

A MONTHLY LETTER

BY MANLY P. HALL



DISCIPLINES OF MEDITATION AND REALIZATION

Fifth Letter

December 1940

Dear Student:

CONCENTRATION

From the realization of the esoteric significance of posture as establishment in the Law, we must now proceed to the practice of the first of the seven operative disciplines. For convenience we may term this discipline *concentration*.

It is first necessary to understand the meaning of the word in its truly mystical sense. Concentration is the gathering together of the faculties of the mind; it is the achievement of one-pointedness of purpose. As we use the word concentration it is best to describe it in the terms of the Eastern adepts: "The master, seating himself, gathered his robes about him and entered samadhi."

By "seating himself" is to be understood the posture or establishment; by "gathering his robes about him" we are to learn that he united or bound together, or drew to a point the various faculties of the reason. This, then, is the true *doctrine of the mean*.

Reflect on the mystery of the gathering of the garments of wisdom.

The Buddhist patriarchs were distinguished by their mantles. The various arhats or masters of the schools wore capes, the colors differing with each order. The mantle of the Zen was green, and Daruma, the arhat of Zen, is depicted wrapped totally in the fold of his mantle, one end of which is thrown over his head to form the hood. The disciples were not permitted to wear such cloaks as were the peculiar symbols of the superior abbots.

The Pythagorean initiate, Apollonius of Tyana, possessed a peculiar woolen cape. When he desired to practice the esoteric disciplines, he seated himself in the midst of this cape and drew it about him, covering even his face. While thus concealed he is supposed to have made magical journeys to distant parts of the world. It was while in one of these periods of superphysical extension that he saw at a great distance the assassination of the Emperor Domitian.

So long have we accepted symbols as realities that few students ever ask the meaning of the magical cloaks. These, like the enchanted carpet of Bagdad, Solomon's magic ring, and the ring of the Nibelungs, are symbols of concentration, the gathering up and the pointing together of the faculties of the mind.

How then can we define concentration? Like every other true discipline, its real meaning can not be written. It must be perceived inwardly. It must be known because the discipline has evolved within the disciple the understanding necessary to its practice. Needless to say, no physical cloak is required; the master is clothed in garments not of this world. The peculiarities of his physical raiment by which his station is known in the physical world are merely the shadows or emblems of his true dignities.

Concentration is gentle, unstrained, effortless one-pointedness. It is grounded and founded in the realization of the Law. It may be interpreted as *steadfastness* in one purpose. As a candle burning in a still night, so is realization burning steadfastly in the midst of concentration.

Concentration is the continuity of spiritual motion towards the One. It is described in the commentaries on the Zohar thus: "The disciple of spiritual mysteries gazes with perfect fixedness of attention upon the face of the Real."

The simple practice of concentration is an entirely harmless discipline in so far as false interpretation is prevented. But there is a great interval of understanding between the true practice of concentration and the popular misconceptions which have gained widespread acceptance.

PREPARATIONS FOR CONCENTRATION

No occult discipline should be practiced without adequate preparation. In practice, preparation is of two kinds. The first form is concerned with the general state of individual living. It is useless to attempt any occult exercises in a contradictory and chaotic environment. We must not develop the attitude of fleeing from worldliness into a spiritual condition. Concentration is not an oasis of spirituality in a desert of chaos. So often we hear people say: "My daily meditation gives me the strength to go on in a life that otherwise would be too difficult." With such a motivation, failure is inevitable. Concentration can not be an incident in the midst of contrary incidents. It must

be intimately correlated to the whole pattern of living or it will not succeed and the time devoted to the effort will be wasted.

In the life of man the power to concentrate, according to the mystical meaning of the word, is evidence of an increasing internal poise and the extension of soul power through life as it is daily lived. Hence we say that the first part of concentration is related to the general pattern of the disciple's degree of understanding.

