion to change and provides the will that makes such a transformation possible. In water the intuitive understanding of the need for change and the dynamism of the element allow for such a change to take place in the long term and the new form is provided by the element earth.

Another example is a relationship that was described to me by the salamander I met during my meditation on fire. It is commonly thought of that the passionate emotion of love has its root in fire. In reality it is a relationship between the elements that lead to such a state. This relationship, as was revealed to me, I refer to as the pentacle of love. For the couple, Air lends its energies of communication and allows for knowledge of each other; Air fuels the element Fire to build the heat of passion, and the drive to form the connections (physical or otherwise) between the two. Water erodes the walls between their lives and forms the deep emotional connections that are lasting between them and Earth forms a solid foundation and fertile ground for the relationship to grow into a true Union in Spirit.

This at last brings us to the element of Spirit. In the Tattvas, Spirit is referred to as Akasha and is represented by a black or white egg. In the Tree of life, Spirit is linked to the energies of Tifareth. As we saw earlier the interplay of the four elements forms a solid base like a pyramid that allows us to approach the apex of the pyramid. That apex is the element spirit. To understand Spirit we must first understand it is the connection between all things. If we were to draw an elemental cross (top down diagram of a quarter cast circle, commonly referred to as a Celtic Cross) the paper we would draw it on would be spirit.

The difficulty in understanding the element of Spirit is that spirit is not any one thing by itself; However, in not being any one thing Spirit is also present and

encompasses all things. Spirit is a blending of immanent and transcendent divinity. It bridges the gaps between each of the elements and lends to their blending. As fire is to the soul of humanity, Spirit is the Spirit. That is to say, Spirit is the part of us as humans which is part of the divine source. It is the spark of divinity in us all.

Spirit is the unified field, and thus simultaneously infuses all the elementally aligned tools, yet it has no tool of its own. To understand its place in the human tripartite nature, Spirit is the thread that would bind higher, middle and lower self. To call upon spirit is to pull on the thread that binds all beings together and to access the greater divinity within.

It has been my hope that this exploration of the elements has been as much value to you as a reader as it has been to me to research. The interplay between the elements are varied and complex, though not impenetrable. They form a theoretical framework with which the interplay of ideas in esoteric study becomes more manageable. They are a doorway to greater levels of understanding both within the Western Magical Tradition and with their parallels in the Eastern Tradition.