

# Scaffolding Platonic Theurgic Practice



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When embarking on an undertaking of getting to know Platonism and its commentary tradition, and especially when one is determined to deeply engage in it as one's primary spiritual path, it can seem like a lot. "Writing is a sea / its reeds are a shore," as Thoth says in the *Conversations in the House of Life* scribal initiation text. It takes courage, conviction, and good sense to penetrate into those waters and learn how to swim in them.

This document provides one option for an *integrative* study of Platonism, where theurgy and a study of the dialogues are wedded together in the spirit of what must have happened in the philosophical schools themselves: a balance of ritual, lecture, and communal activity designed to produce an awakening in the soul of serious students entering. Here, I present a modern form of a marriage of theurgy and philosophy modeled after a passage in Plato's *Phaedrus* where Socrates explains to his young interlocutor four types of divine madness:

But there are four parts of the divine fury [mania], distributed according to the four divinities which preside over these parts. For we assign prophetic inspiration to Apollon, telestic to Dionysus, poetic to the Muses; and the fourth or amatorial fury, which we assert to be the best of all, to Aphrodite and Eros. (*Phaedrus*, 265b, Plato, trans. Thomas Taylor)

When we talk about *madness*, we are looking at the Greek word *mania*, which signifies an inspired, divine possession. A folk etymology is presented in the surviving commentary, an adaptation of Syrianus' lectures on the *Phaedrus* as amended by Hermias:

And, dividing [this] madness itself into four parts — mantic, telestic, poetic, and erotic — he assigns presiding (*ephoros*) gods to each, [namely] Apollo, Dionysus, the Muses, and Love, listing all the benefits that are bestowed [on us] through them, [i.e.] through mantic, telestic, poetic <...> hence, [he says,] the 't' has been added, for after initially being called 'manic', it was subsequently termed 'mantic' (244C1-5). Thus much to show that the term 'madness' is not [necessarily] pejorative (*phaulos*). (Hermias' *On Plato Phaedrus*, trans. Baltzly & Share, brackets theirs)

The object of the Platonic school is to become "as Godlike as possible" (*Theaetetus*, 176b) through the cultivation of virtue — the Gods are supremely just and free of wrong, whereas life in embodiment is beset by many uncertainties and a self-alienation that inhibits an unfiltered, raw, and perfect expression of *any* of the virtues. We become as virtuous as possible — as *Godlike* as possible — through spiritual and intellectual development, which touches on every aspect of our lives. We do this not to impress others or to create an impression of being a

spiritual person, but out of a concern to truly and deeply care for our own souls, just as we care for the body through routine medical checkups and hygienic practices. Others may benefit from the care we provide to ourselves, but we should also commit to caring for our souls and bodies in the absence of positive feedback from others.

More nuance about this tension related to embodiment (along with the descent and ascent of the soul) is presented in the dialogues, which someone using this document will be studying. For now, here is a passage from the *Phaedrus* commentary by Hermias/Syrianus that describes the return of the soul to the Gods:

[The soul] must, then, return once more to its own origins and go back once more to the place whence it descended. And in this ascent and restoration these four types of madness assist it. Muse-engendered[madness] brings into concord and harmony those of its parts that have fallen into disorder and have declined into indeterminacy and discord and are afflicted with great confusion, while telestic renders the soul perfect and whole and equips it to operate at the intellectual level; for Muse-engendered madness tunes and orders the parts alone, while telestic makes it function as a whole and renders it whole so that its intellectual part too is active. For after it has descended, the soul seems to be shattered and weakened and the circle of the Same, its intellectual part, is obstructed; and the circle of the Other, its opining part, suffers many bends and twists, and therefore it functions one part at a time and not with its whole being. Dionysiac possession, then, after the harmonisation of parts, renders [the soul] perfect and makes it function with its whole being and live intellectually. Apollonian, on the other hand, causes all of its multiplicitous powers and the whole of it to return to its one and revives. (Hence the God is called Apollo as leading the soul back 'from the many' (*apo tôn pollôn*) to the One.) And, finally, Erotic, receiving the unified soul, joins this one of the soul to the gods and to intelligible beauty. So all the others are, as I said, seen in each of them, but each is named according to what dominates. (*Ibid.*, 93,29-94,15, brackets theirs)

This document uses the four stages of madness as a model for integrating devotional study with practice, and it touches on all areas of someone's life.

These are *general ideas* about what to do at each level. Specifics may be tailored to your own context and what you need, following the idea that spiritual practices are applied *like medicine*, to reference what Plato's dialogues say about rhetoric. For example, the dialogues and the additional readings are provided in bunches. You may want to read through the

dialogues at each stage *first*, before engaging in the additional material, or you may oscillate between dialogues and other items on the reading list, or you may try some other approach. Feel free to go at your own pace and to modify this reading list based on your needs — you know yourself better than a stranger on the Internet does. The [Lifelong Learning chapter of \*The Soul's Inner Statues\*](#) is a great place to start for integrating spiritual study into your life.

The goal with the information below is to ensure that people get an experiential/theurgic sense of what they're doing, and it pulls from the manic divisions established by Hermias/Syrianus. As long as you keep that broader goal in mind, you will be fine.

