

Introduction to the Tarot

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Physically, the Tarot is a deck of 78 cards. These cards are divided into two parts--the Major and Minor Arcana. The Minor Arcana is very similar to a standard deck of playing cards in many respects. It contains 4 suits—usually Cups or Cauldrons, Rods or Wands, Swords, and Pentacles, Disks, or Coins--each with 14 cards (one more than a standard deck of playing cards). These cards include Ace through Ten, and four face cards--usually King, Queen, Prince, and Princess or King, Queen, Knight, and Page. These face cards are sometimes considered to be part of neither the Major nor Minor Arcana. The Major Arcana consists of 22 cards numbered 0 through 21. Each represents the main experiences and influences in our lives.

The History:

There is much debate over the origins of the Tarot. Possible roots of the word itself include:

- The ancient Italian game of Tarocchi
- The *Torah* (the law) from Jewish tradition
- The Hungarian Gypsy word *tar* (a deck of cards)
- The Egyptian words *tar* (path) and *ro* (king) or *Ta-rosh* (the royal way)
- A corruption of the name *Thoth* (ancient Egyptian god of magic or wisdom)
- An anagram for the Latin word *rota* (wheel)

Theories about the origins of the cards themselves are equally diverse. They have been theorized as originating in China and Korea along with the earliest playing cards, India, and most commonly, Egypt. There is also some speculation that the two parts of the deck were never originally intended to go together, and perhaps they originated in separate locations.

It is generally accepted that the Tarot first appeared in Europe in the 14th century and was closely linked with the Gypsies and heretical Christian sects that are today collectively known as the Gnostics. In the late 18th century a theory was proposed that the Tarot of the Gypsies was the remains of an ancient Egyptian book of magical wisdom which had been treasured since their exodus from their native land of Egypt (*Gypsy* is an old English abbreviation of *Egyptian*). This theory had the effect of causing the Tarot to become the tool of the Rosicrucian sages. About this same time, divination with Tarot cards became widespread. Some time in the 18th or 19th century, the 22 cards of the Major Arcana were linked to the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet and to the Qabalah. This is still a very common way of viewing the cards. About this same time the four suits of the Minor Arcana were first associated with the four elements. It was not until the early 20th century that the Minor Arcana became illustrated any more than a regular deck of playing cards.

The Cards:

Each card in a Tarot deck represents a stereotype. The messages in each card are given in symbols, and interpreting the cards is like interpreting a dream. Symbols are the domain of the right side of your brain, which deals with intuition, insight, and hunches. Therefore, the best

way to interpret the cards is by using your subconscious. You need to learn to ignore the rational part of the brain that expects precise and consistent meanings. You need to learn to listen to your intuition. When you allow yourself to interpret the Tarot cards using your intuition, you look into a mirror. What *you* see in each individual picture is key. While you should make use of the interpretations in books, your perception is at least as important; both elements should be used. Each card can have a different meaning for you each time you see it. Any symbol or figure may represent you or a certain part of you. There is no such thing as an inherently good or bad card--any card can be looked at in a number of ways. You should be open to any possibility. Some people believe that a card that appears upside down should be interpreted differently. Some say the meaning should be reversed, while others say reversal just makes it a little more unsure. The decision of how to treat them or whether even to use reversed meanings is entirely up to you.

There are many different ways to lay the cards for a reading. Regardless of the layout you use, be open to whatever answer you get. If you ask a simple yes/no question, expect more than just a yes or a no as an answer. Tarot can give us insight into many different aspects of our lives. They have a reputation of being used to predict the future, but they can also be used to understand the past or present. Remember that the cards do not have the power to dictate the future, and what they have to say is not set in stone. You can choose to let it make your decisions, or you can make decisions that will lead your path away from what it indicates.

When choosing a Tarot deck, choose one that feels right to you, not one that others have said is good. It will be your tool and the most important thing is that you be comfortable with it. Before you use a Tarot deck much you should get to know the cards--both Tarot cards in general and those in the individual deck. A very good way to do this is to pick one card a day and really learn what it means. Keep doing this until you have gone through the whole deck. During this process you should learn what the books have to say about each card, as well as studying it for yourself. Use free association to determine what the symbols depicted mean to you. Keeping a notebook or journal might also be helpful to you. This can also be used once you start doing readings. Don't worry if you aren't good at it in the beginning--the only way to get better is to practice.

