



[Home](#)
[IOT Books](#)
[IOT History](#)
[Chaos Magick Theory](#)
[Articles](#)
[IOT World](#)
[Journal](#)
[Books](#)
[T-Shirts](#)
[IOT Links](#)
[Other Links](#)
[Membership](#)
[Kaosgate Classes](#)
[Site Updates](#)



"Gnosis; Inside Outside Upside Down" by Frater Ratatosk

Introduction:

In the years following the publication of "Liber Null & Psychonaut" by Peter Carroll, there has grown an ever increasing number of interpretations or takes on the experience of Gnosis. This is due to several reasons. The first is the evolution of our understanding regarding how magick works; the second is based on the term itself, it's history and baggage; and the final factor rests on various misunderstandings of the term, and the mental state which it suggests. While a definitive and final answer is beyond the scope of this article we can at the very least provide a series of working definitions. These definitions are by no means the "last word" on the topic. They are intended as a framework within which the magician can better understand her mental states and their relationship to the magick that she is doing.

I will begin with a little history and background on the term Gnosis (which many are already familiar with). Next I will move onto Peter Carroll's own definition and the various methods he indicated for reaching Gnosis. Then I will discuss the confusion surrounding the concept of Gnosis and the reasons for it. After that I will touch on the states of consciousness that often occur along the way to Gnosis, that may be useful magically but are not a state of Gnosis in and of themselves. Finally I will conclude with something which suspiciously resembles the introduction.

History:

(This part includes many factoids designed to wow co-workers, family, friends and other cocktail party attendees with your erudite knowledge on really old stuff).

The ancient Greeks, like us, had many ways of saying they knew about something. For example we might have *faith* that something is true, or be *acquainted* with a bit of knowledge or have acquired *wisdom* after having spent many years doing something. Our Mediterranean predecessors made many of the same distinctions. To believe in something without direct

knowledge of it was *pistis*, which was their word for *faith* and it meant pretty much the same thing to them as it does to us. The knowledge acquired by having lots of experience was *sophia*, the modern version of which is *wisdom*. Again, we can almost draw a one-to-one relationship between the ancient Greek term and our own word. Our own verb *toknow* in fact comes from Greek and their word for it was *gnosis*. However for them *gnosis* didn't simply mean to be acquainted with something or be familiar with it or have *faith* in it or to have experience with it, to the Greeks it meant a direct connection between you and the thing itself.

Now had the Greeks simply been left to their own devices this division of the various forms of knowing might have remained the providence of their own quirky language. However, three factors prevented this from occurring. The first was that the Greeks didn't have a lot of land but what they did have were boats, and they went out in those boats and set up shop in all the best ports around the Mediterranean Sea. This pretty much put them in contact with the whole crowd of who's who in the ancient world. The second (in about 350 BCE) was Alexander the Great.

Alexander the Great was the forerunner of many short, overly ambitious men to come. Even though he was from a backwater place north of Greece called Macedonia, he thought that Greek culture was just the bee's knees, and that everyone should agree with him. Considering he was at the head of the most formidable army at the time, his power to convince people he was right was sufficiently enhanced. Alexander overran all the best kingdoms and empires he could find, and in the process took over a sizable portion of Africa and Asia. (He would have gone even further but most of his troops complained that they had marched so far they no longer knew where they lived anymore, so Alex settled down in Babylon). Though dying young, and inconveniently allowing his empire to fall apart he did succeed in setting the stage for the final factor, the Romans.

The Romans came storming out of Italy about 200 years after Alexander had had his day in the sun. The Romans shared Alexander's appreciation for all things Greek. However, unlike Alexander and his magnificent Macedonians, the Romans considered being Roman just about the best thing anyone could be. They thought it was such a good idea to be Roman that they set out to convince just about everyone around that they should be Roman too. In the process of this they took over not only most of Western Europe but North Africa as well and a good slice of Asia, if you please.

The Romans liked roads and trade, so they encouraged a lot of it. A side effect of all the goods and services moving to and fro around the Mediterranean was, that along with all the baggage, grain and slaves also came a lot of ideas. These ideas covered everything from philosophy and mathematics to religion and mysticism. In the parts of the Roman Empire that had once been Alexander's stomping ground just about everyone

spoke Greek. So, when there was the opportunity to express one's ideas one usually did it in Greek.

Another side effect of the Romans conquering everyone living within a couple of 1000 miles of them was that the area enjoyed long periods of relative peace and stability. People had time to worry about other things apart from farming, trade and whether or not they were about to be invaded, raped and pillaged. This created an atmosphere in which mystical, religious and philosophical schools could thrive, and a class of people who could indulge in them (remember all that trade - it created a whole class of individuals with money and time on their hands).

And we finally get to Gnosis:

The mystical schools and cults generally concerned themselves with otherworldly things, and connecting humanity to them. The initiated in these cults had vastly different approaches to this, ranging from abstaining from worldly things as much as possible to indulging in them as much as possible in order to transcend them. The connection to the spiritual realm was sought through direct experience of it, while still in this world. This direct connection, or direct knowledge of it was called *gnosis*. Note: this was often referred to as a direct knowledge or experience of god.