It is recommended, but not required, that someone spend about a year or two at each of these levels of engagement, especially given the length of the reading lists that are included. When it comes to progressing to activities in the next level, trust yourself — if you're still working through Muse-level readings, but you have a solid grasp of the contemplative and reflective activities, feel free to build on your foundation. (Try to avoid introducing the new types of prayer, though, until you're ready to actually progress to the next stage.) **It is important to neither rush spiritual development nor to be afraid of progressing, as both are harmful in the long run.** If you have been studying on your own without structure, I encourage you to adapt this to your own educational plan and to develop the theurgic practice that you judge to be most beneficial for your spiritual wellness.

Contemplation techniques may be supported using YouTube guided meditations, apps like Calm or Headspace, or a timer. Most multipurpose apps contain breathwork modules that can be used at any stage for refocusing and grounding oneself. For contextual information about Platonism, Mindy Mandell's YouTube channel *All About Platonism*, the early episodes of *The Secret History of Western Esotericism* podcast, and the section on Platonism in *The History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps* podcast can be supportive.

The practices here focus on Hellenic Gods, and due to the historical context of Platonism, it's important that these Gods be honored in some capacity — this connects you to Plato and to the tradition of the commentators, and we want to avoid mistreating the tradition. However, it is totally okay to put Platonism in conversation with other Gods you ordinarily worship, and indeed, this was even done in antiquity as Platonism spread from Greece to adjacent cultures, from Egypt and Syria to Rome and beyond. (All of us are part of a cultural reception unless we have a direct connection to Greece.) Let the Gods close to your heart lead the way, and avoid reducing them to correspondences as if the Gods fit into binnable slots — but other than that, you're good to go. As the situation with the Platonic revival is rapidly evolving, it may even be

the case that by the time you read this, there is already a set of conventional interpretations of Platonic doctrines that are in dialogue with the Gods you worship — which is why this document has a Creative Commons license: so others working in other contexts can build on it for their own communities.

## Opening with Prayer

I encourage anyone planning to use this document to establish a study-related prayer practice. Beginning with the Gods is always best, as we want to consciously affirm their care and support for the well-being of each and every one of us.

Depending on your preference, you may pray silently or aloud when you start reading, listening, or viewing materials in order to set the tone, or you may decide to pray at the beginning of the day. One option is to memorize Proclus' *Common Hymn to the Gods* (the hymn to the Gods of Wisdom) or his *Hymn to the Muses*; the Powell translation in *Greek Poems to the Gods* is adequate and affordable. Another is to write your own prayer and say it from the heart. The Prometheus Trust (note: in North America, the distributor is Kindred Star Books) has a set of small hardbacks in a series called *The Music of Philosophy* that contain small readings; *A Flight of Souls* contains hymns and prayers, including ones for reading.

Here is another prayer that you may use, written by me:

BEAUTIFUL EROS, LOOSENER OF GARMENTS,  
GOD WHO BINDS SKY TO SEA, DUST TO FIRE,  
SOMBER LIMIT TO LAUGHING LIMITLESSNESS,  
WHO HOLDS ALL THINGS IN YOUR EMBRACE —  
YOU KEEP CONVERSATION JOYOUS AND RAPT,  
YOU TIE EVERY SACRED UNION TOGETHER,  
YOU BESTOW THE TEACHINGS OF DIVINE MANIA.  
TWO-NATURED GOD, LIGHT-FORMED, WINGED,  
MAY YOU ANCHOR US IN OUR EXPLORATIONS,  
MAY YOU SPARK THE LOVE OF WISDOM,  
MAY YOU STOKE AN INTELLECTUAL BONFIRE  
WARMING US FROM THE CHILL OF GENERATION  
SO WE MAY BRING FORTH BEAUTIFUL THINGS  
GUIDED BY YOUR SACRED ILLUMINATIONS.

# Level of the Muses

Muse-engendered [madness] causes [us] to give utterance in metrical form, and to do things and to move in a rhythmic manner, and to sing of the achievements and virtues of divine [persons] and of their way of life in metre, and by these means schools [our] manner of living, just as within it unified the parts of our soul. (Hermias, *On Plato's Phaedrus*, trans. Baltzly & Share, 96,7-9; most brackets theirs, but I made this gender-netural)

The priority at this level is to gain a solid footing in what the Platonic tradition is about, in both a philosophical and theurgic sense. The readings are meant as general guidance, with the goal of supporting inquiry. Do read the bibliographies and notes, and start a *commonplace book* to keep track of insights, notes, and plans for follow-up. This commonplace book may be digital or in print; if you need some pointers on setting one up using the software or journaling style you prefer, there are many tutorials on YouTube.

