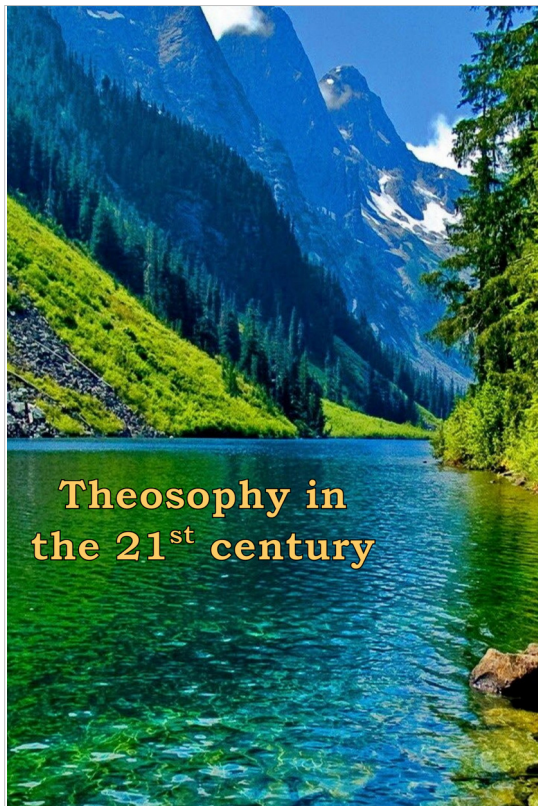




**Theosophy in  
the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

## ***9 Symbolism and the esoteric tradition***

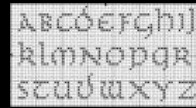
Course created by  
Carlos Pérez Menéndez  
SOCIEDAD TEOSÓFICA ESPAÑOLA

2018

## Symbols

- All communication is done through symbols

- Alphabets
- Numbers
- Mathematical symbols
- Icons
- Logos
- Emblems
- ...



It is interesting to note that every communication process is done through the use of *symbols*. Everything we can read and write, what we can say, count, represent, publish, we do it using a communication process that exchanges symbols such as letters of an alphabet, numbers, icons, special signs, emblems, etc.

The **symbols** are then an abstraction that allow us to communicate. The symbol is the vehicle of information, of the message.

For communication to occur, the sender and receiver must have a *common meaning* for the symbols used. For example, the authority responsible for regulating traffic on the streets, puts a STOP signal when he want to prescribe a car stop to observe before moving. But this is possible only if the drivers know what they should do when they see that signal.

We are surrounded by symbols of different types that facilitate communication. Those that are a graphic representation such as icons, logos and emblems, are easier to perceive and decode with the naked eye.

A word is another higher level symbol that is composed of several letters of the alphabet. This shows us that the symbols are associated with each other to form other more complex and with a special meaning.

The symbols have been used since ancient times in the esoteric tradition to convey ideas or rather archetypes about life, the Universe and man.

## Symbols and allegories

### Symbols

- Conceptual abstractions.
- Simple representations, usually geometric figures



Geometric symbols

### Allegories

- Based on metaphors
- They seek the representation of more elaborate and difficult to define concepts.



Dove of peace



Anubis



Psique and Eros

Symbols and allegories are the key elements of symbolism, the study of them and their possible meanings.

**Symbols** are conceptual abstractions, usually represented by simple figures, often geometric. For example, the circle is the symbol of infinity because it is a geometrical figure with infinite sides, it also symbolizes eternity because its circumference has no beginning or end, and also represents balance and harmony because all its points are at the same distance from the center.

**Allegories** are more complex representations of a concept based on a metaphor. A known figure is associated with an idea due to some attribute of the first. For example, the white dove is an allegory of peace, for its whiteness that represents purity and for its meekness.

The ancients used allegories to represent the gods as aspects of nature. For example for the Egyptians, *Anubis* was the jackal-headed god, in charge of guiding the dead in their transit through the other world. Its representation with the head of a jackal or dog seems to derive from the fact that it was common to find these animals in cemeteries.