The Major Arcana:

There are various different ways to look at the Major Arcana as a whole. Many people look at it as representing a person's progression or journey through life. This can be done by dividing all but the zero card, The Fool, into three stages--the elementary stage (I-VII), the spiritual stage (VIII-XIV), and the cosmic stage (XV-XXI). Another more modern way of looking at the journey is as a circle. This way each card can be either a starting point or a destination point. A term frequently used for viewing the Major Arcana in either of these ways is the Fool's Journey, or sometimes the Hero's Journey. This idea was first suggested by the Swiss psychologist C.G. Jung as a parable for the human being's path in life.

“The Journey of the hero is the oldest story in the world. As the basic structure, it is woven into myths, fairy tales, and legends that tell us how a person sets out to accomplish the great work. It is the story behind all these stories, which to this very day are always told in the same way under countless names in all languages and cultures over and over again. No one has ever devised,

invented, or thought up this story. Instead, a direct knowledge of the soul is expressed in the story; one could say a knowledge that we have 'brought along' with us. As the oldest story in the world, it is also an exemplary story, a parable for the human being's path in life. This is what makes it so interesting, and this is why it must be told time and again so that we never forget why we are on the Earth and what we have to do here."

The first card of the Major Arcana is The Fool. He is generally depicted with all his possessions and all he will need in a knapsack, walking toward the brink of a cliff without seeming to realize his danger. A dog or other animal, which represents his instincts, seems to be warning him, but he does not seem to notice. Some say that he will take this first step and naively tumble into the world, while others say he will be distracted away from his path and never realize how close he came to peril. The mountains in the distance symbolize the heights yet to be climbed. This card represents the uncomplicated side of us that does not care about perfection and tries new things without fear of embarrassment or failure. Various different symbols of innocence frequently appear on this card.

The second card is the Magician (once called Pagat). At this stage the Fool learns the seemingly magical process of the spirit world becoming manifest. From the Magician he learns to pursue knowledge and explore nature to the fullest extent in order to understand and ultimately rule over it. The Magician teaches him how to focus the creative energy in him. The Fool needs to learn how to align his will with the universal will. The card symbolizes the connection between above and below. This is symbolized in the infinity symbol, which is seen on this card in most decks. Also represented are the symbols from each of the four suits of the Minor Arcana, representing the 4 elements and the tools of the Magician's trade.

The Magician is balanced by the High Priestess. Instead of the active pursuit taught by the Magician, she teaches receptivity and acceptance. She teaches faith and trust in order to be guided by spirit. The card frequently includes both crescent and full moons, as well as symbolism of light and dark, indicating that she is a balancing force. In many decks she sits between two pillars of secret knowledge and initiation, as she is the guardian of things hidden and intuitive.

Card III is the Empress, who is very much a mother figure. She is the first representative of the physical plane. She represents fertility and abundance. The card shows a woman sitting in a throne, frequently holding a scepter and frequently pregnant or holding a baby. She may also be surrounded by animals and signs of harvest. Many cards show the symbol of Venus. She teaches the fool about sensuality and pleasure.

The Empress is followed by the Emperor. The Fool needs strength and direction to leave the pleasant realm of the Empress. The Emperor teaches him control over the emotions that have been awakened. He gains power by learning to control all aspects of his life. This is however a double-edged sword, as he must overcome the temptation to use this only for his own gain before he can continue on his journey. The Emperor is also generally depicted on a throne holding a scepter. He wears a crown, and the symbol of the ram is almost universal in this card. It is a forceful symbol of leadership. The fruit that he frequently holds in his hand symbolizes unequalled qualities of character.

After having experienced the passion for both life and power, the Fool is reminded of all he has experienced. The Hierophant is his teacher for this. The Hierophant holds the wisdom of those who have passed before him. His hand is frequently raised in the symbol of benediction. He frequently possesses the key of knowledge. In some decks he is the Pope and in others the High Priest, but he is always a spiritual leader and teacher.

At this stage the Fool must integrate all he has learned of himself. The Lovers teach him that he is made of both light and dark. Duality is the symbolism behind this card, and to many it signifies love and relationships. Most decks show this with a man and a woman, but many also include the yin yang symbol as well as other manifestations of light versus dark and day versus night. It is at this stage that he must choose between these two natures, so this is also a card of choices.

Now that the Fool has realized his dual nature, he must gain mastery over it. This is the lesson of The Chariot. He needs to learn how to handle both the ups and downs of life. He must learn how to use his will to balance the seemingly contradictory perceptions of his senses. The card depicts a man driving a chariot driven by creatures of opposite nature. Sometimes they are light and dark, other times representative of the four elements.