## Readings

- Platonic dialogues: *Alcibiades I*, *Gorgias*
- Commentaries: Proclus' and Olympiodorus' commentaries on *Alcibiades I*; Olympiodorus' commentary on the *Gorgias* if one can locate it affordably (or get it from a library/interlibrary loan)
- *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*
- Dwayne A. Meisner's *Orphic Tradition and the Birth of the Gods*
- *Orphic Hymns*, in any translation
- *Greek Poems to the Gods: Hymns from Homer to Proclus*, Barry Powell (don't take the introduction seriously because Powell gets some of Proclus' metaphysics wrong due to a lack of familiarity with Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, but Powell is an amazing translator)
- *A Flight of Souls* (Prometheus Trust) — optional, for additional prayer readings
- *Enchiridion/Handbook* (the title depends on the translation), Epictetus; *Commentary on Epictetus* (two volumes), Simplicius
- *Golden Verses with Commentary*, Hierocles
- Proclus' *Essays 5 and 6* on Plato's *Republic*. This is available in several translations. Thomas Taylor also includes some of Essay 6 in an introduction to Books 2 and 3 of his *Republic* translation. If you haven't read the Homeric myths, it is recommended to listen to an audiobook translation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*

- Tim Addey's *The Unfolding Wings*
- Mindy Mandell's *Discovering the Beauty of Wisdom*
- Start reading the Noësis Archives ([this link will take you to the earliest posts](#)) from Edward Butler; [he also has an Academia.edu page](#) with many essays on deities from a Platonic perspective
- Layne, Danielle A. (2014). The Character of Socrates and the Good of Dialogue Form. In *The Neoplatonic Socrates* (p. 80). University of Pennsylvania Press. You may need to get this through interlibrary loan, but the tables in it are valuable for looking at how Platonists like Proclus read the dialogues.
- Kate Johnson's *Radical Friendship: Seven Ways to Love Yourself and Find Your People in an Unjust World*; Marisa G. Franco's *Platonic: How the Science of Attachment Can Help You Make – and Keep – Friends*; Vivek Murthy's *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World*; Garth Gwyn's *You Are Us: How to Build Bridges in a Polarized World*; and/or Plato's *Lysis* (suggestion: read after Simplicius' commentary on Epictetus)

## Practice

The **theurgic** practice concentrates on **establishing cultus for the Muses** and, optionally, other deities who are active in creative arts (e.g., Sága or Bragi, Seshat and Thoth, or Brigid). Plato set up a shrine for the Muses in his Academy, and the Platonic tradition historically celebrated a holiday within the school for the Muses called the *Mouseia*. The *Orphic Hymns* and *Greek Poems to the Gods* contain translations of prayers to the Muses that could be read after lighting a candle or incense or — flamelessly — with a libation of some liquid. Optionally, you may also want to start praying to a household deity. [See \*The Soul's Inner Statues\* for more about household practices and the foundations of devotional worship if you want or need guidance.](#) You can also add books about specific Gods, in audio or written format, to complement the readings above.

The **contemplative** practice centers on **body scan and environment-oriented meditation**. The goal for this style of meditation is to get an inner sense of what Plato's Socrates is arguing for in the *Alcibiades I* about the self being the soul and what Simplicius says about differentiating the self from the self's belonging (the body) and the self's belonging's belongings (externals associated with the body, especially possessions).

## Reflections

When embarking on any spiritual path, one enormous risk in Western cultures (especially in America) is overshooting the target (spiritual wellness) — instead, many people engage in behaviors that fall under the “spiritual bypassing” umbrella. Human beings often make mistakes about what is necessary for happiness and get caught up in momentary pleasures without thinking about the consequences. In addition, the media we read, watch, and listen to impacts the self.

You are encouraged to cultivate mindfulness about these topics and to investigate (without being too harsh if you slip up) what the best boundaries are for you when it comes to thinking about your habits and how you relate to the virtues (see *The Unfolding Wings*, *Discovering the Beauty of Wisdom*, and Michael Griffin’s introduction to the second volume of his translation of Olympiodorus’ *Alcibiades I* commentary for the best intro to virtue). When someone decides to make changes, the changes will typically be oriented towards changing our relationship to consumerism and “FOMO” (fear of missing out) culture in favor of a more mindful engagement with one’s embodied context. If so moved, Google phrases like “Scandinavian Death Cleaning” or “KonMari method” or “digital minimalism” — there is a lot of information out there. The book *Digital Minimalism* by Cal Newport is useful for anyone who is looking to reframe screen time in a healthier way. For younger people who haven’t accumulated habits and things, intentionally setting lifestyle habits (and, for professional contexts, looking into something like *Project 333*) can be useful for reframing consumerist mindsets. If you try one (or more) of these tools, reflect on your experience with it.



# Level of Dionysos

Telestic [madness], by chasing away all that is alien, polluted, and harmful, keeps our lives unblemished and unharmed, and by chasing away the [undesirable] types of madness and daimonic apparitions, makes us sound, perfect, and unblemished, just as within it rendered the soul unblemished and perfect. (Hermias, *On Plato's Phaedrus*, trans. Baltzly & Share, 96,10-14; brackets theirs)

The priority at this level is to engage with the myths and put into practice what you were learning in the readings at the Level of the Muses — we want to start treating ourselves seriously as the soul we are. This involves learning more about a spiritual lifestyle and shaking things up — a sort of self-initiation, as it were, under the watchful gaze of Dionysos — so we can set ourselves up for a successful climb up the mountain. As Plato said, many are the thyrsus-bearers, but the Bacchantes are few.

