

Omraam Mikhaël Aïvanhov

# The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil



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# **The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil**



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## Chapter One

# The two trees of Paradise

For thousands of years human beings have tried to understand how the world began and how evil and its attendant ills came into this world. The explanations they found were often presented in the form of myths, and this is why the sacred scriptures of all religions contain symbolical accounts, which can be understood only if we have the key to their interpretation. The Christian tradition, for instance, has adopted the account given by Moses in the Book of Genesis, but does this mean that Christians really understand it?

Let us look, first of all, at what Moses says. On the sixth day of creation God made man and woman and put them in the midst of all kinds of animals and plants in a garden called Eden. Two of the trees in this garden are mentioned specifically: the tree of life, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – and it is the latter that has since become particularly notorious. God forbade Adam and Eve to eat the fruits of this tree, and

as long as they obeyed him they lived happily in the midst of abundance. But then the serpent came and persuaded Eve to taste the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and Eve in turn persuaded Adam, with the result that God drove them out of paradise. This is the substance of the story, and we shall come back to certain aspects of it in a moment.

A great many people have gone in search of this earthly paradise, believing that it must have been in India, America, or Africa, but of course no one has ever found it. The Garden of Eden was certainly on earth, but what exactly is meant by earth? As you will soon see, the whole account is symbolic. Of course, I cannot explain every detail to you; that would be impossible, for the whole question of the first man and woman is too vast, but let me begin by telling you about the two trees, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

As you know, when Adam and Eve lived in paradise they were allowed to eat the fruit of all the trees in the garden with one exception, that of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But what you do not know is that the fruit of this tree is the symbol of all those forces that the first man and woman were still incapable of controlling, transforming, and using. This is why God told them: 'The time will come when you will be

allowed to eat this fruit, but at the moment you are still too weak. If you eat it, the forces it contains will kill you, and you will die.' The words, 'you will die' we should understand to mean 'your state of consciousness will be changed.' This changed state of consciousness is indicated in Genesis, but it has not always been understood. Genesis says that when Adam and Eve were living happily in paradise, '*they were both naked and were not ashamed.*' Later, after eating the forbidden fruit, '*the eyes of both were opened and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons.*' This sudden awareness of their nakedness shows that there had been a change within them.

The tree of life represents the unity of life, life as it is before it is polarized, before there is either good or evil. The tree of life is a realm that transcends good and evil.<sup>1</sup> The tree of knowledge, on the other hand, represents the world of polarization, a realm in which we are subject to the alternation of day and night, joy and sorrow, and so on. These two trees therefore are not simply phenomena of the vegetable kingdom, they are realms of the universe, or states of mind. God forbade Adam and Eve to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because he did not want them to enter the realm of polarization. Why this prohibition? Was it simply a whim on God's part? No. Was this

tree useless then? No again. God does not create anything useless. A tree that produced fruit that no one could eat or make use of in any way would be contrary to divine wisdom, for divine wisdom never creates something unless it is useful.

There were beings who were capable of eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil without harm to themselves, but Adam and Eve were not yet ready to do so. The contact with the astringent forces contained in this fruit would have caused the subtle matter of their bodies to congeal and solidify. And in fact, this is exactly what happened. Tradition speaks of a 'fall', and the word 'fall' symbolizes their passage from a subtle state of matter to a state that was more opaque. After eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve were more densely material, and it is this materialization that is expressed in the words '*they knew that they were naked.*' Before their act of disobedience they were already naked, but they were clothed in light; afterwards they saw that they had lost their robes of light, and they suddenly felt ashamed and tried to hide.

After eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve continued to live physically, but they died to their higher state of consciousness. They were driven out of paradise (which is the symbol of this higher consciousness), and angels with flaming swords guarded the entrance. What do we mean when we



say that Adam and Eve were exiled to earth? The paradise from which they were banished was an 'earthly paradise'; what was the difference then between the earth on which they already lived and that to which they were banished? The Cabbalah teaches that the earth exists in seven forms, and it gives the name and the attributes of each, from the densest to the subtlest, and it was from the subtlest form of earth that the first man and woman were banished.

