

Esoteric Living: the Way up the Mountain and Back to the Valley

By Egon Eklund

The title of this article refers to our birth and life in this world, but especially to our spiritual birth and aspiration. In spiritual birth we begin to see and aspire toward the mountain that symbolizes our spiritual goal as seen from the place we are living in this huge valley. We begin to strive toward this mountain and wonder what it might be like to live there, but we also realize that our familiar place of residence is in the valley. Then, as we strive up the slope of this wonderful mountain, we begin to realize that it is not so easy to live constantly on the mountain without our social life and family in the valley and the abundance of its marketplaces. But we have seen the mountain, and that is something we cannot forget. When we saw it for the first time, it was a wonderful vision, and for many people it begins to be worth striving for. This inner realization can be meaningful for a searching mind.

This symbolic description epitomizes what is called *esoteric living*, which could also be called *the way of the initiate*. And it is most important to understand that it can be seen as a picture of the relationship between higher and lower mind: the spiritually aware mind at work within our everyday life.

There are some people who are able to live almost constantly on the mountain, and, of course, there are the Higher Beings who live still higher. But most people live in the valley, and some never even glimpse the mountain. Life is harder on the mountain, and it is also a more solitary place to live, although group living is possible there and must be present. Life in the valley, on the other hand, is more turbulent, and it is necessary to be more concrete minded and to spend more time among less spiritually oriented people. While in the valley we often forget about the mountain either because we have no time or appreciation for it or we are too restless and tied to our daily routine. But if a persons longs for a higher life, and there is enough of an aspirational drive, then life on the mountain becomes a real possibility.

But if we aspire to live only on the mountain, we have to leave the valley behind. Can we do it, and are we willing to do it? People will tell us that it is not realistic, that we will be too isolated on the mountain and that for practical purposes we have to live in the world. After all, our bodies are composed of substance from this world!

This archetype of mountain and valley represents the dual nature of our makeup, part of which is very basic and earthly and influenced by our surroundings, and part of which is spiritual and influenced by our higher selves. Esoteric living has to do with these two lives or places seen and realized together in a synthetic relationship, bringing the mountain experience down into our life in the valley.

First we saw the mountain, aspired toward it and found the path, and then we noticed that there were certain conditions necessary to follow this path. These can be described by certain key ideas: 1) the need to refine our constitution and consciousness, 2) the need to sacrifice and 3) the need to serve.

As we begin to undertake these requirements, we wonder whether it is safe for someone from the valley to climb the heights of the mountain, and we feel reluctant to leave the foothills. But when we do climb up the mountain, we then have to remember to look back toward the valley. Seeing the valley from above has its teaching value; we learn to walk and work in two directions, and both valley and mountain are then present in our awareness. This is more realistic and practical than the impulse to lose ourselves in the mountain experience.

Regarding the need to refine ourselves, we can find an analogy in those medieval alchemists who worked on changing base metals into gold. Human beings can also work on changing the lower elements in their constitution into higher ones. This “change from above” is possible on every level, on emotional and mental levels as well as on the physical. Before this “change from above” becomes possible, which must be a gradual process, a certain readiness for change has to be present. It is our lower bodies and our personality that keep us in the valley, and thus resistance is very much present. We have to remember that this resistance not only hinders progress, but it can also be a sign of personality pride (Leo). That is why the decentralization of the personality has been such an important topic in all esoteric schools. It has been taught not only in order to become a cooperative co-worker in the group, but also so that a better connection can eventuate between “the mountain and the valley” in our consciousness, which will lead to change.

Looking at the astrological factors involved in this refinement process, we can see that some people are more ready for change than others. Some are more courageous (Aries). Attention to detail and orderliness is needed (Virgo). If our mind and emotions lack balance, and the sense of proportion and direction is not developed (Libra), how do we handle our changes? If we are not prepared for testing and crises (Scorpio), how do we surmount our difficulties? These esoteric factors can be seen processed in the astrological signs of Leo, Virgo, Libra and terminating in Scorpio, the fixed sign of transformation, with its testing and crises. Scorpio opposes easy changes, especially if they are superficial. It is very evident that if our lower bodies are not prepared and refined while living in the valley, it will not be possible to live securely and meaningfully on the mountain. Scorpio also opposes unhealthy cleavages: there cannot be a mountain “I” and a valley “I” separated from each other.