The second part of the preparation is that phase which immediately precedes the actual practice of the discipline. For a short time immediately prior to a period devoted to concentration, the mind should be in a condition of repose and there should be a complete physical relaxation—not necessarily idleness, but an entire absence of stress. To sit down in the midst of confusion and to try in such a condition to suddenly and forcibly block it out by means of an attitude is unreasonable and unphilosophical.

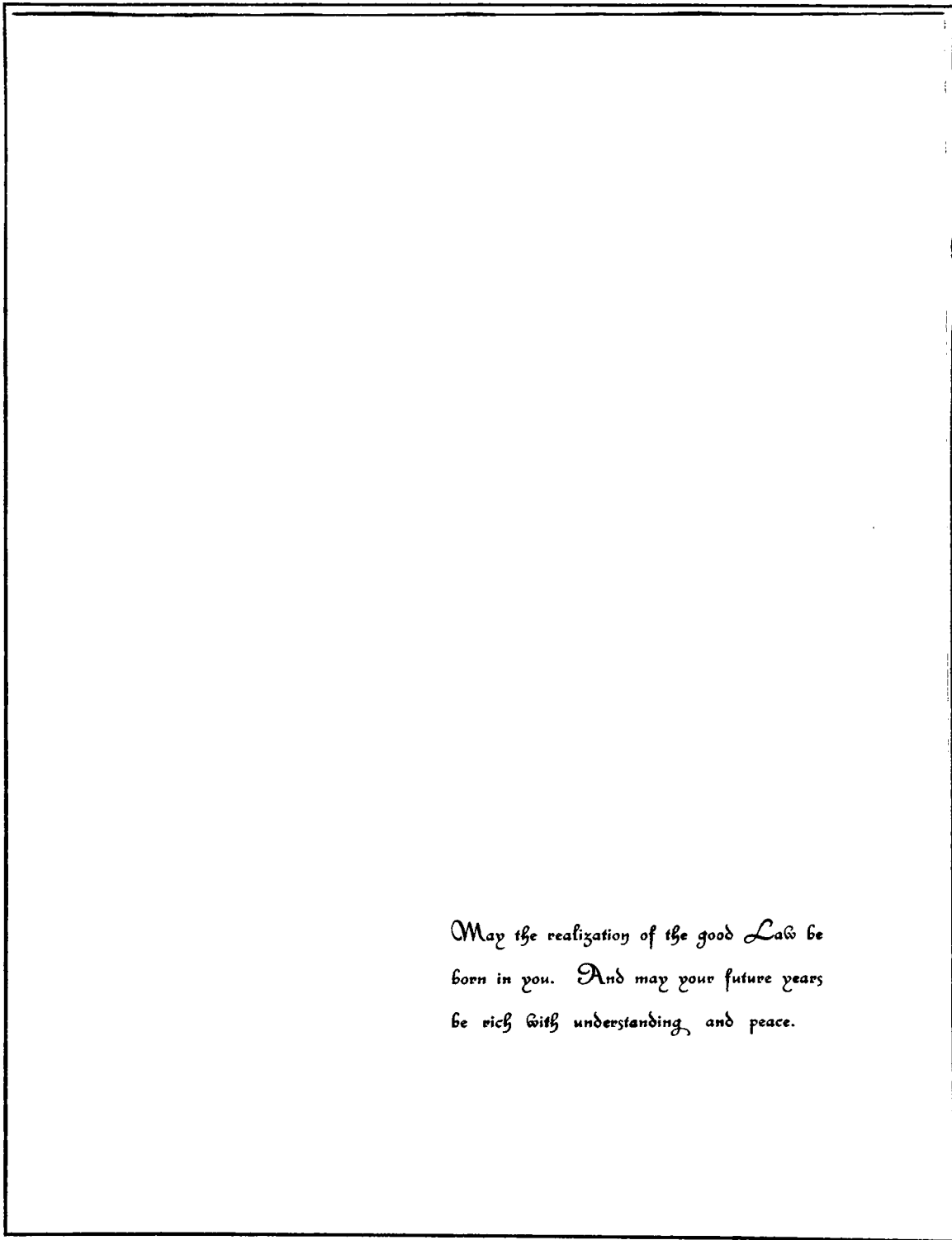
It is for that reason that the master first "seats himself." In these few words is a great mystery for those who can comprehend.