What do we really know about the earth? If you think about it, you will have to admit that we know very little.<sup>2</sup> According to initiatic science, the earth has an etheric double which surrounds it like a luminous atmosphere. It is this subtle, etheric double that is the true earth spoken of in Genesis, the earth as it was when it came from the hands of God. The true earth is not the solid, condensed ground on which we live. The true earth is the etheric earth. It was on this earth – which we call paradise – that God placed the first human beings. It was here that they lived in the radiant, luminous bodies I spoke of earlier, and they knew neither suffering, nor sickness, nor death.

Paradise still exists. Did you know that? It has never ceased to exist. Although we cannot see it, it is all around us as a material reality, but a reality that exists on the subtle, etheric plane of matter. And the tree of eternal life still stands in paradise

and still produces the elements that constituted the nourishment of our first parents. They lived in and were nourished by this etheric substance of the earth; it was this substance that gave light and purity to their lives. Of course, as I have already said, the tree of life was not actually a tree; it was a current that flowed through this region from the sun. Adam and Eve were nourished by the sun's rays. The tree of life is the sun.

Human beings are constructed in exactly the same way today as when they were first created; they still have the innate capacity to receive the sun's rays, to eat once again the fruits of the tree of life—that is, they still have the ability to turn back to God. Each religion has its own language and its own way of expressing things, but all religions speak of this reintegration in God, of this turning back to the prime cause. With different words they all speak of the same reality.

And now we come to the question: what is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? This tree also represents a current that flowed through paradise, but a current of a very different sort which put human beings in contact with the densest form of the earth. God told Adam and Eve to be content to explore the realms of the tree of life. The time was not yet ripe for them to leave this region of light and to go down to study the roots of creation. That was for a later stage. They should not try to

know everything all at once. Since this second tree existed, there was no question of eliminating it, any more than one can eliminate one's intestines, or liver, or spleen. For just as there are two regions in the universe, there are two regions in man: a higher region which corresponds to the tree of life and a lower region in which are the roots of creation and which corresponds to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.



The fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil contained such powerful astringent elements (representing the current of *coagula*) that Adam and Eve could not withstand their effect. God knew that these currents would immediately change their state of consciousness, and, as we have seen, this is precisely what happened. On contact with this astringent current, their bodies changed, lost their luminosity, and began to become opaque and more densely material. By forbidding them to eat this fruit – that is, to explore this current and experiment with these natural forces – God wanted to shield them from suffering, sickness, and death (death of the physical body, of course, not of the spirit, for they were created immortal). But they ate the fruit, and as a result they died to their first luminous state and became alive to a state of darkness and density. Then they had to leave paradise, this etheric realm of light and joy, and descend to the lower levels of earth; and it is on

this same level of earth that we live today, for we too have left the earth of our first homeland.

Now what about the serpent who tempted Eve? Who or what was this clever creature who talked so persuasively? The serpent is a very profound and comprehensive symbol which is found in all religions. Initiates of every era have always had to deal with the serpent, even though they may choose not to talk about it openly. The serpent symbolizes many realities which on the surface seem very different: the Kundalini force,<sup>3</sup> or evil, or the devil, or the magic agent through which all things flow and are carried from heaven to earth and from earth to heaven.<sup>4</sup>

For an initiate, the serpent is not only a symbol of evil. True, it has this lower aspect of darkness, but it also has a higher aspect of light. It is the magic agent that is capable of transmitting both good and evil. The serpent is what Eliphas Levi called ‘astral light’. It can be impregnated with impurities – in which case its effects are harmful – just as it can be suffused with the luminous thoughts of saints and prophets, which it carries aloft to the very throne of God. The serpent therefore is luminous in its upper half and dark in its lower half. The *Zohar* (Book of Splendour) speaks of the symbol of a white, luminous head which, when reflected in the black pit of opaque matter, appears as a dark head of frightful aspect. This is God’s shadow. But I prefer

to keep these things for later, when you are better prepared to understand them. The serpent or dragon therefore symbolizes this magic agent, which fills the whole universe, from earth to the heavens, and is the vehicle of both good and bad emanations.