Allegories can appear in the form of stories that facilitate oral transmission through many generations. An example of this are fables, in which animals play roles in a story that has a moral and psychological background applied to human life. From ancient times many allegories are known that symbolize laws of the nature or universal archetypes observed by the wise men, that thanks to the vehicle of the allegory easy to remember have been transmitted from generation to generation and have been object of representations in the art. One of these allegories is for example the story of Eros and Psyche that we will see later.

Symbolism requires not only analysis but a large dose of intuition to grasp its meanings and relevance.

## Interpretation of the symbols

▪ The symbol, religious, mystical or esoteric, the more abstract it is:

- Transcends cultural diversity
- It's more universal (Jung)
- It is not limited by language
- It is richer in interpretations

▪ There are several keys to interpret the symbols:

- Astronomic,
- Numerical, Geometric
- Cosmological, Terrestrial
- Human, psychological
- ...

▪ An **emblem** is a grouping of simpler symbols.



Emblem of the Theosophical Society

A property of the symbol is that the more abstract it is, the more powerful its meaning becomes because it becomes independent of the cultural context, the time, language and other factors. That is, the symbol becomes universal.

The appearance of similar symbols in cultures that are far from each other and not communicated, drew attention to the Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), founder of the School of Analytical Psychology. Jung came to postulate the existence of a **collective unconscious**, below the personal unconscious, which is a world of archetypes, of ideas shared by humanity. The psychological nature of the human being is then manifested through a universal language of common symbols.

The collective unconscious is anything but an isolated and personal system. It is objectivity, wide as the world and open to the world. I am the object of all subjects, in perfect inversion of my habitual consciousness, where I am always subject that *has* objects. There I am in the most immediate and intimate union with the world, united to such an extent that I forget too easily who I really am. "Lost in itself" is an adequate phrase to designate that state. But that "self" is the world, or a world when a consciousness can see it. That's why you have to know who you are.

Carl G. Jung, *On the archetypes of the collective unconscious*

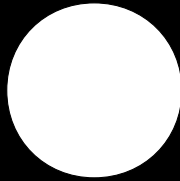
Associated with symbols are the **keys** to their interpretation, the ability to explain or decode their message. The keys are multiple, offering to the one who approaches the symbol several dimensions for its comprehension.

The teaching is offered as it is understood; and as there are seven keys of interpretation to every symbol and allegory, that which may not fit a meaning, say from the psychological or astronomical aspect, will be found quite correct from the physical or metaphysical.

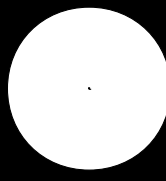
Helena P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine, Anthropogenesis*

## The circle and the cross

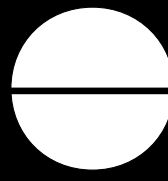
In the Proem of the Secret Doctrine, HP Blavatsky describes a sequence of symbols in an archaic manuscript.



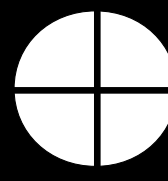
Pralaya



Aurora of the differentiation



Spirit-Matter



The Cosmic Ideation

They are symbols of the genesis of the Universe.

The sequence of manifestation

0 – 1 – 2 – 3

Separate the land from the fire,  
the subtle of the gross ...  
Ascend ... from earth to heaven  
and then go back down to earth

*Emerald Table*

One of the most universal and ancient symbols is the circle.

We have seen in previous chapters how HPB describes in the Proem of the Secret Doctrine the pages of a mysterious book that only contains a sequence of symbols describing the genesis of the Universe. The first of these symbols is a white circle representing the Universe in its unmanifested, undifferentiated state. Then a point appears, the dawn of manifestation, the One manifested. Next we have the circle with a horizontal line that symbolizes the appearance of the primordial Duality spirit-matter. The sequence ends with the circle having an inscribed cross that represents the fundamental Trinity of the Universe with spirit, matter and the interaction between the two as a third element.

