STORIES FOR THE PLATES

A companion of fables, myths and parables
for the fifty-four plates of the Gnosis booklet

5 September 2026

How to use this

Every plate in the booklet gets an entry here, in booklet order, under the same file numbers — 01-01 through 08-02. Each entry opens with a line naming what the plate is teaching, and then offers three stories drawn from three different traditions.

Each story is written the way it would be told out loud, at the length it needs and no longer, with the heart of it kept intact rather than summarised away. Under each one is a line marked *The link* — the point where the story hinges into the plate, and the thing worth landing before moving on.

The three are alternatives, not a sequence. Choose by the room: a class that is heavy and self-critical wants the Japanese sparrow, not the Egyptian scale.

No story is used twice in the fifty-four. Where a story that would fit several plates has been given to one of them, it has been given to the plate it fits best.

Part VII already carries stories on the plates themselves. Those entries hold **companion** stories instead — a tale from another tradition teaching the same thing, so the two can be twinned in a single class.

The **Supplement** gathers twenty-five Norse, Irish, Welsh and Druidic stories — a fourth option for the plates where that material honestly earns its place. The other twenty-nine plates were not forced.

Where a story is usually attributed to a tradition it does not actually come from, the entry says so. Better to know before a class than after one.

A Spanish edition runs alongside this one — same plates, same stories, same numbers — in the register of the tradition’s own texts.

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NOTES ON THE SOURCES

PART I — Foundations of the Path

Plate 01-01 · What Is Gnosis?

Knowledge of the Being, learned immediately and intuitively — direct knowing, not information about knowing.

1. The Wheelwright and the Duke — *Chinese (Zhuangzi)*

Duke Huan sat reading in his hall. Below him, an old wheelwright was cutting wheels. He put down his mallet and asked what the Duke was reading. "The words of the sages." "Are they alive?" "They are dead." "Then you are reading the dregs of dead men." The Duke, furious, demanded an explanation or the man's life. The wheelwright said: "When I cut a wheel, if I go too slow the chisel slides and grips nothing; too fast and it bites and will not move. Not too slow, not too fast — my hand knows it and my mouth cannot say it. I could not teach it to my own son. He is seventy and still cutting wheels. What cannot be handed over died with the sages. You are reading what was left behind."

> *The link: the plate's whole claim in one story — what can be written down is the residue. Gnosis is the wheelwright's hand.*

2. The Blind Men and the Elephant — *Indian (Buddhist and Jain sources)*

A king gathered men blind from birth and had an elephant brought. Each was led to a different part. Then he asked what an elephant was like. The one who had held the trunk said a thick snake. The one at the ear said a fan. The leg: a pillar. The side: a wall. The tail: a rope. The tusk: a smooth pipe. They began to argue, then to shout, then to strike each other — each of them honest, each of them describing exactly what he had touched. The king laughed, and then he did not laugh.

> *The link: every man there had information. None had the elephant. Useful for the difference between doctrine and gnosis — and gentle, because nobody in the story is lying.*

3. Setne and the Book of Thoth — *Egyptian*

Setne Khamwas, a prince and a scholar, heard of a book written by Thoth himself: two spells, one to enchant heaven and earth, one to see the gods. It lay in a tomb, guarded by the dead magician Naneferkaptah, who had stolen it before him and paid with his wife and son, drowned in the Nile, and then with his own life. Naneferkaptah warned him. Setne took it anyway. He could read every word — and the reading destroyed him: he lost himself to a woman who was not a woman, believed he had killed his own children, and woke naked in the road before Pharaoh. He carried the book back and returned it to the tomb.

> *The link: the plate distinguishes knowing from possessing information. Setne possessed the highest information in Egypt and it flattened him, because he had not been changed enough to hold it. Good for a class where somebody is collecting teachings.*

Plate 01-02 · The Path and Life

Two directions in human experience.

1. Heracles at the Crossroads — *Greek (Prodicus)*

Heracles, still a boy, went out alone to decide what to do with his life. Two women came to him on the road. The first was groomed and soft-eyed, and she hurried to get there first. "Come with me. You will taste every pleasure and never do a hard thing. Others will work; you will enjoy what their work produces." He asked her name. "My friends call me Happiness. My enemies call me Vice." The second walked plainly and did not hurry. "I will not lie to you. Nothing good is given. If you want the favour of the gods, serve them. If you want a body that obeys you, make it obey. Everything worth having has a price attached, and I am the price."

> *The link: the plate's two directions, standing on the road in human shape. Note that Vice arrives first and speaks first — she always does.*

2. Nachiketa and the Lord of Death — *Indian (Katha Upanishad)*

A boy named Nachiketa was given by his father, in anger, to Death. He went, and waited three nights at Death's door without food. Death, ashamed at the discourtesy, offered him three wishes. The boy used the third to ask what becomes of a man when he dies. Death tried everything to buy him off: sons, cattle, chariots, women, long life, kingdoms. "Take all of it. Do not ask me this." Nachiketa answered: your pleasures wear out the senses that enjoy them, and even the longest life is short. Keep your horses and your dancing girls. Then Death told him: there are two things, the pleasant and the good. The wise choose the good; the foolish choose the pleasant, and are lost.

> *The link: the same fork as the plate, drawn by a boy who refuses a bribe. The line "the pleasant and the good" is worth giving to a class verbatim.*

3. Esau Sells His Birthright — *Biblical (Genesis 25)*

Esau came in from the field starving. His brother had a pot of red lentils on the fire. "Give me some of that red stuff, I'm about to die." Jacob said: sell me your birthright first. Esau said: what use is a birthright to a dead man? — and swore it away. He ate the bread and the lentils, got up, and went off. That is the whole transaction. Scripture adds only: *thus Esau despised his birthright.* Later he wept for it and could not get it back.