The first requirement in the constructing the bridge between mountain and valley, or Soul and personality, is *intention*. Of course, we must have motive and impetus, but we must, as well, be ready for the changes in our selfhood and in our relations to other human beings.

The second requirement, the need for sacrifice on the mountain path, is not so self-evident. We are so accustomed to taking and receiving that we miss the very simplicity of the meaning of sacrifice. In everyday life the giving of something is usually seen as a loss, especially if it is a material object we are giving. But when we try to define the concept of love, we are reminded of the qualities of giving freely, living in peaceful co-existence, being mutually helpful, etc. It seems that giving freely is the opposite of gaining and possessing. In material existence we experience the curious phenomenon that if we try to stop the flow of energy by trying to keep something for ourselves, we tend to lose it, as well as the beneficial flow of energy. And opportunity is lost, because we do not appreciate the timeless nature of phenomena. This is especially true in the spiritual realm when we try to achieve some higher quality, capacity or level of awareness.

When reading the Tibetan’s books we become aware of higher knowledge, but at the same time we see that this awareness is not a constant state, and its inspirational power is often lost. The Tibetan teaches us how to make this knowledge our own. He explains that before we are entitled to further knowledge we must give life to the understood lesson by applying and practicing it in our own life, by filtering it through our own experience in some practical way.

The need for sacrifice can be understood in this light. We have to share our possessions and ourselves in order to make them really our own. Plus, we need to be aware that pleasant thoughts or words are not necessarily evidence of a generous nature if they are not backed by love and care.

This is the challenge of the hermit's life on the mountain. He has isolated himself to such an extent that there are no people to whom he could give himself in sacrifice. The wise hermit can hear the voice of God in the mountain experience, but he has to return to the valley to share his insights if he loves his neighbors. Thus the group experience is important, and this aspect of sacrifice is essential.

On the other hand, giving cannot be forced upon someone. Also, if there are conditions attached to the gift or there is a price upon it, the free flow of energy is again broken. It must be a gift freely given and freely received. Is not sacrifice the most important lesson that the Great Teacher of Christianity spoke of? (As to the astrological signs representing the idea of sacrifice, that quality can be found in every sign, but especially in Sagittarius and Pisces.)

The third requirement, the need to serve, is a very real aspect of spiritual aspiration. We have to work in the valley with others not only to make our living, but also to work out our life's purpose in service. We have to use our energies in some useful way. And it is the same on the mountain. We cannot just sit on a rock and think this and that. Nothing comes out of nothing. Service is movement, and we find our purpose by following this movement, and we also teach ourselves by serving in alignment with this movement.

This may seem very self-evident, but many who develop esoteric values often spend too much time thinking and dreaming about their aspirations. They forget to actually embody in practical terms what they envision, and this often entails very uninspiring work and conflicts with others. The conflicts we must work through in the valley are real, but often we do not understand the use of such conflicts, which is to develop the courage, strength and ability to overcome them, thus preparing us for more challenging spiritual work ahead.

One reason group work and developing group consciousness are so important is because they teach us about service. It is through the group that we understand more concretely the value of service and are even forced to see it. Thus we can understand the Tibetan's command for all disciples to serve. The Christ also said that we should go into the world and serve. (As to the astrological signs of service, that virtue develops in its own unique way in every sign, but Capricorn and Aquarius especially emphasize the ideal of service.)

The mountaintop experience is exhilarating; it provides us with life-enhancing insights, and we learn and develop spiritually, but the mountain should not be a place of escape. On the contrary, the mountain is a place where we must withstand a strong, cold light; and when we return to the valley we are humbled and at the same time strengthened.