

Symbols of the Soul: 5 - The Soul as a castle

Chapter 14 of Mysteries and Symbols of the Soul

Castles still appeal to everyone's imagination. These fortified buildings for aristocracy appear in famous stories with a deeper significance, like the fairy tales of Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty, the legends of King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table, the legend of Percival and the grail castle, the mystery script about the alchemical wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz (Rosycross) and the books about Harry Potter.

Castles are primarily a symbol for safety, wealth, power and fame. They can be used for many purposes. In order to delve further into the spiritual symbolism of castles, it can be helpful to connect their different functions to the characteristics of the chakra system of the personality-soul, as follows.

7. Crown chakra: temple and oratorio
6. Third eye chakra: drawing office and observatory
5. Throat chakra: studio and concert room
4. Heart chakra: conference room and auditory
3. Solar plexus chakra: workshop and laboratory
2. Sacral chakra: dining room and theatre
1. Root chakra: fortress and home

From this follows a variety of activities that can take place in a castle: celebrating, praising, praying, designing, observing, creating, music making, connecting, exchanging, making, eating, playing, defending and living. These emotions are of course applicable to daily life but are also important for the spiritual path.

Game of cards and chess

If we want to get an overall impression of the residents of a fortress or castle, we only have to take a look at the game of cards, or at the game of chess. We discover kings, queens, warriors (jacks and pawns), jesters (jokers), priests (bishops) and horses with riders. All of these are content of the collective unconscious, which Carl Gustav Jung called archetypes and which, together with many others, are also active in the personality-soul and the soul.

On the spiritual path the pupil of the soul obtains a more extensive and higher consciousness. This becomes possible if king-I, the personality, relinquishes its power to the soul king – if the fake priest makes room for the priest of the soul and if the joker of the personality subordinates his jokes and pranks to the salient truths that the court jester of the soul proclaims, fearless and openly, to the court.

In the Old Testament fortresses and castles are associated with God and the soul, on several occasions.

- God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge, my saviour; you save me from violence. (2 Samuel 22:3)
- The work is great, for the palace will not be for man but for the Lord God. (1 Chronicles 29:1)

- The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies. (Psalm 18:2-3)

Theresa of Ávila

The Spanish mystic Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582) probably was not only inspired by her personal mystical experiences, when writing her famous scripture 'The interior castle' or 'The Mansion of the Soul', but also by the bible texts quoted above. In that book the Carmelite nun wrote, among other things, the following:

'Consider the soul as resembling a castle, formed of a single diamond or a very transparent crystal, and containing many rooms, just as in heaven there are many mansions.

What, do you imagine, must that dwelling be in which a King so mighty, so wise, and so pure, containing in Himself all good, can delight to rest? Nothing can be compared to the great beauty and capabilities of a soul; however keen our intellect may be, they are as unable to comprehend them as they are unable to comprehend God.

Let us imagine that there are many rooms in this castle of which some are above, some below, others at the side, in the centre. In the very midst of them all, is the principal chamber in which God and the soul hold their most secret intercourse. Think over this comparison very carefully; God grant it may enlighten you about the different kinds of graces. Now let us discover how to enter it.

This appears incongruous: It is clear that the soul does not need to enter the castle for she is the castle herself. One might as well tell someone to go into a room he is already in! There are, however, very different ways of being in this castle; many souls find themselves in the courtyard of the building where the sentinels stand, not caring to enter farther, nor to know who dwells in that most delightful place, what is in it and what rooms it contains.

I was recently told by a great scholar that souls without prayer are like palsied and lame bodies, having hands and feet they cannot use. Just so, there are souls so infirm and accustomed to think of nothing but earthly matters, that there seems no cure for them. It appears impossible for them to retire inside themselves.