> *The link: the plate's second direction isn't chosen in a dramatic moment. It is chosen while hungry, over a bowl of soup, for something that mattered enormously an hour later.*

Plate 01-03 · The Four Paths to Self-Realization

The paths of the fakir, the monk, the yogi — and the fourth.

1. The Four Travellers and the Grapes — *Sufi (Rumi)*

A Persian, an Arab, a Turk and a Greek were travelling together and were given one coin between them. The Persian said: let us buy *angur*. The Arab said no — *inab*. The Turk: *üzüm*. The Greek: *stafil*. They argued, then insulted each other, then came to blows, because each knew what he wanted and none of them could

hear it in another man's mouth. A man who spoke all four languages passed by, took the coin, and came back with a bunch of grapes.

> *The link: the plate's four paths, and why people on different ones fight. The one who could settle it was not on a fifth path — he simply understood the other four.*

2. The Ladders to the Roof — *Indian (Ramakrishna)*

He would say: you want to get to the roof. There is a stone staircase, there is a wooden ladder, there is a rope ladder, there is a bamboo pole. You can go up any of them, and by any of them you arrive at the same roof. But — and here he would stop his listeners — you cannot climb all four at once, and you cannot reach the roof by praising the staircase. He would also add the harder half: the one who has been on the roof knows what all the others are climbing towards. The one still halfway up the rope thinks his rope is the only way.

> *The link: pairs with the plate's warning against sectarianism, and it has the sting built in — the man arguing loudest is usually the one still halfway.*

3. The Three Vinegar Tasters — *Chinese*

A painting more than a story, but it tells: three men stand around a vat of vinegar, and each has dipped a finger and tasted. Confucius pulls a sour face — life has gone off, the ancient harmony is spoiled, we must restore the proper order. The Buddha's face is bitter — the world is suffering, this is what tasting anything gets you. Lao Tzu is smiling. It is vinegar. Vinegar is supposed to taste like this.

> *The link: one substance, three responses, three whole paths growing out of the difference. Useful before the plate, as the opening question: what is the vinegar, and which face are you making?*

Plate 01-04 · Initiation

The path back to our divine origin — the Guardian of the Threshold, the trials, the mysteries.

1. The Weighing of the Heart — *Egyptian (Book of the Dead)*

The dead man is led into the Hall of the Two Truths. Forty-two judges sit along the walls, and he must name each one and declare before him what he has not done. Then Anubis places his heart on one pan of the scale, and on the other the feather of Ma'at — not a weight, a feather. Thoth stands with the palette to write the result. Beside the scale crouches Ammit, part crocodile, part lion, part hippopotamus, waiting. The heart is not asked to be light. It is asked to be *true*. If the scale tips, Ammit eats it, and the man does not go to hell — he simply stops.

> *The link: the plate's threshold and its trial. And the detail worth pressing: the heart is weighed, not the deeds — because the heart is what the deeds were made of.*

2. The Four Tasks of Psyche — *Greek (Apuleius)*

Psyche, having lost her divine husband by looking at him with a lamp, went to Venus and was set four impossible tasks. Sort a mountain of mixed seed by nightfall — the ants did it for her. Fetch wool from the golden rams that gore anything that comes near — the reed by the river told her to wait until noon, when

they sleep. Fill a jar from the river that guards the underworld — the eagle of Zeus flew it down for her. Last: go down to Hades and bring back a box of Persephone's beauty, and *do not open it*. She did the impossible three times and then, on the way home, opened the box, and fell down as if dead.

> *The link: the plate's trials in sequence, with the true ending — she is not saved by her own strength at any point, and she still fails the last one on curiosity. Initiation is not a test you pass by being clever.*

3. Odin on the Tree — *Norse (Hávamál)*

"I know that I hung on the windswept tree nine full nights, wounded by a spear and given to Odin, myself to myself, on that tree of which no man knows from what root it rises. They gave me no bread and no horn to drink from. I looked down. I took up the runes, screaming I took them, and I fell back from there." He hung himself on the world-tree, pierced himself, and gave himself as a sacrifice to himself, to get the letters.

> *The link: the plate's price. Nobody did this to Odin. Every part of it — the spear, the hunger, the nine nights — he arranged, and he is the god of wisdom, not the god of endurance. He knew what it cost and paid it.*

Plate 01-05 · The Four Conditions for Becoming a Theurgist

What has to be in place before the work can begin.

1. A Cup of Tea — *Japanese (Nan-in)*

A professor came to the Zen master Nan-in to ask about Zen. Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept pouring. The professor watched it overflow onto the mat, and then could not restrain himself: "It's overfull. No more will go in!" "Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"

> *The link: the first condition is always subtraction. A class that already knows what the plate is going to say cannot receive the plate.*

2. The Ten Virgins — *Biblical (Matthew 25)*

Ten young women went out with lamps to meet the bridegroom. Five took spare oil; five took only what was already in the lamp. The bridegroom was late, and all ten fell asleep — that is not the failure. At midnight the shout came. The five with no oil found their lamps guttering and asked the others for some. "There isn't enough for both of us. Go and buy." While they were away buying it, the bridegroom came, the ones who were ready went in, and the door was shut.

> *The link: every condition on the plate is oil. It cannot be borrowed at the door from someone who has it, and there is no time to fetch it once the shout goes up.*

3. Orpheus Looks Back — *Greek*

Orpheus went down alive to bring his wife back from the dead, and did what no one had done: he sang to Hades and Persephone until the wheel of Ixion stopped, Tantalus forgot his thirst, and the iron cheeks of the Furies were wet. They gave her back. One condition: she walks behind you, and you do not look until you are both in the light. He climbed the whole way. At the very edge, in the last few

steps, hearing nothing behind him and unable to bear not knowing, he turned. He saw her for a moment. Then she went back, and this time the door stayed shut.

> *The link: he met every requirement of talent, courage and love, and lost it on the one condition attached. The plate lists conditions, not suggestions.*

Plate 01-06 · The Internal Evolution — Lunar vs Solar

Two kinds of development: mechanical repetition, and conscious ascent.