The first illustration being a plain disc  the second one in the Archaic symbol shows , a disc with a point in it — the first differentiation in the periodical manifestations of the ever-eternal nature, sexless and infinite “Aditi in THAT” (Rig Veda), the point in the disc, or potential Space within abstract Space. In its third stage the point is transformed into a diameter, thus . It now symbolises a divine immaculate Mother-Nature within the all-embracing absolute Infinitude.

When the diameter line is crossed by a vertical one , it becomes the mundane cross. Humanity has reached its third root-race; it is the sign for the origin of human life to begin. When the circumference disappears and leaves only the  it is a sign that the fall of man into matter is accomplished, and the FOURTH race begins. The Cross within a circle symbolises pure Pantheism; when the Cross was left uninscribed, it became phallic. It had the same and yet other meanings as a TAU inscribed within a circle  or as a “Thor’s hammer,” the Jaina cross, so-called, or simply Svastika within a circle .

Helena P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine, vol. 1, Proem*

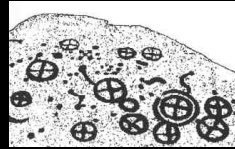
## From the solar disk to the cross

- The archaic origin of the cross is a representation of the solar disk with its rays.

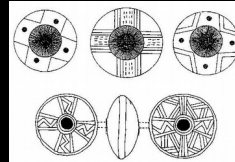
- It was a symbol universally known before Christianity.

- Constantine the Great proclaimed it in the s. IV as a symbol of the new religion.

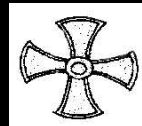
- It shows how symbols have different aspects and interpretations.



Engravings of the Bronze Age



Symbols found in the ruins of Troy



Cross the Assyrian king Shamash-Adad V (823-811ac) wore hanging from his neck



Greek cross

The cross is a symbol much older than Christianity.

Its origin is in the representation of the solar disk radiation. Engravings of the Bronze Age have been found where the cross appears inscribed in a circle representing the Sun. In the ruins of Troy more refined but similar representations have been found, until we arrive at the most well-known representations nowadays.

An Assyrian king who lived in the eighth century before the present era wore on his neck a cross with rounded edges, as if the solar disk had been removed the part of the circumference that is not within the rays or arms of the cross.

The evolution of this figure shows that the ancients wanted to represent the sun's rays through the arms of the cross. The cross has been then, as a solar symbol, a symbol of life and not of death as most people think today within Christianity.

The cross was used by Christianity because of the popularity it enjoyed in the ancient world. The emperor Constantine the Great (272-337), definitive promoter of Christianity in the Roman Empire, reported that in a dream he saw the cross with the legend "in hoc signo vinces" (IHSV, by this sign you will win). The phrase itself has earlier initiatory connotations, since as some point out IHS was a name of Bacchus.

A common characteristic of the symbols is that their meaning can vary according to the context, giving rise to different aspects.

There are many interpretations of the symbol of the cross, since as we said before the symbol is an abstract language that serves to communicate a message that can have several contexts, dimensions of meaning or keys of interpretation.

## The emblem of the Theosophical Society

- It is a set of very old and universal symbols.
- The **uroboros**. The snake that bites its tail in a circle. The infinite cyclic law.
- The **swastika**. The igneous cross of Hinduism. It symbolizes the continuous power.
- The **AUM**. The sacred monosyllable. The One Life producing the manifestation.
- The **interlaced triangles**. Spirit and Matter, both trinities in correspondence.
- The **ankh** or ansata cross. It is the regeneration of Life.



The emblem of the Theosophical Society is composed of several symbols, which have been used since antiquity to express deep spiritual and philosophical concepts about man and the universe. Each symbol studied separately helps us to understand it. Studied together, as in this emblem, they suggest a vast evolutionary scheme that embraces all of nature, physical and spiritual, and its study can make the serious researcher come to contemplate some of the deepest mysteries of existence.