Now let us turn back to our castle with its many mansions. You must not think of a suite of rooms placed in succession, but direct your eyes on the centre place, the middle court where the King resides. This principal chamber is surrounded by many others. However large, magnificent, and spacious you imagine this castle to be, you cannot exaggerate it; the capacity and qualities of the soul are beyond all our understanding, and the sun within this palace lights up every part of it.'

The sun in the centre of the castle that Teresa mentions is the spirit-spark in the heart of the microcosm. For her, the castle represents above all: repentance, introspection, contemplation and prayer. These are essential, according to her, and she is not unique in this respect. These aspects were the key issues in a spiritual movement within the medieval catholic church that began by the end of the fourteenth century in the Netherlands, with Geert Grote (1340-1384) (Grotius in the Latin variant of the name), in Deventer, known as the *Modern Devotion*.

In this reform movement within the church and society, the clergy and laity aspired to practical wisdom of life and personal life sanctification. This movement can be viewed as a reaction to the malpractices among the clergy and the church leadership at that time. Geert Grote founded the first communes of the Sisters of the Common Life. Within these Christian groups, members jointly followed an inner path and endeavoured for youth education and improvement of the living conditions of the population.

Thomas à Kempis

The Modern Devotion has become famous worldwide by the book *'De Imitatione Christi'* (The imitation of Christ), which was written by the Dutch canon, copier and mystic Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471), and about which people say that – after the Bible – it is the best-read printed matter in the world. It was written for religious orders, but the practical instructions in the book were also appreciated outside the monastery walls. If the castle is used as a symbol of the soul, then the following two quotes from *'The imitation of Christ'* match well.

'Keep constantly in mind the saying, "The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. Strive to withdraw your heart from the love of visible things and turn yourself to that which is invisible."(1:5)'

'Within your cell you will discover what you will only too often lose abroad. The cell that you dwell in then becomes a delight, but when ill kept it breeds weariness of spirit. If in the beginning of your religious life you have dwelt in it and kept it well, it will later become a dear friend and a welcome comfort. In silence and quietness, the devout soul makes progress and learns the hidden mysteries of the scriptures. For God with his holy angels will draw near to him who withdraws himself from his friends and acquaintances. (20:5-6)'

Thomas à Kempis continuously emphasises the great significance of silence, rest, contemplation and prayer. This advice is reminiscent of the school of Pythagoras, where the pupils in his Mystery School had to be silent during the first five years. Such a rule goes rather far for 21st century man, but we can surely take the call for regular repentance on board, in our current hectic and secular society, in which countless physical and virtual incentives are poured out over us. If you regularly retire in your inner castle, a wholesome effect will be the result.

An interesting aspect of the movement of the Modern Devotion is its respect for the written word. Geert Grote held that reading and rereading inspiring texts should be daily sustenance for every dedicated person. At that time, books were still handwritten and often extremely beautifully hand-copied. These manuscripts started to play an important role within the communities of the modern devotees, in two ways.

In the first place the book was central in what was called collation. That was an organised circle conversation, as a spiritual nourishment. In circles of 'the common life' the starting point of this conversation was usually a bible text. The conversation in such a discussion circle was about the question how this text could positively contribute to the construction of the individual as well as the community. Secondly, there was the so-called rapiarium. This was a personal notebook, in which people wrote down what had moved them, to think it over again and again. The conversations one had with others, in the circle conversations for example, sometimes provided a single phrase or argumentation that one wished to come back to. It could also happen that during the prescribed daily reading of the Scriptures, the reader encountered a passage that shed a new light on a situation, like a stone touching quiet water. Such a passage was also laid down in one's rapiarium. Geert Grote thought that writing was the best way of learning.

Nowadays conversation circles and the rapiarium still are very effective instruments for awareness and renewal. Postmodern rapiaria are found on social media. On facebook, instagram and pinterest, for instance, the wisdoms, aphorisms, quotes and one-liners pop up everywhere, all the time. Internet and social media offer tremendous opportunities to stimulate people towards

internalisation, but it is crucial to understand that inner growth does not take place online, but offline, in the silence and the rest of one's own inner being.