## Readings

- Platonic dialogues: *Phaedo*, *Cratylus*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Apology*, *Crito*
- Olympiodorus' and Damascius' commentaries on the *Phaedo*; Proclus' commentary on the *Cratylus*
- Iamblichus' *Letter to Anebo/On the Mysteries*, translated by Thomas Taylor or by Clarke et al. The latter is in more current idiomatic English
- Tim Addey's *Seven Myths of the Soul*
- Gregory Shaw's *Theurgy and the Soul*
- Algis Uždavinys' *Philosophy and Theurgy in Late Antiquity Book and Orpheus and the Roots of Platonism*
- Shannon Grimes' *Becoming Gold: Zosimos of Panopolis and the Alchemical Arts in Roman Egypt*
- *The Life of Plotinus* by Porphyry; *The Life of Proclus* by Marinus; Eunapius' *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists*; if you can get ahold of it, Damascius' *Life of Isidore*
- Plotinus' *Enneads*, sections I-III (the first half of them according to Porphyry's organization). These are many treatises
- Paul Kalligas *Enneads of Plotinus: A Commentary, Volume I*
- Apuleius' *The Golden Ass/The Metamorphosis*; other Middle Platonists' works as you deem appropriate
- Niketas Siniossoglou's *Radical Platonism in Byzantium: Illumination and Utopia in Gemistos Plethon*; Niketas Siniossoglou's *Plato and Theodoret: The Christian*

*Appropriation of Platonic Philosophy and the Hellenic Intellectual Resistance*; and materials on how Platonism arrived in your part of the world (such as Paul Anderson's *Platonism in the Midwest*)

- Georg Feuerstein's *Holy Madness: The Shock Tactics and Radical Teachings of Crazy-wise Adepts, Holy Fools, and Rascal Gurus*; Shenpen Hookham's *The Guru Principle: A Guide to the Teacher-Student Relationship in Buddhism*; and Amanda Montell's *Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism* — together, these are to encourage mindfulness as you start to navigate social dynamics within Platonism and to encourage reflection about the differences between healthy weird/niche and toxic, both within your own practice and in any communities you decide to join
- Pema Chödrön's *How We Live Is How We Die* and *The Places That Scare You*
- Pick some self-help podcasts and books that fit in with the things you are working on within your own life; you can learn about people active in these spaces by watching some TEDx talks and following up on professionals whose work interests you. Even if someone's story inspires you, avoid falling into cults of personality by practicing mindful awareness

## Practice

The **theurgic practice** focuses on **Dionysos**. One very beautiful chant, popularized by bloggers involved in Dionysian worship to the benefit of all of us, Dionysian and not, is this:

*Οὐδὲν ἄρα οὕτως βεβαίως δεδήσεται, οὐ νόσῳ, οὐκ ὀργῇ, οὐ τύχῃ οὐδεμιᾶ, ὃ μὴ οἶόν τ' ἔσται  
λῦσαι τῷ Διονύσῳ.* (“Nothing can be so firmly bound by illness, wrath, or fortune that cannot be released by Dionysos.”)

This can be done by purchasing a set of prayer beads to use with the chant, creating your own (it can be as simple or complex as needed) — or you can chant freestyle. If you purchase prayer beads, select wood, seed, or glass beads over crystals (if possible) or stick to a list of crystals on an ethical mining list, as crystal mining often involves exploitative labor practices. I find that prayer beads decrease my uncertainty about when the chant will stop. Schedule a few times a week to do the chant. If you're using a prayer bead set with 108 beads, it will take you 15-20 minutes to chant this. The chant focuses on Dionysos' activity of *loosening bonds* and acting providentially for the health of each of us, as a soul, striving for wholeness through the power of the Gods. Once you start to read Damascius' *Phaedo* commentary, you can combine chanting with reflecting on specific passages from the early sections in the commentary about Dionysos and the soul's journey. I started out 30 days of chanting this daily and then dialed back to twice a month.

In addition to the prayers to Dionysos, you may also want to engage with Gods to whom you are drawn and who have mystery cycles of their own, *either at this level or at any point in time moving forward*. If you are approaching Platonism from a polytheistic framework that is less focused on Hellenic Gods, this is an opportunity to explore what it looks like to approach your Gods and their myths from a Platonizing lens. Each God's mysteries is different, and you will come to the mysteries you need at the time in your life and at the point in this practice that you need them. Marinus, in his biography of Proclus, described Proclus as actively seeking religious knowledge and engagement with ritual initiations long after he became head of the school. That pious behavior is a good model for how we want to approach mysteries — go for the ones you need (and, in addition, you can sometimes consult with a divination specialist or spiritual teacher about a mystery's appropriateness for you), and do it with enthusiasm.

You can also focus on **Mnemosyne**, who stirs the memory of the soul and who is the mother of the Muses, and the **Mother of the Gods**. Depending on one's family, societal, and cultural history, there may be some purifications related to **the restless dead** in order — Hermias lists the example of stolen estates, gold, and silver in the *Phaedrus* commentary; descendants incarnate in a specific environment to make amends as a tonic for their own souls. Research your family and region/country and note down what strikes you. Depending on the circumstances, prayers to the **Eumenides** and other justice-oriented Gods are appropriate here, in addition to mundane/social actions that can help mitigate the damage, like donating to causes related to groups your ancestors wronged and supporting local and regional programs that further the health and healing of the *polis*.