The **uroboros**. The snake that bites its tail in a circle. It is a symbol of eternity and of the infinite cyclic law. It is also a representation of wisdom because they transcend the opposites and the beginning and end of things.

The **swastika**. It is the cross of fire with arms of flame that turn (clockwise) to represent the powerful energies of nature that create and dissolve the forms through which the evolutionary process takes place. It is used in India as a symbol of bliss. Regrettably, it was adopted by Nazism and provokes certain prejudices.

The **AUM**. Aum or also OM is the sacred monosyllabic of Hinduism, in Sanskrit written in Devanagari. It represents the Principle of Universal Life manifesting itself and giving origin to the Universe.

The **interlaced triangles** symbolize on the one hand the essential duality of the manifested Universe: Spirit and Matter, and on the other hand the triune nature of both: Sat, Chit and Ananda in the Spirit and the 3 Gunas or properties in Matter: Tamas, Raja and Sattva. It also represents the hermetic principle of similarity in the Universe, the Holographic Universe: "As it is above it is below", the microcosm is similar to the macrocosm.

The **Ankh**. At the center of the two intertwined triangles is what is known as the Ankh or ansata cross which is composed of a circle superimposed on the Tau Cross (the type of cross that has the shape of the letter T). It symbolizes the process of regeneration of Life. The evolution of Being or "exit in the light of day" as the Egyptians called it.

Surrounding the emblem is the motto of the Theosophical Society: "There is no religion higher than truth".

## ***Ansata or Ankh Cross of Egypt***

- Composed by a circle on a Tau.
- It is the attribute of Isis, symbol of Life.
- As a hieroglyphic symbol it means "life".
- It represents the sacred union of Spirit and Matter and the regeneration of Life.



Apis  
*Alexandria Museum*



Venus  
symbol



**Ru** = Mouth, door, place of birth of the Sun, circle, spirit

**Tau** = Matter, generation (Taurus)

One of the oldest and most emblematic crosses is the Ansata cross or **ankh**, widely used in Egypt as we can see in its engravings and writings.

The ankh is the symbol of life. It was an attribute of Isis, meaning that she is the giver of life. It has historical continuity with the symbol of Venus, the most modern symbol of the feminine, as it is easy to see by the similarity of form. On the other hand Isis is the Egyptian equivalent of the pagan Venus, both representing the feminine aspect of life.

In Egypt *Apis*, the ox or bull, was represented with the solar disk between its horns as a symbol of fertility. Its shape seen from front resembles the Ankh.

The Ansata cross is composed of two parts. The upper part is a circle, symbol of the spirit, of the infinite, while the lower part is a Tau, a T that symbolizes matter. In this way, with united spirit and matter, the Ankh represents the Life that is possible thanks to the interaction of both aspects of duality.

There is also a sexual interpretation of the Ansata cross, the circle being the feminine element and the Tau the masculine, representing the sacred union that generates life.

But the ankh, as with many symbols, has a key to interpretation related to the inner process, to the transformation of the human being, the mystical union and expansion of consciousness that occurs after its awakening. In this process the internal nature of the human being takes possession of the functions of the mind, emotions and physics, so that it acts as a unit and not as a fragmented being, as a set of tendencies.

In this way, the union symbolized by the Ansata cross, in one of its most mystical interpretations, is a symbol of the union of the spiritual with the human, of the inner Being with the personal self, union that is the goal of Yoga and of the great initiatory traditions.

## Myths and legends

### Legends

*Legenda:* [LA] what it must be read.  
Real and fictional characters.  
Imaginary and real stories.  
Idealization.



The Cid



Romulus and Remus

### Myths

*Mythos:* [GR] story.  
Fictitious characters and facts.  
Symbolic content, didactic,  
moral, religious,  
philosophical and sacred.