Dangers of digital media

From clinical practice and all kinds of scientific studies, we know that digital media have a strong addictive effect and are dangerous for our body in the long term (stress, insomnia and overweight) and most of all for our power of thought. In this respect the term digital dementia is sometimes used. Excessive use of digital media promotes an insatiable hunger for trivial pieces of information, dissipating attention and making it impossible to think thoroughly and be alert.

When we are online, we often forget what is happening around us. We are then fascinated by the images on the screen, and there is hardly any awareness of other things around and within us. The real world disappears into the background, while we are processing the flood of symbols and incentives that come from our devices. The interactivity of the internet strengthens this effect. Neural connections in the brains of people who are very often on the internet and send many online messages, degenerate because they are not charged in a challenging way anymore. Stress destroys the brain cells and newly made brain cells do not survive, because they are not used.

A range of psychological studies has shown that people demonstrate much more attention, a stronger memory and an improved cognition, after spending some time in a rural environment. Their consciousness becomes calmer and sharper. On the internet there is no peaceful place where concentration, meditation and reflection can perform their miraculous wholesome activity. There, we only find the endless hypnotising bustle of the shopping street.

Meister Eckhart

Especially in this time where everything goes so fast, you can greatly benefit when you regularly withdraw in your inner castle. The famous mystic Meister Eckhart (1260-1320) also compares the soul with a castle. With some mystics we see a flight from earthly life and an unquenchable desire for divine bliss.

The mysticism of Meister Eckhart is, on the other hand, very grounded, because he thinks that a tall building should have a solid foundation. The right attitude towards life, according to him, is not a focus at 'the world beyond', but an inner orientation on the here-and-now in everyday life. Meister Eckhart advises us to love life with all its revelations, and always and everywhere to see the good in everything and strive towards it.

He wrote: 'In the midst of things, man must embrace God and let his heart get used to him as a steady presence in his mind and in his will. Reflect on how you regard God when you are in your inner room: hold fast to the same state of mind and carry it with you in the crowd and in unrest and inequality. In your labour have a tranquil mind and equal faith and equal love for your God. Assuredly, if you live tranquil-minded in this way, no man can hinder you from having God ever present within you.'

An example of such an attitude towards life and its results, is given in his parable of the scholar who, for a long time, unsuccessfully searched for someone who could show him the way to God, until, one night, an inner voice encouraged him to go to the church. There he would find someone at the front door who had knowledge of the way to consummation.

'The scholar went there and found, to his surprise, a barefoot man in shabby clothes. He nevertheless greeted the poor man, in compliance with the inner indication, and said:

"God may give you a good morning!"

The poor man answered gently: "I never had a bad morning yet."

"God may give you happiness!"

"I was never unhappy."

The scholar then asked: "Please explain, I don't understand."

And the poor man answered gently: "With pleasure. You wished me a good morning. I have never known a bad morning. For when I am hungry, I praise God; if I am cold, or it rains or snows, I praise God, and that is why I never had a bad morning. You wished for me that God would give me happiness. I never had misfortune, as I live with God and I know: what He does, is best; and what God gives me or disposes for me, be it joy or sorrow, I gratefully accept it from God as the very best; and therefore, I never knew misfortune. Finally, you wished that God would bless me. I have never been unblessed, for I desire nothing else than to be in God's will and I have surrendered my will so completely, that what God wants, I want too."

The scholar then asked: "Where do you come from?" "From God."

"And where did you find God?"

'He was there when I left all creatures."

The scholar was delighted because he started to fathom some of the truth, and exclaimed: "What kind of man are you?"

"I am a king."

"Where is your kingdom, then?"

"In my soul; as I can control my inner and outer senses in such a way, that all my desires and powers are subservient to the soul. And this kingdom is greater than any other kingdom on earth."

"And what has led you to this perfection?"