CONCENTRATION SYMBOLS

The priesthood of antiquity and the mystical institutions of modern Asia are in perfect agreement as to the use of various sacred objects in the practice of concentration. Pythagoras taught his disciples to meditate upon the mystery of the tetractys, a triangular arrangement of ten dots. He also advised all genuine Pythagoreans to devote time to the realization of the peculiar sacredness of the dodecahedron or twelve-faced symmetrical solid. Plutarch in his *Mysteries of Isis and Osiris* declared that the Egyptians concealed within the adyta of their temples mysterious geometrical forms and patterns, the contemplation of which inspired towards a proximity with the gods. Theon of Smyrna, the mathematician, advocated that Deity be attained as a state through the contemplation of the patterns of numbers according to a regular pro-

gression. A considerable part of religious art and architecture belonging to the old mystery cults was

The modern lama makes use of several symbolical instruments in the performance of his



*May the realization of the good Law be
born in you. And may your future years
be rich with understanding and peace.*

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ing wheel, and the tanka. To these objects must be added the elaborate imagery which makes up the Tibetan pantheon. Each of the divinities represented is depicted in certain postures and performing certain actions. To the initiated each of these subtle variations has special esoteric significance.

Among the concentration formulas of the Chinese Taoists, the word *Tao* itself occupies the chief place. Next in importance is the ying-yang symbol, representing the equilibrium of the positive-negative poles. Following in importance is the pattern of trigrams, groups of whole and broken lines of which there are recognized eight primary and sixty-four secondary combinations. The commentary by Confucius on the esoteric mysteries of the trigram formulas is held in the highest veneration.

Calligraphy contributes to the concentration symbols of both the Chinese and Japanese. Involved written characters embodying certain principles of form, line, and rhythm are regarded as especially efficacious. Religious paintings, sculpturings, and frescoes adorn most of Eastern temples. They also are part of the religious life of the devout. The paintings most widely admired are the work of priests who execute symbolical designs while they are in a state of meditation. All beautiful and meritorious works of artists and craftsman are regarded as possessing the power to stimulate inner realization.

Such is the exoteric doctrine in regard to concentration symbols. Even some of the more mystical sects accept the literal sanctity of these objects. For our purposes, however, we must search more deeply for the true *Tao*, that is for the right *Way* to the understanding of the sacred symbols.

Each of the emblems symbolizes and represents figuratively a function of the mind, a condition of the Self, or expression of the will. They are, therefore, pictures or physical likeness of the invisible formulas of truths, virtues, or states. By truths we mean reality; by virtue, likeness to fact; and by state, the level or degree of proximity to reality. Here again, only realization itself can clearly distinguish between terms that in popular

usage have been accepted as practical synonyms. In mysticism all meanings are subtle and the most subtle are the most nearly true.

When it is written that the master picks up the dorje, it means that he is grasping universal power within his consciousness, balancing cosmic energies by the process of concentration. When he elevates the dagger, he is cutting the bond of sense. When he holds the bowl, he is receptive to the inflowing of universals. When he spins the wheel, he is turning the truths of cause and effect upon the axis of the Self. Thus it is with each instrument in turn. No actual or physical symbol is necessary or implied. The tangible remains as it always must be, merely the key or clue to the mystery of the intangible. To the uninitiated many of these truths must remain obscure and meaningless. Thus the secrets protect themselves by their own very nature and can not be profaned by the unworthy. Those who have not eyes to see, have not the skill to use or the power to abuse.