Start celebrating the birthdays of Socrates, Plato, Proclus, and (if you are in the English-speaking world) Thomas Taylor. We know their birthdays. Socrates and Plato are traditionally on 6 and 7 Thargelion in the Athenian calendar (which moves in the solar year), Proclus' birthday is February 8, and Thomas Taylor's birthday is May 15. You can also routinely make libations to intellectual predecessors at the close of the lunar month, ideally near the dark moon — that's a great way to honor those whose birthdays we've lost track of.

The **contemplative practice** can start to integrate **noting meditations** of various kinds. In noting meditations, when one focuses on the breath and is drawn away (as our attention inevitably wanders), label the type of distraction you experienced. Some instructors ask you to differentiate between thinking/feeling; others will apply a temporal facet of past/future-oriented (ruminating/planning). You could also label interruptions as desires, emotions, and thoughts. Try out a few kinds and stick with the practice that is most

actionable for you. The goal of this practice is to become more sensitive to the shifting states of the mind, and this activity supports the Dionysian activity of loosening the bonds between you and the objects of your suffering — the way our internal state changes due to external stimuli and scatters us.

If you are using a meditation app, many of them also include **emotional check-in** modules — start doing those check-ins if you can. When we start checking in with our feelings at random times during the day or before/after meditating, we'll notice that our emotions change like the weather. We often remember the crises, but until we start tracking, we don't realize how often we're content or relaxed or calm. This can do wonders for our health because it allows us to check our mental story against what is really happening — data is empowering, and by backing up or refuting our mental narrative's hypothesis about how we're doing, we can start showing up for ourselves better.

## Reflections

Especially if you did a few minimalist challenges — an attempt to avoid social media or consumerism — in the Level of the Muses, you likely faced a lot of challenges. We all have a very strong attachment to things around us, and one of the challenges is that we often mistake true self-care (from *Alcibiades I*, we know that true self-care is the care of the soul) for short-term gains, a reflection of what Plato takes us through in the *Gorgias* discussion of doctors vs. pastry-bakers.

We all have a range of issues going on: managing chronic conditions, caretaking for children or aging loved ones, working a job or three ... and after a rough day at work or a grueling void of loneliness, it can truly seem like a pastry (online splurges, three hours of a media binge, drinking, &c.) is what is best for us — but it doesn't lead to our long-term happiness. We could all just as easily decompress with a foam roller or tennis balls to soothe aching muscles after a day spent sitting, spend a few moments of rest or motion in meditative silence or movement, or any number of activities that show long-term care and respect for our bodies, appetites, and emotions. These activities do not activate the brain's reward centers as quickly, so it takes more effort to habit-build positive responses to the stressors of our daily lives.

We can think of these issues as an extension of training our habits, but this is also where we can look to the myth of Dionysos. Enthroned by Zeus, symbolized as a young child, Dionysos was lured away from the throne by the Titans (who preside over division). They entranced Dionysos with toys and, ultimately, a mirror, before they ripped the young God apart. The

soul-related myths in the Platonic tradition link our various experiences in embodiment to specific Gods, many of them Hellenic Gods due to Platonism's origins. A good cornerstone for contemplative practice is to put to memory, and always remember, these words from Damascius:

*“Like Kore, the soul descends into genesis; like Dionysos she is scattered by generation; like Prometheus and the Titans she is chained to the body. She frees herself by acquiring the strength of Herakles, gathers herself together through the help of Apollo and of Athena the savior — by truly purifying philosophy — and she elevates herself to the causes of her being with Demeter.”* Damascius' *Phaedo Commentary*, §130

The Dionysian purifications and madneses are related to the God's rulership of the encosmic realm, where we have so much going on within us that is scattered. (If you prefer, you can think of Psyche instead of Herakles; in her myth, she undergoes a similar set of labors with the same ultimate function.) It involves facing what is unpleasant within us and working to come into a place of self-compassionate care. Ultimately, we want to “gather ourselves together” into a unity, our soul's place of thriving. This means doing what is possible (note: not everything we dream about is possible) for ourselves when it comes to showing up in our lives — at work, at home, and elsewhere — so we can integrate ourselves into a whole.

The dangers within this level of purification are that our culture as a whole tends to frame self-care in a toxic manner as a deprivation — we see uninhibited consumption as the ideal of human life — and we juxtapose that against the Puritans, who are the subjects of so many horror films for their inhumane persecution of embodied happiness. As an extension of this, many of us are taught in our culture that we are broken and unfixable due to either an innate wrongness within ourselves or an inherited guilt from past generations. This toxic teaching can sometimes come from religions like Christianity that have an original sin doctrine or from cultural supremacist doctrines — for example, Dalits are seen as inherently defective on a spiritual level in South Asian societies across a range of religions (including many forms of Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity), which is an abhorrent and dehumanizing belief. Both teachings have horrific real-world consequences. Beyond that, seeing oneself as “bad” can come from toxic family patterns and malefic interpersonal dynamics in one's childhood, regardless of someone's cultural substrate. It is possible to develop a healthy relationship with one's body and life without losing oneself (the soul) in wanton passions or binding oneself so tightly with deprivation that any movement is impossible. It is worth facing our lives' challenges to achieve well-being for our souls. This is a process we will be engaging in every day of our lives — there is not a day when you can say,

“Oh, yes, I’ve spiritually arrived.” A huge sign of toxic gurus is that they have deluded themselves into believing that they no longer need to self-regulate.