1. The Night Barque of Ra — *Egyptian*

Every evening the sun-god enters the boat and sails into the Duat, the twelve hours of the night, and it is not a rest. In the seventh hour the serpent Apep lies across the river and drinks it dry, and the crew must fight him — Set with a harpoon at the prow, Isis and the magicians binding him with words — every single night, and he is never finally killed. Only when he is driven back does the boat go on, and at the twelfth hour Ra is joined to his own corpse, renewed, and comes out of the mountain in the east as a child.

> *The link: the plate's two motions in one night. The sun does not rise because time passed. It rises because something in the dark was fought. Nothing in nature gives you the dawn for free.*

2. The Two Birds on One Tree — *Indian (Mundaka Upanishad)*

Two birds, companions, always together, cling to the same tree. One of them eats the sweet fruit. The other does not eat at all; it only watches. The eating bird goes from fruit to fruit — sweet, then sour, then bitter — and grieves at its own helplessness, because the fruit decides its mood. Then, one day, it looks up and sees the other bird, silent, unstained, its own self, and its grief goes.

> *The link: the plate exactly. The lunar man is the bird that eats and is moved by every fruit. The solar man is the one who looked up. Same tree, same bird — no journey, one turn of attention.*

3. Prometheus Brings the Fire — *Greek*

Zeus withheld fire from men, and men lived like animals — they had eyes and saw nothing, ears and heard nothing, and moved through their lives like shapes in a dream, building nothing that lasted. Prometheus stole the fire in a hollow fennel stalk and gave it to them, and with it, he says, came number and letters and the reading of stars and the knowledge of medicine. For this he was chained to a rock and an eagle ate his liver, which grew back nightly so it could be eaten again.

> *The link: the plate's line between the merely living and the consciously living. And the price: whatever brings the fire down into the human being gets nailed to a rock for it.*

Plate 01-07 · What Does It Mean to Be Serious?

Gurdjieff on what actually deserves attention.

1. The Keys Under the Streetlight — *Sufi (Nasrudin)*

Nasrudin was on his hands and knees under a lamp post. A neighbour asked what he was doing. "Looking for my key." The neighbour got down and helped, and after a while asked: "Where exactly did you drop it?" "In the house." "Then why on earth are you looking out here?" "There's more light here."

> *The link: the plate's whole subject, in four lines. Most of what people call spiritual work is conducted where the light is good — in reading, in discussion, in company — and not in the dark house where the thing was actually lost.*

2. The Man Shot with a Poisoned Arrow — *Buddhist (Majjhima Nikaya)*

A man is shot with an arrow thick with poison. His friends fetch a surgeon. He says: wait. I will not have this arrow pulled out until I know who shot me — his caste, his name, his village. Whether he was tall or short or of middling height. Whether the bow was a longbow or a crossbow, whether the string was bark or hemp or sinew, whether the shaft was wild or cultivated, whether the feathers came from a vulture or a peacock. The Buddha finishes: that man would die, and he would still not know.

> *The link: seriousness is not intensity of interest. It is knowing which question is the arrow. A class full of metaphysical curiosity and no self-observation is the man on the ground, asking about feathers.*

3. Martha and Mary — *Biblical (Luke 10)*

He came into the house, and Martha started cooking, and Mary sat down on the floor at his feet and listened. Martha did the whole meal alone, getting angrier, and finally came out and said in front of everyone: "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her to help me." He said her name twice, gently: "Martha, Martha. You are anxious and troubled about many things. One thing is needful, and Mary has chosen the good part, and it will not be taken from her."

> *The link: Martha is not lazy, wicked or wrong — she is doing something genuinely useful, and that is precisely the trap the plate is describing. The competitor for our attention is never obviously worthless.*

PART II — Knowing the Human Machine

Plate 02-01 · The Human Machine

Man as a machine: reactions without a real I behind them.

1. The Automaton of Yan Shi — *Chinese (Liezi)*

King Mu was shown a craftsman's work: a man. It walked, it lifted its head, it sang in tune, it danced in time. The king brought his court to watch. Near the end of the performance the figure winked at the ladies of the harem, and the king leapt up in a rage to have the craftsman executed. Yan Shi, terrified, tore his creation open on the spot. Inside: leather, wood, glue and lacquer, painted white and black and red. The king examined it. Take away the heart, and the mouth could not speak. Take away the liver, and the eyes could not see. Take away the kidneys, and the feet could not walk. "Can it be," said the king, "that human skill reaches as far as the Creator's?"

> *The link: the plate's claim, from the outside. It looked exactly like a man, it flirted with the women, and there was nobody in it.*

2. The Valley of Dry Bones — *Biblical (Ezekiel 37)*

He was set down in a valley full of bones, very many and very dry, and told to prophesy to them. There was a noise, and a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone. He watched sinews come up over them, then flesh, then skin covering it all — and he says plainly: *but there was no breath in them.* A whole valley of complete, correct, assembled human bodies, and not one of them alive. Only then is he told to call the wind from the four winds, and they stand up.

> *The link: the machine can be complete and still be a corpse. The plate's distinction between having the apparatus and having someone home.*

3. The Golem of Prague — *Jewish*

The Maharal made a man out of the clay of the riverbank, walked around it, said the words, and put a slip of parchment with the Name into its mouth. It stood up. It could carry, fetch, guard, do exactly what it was told — and only what it was told. It had no speech and no judgement. Told to fetch water, it fetched water and went on fetching water until the house flooded. Every Sabbath eve the rabbi had to take the Name out of its mouth and let it fall down inert, because a thing that only obeys cannot be trusted to rest on its own.

> *The link: excellent for the plate's "man does not do; it is done." The Golem is not evil. It is obedient without a self, which is worse in the long run, and it floods the house.*

Plate 02-02 · The Three Minds

Sensual mind, intermediate mind, inner mind.