MANDALA MAGIC

The mandala is a kind of sacred painting or diagram, usually symmetrical and geometrical, rather than pictorial. The size is of little consequence, and the colorings, though often traditional, vary considerably. The complete arrangement may be basically lotus-form and the compartments or symbolic petals may be ornamented with Chinese, Tibetan, or Sanskrit letters or numbers. Exoterically the mandala is a kind of universe map depicting the symbolic form of the world, the heavens, the paradisiacal abodes or symbolical parts of the human body.

While the conventionalized form of the mandala is recognized throughout Asia, various sects have created definite departures from the traditional type. Only an advanced disciple thoroughly familiar with the mystical disciplines can identify with certainty all types of the mandala. Also, he alone can discriminate between the genuine temple formulas and the commercial reproductions which are prepared to deceive and exploit the tourist trade by unscrupulous art dealers.

The celebrated Abbe Huc was unfrocked by his church as the result of the reports which he published about certain magical rites practiced in the innermost parts of Asia. Among other interesting observations, the learned Abbe commented on a mandala painting he discovered in one of the temples. Among the designs on the painting was a figure representing the moon. The painted symbol, according to his report, changed on the canvas, conforming exactly to the phases of the moon in the sky.

There is a considerable literature available in the Far East explaining such magic painting to those capable of understanding. For example, there is the legend of the Buddhist monk who painted while in a state of raptured meditation the gate of Sukhavati, the door to the western heaven of Amitabha. Having completed his masterpiece, he hung the silken painting upon the wall of his cell. One day while deep in meditation, he rose, stepped over to the painting, and walked through the gate he had painted himself and disappeared forever. He had attained nirvana.

How shall we interpret this legend? If we depend upon the faculties of the mind alone, the story seems strange and absurd. If, however, we possess the power to contemplate the true mystery of the legend, it becomes a sublime allegory. The meditating monk is the Self imprisoned within the human form which represents the limitations of the mortal mind. The painting is the visualization of the "middle road," the *tao*. The picture represents a gate or door because it truly is the "way". Having through concentration visualized and participated in the mystery of the right "way", the disciple is able to attain the end which, like the way, also is *tao*. He realizes the Truth through his own realization and becomes one with that which he has realized. Concentration is the gateway to the Real, the bridge built of the subtle stuff of the inwardly perceived. He who builds the bridge may pass across it to identity with that which he has built.

Young disciples in some of the Eastern schools are set to the task of concentrating daily upon the

mandala patterns. They are then questioned as to the results they have achieved. Usually the first experience is the sensing that the patterns move. If the mandala be wheel-like, it appears to revolve, first slowly and later with a gradually increasing velocity until the colors mingle and seem to become whirling disks of light. The attainment of such results requires many months—sometimes years—of daily concentration.

In the next stage, the background of the painting, the wall upon which it is hung, and all other surrounding objects slowly disappear, and the whirling disk is seen hanging in space supported only by the power of concentration.

In the third stage, the concentrating disciple feels himself and the disk drawn together, experiencing the sensation of flowing into a whirling vortex of luminous power. When this condition is reached, the disciple must appeal to his teacher for assistance before proceeding further. He is at the forking of the roads. A mistake at this point may undo all the work of years of effort.

The master then interrogates the disciple as to what he has discovered by the whirling of the disk. The purpose of the questioning is to find out whether the concentration is essentially visual or truly mystical. If it is visual only, the symbol is taken away, otherwise the results verge towards idolatry. Metaphysically, idolatry means to mistake the symbol for the Real and to worship the symbol as Reality. If the disciple's experience has been primarily a mechanical one and he has seen the whirling disk as he might gaze at some object outside of himself, he has failed.

His concentration must have caused him to EXPERIENCE the wheel. He must have found it as a value rather than as a form. It must be a living wheel, the very Law itself in motion. The master, therefore, will ask for an explanation of the true meaning of the whirling mandala. If the disciple replies that he knows but can not explain, the master will be satisfied if he sees in the eye of the disciple the light of soul power and perceives in every gesture the awakened strength of realization. By certain occult means of penetration, the

teacher can accurately estimate the advancement that has been made. If it is satisfactory, certain instruction is given and the disciple told to proceed. He is given the thunderbolt and told to smash the wheel. He must destroy the pattern of his own concentration and he must do this while in concentration. Beyond this point words can not go.