On a spiritual level, these Dionysian purifications also put us “out-of-resonance” with material daimons. Daimons are a class of divinity that is above us and below the Gods, and they enact a range of activities within a God’s series ([see here for more information on what a series is](#)). At the level most proximate to the material world are the material daimons. When we engage in scattered behavior that is not in our long-term best interest, or when we engage in toxic, culturally-inherited behavioral patterns, we come into resonance with them, and this acts as a feedback loop that drags us deeper into that scattered state of being. Material daimons are not bad; they’re active at the level of matter, and they will do what they do regardless of who steps onto the path in front of them.

# Level of Apollon

Mantic [madness] brings together in unity the extended and unbounded [nature] of time and sees all things — those that have passed, those that are present, and those yet to be — as though in a present unity, the ‘now.’ Hence, by foretelling future events, which it sees as contemporaneous, it makes our lives go by without stumbles, just as within it brings together and leads up to the one all of the multiplicitous and manifold lives and powers of the soul so that it will be kept safer and be preserved. (Hermias, *On Plato’s Phaedrus*, trans. Baltzly & Share, 96,15-20; brackets theirs)

Apollon, in the myths, gathered Dionysos back together, and he helps us to tune our souls into an effective unity. Apollon is an infinitely compassionate God, but often depicted as a distant God and as a God who holds terrifying mysteries. He is connected to prophecy and the knowledge of the future, and his daimons can be just a tad no-nonsense due to his series’ connections to truth. This level focuses on deepening that unity without falling into the trap of engaging in spiritual dualism.

## Readings

- Platonic dialogues: *Symposium, Phaedrus, Ion, Republic, Seventh Letter*
- Proclus’ essays on Plato’s *Republic* in three volumes; Hermias’ commentary on the *Phaedrus*
- Majercik’s translation of the Chaldean Oracles fragments; fragments from Proclus’ commentary on the Chaldean Oracles
- Crystal Addey, *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism: Oracles of the Gods*
- Proclus’ *Ten Problems Concerning Providence* and *On Providence* and *On Evils*
- Re-reads of *Enchiridion*, Epictetus; *Commentary on Epictetus* (two volumes), Simplicius
- Re-read *Golden Verses with Commentary*, Hierocles
- Re-read the introduction from Michael Griffin to the second volume of Olympiodorus’ *Alcibiades I* commentary
- Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*
- Aristotle’s *Categories*, if you’re feeling ambitious, or something related to it
- Read the surviving text of the Delphic Maxims. Opsopaus’ *The Oracle of Apollo* includes a commentary on the Delphic Maxims in the context of a modern divination practice using the Maxims
- *Homeric Hymns*, any translation
- Plotinus, *Enneads*, sections IV-V (as bundled by Porphyry)

- Paul Kalligas *Enneads of Plotinus: A Commentary, Volume II*
- Porphyry's *To Gaurus on Embryos* and *On What Is in Our Power*, ideally read at about the same time as Proclus' *Myth of Er* essay among his *Republic* essays
- Eric Perle's *Thinking Being: Introduction to Metaphysics in the Classical Tradition*
- Some modern science writing about physics, cosmology, and causality; type "top physics books of [last year]" (unless it's late December, and then you're good for typing in the current year) into Google and pick a few out of the lists; stick to books from the past 5 years, if possible
- Modern science books on natural history, exoplanets, ecology, and the environment, including indigenous lifeways; as with the previous bullet point, stick to recently-published works at first, such as Susan Bauer-Wu's *A Future We Can Love*, Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Gathering Moss*, Richard Fortey's *Horseshoe Crabs and Velvet Worms*, Siddhartha Mukherjee's *The Song of the Cell*, Helen Gordon's *Notes from Deep Time*, and Marcia Bjornerud's *Timefulness*
- Christopher G. De Pree and Sarah Scoles' *Astronomical Mindfulness*

## Practice

This practice builds on what came before through a prayer to the **Anagogic/Elevating Triad** of Hermes, Aphrodite, and Apollon. These Gods' activity, as outlined by Proclus in the *Theology of Plato* (Book VI, Chapter XXII, in the Thomas Taylor translation) prepare us through unification. In Proclus' words,

the anagogic, or elevating, Hermes indeed is the supplier of philosophy, and through this elevates souls, and by the dialectic powers, sends upward both total and partial souls to the good itself. But Aphrodite is the first-effective cause of the amatory inspiration which pervades through wholes, and familiarizes to the beautiful the lives that are elevated by her. And Apollon perfects and converts all things through music, convolving, as Socrates says [in the *Cratylus*], and through harmony and rhythm attracting to intellectual truth, and the light which is there.

Through praying to each member of this triad, we first come into propitiation. **Hermes** is the teacher of all, the God who distributes philosophy. In the mythic tradition, he is said to go among all of the realms: the Heavens, the Earth, and the Underworld. This is reflected through his opening of the way in this prayer, acting as the soul's guide through the education she is undergoing. **Aphrodite** connects us to bliss, and she is the one who inspires the soul to the viewing of Beauty and who turns the soul's desires towards the blessed seen-unseen.