"My being-silent, my inner balance, my total focus on God and my unification with God. This is how I found God and thus have I eternal peace in God."

Reconnecting

Religion means 're-connection' and has, in the view of Meister Eckhart, nothing to do with theological dogmas. According to him, religion is not a supposition, but an absolute knowledge, not a one-time historical revelation, but the eternal self-revelation of the divine in man and in the whole of creation, which in principle may be experienced by everyone. The way to the cosmic consciousness on which Eckhart leads us, has ten steps, ten consecutive stages of ripening of the soul, which are clearly discussed in the book *'Meister Eckhart's way to cosmic consciousness – a breviary of practical mysticism'*, by Karl Otto Schmidt. The stages correspond with the ten sefirot of the tree of life of the Kabbalah (see image 14). They merge, one into the next, almost unnoticeable, and are clearly recognisable as steps on the path, thanks to the indications of Meister

Eckhart.

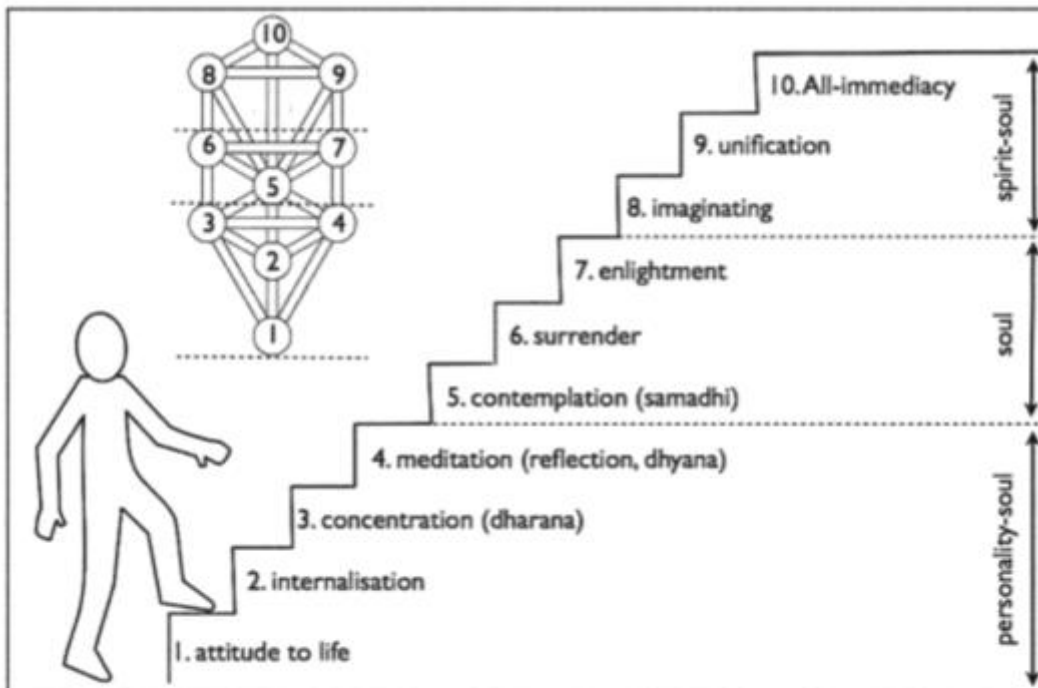


image 14: ten steps to cosmic consciousness based on the writings of master Eckhart

The first four steps relate to the personality-soul and successively cover: attitude to life, internalisation, concentration and reflection. In the next three steps – contemplation, surrender and enlightenment – the soul plays a significant role as well. The spirit-soul is particularly active on the three highest steps, in the form of vision, unification and all-immediacy.

Faiths are thought out by man and are about forms that were created in time and are subject to rigidity. Genuine religion refers to the continuous activity of the indwelling deity. It is always refreshingly new and there is no end to it. Faiths shroud and conceal the truth, but religion is still the core. And this core, this inner castle in the centre, is what only matters.