Modern day Christianity itself arose in this soup and had a profound impact on many of these mystery cults. The role of a divine savior was a center piece to many of them though Jesus was only one of several choices; there were also characters like Seth and Adam. Since the one thing these groups shared in common was an attempt to dial in and connect to the big G they were collectively called "Gnostics" though they really were in some cases vastly different, competing schools of mystical thought.

As Christianity ramped up, its advocates set out on a determined campaign to eliminate the competition. All the Gnostic mystery schools were collectively lumped into the category of being heretical, and a lot of nasty things were said about them. When the Roman authorities themselves converted to Christianity, the Gnostics were pretty much doomed. So effective was the campaign against them, that if we didn't have the records recovered and translated from the Nag Hammadi library, we would only have the writings of various Christians regarding the Gnostics to go by (and since the Church was in competition against the Gnostics it's hardly an impartial view to go by).

What did survive was the term *gnosis* and the various ideas associated with it, primary the direct knowledge of the spiritual. While various "Gnostic" heresies would come and go in the centuries between then and now the idea was defined by the first Gnostics way back when in ancient Rome.

Peter "double R - double L" Carroll:

From about the mid to late 1800's through to today there has been a consistent and permissible interest in magick. Now Magick has been defined in a number of different ways but the best way to put it might be the following: Magick is an act of will which produces a result through the use of a non-local medium.¹

While the middle ages did have its magicians, these were usually one of two classes of individuals. Some were very wealthy, very bored aristocrats who were above the law (as they were the law) and so didn't have to worry about overly eager churchmen with spare matches. The others were charlatans, who existed outside of the law (often relying on the protection of patrons or a high rate of mobility to avoid said pyrophilic clergy). However it was in the 20th century that occultism as we know it really got going. One of the last things on the scene was something called "chaos magic" and the first author to reach a wide audience on the topic was Peter Carroll.

Peter Carroll took ideas from Crowley, A. O. Spare and others and put it all together into a relatively simple and straightforward system for doing magick to produce results. He eventually came to call his concoction "Chaos Magick Theory" and it is explained elsewhere on this website in a very interesting and informative article. One of the central ideas in chaos magic is the concept that in order to have an impact on either yourself or the universe the magician had to enter into an extreme altered state of consciousness. This state of consciousness was so extreme that all other external and internal stimuli and information was blocked out. The universe for the magician narrowed to a single point (one could even say it narrowed to a singularity of consciousness). Carroll chose to call this single-pointed consciousness or "no-mind" state, *Gnosis*. Peter Carroll classified all the ways to reach *Gnosis* under two categories: Inhibitory and Excitatory. In the Inhibitory category, the body/mind is progressively stilled until all your conscious awareness is restricted to a singularity of consciousness, while in Excitatory category the body/mind is taxed through overuse until it collapses into that same state.

Gnosis, in either case, is not the process itself, but the end result. A state in which consciousness collapses into a single point. Until you cross that threshold you are not in a state of *Gnosis*. To get across that threshold you can use your body, your emotions or chemicals (or any combination of these).

Carroll listed a short list of activities and stimuli, which could be useful in breaking through the normal levels of consciousness and reaching *Gnosis*. Here is a similar sample list with each activity along with a brief explanation.

Physical Activities:

Chanting - A rhythmic repetition of sounds, syllables or words.

Drumming - Open handed pounding on a percussion instrument.

Dancing - Repetitive series of body movements.

Hyperventilation - Rapidly forced inhalation and exhalation of air.

Glossalalia - Quickly stringing together letters and syllables in a nonsensical fashion.

Gazing - Keeping your gaze focused on one point for an extended period of time.

Visualization - Holding the same image fixed in your mind's eye.

Sensory Deprivation - Removing as much external stimuli as possible.

Sensory Overload - Bombarding your eyes, ears, nose and/or touch with stimuli.

Pain - Ouch.

Emotional States:

Rage - Have you ever "seen red" - that's pretty much what it means.

Fear - The expression "paralyzed with fear" sums it up.

Laughter - Sometimes loosing bladder control isn't all bad.

Chemical Aids:

The consumption or use of just about any substance legal or illicit in sufficient quantities can produce extreme altered states of consciousness. However, these are often ill focused and hard to manage. So called hard drugs (LSD, THC, Opium, Cocaine, etc) often enhance a mental state or feeling, but do so in such a way which doesn't readily bring the entirety of one's consciousness to a single purpose (unless that purpose is unconsciousness). However, if one can focus on a desired goal it is possible to cross into a state of Gnosis - shamans of primitive cultures have been doing so for ages.