**Apollon** unifies and harmonizes the soul together, just as he gathered the body of Dionysos, energizing us to come intact into ourselves within, realizing that we have never not been intact within. When praying to this triad as a whole, precede it with prayers to the Muses and to Dionysos. You might include the chant mentioned in the last level in either its full extent or a shortened Dionysian practice: do the full-length Dionysian chant if you need extra grounding, or do a shortened version if you judge your interior state is decent.

Thomas Taylor wrote prayers for Hermes and Apollon that work well here and that can be accompanied by frankincense or other appropriate offerings — his prayers are in the *Hymns and Initiations* volume of the Prometheus Trust series. For Aphrodite, Proclus' first hymn to Aphrodite is an appropriate one to recite; if offering incense, select something delicate and floral. These prayers should be immediately followed by contemplation, with a focal point on the breath and on the expansiveness of the divine energy. You will likely not be able to do this prayer with daily or weekly frequency because the prayer and contemplation sequence can take about an hour. In addition, I recommend avoiding doing this prayer during the final days of the lunar cycle or, if you menstruate, during the part of your cycle when you are exhausted or in pain.

You can also pray to the Elevating Triad for the best guidance possible for your soul, including a realization of γνῶθι σεαυτόν (“know thyself”) — ask them for insight in ways that are most appropriate and best for your own development, leaving the details up to them. If you want to know which divine series you are in, you can also pray for guidance about that. Use journaling or connect with a capable and qualified religious specialist if you are working through that discovery process.

The **contemplation** focus at this stage is breathwork/light meditation (remember the importance of the breath and light imagery in the Chaldean Oracles), the contemplation of divine icons, the contemplation of the Delphic Maxims and passages from the commonplace book you have developed, and the contemplation of the universe. If you have an intuitive sense of the God you are connected to, employing an icon of the God, focus on them in meditation. If you do not yet have an intuitive sense of who that is, set up a contemplative rotation of Gods whom you are drawn to. There are Zen Buddhist techniques for reducing eye fatigue while meditating with the eyes open, which include “softening” the gaze, and it can take some time to learn how to do that. You can use some of the exercises in *Astronomical Mindfulness* for contemplating the universe. Photographs from James Webb Space Telescope, Hubble, and other cosmic missions can be helpful as focal points in meditation.

Icons do not need to be physical. You can use a slide show on a tablet or computer as long as the notifications are off. Take your time with deciding to purchase statuary for any Gods, and don't settle for divine icons that don't speak to your relationship with that God.

You may notice that the list of contemplative techniques here is much longer. This is because, at this stage, you are developing a broader level of contemplative techniques that you can make use of in prayer and meditation throughout your lifetime.

Finally, **volunteering**. In embodiment, we exist in society, and it's very easy to start a spiritual practice and to let it turn into something that is solely self-directed and that is compartmentalized away from the rest of your life. Start to brainstorm ways that you can contribute back to society's flourishing, and contextualize this in terms of what you have been learning about ethics and society within the Platonic tradition. This could be physically going to a soup kitchen, coordinating beach or highway cleanups, working with abandoned animals at a pet shelter, participating in walks and runs for social goods, or any number of things. Try to make whatever you do local. Some workplaces even have volunteering initiatives, and you just have to sign up. If your situation allows for it, you could start to set aside part of your income (5-10%) to contribute to causes, especially if your life is busy, so that nonprofit workers are supported. Nonprofit workers have a wealth of experience, and thinking back to the *Gorgias*' difference between being a specialist and a nonspecialist or a false-specialist, we want people who have deep skills to have the resources they need to practice their craft. If you do make a difference via funding more frequently than you volunteer, make a point of actually reviewing the reports that you are receiving from the organizations you donate to so you are aware of what your money is supporting and how it is impacting others. Otherwise, you risk floating on autopilot. If you work in a nonprofit and are focused on serving others, shift your focus to ensuring that you are taking care of yourself well enough that you are avoiding burnout.

If you are a member of a philosophical or spiritual group, see what you can do to step up and get involved in supporting its continuation. Start to consider how you can "pay forward" to people on their spiritual paths who are still growing, both in terms of your peers and in terms of those who are just starting out and who need formal or informal mentors. You are still making progress, but if you have made it this far, you have definitely learned some lessons along the way, and sharing your struggles and what you've learned from them can empower and inspire. The spiritual path is a mountain with many brambles, stones, and boulders, and the more we can show up for one another, the more success we will have as a community and as individuals within that community.

## Level of Eros (and Aphrodite)

Erotic [madness] turns young [people] to us and leads them into friendship with us, since it too educates [the young], and leads [the young] from sensible beauty to the psychic beauty in us, and from this leads them up to the intelligible [kind], just as within it joined the one of the soul to the gods. (Hermias, *On Plato's Phaedrus*, trans. Baltzly & Share, 96,21-24; most brackets theirs; I made some gender-neutral modifications)

The focus at this stage is on a deepening and a gradual growth of your own knowing and sensemaking within Platonism. By now, you will have been practicing these techniques and doing readings for several years. This is an opportunity to use what you have learned about yourself, your goals, and your affinities to be intentional about the Gods you worship. It is also an opportunity to explore sacred writing (if you haven't been expressing yourself in that way already) — essays, poems, and other creative works — and to deepen your connections to society in a positive way.