1. The Three Fish — *Sufi (Rumi, from Kalila wa Dimna)*

In a pool lived three fish: a clever one, a half-clever one, and a fool. Fishermen came past with a net and said they would return. The clever fish did not consult

anyone — it left at once, by the hard route, out to the sea. The half-clever fish thought, then thought again, then decided too late; when the net came it played dead, floating on its side, and was thrown back on the bank, and flapped its way to the water half-drowned and lucky. The foolish fish darted about in a panic, up and down, and ended in the frying pan, sizzling, and still saying: if I get out of this, I will never live in a pool again.

> *The link: three levels of mind, and how each meets the same danger. Note that only the first acted on knowledge before it needed it — the intermediate mind survives by imitation, and the sensual mind learns nothing even in the pan.*

2. The Three Pots — *Tibetan Buddhist*

Listen, the teachers say, and be careful which pot you are. The first pot is upside down: rain falls all day and nothing gets in — you are there, you hear the words, none of it lands. The second pot is the right way up but has a hole in the bottom: it fills while the teaching lasts and is empty by the time you reach the door. The third pot is upright and whole, but there is poison in the bottom: everything that goes in is spoiled — you take it in and turn it into ammunition, or pride, or a way to be right at somebody.

> *The link: good opening for the plate — it makes the listener locate their own mind before being told about the three. The poisoned pot is the intermediate mind at its most convincing.*

3. The Sower — *Biblical (Matthew 13)*

He went out to sow. Some seed fell on the path and the birds ate it before it did anything at all. Some fell on rocky ground with a skin of soil, and came up fast — fastest of all — and then the sun came up and it withered, because it had no root. Some fell among thorns and grew, and the thorns grew too, and choked it. And some fell into good ground and bore fruit, some thirty, some sixty, some a hundredfold. The disciples had to ask him privately what it meant.

> *The link: the same seed everywhere; the difference is entirely in the ground. Pair with the plate to show that the level of mind receiving a teaching determines what the teaching becomes — and that the fastest sprouting is the shallowest soil.*

Plate 02-03 · Four States of Consciousness

Sleep, waking sleep, self-remembering, objective consciousness.

1. The Cave — *Greek (Plato, Republic VII)*

Men have been chained since childhood in a cave, facing a wall, unable to turn their heads. Behind them a fire burns, and between fire and prisoners is a walkway where others carry figures of animals and men. The prisoners see only shadows and hear only echoes, and they name the shadows, and give prizes to whoever is quickest at predicting which shadow comes next. Unchain one and turn him around: the fire hurts, and he wants his wall back. Drag him up into the sun: he is blinded and useless, and can see nothing at all at first. And when he goes back down to tell the others, his eyes no longer work in the dark, he is clumsy at the shadow game, and they say the journey up ruins a man — and would kill anyone who tried to take them.

The link: all four states in one image, including the two most awkward truths on the plate: waking up is disorienting and looks like a downgrade, and the sleepers do not thank you.

2. Zhuangzi's Butterfly — *Chinese*

"Once I, Zhuangzi, dreamed I was a butterfly — fluttering about, happy with myself, doing as I pleased. I did not know I was Zhuangzi. Suddenly I woke, and there I was, solid and unmistakable Zhuangzi. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly dreaming I am a man."

The link: short enough to open a class with. The plate says most of humanity is asleep while walking about; the objection is always "but I would know." Zhuangzi's answer: inside the dream you were entirely certain too.

3. Narada Fetches Water — *Indian (Puranic)*

Narada asked Vishnu to explain maya. Vishnu said: fetch me some water first. Narada went to a house at the edge of a village, and a girl opened the door, and he forgot the water. He married her. They farmed; they had three children; twelve years passed, and her father died, and he inherited the land. In the twelfth year the river flooded at night. He took one child on his shoulders, one by each hand, and his wife behind, and waded out — and the current took the child from his shoulder, and reaching for it he lost the other two, and then his wife. He was thrown up on a bank, alone, and lay there sobbing. And a voice said: "Child — where is my water? I have been waiting half an hour."

The link: the plate's first two states, and the hardest thing about them: the years inside the dream were not experienced as a dream. They were experienced as a life.

Plate 02-04 · Analogy of the Development of Consciousness

How consciousness actually grows.

1. The Pond of Lotuses — *Buddhist*

After his awakening the Buddha considered not teaching at all — it was too subtle, people were too tangled. Then he looked at the world as a man looks into a lotus pond. Some lotuses are still down in the mud, born in the water, living in the water, never rising. Some have grown up to the level of the water and stand at the surface. And a few are already up and clear of it, standing in the air, untouched by the water at all. Some are ready to open today; some will need many seasons. Seeing that, he decided to teach.

The link: the plate's stages, without a hierarchy of worth — the mud lotus is not a failed lotus. Useful when a group compares itself unfavourably to somebody further along.

2. The Seed Growing Secretly — *Biblical (Mark 4)*

A man scatters seed on the ground, then sleeps and rises, night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows — *he knows not how*. The earth produces of itself: first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And when the fruit is ready, he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.

The link: the plate's sequence, with the part that irritates everyone: the farmer's job is to sow and to sleep. The order cannot be skipped and the growth is not under his hand — but there is a harvest, and it is his to reap.

3. The Man Who Pulled Up His Sprouts — *Chinese (Mencius)*

A man of Sung was distressed that his young grain was growing so slowly, so he went out into the field and pulled every shoot up a little, to help it. He came home exhausted and told his family: "I am worn out today — I have been helping the corn to grow." His son ran out to look. Every plant in the field was withered.

The link: the plate's warning about forcing. The man is not lazy; he works himself to exhaustion. He kills the crop with effort applied in the wrong direction, which is what impatience in the inner work looks like.

Plate 02-05 · The Dialectic of Consciousness

Thinking that is not the formal logic of the intellect.