Thor



Isis and Osiris

The religions, the mystery schools and the literature of antiquity have been nourished by myths and legends.

The word **legend** comes from the Latin *legend* and points out what must be read. It usually refers to stories about characters that may have been real, although the stories are a mixture of real and imaginary events, thus producing an idealization of the character.

Examples of legends are those of Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, the *Cid*, hero of the Spanish Reconquista. Cid feats, courage and extraordinary moral qualities are attributed to him, which may have been exaggerated to highlight the figure of the hero and convey an enthusiastic message to the people.

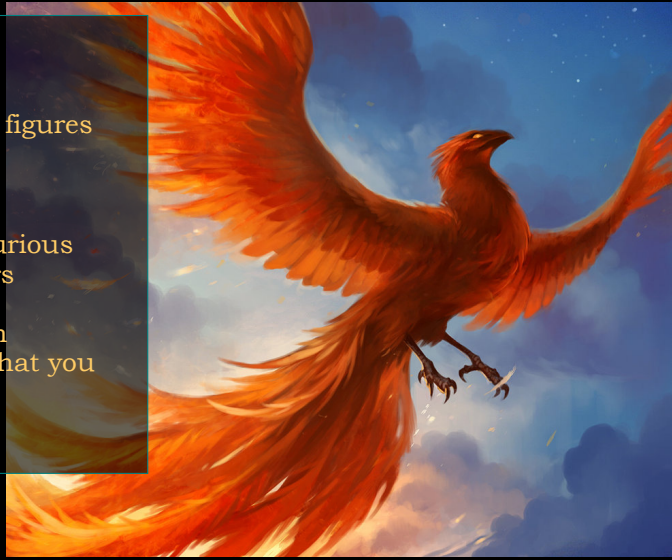
Another well-known legend is that of Romulus and Remus, the founding brothers of Rome, who according to it were nursed by a wolf. It seems likely that children have been protected by a prostitute (popularly called *loupe* or wolf). The legend tries to highlight the value of the characters to overcome extreme difficulties.

The word **myth** comes from the Greek word *mythos* and means story. In it both the characters and the facts are fictitious and have been designed with a didactic purpose, to easily convey a message with a teaching that may have a moral, religious or philosophical character.

Examples of myths are the figures of mythologies. *Thor*, in Nordic mythology was the god of thunder, which influenced the climate, harvests, justice and other things. In ancient Egypt, the most revered myth was the myth of the death and resurrection of *Osiris*, which we will see in more detail in another chapter.

## *Reasons for the myth*

- Easy to transmit
  - Oral story
  - Awesome to remember
  - Easy to represent with figures and allegories
- Veiled teachings
  - They move away the curious
  - Mislead the persecutors
- They appeal to intuition
  - They have a message that you have to un-cover
  - They last in time



The Phoenix

The teachings transmitted through the myths have the advantage that they are easy to transmit from mouth to ear. In the ancient world, when the printing press did not exist and the books were not available to anyone, myths were an important vehicle for the transmission of ideas. As they were attractive oral stories, they impressed the listener, making it easy to remember them. For this reason they have been represented with figures and allegories and the art was commissioned to perpetuate them in the collective memory through the classic paintings and sculptures that we admire today.

But there is also another reason for the transmission of the deeper teaching in the myth format. The allegories, symbols and stories make people believe that it is simply a story to entertain, and they do not give them value but help to transmit it. The one who has eyes to see will see them. The myths mislead the persecutors and instead attract those interested.

What is more important to note is that when using symbolic and allegorical language myths appeal to intuition. More than teaching, they suggest, they inspire. They contain a message that must be uncovered, that is to say that it must be found behind the veil of the characters and the events related, because that message is intended to evoke an answer that goes beyond ordinary thought. The message of the myths is directed to the depth of our consciousness and allows us to bring to consciousness the connection with the collective unconscious, with that deep level of Reality in which the laws and models described by the myth are evident.