In many decks the next card is Strength*. As the Fool gains mastery over himself and his perceptions, he begins to become more aware of the subtle laws of nature. This card shows a woman together with a lion. Sometimes she has her hand or head in it's mouth, other times she is riding it, and other times she is holding it's jaws closed. All of these are representative of the fact that compassion and a sense of control originating in the higher consciousness are all she needs. Her Strength is hidden by her softness. This realization that spirit can conquer matter begins the Fool's quest for spiritual awareness.

At this point the inner light the Fool is gaining separates him from the common path. The Hermit teaches him that while the knowledge he is gaining should not be kept from the people, he will need to go where there are no people in order to learn it. The Fool is at first lonely, but then gains a sense of peace brought by inner tranquility. The card depicts a man by himself. He is on a mountaintop or some other isolated place. He carries a lamp, symbolizing knowledge and a guiding light.

The Wheel of Fortune brings the lesson that no matter how focused the Fool stays, life continues to change. He learns to see that all the changes are like spokes on a wheel: separate but united at the hub. He begins to learn of karma, and that all things have consequences. Each step in life is laying the foundation for the next one. This causes him to consider his actions and their consequences more thoroughly. This card shows a wheel. In this wheel are shown cycles. In some deck there are the symbols of the horoscopes on the spokes of the wheel, and in others there is shown the passing of the seasons.

Stemming from this realization of consequences to actions, the Fool learns Justice. Things that once appeared random, now are understood. The card of Justice is a card of balance. Scales are commonly depicted, sometimes empty and sometimes weighing different. This card is the lesson

that in the end, justice will be served, and a further lesson that all choices have consequences that we must accept.

At this point the Fool is aware of what he can and can't do to remain in balance with his karma. He knows what interferes with his enlightenment and is willing to make sacrifices. His challenge is to express his individuality in the face of possible ostracism without becoming a martyr. The Fool learns the fine line between real and imagined limitations. The card of The Hanged Man generally depicts a man hanging by one foot from a tree. The other leg is crossed over that leg. He is hanging there by choice, not by force, and the posture is one of comfort and ease. The card is representative of gaining a new perspective on life.

Now, the Fool must learn how to let go of previous beliefs and ideas to make room for new ones. It is time for him to rejoin the world of man, and to do this his attitudes must change—they must in a sense die. The Death card is a card of change. In order to continue to change, the Fool must be willing to let go of his previous concepts of self. Death is necessary for birth. This card generally depicts a skeleton or some other symbol of death. It frequently also shows new life in the midst of the death.

The next step for the Fool is learning to balance and integrate his spiritual and physical lives. He has learned that he needs a firm footing in the material world before he can set foot into the waters of consciousness. He cannot move ahead before he has integrated all he has learned and his objectives are once more clear. The symbol for Temperance is the pouring of water between one vessel and another. The figure is frequently standing with one foot in the water and the other on land, symbolizing a link between the physical and the spiritual.

At this stage the Fool must be wary of letting his mind become so cluttered that he only sees what he is afraid of losing. The Devil plays on this with temptation. Unless he is strong, the Fool will be held back by negative thinking patterns. This card generally shows the Devil presiding over people in chains or otherwise restrained. The Fool must deny the power of negativity and refused to be ruled by his own weakness.

The next step is the sweeping away of everything that is not needed. While Death is a representation of necessary change, the Tower is much more drastically so. It represents upheaval and the destruction of much which you thought was solid and stable and the crumbling of your way of thinking beneath your very feet, but in the process it shows you the difference between those things of lasting value and those that are only temporarily satisfying. This change may be hard to adjust to immediately because it is so intense. The cards show towers being struck by lightning. They are on fire and crumbling. In many cases, people are falling out of them.

Now that all the unnecessary baggage has been cleared away, the Fool's mind is nearing the point where he can receive inspiration from his higher consciousness. The Star shows him that ideas as well as things can be restraining, and in order to receive this inspiration, he must quiet his mind. This is symbolized by water being poured from a cup, which can be seen in most decks. The star is shining down on the scene.

The Fool must now be wary of becoming attached to this new intuition and watch for signs of illusion. In this card we see animals howling at the Moon that they find disquieting. We also see a crayfish, symbol of early conscious growth, emerging from the water. The Fool learns to make himself a purer reflection of the wisdom in the world.

As the Sun, symbol of consciousness appears, the Fool appears as more innocent and childlike. As the journey is a cycle, he must leave as he entered. This is a card of rebirth of the joy and innocence of childhood along with consciousness of the spirit and unity with the creator. A clear morning or day is shown on the cards and the sun is shining. In many cases you see sunflowers, also symbolizing the sun.