1. Not the Wind, Not the Flag — *Chinese Chan (Huineng)*

Two monks were arguing at a temple gate about a banner moving in the wind. One said: the flag moves. The other said: the wind moves. Back and forth, each with good arguments, neither able to shift the other. The Sixth Patriarch was passing and said: "It is not the wind that moves. It is not the flag that moves. Your mind is moving." Both of them were struck silent.

The link: formal logic can only pick between the two positions in the room. The plate's dialectic is the third move — the one that dissolves the argument by relocating it.

2. Socrates and the Slave Boy — *Greek (Plato, Meno)*

To prove that learning is remembering, Socrates called over a slave boy who had never studied geometry, drew a square in the sand, and asked how to make one of double the area. The boy answered confidently: double the sides. Socrates drew it — four times as big, not twice. The boy tried again, and was wrong again, and then said, out loud, that he did not know. Socrates said to Meno: notice, he is better off than before; he used to think he knew. Then, with questions only, never a statement, he drew the diagonal, and the boy saw it himself.

The link: the plate's method exactly. Nothing was put into the boy. The wrong answer had to be lived through, and the confusion was not a setback but the doorway.

3. Two Men Down a Chimney — *Jewish*

A student comes to the rabbi to be tested. "Two men fall down a chimney. One comes out filthy, one comes out clean. Which one washes?" "The dirty one." "No. The dirty one sees a clean face and thinks he is clean. The clean one sees a filthy face and goes to wash." The student asks for another. The rabbi asks the same question. "The clean one!" "No — how can two men fall down the same chimney and one come out clean? You are still answering the question. Start by asking whether the question is true."

The link: the plate's hardest point. Consciousness does not only answer better than the intellect; it interrogates the premise the intellect accepted without noticing.

Plate 02-06 · Return, Recurrence and Reincarnation

The wheel: coming back, and coming back the same.

1. The Myth of Er — *Greek (Plato, Republic X)*

Er was killed in battle, and on the twelfth day, laid on the pyre, he came back to life and told what he had seen. Souls, having finished their reward or punishment, are gathered in a meadow and lots are thrown for the order of choosing. Then the pattern of lives is spread on the ground — tyrannies, animal lives, obscure lives, beautiful and ugly ones — and each soul chooses its own next life, and a spokesman cries: *the responsibility is the chooser's; God is blameless.* The one who drew first lot rushed and took the greatest tyranny, and only afterwards read the small print, that he would eat his own children. Odysseus, drawing last, went looking a long time and finally found the life of a quiet private man, lying in a corner, ignored by everybody, and said he would have chosen it even if he had drawn first.

The link: the plate's mechanism with the responsibility left where it belongs. The souls choose by the habits they arrive with — which is why the choosing looks like fate and is not.

2. Jada Bharata and the Fawn — *Indian (Bhagavata Purana)*

A king renounced everything and went to the forest, and was very near the end of the road. One day he saved a newborn fawn whose mother had died. He fed it, and worried about it, and looked for it when it wandered, and thought about it during his practices, and loved it. When he came to die, his mind was on the deer — and he was born a deer. He kept his memory in that body, and lived near the ashram, eating nothing but dry leaves, waiting to be finished with it.

The link: the plate's return governed by what the attention was fixed to at the end. Nothing wicked happened. He was destroyed by a kindness he never questioned.

3. Tuan mac Cairill — *Irish*

Tuan came to Ireland with the first settlers and was the only one to survive the plague. He lived alone in the wilderness, ragged and grey, and then he lay down in a cave and woke as a stag, young again, and led the herds. He aged, and lay down, and woke as a wild boar. Then as a hawk, then as a salmon — and while he was a salmon a fisherman caught him and gave him to the queen, who ate him, and he was born again as a man, with every one of those lives still in him, and told the whole story to the monks.

The link: an unusual angle on the plate. What returns is not the personality — every form was completely lost — but something kept the thread through all of them, and could tell the tale at the end.

Plate 02-07 · Personality, Essence and Ego

The three per cent that is really ours, and the ninety-seven that is not.

1. The Fox and the Mask — *Greek (Aesop)*

A fox got into an actor's storeroom and turned everything over, and found a mask made for the tragic stage — a great noble head, mouth open, the brow of a hero. He picked it up in his paws and turned it about and admired it from every side, and then he said: "What a magnificent head. And no brain in it."

> *The link: the plate's personality in one sentence, and the tone is right — not condemning, just noticing. The mask is well made and impressive and there is nothing behind the eyes.*

2. The Tiger Raised Among Goats — *Indian (Ramakrishna)*

A pregnant tigress leapt into a flock of goats, gave birth, and died. The goats raised the cub. It grew up eating grass, bleating, timid, running when they ran. One day a full-grown tiger came out of the forest and scattered the flock, and found this ridiculous creature standing there in the middle, chewing grass and trembling. It seized it by the neck, carried it to a pool, and made it look. Then it forced a piece of raw meat into its mouth. The young one gagged, and then swallowed, and then something moved through it, and it lifted its head and roared.

> *The link: the plate's essence, buried but not destroyed. The grass-eating was learned; the roar was not, and did not have to be taught.*

3. Jacob in Esau's Skins — *Biblical (Genesis 27)*

Isaac was old and blind and wanted to bless his elder son. His wife dressed the younger in his brother's good clothes and tied goatskins to his hands and neck, because his brother was a hairy man and he was smooth. He came in with the food. His father said: "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau." He asked twice, straight out — *are you really my son Esau?* — and was lied to twice, and he felt him, and smelled the clothes, and blessed him.

> *The link: the plate's ego wearing a borrowed identity — and the disquiet in the story is that the blind old man hears the true voice, and lets the hands and the smell overrule it.*

Plate 02-08 · Awakening Consciousness

What waking actually means.