An example of the myth is that of the Phoenix Bird that periodically is consumed by fire but then resurfaces from its ashes. It is a symbol of cycles and continuous regeneration in Nature. It also suggests how in everyday life we can resurface from a state in which what we are used to has been destroyed if we let the strength of our being regenerate our life and emerge triumphant in new circumstances.

## The myth of Eros and Psyche

- Of classical Greek origin, immortalized by Apuleius, other ancient and modern myths correspond to it.
- Main characters:
  - Eros: god son of Aphrodite
  - Psyche: beautiful princess
  - Aphrodite: mother of Eros
  - Father of Psyche
  - Relatives of Psyche
- Plot: mystical union and its difficulties



As an example we will try to interpret the myth of **Eros and Psyche**. It is a classic story of Greek origin that was immortalized by the Latin poet Apuleius as a story in his work "*The Metamorphosis*" also known as "*The Golden Ass*".

The main characters are:

- Eros: god of love, son of Aphrodite.
- Psyche: beautiful Anatolian princess, the youngest of 3 sisters.
- Aphrodite: goddess of beauty, desire and love.
- Father of Psyche: King of Anatolia
- Relatives of Psyche: especially her 2 sisters, jealous of their beauty

### Eros and Psyche

It tells the story that a long time ago there was a king and queen in Anatolia who had three daughters. The youngest, Psyche, of such dazzling beauty that she was adored by humans as a reincarnation of the goddess Aphrodite. The goddess was jealous of the beauty of the mortal Psyche as men were abandoning their altars to worship a simple woman instead. Then he ordered his son Eros to intercede to make the girl fall in love with the most horrendous and vile man that could exist.

For its part, beauty had not brought Psyche any happiness. Men idolized her in a thousand ways, but none dared approach her or ask for her hand. The concerned parents consulted the Oracle of Apollo to determine what fate would bring to their daughter. Far from finding comfort, the Oracle predicted that Psyche would marry at the top of the mountain with a monster from another world. Psyche accepted her fate bitterly, and obeying the Oracle, her parents took her to the top of the mountain followed by a long procession, where they left her in tears to face certain death.

This is how the Cephire (wind of the West) found it, who raised it over the mountains until it was deposited in a valley full of flowers. Upon awakening, Psyche entered the nearby forest following the sound of the water. What he found was a beautiful palace, of indescribable luxury and beauty, and disembodied voices whispering that the palace belonged to her and that everyone was there to serve her. That night, while lying in the darkness of her new bedroom, a stranger visited her to make her his wife. His voice was soft and kind, but he did not let himself be seen in daylight, which aroused Psyche's curiosity that he wanted to know her face.

With the passage of time Psyche began to feel uneasiness, and suffered from feeling alone. She missed her sisters, whom she had not seen in a while and this caused her sadness. She then implored her husband to allow her to receive the visit of her sisters, but he warned her that they would try to incite her curiosity and encourage her to try to reveal the identity of her husband. He warned her again and again not to be persuaded by her hypocritical sisters, since the day she saw his face she would not see him again and it would be the day when her happiness would end.

Finally, Eros yielded to the intense and passionate pleas of Psyche and asked the wind Cephire to bring the sisters to the palace. These, at the sight of so much luxury and beauty, burned with jealousy and envy at the good fortune that had touched her sister. Secretly, each of them began to depreciate what they themselves had been lucky, their elderly husbands with their petty riches. They left the palace planning how to punish her sister and on their return convinced Psyche that her husband was a huge and monstrous snake that was waiting to lurk to devour her. They suggested a detailed plan of action, which was based on waiting for the dream to overcome her husband and then approaching him with a lamp and a dagger and cutting off her snake head.