Now that the Fool has become what is possible for all to be become, he is able to be judged. He realizes that Judgment is ever-present, but due to our own actions and ways of thinking, we can't see that. This awareness opens doors in his mind, and he is able to receive guidance from his higher self. The symbols of this card are those of judgment—the trumpet, the gavel, or the scales.

The final step in the Fool's journey before the cycle repeats itself is the World. The World has not changed through the journey, but the Fool now sees it with different eyes. He has a new awareness to take with him, and he is ready to emerge into the world of spirit and start over as the Fool. This card represents the ultimate goal, the realization of truth, and the origin of all things.

*Originally Justice was VIII and Strength was XI. They were switched in the Waite Tarot without much reason given. Aleister Crowley switched them back in his Thoth deck.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Complete Book of Tarot Spreads
Evelin Burger & Johannes Fiebig
Sterling Publishing Company, Inc. 1995
ISBN 0-8069-9505-X

The Metaphysical Handbook
David Pond and Lucy Pond
Reflecting Pond Publications, 1984
ISBN 0-915395-18-5

Tarot and the Journey of the Hero
Hajo Banzhaf
Samuel Weiser, Inc. 2000
ISBN 0-57863-117-3

The Tarot Handbook: Practical Applications of Ancient Visual Symbols
Angeles Arrien
Arcus Publishing Company 1990
ISBN 0-916955-02-8

Appendix A: The Major Arcana

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|-------|--------------------|--|
| 0 | The Fool | Radiance, Courage, Transcendence |
| I | The Magician | Expression, Communication, Timing, Flexibility |
| II | The High Priestess | Intuition, Independence, Clarity |
| III | The Empress | Nurturance, Support, Care, Beauty |
| IV | The Emperor | Leadership, Builder, Doer, Pioneer/Futurist |
| V | The Hierophant | Teacher, Counselor, Consultant, Resource, Inspiration |
| VI | The Lovers | Love, Unification, Relationships, Duality, Oppositions |
| VII | The Chariot | Motivation, To Cause, Intention, Victory/Triumph |
| VIII | Strength* | Courage, Power, Fortitude, Vitality, Passion, Will |
| IX | The Hermit | Illumination, Seeker, Completion, Revelation, Introspection |
| X | Wheel of Fortune | Prosperity, Cycles, Evolution and Involution, Probability |
| XI | Justice | Balance, Truth, Arbitration, To Measure, Legality |
| XII | The Hanged Man | New Perspective, Surrender, Faith, Sacrifice, Duty, Initiation |
| XIII | Death | Transformation, Change, Emergence, Release |
| XIV | Temperance | Synergy, Alchemy, Combination, Integration, Assimilation |
| XV | The Devil | negative thinking, Temptation, Desire, Endurance, Sensation |
| XVI | The Tower | Purification, Restoration, Self-Realization |
| XVII | The Star | Confidence, Hope, Vision, Light, Recognition, Self-Esteem |
| XVIII | The Moon | Passage, Choice, Truth, Illusion, Romance |
| XIX | The Sun | Synergy, Collaboration, Co-operation, Consciousness |
| XX | Judgment | Understanding, Good Judgment, Observations, Actualization |
| XXI | The World | Manifestation, Expansion, Liberation, Attainment |

Appendix B: The Minor Arcana

Suits

The four metaphysical elements are used for interpreting the fifty-six cards of the Minor Arcana. They are commonly assigned to four suits called: Wands, Cups, Swords, and Pentacles.

| SUIT | ELEMENT | FUNCTION |
|-----------|---------|-----------|
| Wands | Fire | Intuiting |
| Pentacles | Earth | Sensing |
| Swords | Air | Thinking |
| Cups | Water | Feeling |

Wands (Rods) represent the element of fire and deal with the spiritual aspects of a person. They stand for willpower, vitality, zest for life, creativity, and growth. The world of the Wands is the world of initiation and action, engagement, accomplishments, and power. The Wands also deal with enterprise and entrance, identity, self-confidence, intuition, enthusiasm, success, and planning for the future. Aries, Leo, and Sagittarius are the astrological signs assigned to the Wands and the element of fire. The equivalent in a regular deck of playing cards is Clubs.

Cups (Cauldrons/Chalices) represent the element of water and deal with the emotional aspects of a person. They stand for the soul, inner life, and the unconscious. Their world is the world of feelings, moods, premonition, inner voices, and spiritual experiences. The Cups deal with intuitive awareness and knowledge, sense and meaning, joy, sadness, emptiness, abundance, and experiencing emotions. Cancer, Scorpio, and Pisces are the astrological signs assigned to the Cups and water. The equivalent in a regular deck of playing cards is Hearts.