1. "I Am Awake" — *Buddhist (Anguttara Nikaya)*

Soon after his awakening the Buddha was walking on the road, and a man coming the other way stopped, struck by the way he carried himself, and asked: "Are you a god?" "No." "Are you an angel?" "No." "Are you a spirit?" "No." "Are you a man?" "No." "Then what are you?" "I am awake."

> *The link: thirty seconds, and it gives the class the whole plate. Every category the man offered was a kind of being; the answer was a state.*

2. The Turkey Prince — *Hasidic (Rabbi Nachman of Breslov)*

A prince lost his mind and became convinced he was a turkey. He took off his clothes, sat naked under the table, and ate crumbs and bones off the floor. Doctors came and failed. Then a sage came, undressed, and sat down under the table beside him and ate crumbs. "Who are you?" "A turkey. And you?" "A turkey." They sat together for days. Then the sage asked for a shirt to be thrown down — "a turkey can wear a shirt and still be a turkey" — and they put shirts on. Then trousers. Then he asked for food from the table, on plates — "a turkey can eat proper food and still be a turkey." Then chairs. And so, a step at a time, the prince came back, and was still a turkey the whole way, until he wasn't.

> *The link: the plate's awakening as a process, not an event, and a beautiful model for how to help someone: not by arguing them out from above, but by going under the table.*

3. Urashima Taro — *Japanese*

A young fisherman saved a turtle from some children on the beach, and the turtle came back and carried him down to the palace under the sea. He married the Dragon King's daughter and lived there in a summer that did not end. After what felt like three years he wanted to see his mother. His wife gave him a lacquered box and told him: take it, but whatever happens, never open it. He came up on his own beach and knew nothing — different houses, different faces. He asked about his family. An old man said there had been a fisherman of that name who was lost at sea three hundred years ago. He sat down on the sand and opened the box, and a thread of white smoke came out, and his hair went white and his skin folded and he crumbled into an old man's dust.

> *The link: the plate's cost of sleep. He is not punished for wickedness. He is only away, comfortably, and the years spend themselves regardless.*

Plate 02-09 · The Psychological Ego

Not one ego but a legion of them.

1. "My Name Is Legion" — *Biblical (Mark 5)*

There was a man among the tombs at Gerasa who could not be bound any more — chains had been pulled apart and fetters broken, and nobody was strong enough to hold him, and night and day he was in the tombs and the hills, howling and cutting himself with stones. He ran and fell down and was asked: "What is your name?" And the answer came: "My name is Legion, for we are many." They begged not to be sent out of the country, and went into the pigs, and two thousand of them ran down the cliff into the sea. Afterwards the townspeople came out and found him sitting, dressed, in his right mind — and they were frightened, and asked the one who had done it to leave.

> *The link: the plate's central claim in scripture's own words. Note two details for a class: the man could not tell you his own name, and the town preferred him mad.*

2. The Hydra — *Greek*

Heracles came to the swamp of Lerna to kill a serpent with many heads. He crushed one with his club, and two grew out of the stump. He crushed another,

and two more. The more work he did, the more there was, and a crab came out of the marsh and bit his foot while he was at it. He could not win by force and he could not win alone: he called Iolaus, and as Heracles struck each head off, Iolaus came in with a burning brand and seared the neck so nothing could grow back. The last head was immortal — it could not be killed at all, only cut off and buried under a great rock.

> *The link: the plate's defects. Fighting them by suppression multiplies them; they die only when something is burnt — comprehension, on the plate's language — applied at the moment of the cut. And Heracles needed help.*

3. The Armies of Mara — *Buddhist (Sutta Nipata)*

Under the tree, Mara came against him with his armies, and their names are given: the first army is sensual desire; the second, discontent; the third, hunger and thirst; the fourth, craving; the fifth, sloth and torpor; the sixth, fear; the seventh, doubt; the eighth, hypocrisy and stubbornness; then gain, praise, honour and false reputation; and last, praising oneself and despising others. "This is your army, Mara, the striker's black squadron. No coward can defeat it, but whoever defeats it gets happiness."

> *The link: pair with the plate's enumeration. Two things worth pointing out to a class: they arrive in order, and the last army — self-satisfaction at having beaten the others — is the one that gets everybody.*

PART III — The Inner Work

Plate 03-01 · Self-Observation

The art of looking within.

1. Geshe Ben and the Pebbles — *Tibetan Buddhist*

Ben Gungyal had been a bandit before he was a monk, and he knew himself well enough not to trust himself. He kept two piles of pebbles beside him. Every time he caught a selfish thought he put down a black stone; every time he caught a good one, a white stone. At the start of the day the black pile was a heap and the white pile was almost nothing. He did not scold himself; he counted. Over the years the piles changed places. And the story people remember best: he was alone in a patron's house, reached into the tea jar to steal a handful, caught his own hand in the act, shouted "Thief! Thief!" and held his wrist in the air until the household came running.

> *The link: the plate's method, made physical. He never argued with the defect. He watched it, named it out loud, and let it be seen — and shouting "thief" while holding your own wrist is the exact posture of self-observation.*

2. The Mote and the Beam — *Biblical (Matthew 7)*

Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and take no notice of the plank in your own? How can you say, brother, let me get that speck out for you, when you cannot see past the beam sticking out of your own face? Take the plank out first. Then you will see clearly enough to help him with the speck.

> *The link: the plate is asking for attention to be turned round. Worth stressing that the ending is not "mind your own business" — it is then you will see clearly. Self-observation is what makes a person useful to others, not what excuses them from it.*

3. Thales in the Well — *Greek*

Thales, the first philosopher, was walking at night with his eyes on the stars, working out the nature of the heavens, and fell into a well. A Thracian servant girl who had come out for water heard him down there and laughed at him: he was so eager to know what was in the sky that he could not see what was in front of his feet.

> *The link: a light one for opening a class. The plate is not against studying the heavens — it is against a man who can map the cosmos and cannot see the hole he walks into every week of his life.*

Plate 03-02 · Self-Remembering

Steps into the third state of consciousness.