And now that Part about Confusion:

The use of any of the above, in and of itself, does not constitute achieving Gnosis. It's quite possible to chant, drum, dance, be angry or be afraid, be stoned, high, or

tripping, and not be in a state of Gnosis. Nor is doing any of the above activities in the context of a ritual automatically make it Gnosis either. This is where many experienced and semi-experienced magicians get confused. They engage in a practice and mistake the practice for the goal, the drive for the destination (and other assorted cheesy metaphors) leaves them with a partial understanding regarding Gnosis.

Additionally, a pure state of Gnosis is not always required to achieve one's ritual objective. Why? There are a number of reasons: First reason being that some events are just going to happen by chance anyway. It didn't matter squat whether or not you did magick for it. The second reason is that we manufacture a good deal of our reality through the creative interpretation of the informational soup that we swim through every day. In short, once we determine that something will happen, it does. It does so because we are paying attention for it. We look out for it and thus it appears. The third reason is that quite a number of magical objectives are about you manufacturing a change in yourself, doing the ritual at all was a sign to your subconscious to bring such-and-such a change about.

The fourth reason is, that even if the event was not going to happen by chance or have something to do with your perspective or involve an internal change, you are directing some energy at the probability matrix around the event you desire. If the circumstances only required a bit of a nudge then you may succeed without the consciousness singularity which is Gnosis.

Add to all of that a lack of rigor in terms of judging the probability of one's objectives, and a general unwillingness towards any kind of self-directed critical thinking regarding one's own methodologies, and we have the perfect stew for not having a clue about Gnosis. This doesn't mean that most people lack the intellectual capacity to understand what Gnosis is, they do have that capacity. But Gnosis isn't something you learn about through study, it's knowledge gained through direct experience. If you have not had the experience you may know about Gnosis, but you do not know Gnosis.

The Cul de Sacs on the way to Gnosis:

Human consciousness is a flexible thing. It has evolved to be that way over time. The more flexible you can be - the more likely you are to survive adverse conditions. One element of flexibility is the ability to maintain a general sense of awareness even when preoccupied. Awareness is crucial to survival and since Gnosis short circuits awareness (and thus on a purely physiological or instinctual level puts the magician at risk from outside dangers) the mind will avoid it, or more correctly work around it, until the magician applies enough determination to reach it. These states are not the work of some subconscious saboteur but are, instead, a testament to the depth and flexibility of the human system.

Light Trance State: This is where the consciousness forms what is called a "cognitive loop" - a single repetitive action continues while the mind forms a secondary stream of consciousness. This is why you can drive a manual transmission car and carry on a conversation at the same time; or why you can be really angry but still remember to pick up a loaf of bread from the store. Your mind can multitask. If we rated the process of achieving gnosis on a scale from "0" = No Gnosis and "1" = Gnosis, then a Light Trance would be somewhere about 0.3 and magical operations succeeding would depend more on the probability of them happening through chance or design than from the force obtained from this operation.

Medium Trance State: If you keep up the activity the secondary stream of consciousness may itself form a cognitive loop. This is called a Medium Trance State, to use the driving analogy once more, long haul drivers are very familiar with the case of being "hypnotized by the road" where it appears that the car is stationary and earth is moving underneath you. To use the same emotional analogy - it's possible to get so mad that you can still drive home, but you will forget to stop at the store.²

Our minds can easily break out of this state or form a tertiary stream of consciousness but it's safe to say that once we've looped two streams of consciousness, we're in a Medium Trance State: On the Gnosis Scale this would be about 0.67. The chance for this amount of energy forcing a magical result is about 50/50.

Deep Trance State: If the primary, secondary and tertiary consciousness streams are all forced into cognitive loops we have a deep trance state. This state is extremely close to Gnosis but isn't quite there. It has many of the hallmarks of Gnosis (time distortions, memory blackouts, loss of equilibrium), but there are still thoughts and sensations which are secondary to the activity designed to produce the state of Gnosis. If this state were on a Gnosis Scale it would be about 0.95 - 0.98; one should note that reaching this state is sufficient for most magical operations to be effective. In fact, most magicians can go through their entire magical careers getting no farther than this state and still be obtaining really good results.

Conclusion: (Déjà vu all over again.)

Hopefully this article has provided you with a better understanding of Gnosis. While there are differing opinions on what Gnosis is or is not - the magician should only be concerned with using which definition works best for her. Gnosis, whether the direct knowledge of the supernatural or a singularity of consciousness remains an integral part of the modern occult lexicon. Our understanding of the term has evolved over time and shall continue to do so. It is an important aspect of results-orientated magick, but it is not

the only one. Nor is it entirely required. However, it is a valuable and desirable tool nonetheless.

As always the author welcomes feedback and questions.

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1 Crowley's definition of magick: "Magick is the Science and Art of causing change to occur in conformity with Will" fails the primary test of a definition as it does not also define what it is not. For example if I make a baloney sandwich I have changed something in accordance with my will but it's not an act of magick. However if I had employed a non-local medium to make the sandwich that would be magick, i.e. summoned a servitor who made the sandwich or cast a sigil which resulted in a sandwich being delivered to me.

2 Don't drive angry.