If you are familiar with the Tarot you will know that the fifteenth major arcana card represents the devil. Stanislas de Guaita understood the profound significance of this card. He also wrote a commentary on a symbolic drawing which depicts two faces: above is the luminous, radiant face of a victorious, all-powerful initiate, and reflected below it, as though in a mirror, is the image of the devil, a hideous, depraved being with a face contorted by a devouring rage. The two together form a single reality as though they were two triangles linked together; not intertwined as in the Seal of Solomon , but joined at the base . This figure signifies that the devil and the luminous magical agent represent two levels of one and the same reality. And this can also be seen in human beings: the lower part of their being is unclean and repugnant; the upper part is beautiful and divine. It all depends on the forces they work with, the level of consciousness on which they dwell, and the elements they handle.<sup>5</sup>

The serpent of Genesis therefore represents a current that arises from the earth and ascends to

great heights. In the higher reaches it is pure and luminous, and in the lower regions it is obscure and repellent. In any case, we know that it was at home in the Garden of Eden, for it was there that Eve met it. Eve was very curious by nature. She wanted to know exactly what this tree of the knowledge of good and evil was, but as she was afraid to go too near, she began by studying it from a distance. Little by little, however, devoured by curiosity, she moved closer, and as she gazed at it, without daring to touch it, she became more and more aware of the voice of the serpent—that is, of the current that rose from the earth and spoke with such intelligence: ‘Ah, but there are many things you do not know yet. You should come and learn from us, for our knowledge is very great.’

Now I must tell you that the serpent was not a single entity. It was an egregor,\* a coalescence of beings that God had created long before he created human beings; a generation of angels, archangels, and divinities who had been sent by God to work with the fire, metals, and crystals that exist in the depths of the earth. Their mission was to prepare and perfect the riches that lie beneath the surface of the earth, and once this was

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\* An egregor is a psychic collective being formed by the thoughts, wishes, and fluidic emanations of all the individual members of a collectivity working together toward the same goal.

done, to return to heaven. This is what tradition tells us; I am not making it up. (Sometimes I embroider the traditional stories a little or add some dialogue to make them more alive, but I never invent anything.) So, as I say, tradition tells us that God had created these luminous beings, a whole hierarchy of angels and archangels, and that once their mission was accomplished they were supposed to return to their Creator. However, some of them allowed themselves to be influenced by the life they experienced below and chose not to return to the Lord. This is what is known as the revolt of the angels. They did not rebel while they were in heaven; they rebelled when they were far away from God.

God did not threaten the rebellious angels with death or destruction. He simply said: 'Stay where you are then. You will certainly learn a great deal, and when you are sick of a life of obscurity and constraint you may come back. You will always be welcome.' Yes, such is God's love that he allows even his most debased creatures to return to him. If God truly is love, how could he refuse forever to welcome sinners who want to return to his embrace? Such a refusal would be a terrible cruelty, and it is not possible for God to be cruel. Even demons can return to God, for he is absolute love. You must not think that demons are happy in the life they have chosen, for they are not. But



*The French philosopher and spiritual Master, Omraam Mikhaël Aïvanhov (1900-1986), was born in Bulgaria and came to France in 1937. Although his work addresses many aspects of initiatic science, he explains: 'The questions with which we are faced will always be the same: to understand who we are, to discover the meaning of our lives and to overcome the obstacles which we find on our path. So, do not ask me to talk to you about anything else; I will always return to the same subjects: our development, our difficulties, the path to be followed and the methods we need to follow it.'*

The existence of evil in a world created by a perfect God is an enigma which has always preoccupied philosophers and theologians. Without departing from the general framework of the Judeo-Christian tradition, Omraam Mikhaël Aïvanhov's approach to the problem is original: he insists that the solution to the problem of evil is not a question of philosophical explanations but of practical methods. Whatever its origin, evil is both an internal and an external reality, and we have to learn to deal with it in our everyday lives. To attack it head-on is not only useless, it is also dangerous; the odds are too heavily against us. What we need is to learn the methods that will enable us to overcome and transform it.

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