1. The Hymn of the Pearl — *Gnostic (Acts of Thomas)*

A king's son was sent from his home in the East down into Egypt, to bring back a single pearl guarded by a serpent in the sea. They took off his robe of glory and gave him travelling clothes, and told him: when you have the pearl you will wear the robe again. He went down. In Egypt he put on their clothes so he would not be

noticed, and ate their food, and they were subtle with him, and he forgot. He forgot the pearl, he forgot his father, he forgot he was a king's son at all, and he fell into a deep sleep. His parents wrote him a letter. It flew as an eagle, and landed beside him, and spoke aloud. "You are a king's son. Remember the pearl. Remember your robe of glory." And at the sound of it he woke, and remembered everything, and took the pearl and went home.

> *The link: the plate, told from inside the tradition. Nobody stole anything from him. He put on the clothes of the country himself, out of ordinary practicality, and that was the whole mechanism of the forgetting.*

2. Zuigan Calls His Own Name — *Japanese Zen (Mumonkan, case 12)*

Master Zuigan used to call out to himself every day. "Master!" And he would answer himself: "Yes, sir." Then he would say: "Be wide awake!" And answer: "Yes, sir." "From now on, do not be deceived by others!" "Yes, sir, yes, sir."

> *The link: four lines, and it is the practice on the plate exactly — including that it had to be done every day, out loud, by a man who was already a master. And "do not be deceived by others" is worth asking a class about: who are the others?*

3. The Tenth Man — *Indian (Vedanta)*

Ten travellers forded a river in flood. On the far bank, shaken, they counted to make sure everyone had come through. One counted: nine. Another counted: nine. Each of them counted nine, and they began to weep for the lost tenth man, and sat down on the bank in mourning. A traveller came by and asked what was wrong. He listened, then said: "Stand in a line." He counted them: ten. The counter had been forgetting to count himself.

> *The link: the plate's whole subject and it takes twenty seconds to tell. Everything in the world gets counted except the one doing the counting — and the grief was entirely real, and entirely unnecessary.*

Plate 03-03 · The Feeling of Being vs the Feeling of the Ego

Two different sensations of "I am."

1. "It Is Thou" — *Sufi (Rumi)*

A man came and knocked at the door of his beloved. A voice from inside asked: "Who is there?" He said: "It is I." The voice said: "There is no room in this house for me and thee," and the door stayed shut. He went away into the desert and fasted and prayed for a year, and came back and knocked again. "Who is there?" "It is Thou." And the door opened.

> *The link: the plate's two feelings, and which one the door answers to. Note the year in the desert — the change of answer was not a clever trick of phrasing.*

2. Moses at the Bush — *Biblical (Exodus 3)*

He turned aside to look at a bush burning without being consumed, and a voice said: take off your shoes, the ground you are standing on is holy. Then it told him to go and bring a nation out of Egypt. He said: *who am I,* that I should go? He was answered not with a compliment but with a fact — I will be with you. He pushed

further: when they ask me your name, what do I say? And the answer was: I AM THAT I AM. Tell them I AM has sent you.

> *The link: the plate's Being, named. Two feelings meet in one conversation: Moses's "who am I" — small, anxious, personal — and the other, which is not a description of anything but simply being itself.*

3. The Salt in the Water — *Indian (Chandogya Upanishad)*

Uddalaka told his son Svetaketu to put a lump of salt into a jar of water and come back in the morning. In the morning he said: bring me the salt. The boy looked and could not find it; it had dissolved. "Sip from this end." "It is salt." "Sip from the middle." "Salt." "Sip from the far end." "Salt." "Throw it away and come to me." The boy did, and the salt was still there, unseen, in all of it. "That which you do not see is the finest essence, and this whole world has that essence for its self. That is the truth. That is the self. *And that is you, Svetaketu*."

> *The link: the plate's Being is not a stronger version of the ego's feeling — it is the thing that has no edges. The ego is the lump you can point to; Being is the taste through the whole jar.*

Plate 03-04 · Self-Love — The Ego's Mirror

Self-love, self-importance, and the mirror they need.

1. Narcissus and Echo — *Greek (Ovid)*

Narcissus was so beautiful that everyone wanted him and he wanted nobody. The nymph Echo, who had been cursed so that she could only repeat the last words spoken to her, followed him through the woods and could never begin a sentence of her own; when he finally turned on her and said "I would die before I gave you power over me," all she could say back was "power over me," and she withered until only her voice was left. He came to a still pool, bent to drink, and fell in love with the face in the water. He could not touch it, could not leave it, could not understand why it would not come out to him, and lay there until he died on the bank — and where he had lain, a flower grew.

> *The link: the plate's mirror. Two things a class should notice: he never once knows it is himself, and Echo is the perfect companion for a self-lover, because she can only ever say his own words back to him.*

2. The Dancing Peacock — *Buddhist (Jataka 32)*

The Golden Goose was king of the birds, and when his daughter came of age he assembled all the birds and let her choose her husband. She looked over the whole gathering and chose the peacock. The other birds crowded round to congratulate him, and the peacock was so delighted with himself that he began to dance — and dancing, he spread and shook his tail, and displayed himself completely, without any modesty at all, in front of the entire assembly and his bride's father. The Golden Goose said: "He has no shame in his heart and no decency in his manners," and gave his daughter to a young goose instead.

> *The link: the plate's self-love losing the thing it wanted, at the moment of triumph, by the very display that was meant to secure it.*

3. Nebuchadnezzar on the Roof — *Biblical (Daniel 4)*

The king walked on the roof of his palace and looked out over the city and said: "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built by the might of my power and for the honour of my majesty?" The word was still in his mouth when a voice came from heaven, and the kingdom was taken from him. He was driven out from among men and ate grass like an ox, and his hair grew like eagles' feathers and his nails like birds' claws, until he lifted his eyes to heaven, and his understanding came back to him.