That same night, Psyche waited for her husband to fall asleep next to her and lit his lamp to watch him. Who saw was the most beautiful of the gods, the very Eros. The knife fell from his hands and as he watched in ecstasy that glorious image, a drop of oil from the lamp fell on the shoulder of Eros. He awoke and freed himself from the embrace and laments of Psyche, expressed his disappointment at Psyche's betrayal of his love. He told her that he himself disobeyed the orders of his own mother to fall in love with her, but that everything was ruined. And so he spread his wings and left.

Psyche then begins a desperate search to find Eros that culminates in his arrival at the temple of Aphrodite. This one, full of anger and desires of revenge, tears the clothes of Psyche and entrusts impossible tasks to her like classifying myriads of different seeds. Psyche receives help from different gods and forces of nature that make it possible to complete these challenges. Aphrodite then invents a new punishment for Psyche: she should go into Hades, the underground world in search of Persephone, her queen, to beg him to give her the secret of her beauty inside a chest. Avoiding various difficulties, Psyche fulfills the task and begins her journey back to the light. On the way, curiosity falls prey again. Attracted by the desire to please her beloved, adorning herself with divine beauty, she opens the chest and immediately falls into a morbid dream.

Meanwhile, Eros, newly recovered from his wound, goes out in search of his beloved wife to wake her from his sleep. Then he goes to visit Zeus to pray to the god that he would have compassion on Psyche and make her immortal so that she could live with him in heaven. Zeus sympathized with Eros and appeased Aphrodite by telling her that this would be a marriage worthy of her son. So he ordered the marriage of Eros and Psyche, which would last forever.

## Interpretations of the myth

- Which represent?:
  - Eros
  - Psyche
  - The sisters of Psyche
  - The curiosity of Psyche
  - The rescue of Eros
- The myth allows us to connect with an inner reality that transcends the world of ideas and the personal and everyday self.



Psyche reanimated by the kiss of Eros  
Sculpture by Antonio Canova (1793)

We are going to make an interpretation of the myth of Eros and Psyche.

Psyche represents the human personality, the psychological nature of mind and emotions with its expression in the physical body. Psyche is beautiful, like the developed mind, so captivating that it makes one forget about relationships and the loving aspect of life (Aphrodite).

Eros is the inner Being, the spiritual soul that "falls in love" with his personality, inspires it, attracts it to himself and in a state of stillness (in the night) achieves union with it.

An important element of the myth that is also in one way or another in other similar myths is that Eros prevents Psyche from trying to look at him. This can be interpreted as that the inner Being can not be known with the physical eyes or with the emotions not with the ordinary mind. It requires introspection and confidence in him that is self-confidence.

The sisters of Psyche that sow doubt and distrust represent our ideas and familiar habits that will be displaced in the process of transformation and try to undo that mystical union. Observe that they are not strangers, alien to Psyche but are their older sisters. Psyche grew with them but now they become an obstacle. When Psyche sees Eros with her own eyes despite the prevention she is captivated by him. Free from the distrust of acquired habits and the self, the inner Being is revealed with all its glory and beauty. But the union will not be easy. Psyche must fulfill a series of tasks imposed by Aphrodite, she must respond to her outstanding Karma, and despite the love she feels for Eros, she falls into the temptation of obtaining more beauty from Persephone.

Eros, the inner Being, rescues Psyche, the personality. The rescue does not come from the outside but from the inside. Our inner nature comes when the mind is "passed out" and we no longer know how to continue. When the mystical union is consummated it is forever and a new stage begins, it is the moment of *initiation*.

The important thing about the myth is that each one of us can find our own metaphors and interpretations that will be of inspiration helping to understand the transformation of the human being.

## *To think*



Watch, think, investigate, inquire ...  
Make the following questions or thoughts suggestions  
But don't stay here, ask yourself and find out.

- 1- Investigate other myths about the mystical union such as that of Orpheus and Eurydice..
- 2- Why do we always have to overcome difficulties to achieve union?
- 3- What does Psyche's curiosity mean?
- 4- What does the rescue of Eros mean? Does Eros need Psyche as Psyche to Eros?