Note that the term *erotic* is very expansive, and chaste, within the Platonic tradition. After perusing the materials in the Level of Dionysos, it should be evident that employing Platonism to harm others is a perversion of the school — as Damascius wrote in the *Life of Isidore*, “Philosophy cannot be harmed or damaged by any external evil, but only by the evil within, as Socrates said — this is why the downfall of philosophy was caused a disgrace within” (Damascius, *Philosophical History/Life of Isidore*, fr. 146E). If you want to learn more about teacher-student dynamics in historical Platonism, please start here: Markus, D. (2016). Anagogic Love between Neoplatonic Philosophers and Their Disciples in Late Antiquity. *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition*, 10(1), 1–39. You may also be interested in reading [this blog post on KALLISTI about teachers, students, and community](#).

## Readings

- Platonic dialogues: *Philebus*, *Timaeus*, *Parmenides*, *Laws* and remaining dialogues in a self-moving manner
- Damascius' commentary on the *Philebus*; Proclus' commentary on the *Timaeus*; Proclus' commentary on the *Parmenides* and, if you know French, Damascius' commentary on the *Parmenides*
- Porphyry's *Sentences*
- Plotinus, *Enneads*, section VI (as bundled by Porphyry)

- Aristotle's *Metaphysics*
- Syrianus' refutation of Aristotle's interpretation of the Forms in his *Metaphysics 3-4* and *Metaphysics 13-14* commentary
- Proclus' *Platonic Theology/Theology of Plato* (and perhaps Edward Butler's dissertation, which focuses on many parts of the *Platonic Theology*)
- Proclus' *Elements of Theology*
- Damascius' *Problems and Solutions Concerning First Principles*
- Jack Kornfield's *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*
- Pierre Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life*
- You've gone far enough that you likely know where you want to go — both in terms of what new things to read as well as what you want to review. *Be the self-moving agent of your heart's heart.*

## Practice

Most of the spiritual practice at this level will be highly customized to who you are and to the journey that you have been through over the past few years. You may want to pray to **Janus, Hekate, Zeus, and Rhea** (Proclus has a nice prayer to them) at the close of your Elevating Triad prayers. You may be interested in integrating these practices more closely with any non-Hellenic Gods that you worship. You may be focusing on deepening your meditation practice and focusing on the stillness after prayer. You may be navigating knowing who your leader-God is and what that implies about how you should structure your life for your happiness, well-being, and efficacy. Praying to **Aphrodite** and **Eros** while reading the texts in this section (for a year-long commitment each) can enrich and deepen one's experience of the texts.

One exercise that you can add to your practice is **compassion/lovingkindness meditation**. [See this blog post on KALLISTI for more context.](#) You may already be doing compassion meditations, depending on your preference, but this meditation imitates the providential activity of the Gods, and it is especially beautiful to do after praying to the Elevating Triad. In addition, try out some of the contemplative exercises in Plotinus' *Enneads*.

## Reflections

As Hermias says at one point in the commentary on the *Phaedrus*, all of the levels of purification and refinement are simultaneous.

[T]he soul, when destined to ascend and be restored, is first gripped by Muse-engendered madness, then telestic, then mantic, and finally erotic, as we shall learn later. These four kinds of possession cooperate with one another and have need of one another. Accordingly, there is a high degree of interconnection between them. For example, telestic has need of mantic (for mantic determines the greater part of the content of telestic), and, conversely, mantic also needs telestic (for telestic consecrates and dedicates oracular shrines), and, again, mantic also needs poetic and Muse-engendered (for seers pretty much always talk in verse), and in turn Muse-engendered also of its very nature needs mantic, as [Socrates] says himself: ‘for the sacred tribe of poets, being inspired, when speaking prophetically with the help of certain of the Muses and Graces, invariably hits upon much of the truth.’ As for the erotic and the Muse-engendered, what need be said? Pretty much the same people have made use of the Muse-engendered and the erotic since the one cannot exist without the other, as for instance Sappho and Anacreon and their like. (Hermias, *On Plato’s Phaedrus*, Volume I, Baltzly and Share translation, 92,10-92,26, brackets theirs)

At somewhat regular intervals, it’s worth explicitly returning to some readings, practices, and reflective exercises from earlier “levels” in this document. This may happen on its own, especially if you are in a reading and contemplation community that has a habit of returning to dialogues and other foundational texts. On your own, too, it may happen organically. Roll with your intuition when the inclination comes. You can also schedule review times in your practice. If you’d like more structure, try setting aside an evening every few weeks or pick a month every year to review one of the levels.

Ultimately, you are still a work in progress. There is no graduation. Look back over your commonplace book and notes. Make use of them.

I will leave you with these words from *Phaedo* 107d:

For the soul goes into Hades with nothing else except her education and nurture, which things are said to be of the greatest benefit or harm to the one who’s met her end — right from the beginning of her journey There.

and some wise words from Simplicius’ *Enchiridion* commentary (v. 2, 135,30):

Μία ἡ ὅλη ζωὴ καὶ εἰς βίος, τῆδε κάκεισε μεταβαλλόμενος.

All of life is one, and the life you live is one, alternating between here and there.