

THE PRAGMATICS OF THE SECOND ANCIENT

by Phil Hardiman, IV°

“...the very air we breathe is full of mysteries, but the love of God surpasses all things visible and invisible; and Hope is the inheritance of man on earth; and the Word is Hope.”

This short paper is intended to explore the hidden meaning in the brief ritual of the Second Ancient, at least on one level – the Pragmatic level. All good ritual operates on a number of levels and thus has different meaning to different individuals (as well as to those same individuals at different points in time), and different impact on each candidate during initiation. This particular ritual is dense with concepts, and can be understood separately and, perhaps most significantly, in the context of the ritual of the other Ancients taken as a whole.

First, taking the concepts in order separately: What are the mysteries that the air we breathe is full of? This is clarified by the following phrase “all things visible and invisible,” which can be understood to mean “knowable and hidden,” where the sense of sight is simply a symbol of the knowledge represented by the light it perceives. In this case, the subject knowledge is simply the chemistry of the air – in other words, its chemical components of Oxygen, Hydrogen, Nitrogen, and so forth. This is a logical extension of the First Ancient’s teaching “...for in Dust are sown the seeds of Immortality.” Here, the Dust represents our bodily, mortal existence, which must be nourished physiologically by the Air we breathe.

But what is “hidden” in the Air we breathe? If understood in the light of the concept of “the love of God,” which precedes it, then Air must contain other, non-chemical substances which are Life-giving, in a sense larger than or greater than our simple physiological, mortal life. Hence, the first three concepts of the Second Ancient, when taken together, imply that there are hidden substances (or a single hidden substance) which give us a Life greater than our bodily Life, further indicated or clarified by the Word of this Ancient – namely, Hope. This non-bodily Life is the consequence of the Air giving nourishment to the “seeds of Immortality” planted in the earthly, or physiological, body represented by the “Dust” of the First Ancient. Hence, our Hope is for an immortal Life, and the Second Ancient implies that the Air we breathe provides the sustenance for that immortal Life.

This may not seem interesting or particularly startling, unless you realize and understand how the body acquires and utilizes these *hidden* substances (or substance). The act of breathing then points to the importance of the lungs in extracting these substances, chemical *and* hidden, and making them available to the body to do its work – namely, sustaining its mortal existence while building that “house not made with hands.” A Freemason and sometime Rosicrucian (SRIA)¹ of the early Twentieth Century explained:

“Breathing may be considered the most important of all of the functions of the body, for, indeed, all the other functions depend upon it. ... And not only is Man dependent upon Breath for life, but he is largely dependent upon correct habits of breathing for continued vitality and freedom from disease. An intelligent control of our breathing power will lengthen our days upon the earth by giving us increased vitality and powers of resistance, and, on the other hand, unintelligent and careless breathing will tend to shorten our days, by decreasing our vitality and laying us open for disease.”²

He goes on to say “This work will take up the Yogi ‘Science of Breath,’ which includes not only all that is known to the Western physiologist and hygienist, but the occult side of the subject as well. It not only points out the way to physical health along the lines of what Western scientists have termed ‘deep breathing,’ etc, but also goes into the less known phases of the subject, and shows how the Hindu Yogi controls his body, increasing his mental capacity, and develops the spiritual side of his nature by the ‘Science of Breath’. The Yogi practices exercises by which he attains control of his body, and is enabled to send to any organ or part an increased flow of vital force or ‘prana,’ thereby strengthening and invigorating the part or organ. He knows all that his Western scientific brother knows about the physiological effect of correct breathing, but he also knows that the air contains more than oxygen and hydrogen and nitrogen, and that something more is accomplished than the mere oxygenating of the blood.”³

It is this “vital force” which is the hidden substance of the Air, and which explains its pragmatic value. Proper breathing, that is proper use of the Air we are given to breathe, is necessary to produce a vitalized body, which, then, becomes the House of Sanctification of the Third Ancient. Taken together, then, the four Ancients symbolize the vitalized body of Man purified physically and emotionally and finally spiritualized. The same process of spiritualization may be understood by the symbolism of passing the veils in the Royal Arch Degree.

¹ WILLIAM WALKER ATKINSON. “Atkinson, a freemason, theosophist, member of the bar in Pennsylvania and teacher of magnetism warrants special attention. Between 1902 and 1915, he published about 20 works under his own name or as Yogi Ramacharaka, including *The Law of New Thought* (1902) and *the Hindu Yogi Science of Breath*. The originality of this author in comparison with those who preceded him was to include in his theory and practices the relevant elements of Hinduism and Yoga. This innovation came from his association with the Theosophical society and in particular with Swami Vivekananda who came to Chicago in 1893 to participate in the Parliament of Religions. He gave seminars in a number of cities before establishing the Vedanta Society in New York in 1894. In his books William Atkinson discusses health through magnetism, mystical breathing, karma, vibrations, polarity, projection of thought or visualisation. He was probably the author of the famous *The Kybalion*, a study of the Hermetic philosophy of Ancient Egypt and Greece. The cover shows that the work was of "three initiates" scarcely a veiled allusion to Hermes Tresmagistus, the author claiming book revealed the royal art of the Egyptians, a synthesis of all the sciences, with sources from India, Persia and China. It revealed seven hermetic laws allegedly coming from Hermes. Amongst these laws are the laws of correspondence, the vibrations of life, polarity, rhythm, causality (karma) etc." (source: <http://users.telenet.be/ananda/ramach.htm>)

² *Science of Breath*, William Walker Atkinson, c. 1903, Chapter II “Breath is Life”

³ *Ibid*, Chapter II