For the novice, therefore, the key is this: concentration is the envisionment of the Law through magical or transcendental forms. Law is found in the form. However the form itself must be broken up. The Law is formless. It can be found through form, but never in form. All forms, tangible and intangible, reveal the Law. But woe to him who attempts to catch the law within the net of mind! Such is the introduction to mandala magic.

THE BEGGING BOWL

The principal symbol of discipleship is the begging bowl. This circular vessel of bronze or clay was the badge of mendicancy, the emblem of non-possession. But it should not infer moral indigence. Like the other sacred relics of arhatship, it must be realized as an experience of the consciousness. The principal architectural motif of the Shwe Dagon Pagoda, one of the most impressive of all Buddhist shrines, is an inverted begging bowl. The inversion of the bowl itself for the reliquary of the liberated adept tells one of the deepest of universal secrets.

The search for truth is an experience of the part searching for wholeness. It is a discipline of acceptance. Truly we do not seek Truth, although the term seeking is the best we know. We accept, we receive, yet we do not find. All that lives and exists bestows something. Reality is forever flowing in and through all that is. The bowl is a symbol of the mental capacity to receive. Hence the devout Buddhist may accept in it only that which is necessary for a single day—and nothing but food. Rice is the bread of Asia. The Christian in his prayer exclaims: "Give us this day our daily bread." The Buddhist mystic does not even ask. He carries the bowl and those who feel within

the impulse of the good Law will share their rice with him.

When food is offered, the mendicant may not refuse it. It is told of the Buddha Gautama that on his last day upon the earth, a poor farmer out of the generosity of his heart put into the Buddha's bowl a portion of his food. Due to the poverty of the giver, the food was spoiled. But the Enlightened One received it and turning to his disciples declared that the time had come for his departure from among them. Then, knowing that the food was tainted but the best that the poor man had to give, he gravely ate it and died a short time after as a result.

Needless to say, the story is allegorical, but the meaning is perfectly clear. To receive the Law is to be fed. Through all that lives the Law is brought to us, and in any case and under any circumstance we may receive the Law and achieve liberation. The experiences of the day, the problems of life, karma and dharma, all must be accepted into the ever open bowl of the consciousness. No lesser object than food is permissible, but who shall declare what is or what is not food? At the end, experience is perfected in Law. The one who has attained liberation turns the bowl over. When the Law is perfected, then the time of receiving is passed. Until then the monk in his yellow robe wanders up and down the world carrying the bowl.

THE PRACTICE OF CONCENTRATION

Read over several times—thoughtfully—this section, giving special attention to possible double meanings. These can not always be pointed out or the discipline itself will fail.

The practice of concentration should be limited to a brief period with special attention to regularity and continuity. It is not advisable that the disciple should concentrate for more than five or ten minutes at any one time, or more than once daily. Truth is timeless. If realization can not be achieved by adjustment, the extension of the discipline is worthless. For this reason we advise a period of

five minutes each day, a number mystically associated with the control of the five sensory perceptions. Either mornings or evenings are suitable times. The middle parts of the day or nights are less favorable, especially in the case of the novice. Day and night are the ying and yang; midway between them are the suitable times. The time, the place, and the chair having been selected, the mood itself must next be attained.

The faculties of the attention must now be gathered up by a simple, direct, effortless technic. Under no conditions should the mind be made blank. Nor should the disciple wait hopefully for thoughts to think themselves. It is too soon for the Law to flow in with the forms. The artist must first paint his picture of the Law.

Choose an appropriate symbol. This symbol will be your mandala and the cultivation of it will require a considerable time in most cases. Do not be discouraged if it takes many months to clarify this symbol. Do not change symbols frequently, and never give up one design for another until the Law has been found.