Swords (Crystals) represent the element of air and deal with the mental aspects of a person. They stand for the mind, mental energy, awareness, knowledge, and intellect. The world of the Swords is the world of recognition, decision, ideas, and judgments. Swords deal with thought and imagination, the conscious and explicit awareness of the world and the self, originality, freedom, the learning process, and clarity. Libra, Aquarius, and Gemini are the astrological signs assigned to the Swords and the element of air. The equivalent in a regular deck of playing cards is Spades.

Pentacles (Disks/Coins/Worlds) represent the element of earth and deal with the physical aspects of a person. They stand for the body, physical experiences, practical and applied skills, and the creation of the concrete as well as your own environment. The world of the Pentacles is the world of results, facts and production, physical awareness, and impressions. Pentacles deal with work, nature and community, connections to the earth, self-awareness, and security. Capricorn, Taurus, and Virgo are the astrological signs assigned to the Pentacles and the element of earth. The equivalent in a regular deck of playing cards is Diamonds.

Court Cards

All Court Cards represent the total potential of their respective element. They represent developed personalities and distinguish themselves by their characteristics.

Queen: Innovative, spontaneous, initiatory. Represents an older, accomplished person, usually a woman. Maturity and competence are present.

King: Thorough, solid, supportive. Mastery and control. Represents a person, usually a man, who is respected in his field of expression and has attained a certain position of authority. Can be assertive and demanding.

Knight: Considering consequences, drawing conclusions, making changes. An aggressive urge to discover one's abilities using whatever suit the card symbolizes. Acting out of haste. Strong determination is present. The armor protects vulnerability.

Page: Playful, probing. Messengers. Youthful person or enterprise. Young boy or girl or child. New involvement. Immature plan.

Instead of the standard Queen, King, Knight, and Page, Crowley used Queen, Prince, Knight, and Princess in his version of the Tarot. He is fairly ambiguous about how these correspond to the normal Court Cards. At one point he seems to indicate that the Knight card is the most powerful of the Court Cards, which would mean it would correspond to the King in most decks. However, he said that astrology played an important part in his version of the Tarot, and from an astrological point of view, the information he gives indicates that the Knight and Queen remain the same as ever while the Prince replaces the King and the Princess replaces the Page. In general, Crowley's definition of the Court Cards is not clearly stated, and that was his intention. He wanted to introduce a system that was different from all the others, and largely left interpretation up to the reader in this area.

Numbered Cards

In addition to their given meanings, one may also look at each card as a mediator between the one before it and the one after it. In this way, 5 provides a transition between 4 and 6, and so on.

- Ace Origin and root. Both the goal and the achievement. The characteristic power of the respective element. A curse and a blessing.
Beginning, initiation, potential of the suit. Hand out of the sky, not anchored in the real world. Something new exists. It is not yet manifest, simply potential.
- 2 Strengthen or break open the power of the element. Differentiation, rupture, disentangling, contrast, and complementary.
Reflection, opposition, duality, realization of choice. Comparing one option to another. Balance
- 3 The “crux of the matter”: fundamental problem or sum (synthesis) of the respective element.
Expansion, growth, preparation for the future. Enthusiasm. There is now more perspective to make a decision than with #2.
- 4 Stabilizing, organizing, and completion. New challenges and validation.
Structure, foundation, form, realization, work. Solid and stable. Reward through effort.
- 5 The personal quintessence of the respective element. Versatility and concentration.
Uncertainty, strife, flux, adjustment and adaptation. Whatever was established in #4 is now being challenged. Change is required.
- 6 Decision, consolidation, changes. The whole as an expression of complex contradictions. Joy or danger.
Harmony, balance, peace, appreciation and indulgence. Personal values are formed and defended.
- 7 Test, sort out, refine. Take a look at what remains in the sieve and what does not.
Critical phase, baffling, ambiguous, transformation, completion in relation to the respective element.
Change, intuition, aloofness, rebellion. Expanded awareness. Opportunity to stand back and witness your experience.
- 8 Conflict or harmony of weaknesses and strengths. Alternating blockage, balance, or support by different characteristics of the respective elements.
Activity, organization, enterprise, power, and control. Solidity; it’s your test in a chance for recognition.
- 9 Maturing, scrutinizing, becoming aware. Self-awareness, searching, and finding personal autonomy in dealing with the respective element.
Dreamy, compassionate. Martyrdom. Wisdom and understanding. Prepare for transition.
- 10 Fulfillment, goal, starting point. Many “tasks”: the respective element provides the power to let go of and gain much.
Completion, or the end of the cycle. Regeneration. You have gone as far as you can; now you must make a transformation.