The symbol may be an object, an ideal, or a pattern, but it must be capable of some definition, that is, it must be perceptible to the mind if not to the senses themselves. Abstract virtues like goodness, kindness, or unselfishness, are not suitable in themselves as concentration symbols. It is for this reason that in the Eastern schools, all of the virtues are pictured. Buddhism is personified by the Buddha, itself a personification of all of the abstract virtues of the doctrine. In Christianity, the perfection of Christian virtue is figured forth in the life, sacrifice, and death of Jesus the Christ.

The teacher is not the Law, but bears witness of the Law. In concentration the disciple can not concentrate directly upon the Law but upon some pattern or imagery which bears witness. But woe unto him who ever confuses the image with That which is imaged!

Frequently it is advisable to derive the concentration pattern from some phase of the life itself which is pictorially meaningful. It has been

pointed out that men often find Truth according to the inclination of their tastes. To the scholar his books are sacred. To the artist, the laws and canons of art represent his natural approach to the discovery of the Law. The developed mathematician finds God in numbers, and the astronomer finds Truth in the stars.

Choose, therefore, as the first pattern for concentration some form or device which has already proved to be an inspiration and has brought you some measure of realization. Thus through the gateway of the known you pass naturally and normally into the presence of the Knower.

There is no broad restriction imposed on the selection of the proper subject. If you have found merit in it, or have gained merit through it, it is proper. For the sake of an example let us suppose that we are nature lovers. We have found inspiration and strength in contact with growing things. We have found the law in growth. We can not concentrate upon the abstract principle of growth. Therefore let us select some one growing thing as the symbol of the growth, always bearing in mind that we are not limiting growth itself but merely specializing it so that it will remain within the boundaries of human comprehension. In this way we shall escape vagary and indefiniteness, abstractions which in turn would lead only to involvements and platitudes.

Of growing things you may select, a tree is one of the noblest and most complicated, and at the same time the most symbolical, of all forms in the plant kingdom. The tree is especially suitable because from time immemorial it has been used as a basis for diagramming many forms of human knowledge. In old prints and manuscripts we find trees of law, trees of medicine, and trees of religion. Races frequently are represented in the form of a tree and its branches. Several of the old philosophies have represented the entire universe in the form of a tree. Reflections upon such matters as this is a proper prologue to concentration itself. It posits the realization of magnitude and reminds the intellect of the universality of the selected symbol.

In the next letter we shall continue the discussion of concentration, but for the present it is enough that a suitably symbolic subject should be decided upon.

REALIZATION

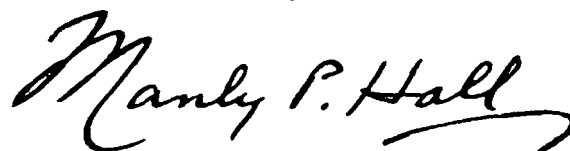
In this particular letter, the entire subject matter is proper for realization. The keynote should be: *Pierce the form*. Learn to recognize all ideas as essentially formless, but perceptible inwardly as manifestations of the Law.

When you read books, when you listen to teachings, when you contemplate the old wisdom, pierce the form. Remember the words of Maimonides: "Beneath the body of the Law is the soul of the Law; and beneath the soul of the Law is the spirit of the Law." Search for the spirit of the doctrine. Accept nothing less.

In everything which occurs to you as incident or circumstance, recognize symbols of the formless. Realize that all visible physical bodies and all tangible, conceivable forms of knowledge are indeed the many-colored fringe on the robes of the Infinite.

Remember the inscription on the temple of Sais in Egypt: "I, Isis, am all that has been, that is or shall be; no mortal man hath ever me unveiled." Recognize the world as the veil and realize that he who is entering into the hidden place must rend the veil of the temple from the top to the bottom. With the sword of insight, *pierce the veil and find the Law*.

Sincerely Yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Manly P. Hall". The signature is written in dark ink and has a fluid, connected style.