> *The link: the plate's self-importance at full height, and the sentence that triggers it is one line long. Worth reading aloud slowly — that I have built, by my power, for my majesty — and asking the class where they said something like it this week.*

Plate 03-05 · Imagination and Fantasy

Conscious imagination, and the daydream that eats the day.

1. The Brahmin and the Pot of Flour — *Indian (Panchatantra)*

A poor Brahmin was given a pot of flour, and hung it on a peg above his bed, and lay looking up at it. If there is a famine, he thought, I will sell this for a hundred coins. With that I will buy goats. The goats will breed, and I will sell them and buy cows, and from the cows, buffaloes, and from the buffaloes, mares, and from the mares I will have a stable of horses and be rich. Then I will marry a beautiful girl, and she will have a son, and I will call him Somasharman. And one day I will be reading in the stable and the boy will get under the horses' feet, and I will call his mother, and she will be busy with the housework and not come — and I will kick her, like *this*. And he kicked, and the pot came off the peg, and the flour came down all over him.

> *The link: the plate's fantasy, complete with the tell — it always ends in an imaginary grievance, and the kick is always real.*

2. The Dream of Akinosuke — *Japanese (told by Lafcadio Hearn)*

Akinosuke fell asleep under a cedar in his garden on a warm afternoon while two friends sat drinking beside him. In his sleep a procession came for him, and he was taken to a great kingdom, married to the king's daughter, and given a province to govern. He governed it well for twenty-three years. He had seven children. His wife died, and he mourned her, and was told it was time to go home. He woke under the cedar. His friends said he had been asleep about an hour. Beside the tree root they dug up an ants' nest — with a small mound where his wife was buried, and a colony that spread exactly as his province had.

> *The link: the plate's distinction is not that fantasy is unpleasant. Akinosuke's twenty-three years were good years. They were also an hour under a tree, and they were an ants' nest.*

3. Joseph the Dreamer — *Biblical (Genesis 37–41)*

The boy dreamed his brothers' sheaves bowed to his, and told them, and they hated him for it. He dreamed the sun and moon and eleven stars bowed to him, and told his father, who rebuked him and *kept the saying in mind*. They sold him into Egypt. In prison he interpreted two dreams exactly, and was forgotten for

two years. Then Pharaoh dreamed of seven fat cows and seven lean ones, and Joseph was fetched, and said the seven lean years are coming, store grain now — and a whole region lived through the famine because a man could read an image correctly.

> *The link: the other pole of the plate. Same faculty, different use: Joseph's images are information about reality, and they are not for his entertainment. Useful for showing a class that the plate is not asking them to stop imagining.*

Plate 03-06 · Methodology of Inner Work

How the work is actually done.

1. Matajuro and the Sword Master — *Japanese*

Matajuro's father, a famous swordsman, threw him out as hopeless. He went to the master Banzo and asked how long it would take to become a master. "Ten years." "That's too long — my father is old. What if I work twice as hard?" "Thirty years." "And if I work day and night, holding nothing back?" "Seventy. A man in that much of a hurry learns slowly." He agreed to stay. Banzo never mentioned the sword. He set him to cooking, washing, weeding, cleaning. After three years, one day while he was bent over the cooking pot, Banzo came up behind him and hit him with a wooden sword. Every day after that, from anywhere, at any hour — while he slept, while he cooked, while he crossed the yard. Within a year Matajuro could not be caught from any direction, and had become the finest swordsman in the land.

> *The link: the plate's method. Note what was actually trained: not technique — continuous attention, at the cooking pot, all day, for years. That is the whole discipline the plate is describing.*

2. Naaman in the Jordan — *Biblical (2 Kings 5)*

Naaman was a Syrian general with leprosy. He came to the prophet's house with horses, chariots and a fortune in silver, and the prophet did not even come out — he sent a servant to the door with a message: go and wash in the Jordan seven times. Naaman went away furious. "I thought he would come out and stand and call on his God and wave his hand over the place. Are not the rivers of Damascus better than all the waters of Israel?" His own servants talked him round: "Father, if he had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much rather, then, when he says wash and be clean." So he went down and dipped seven times, and his flesh came back like a child's.

> *The link: the plate's method offends people by being small. He wanted a ceremony; he was given a repetition. And he nearly went home with his leprosy out of wounded dignity.*

3. Penelope's Web — *Greek (Odyssey)*

The suitors filled Odysseus's house and would not leave until Penelope chose one of them. She told them she would choose as soon as she had finished weaving a shroud for her husband's old father — it would be a disgrace for him to lie without one. So she wove, all day, in front of them. And every night she brought a lamp to the loom and unpicked what she had done that day. Three years she held them off

like that, and they never suspected, until a maid told them, and they caught her at it in the dark.

> *The link: the plate's warning about work without method. Penelope did it deliberately and it was strategy. Done without noticing, it is the ordinary life of a person who works on themselves each morning and undoes it every evening — three years of weaving, and no cloth.*

Plate 03-07 · The World of Relationships

Other people as the field of the work.

1. Atisha's Bad-Tempered Servant — *Tibetan Buddhist*

When Atisha was invited to Tibet, he brought with him from Bengal a servant with a foul temper — rude, complaining, always finding fault with him in front of others. The Tibetans, embarrassed, offered to send the man home; they had plenty of good attendants. Atisha refused. "You do not understand. He is my best teacher. Without him I would have no one to practise patience on."

> *The link: the plate's whole thesis in three lines. Best used before the plate, so the class meets the idea as a joke and then finds out he meant it.*

2. Socrates and Xanthippe — *Greek*

Xanthippe was famously sharp-tongued, and Socrates was famously unbothered. Asked why he had married such a difficult woman, he said that men who want to be good horsemen do not choose the gentlest horses; if he could get on with her, he could get on with anybody. One day she berated him at length in front of his friends, and when he did not react, she emptied a pot of water over his head. He shook himself and remarked: "After the thunder, rain."

> *The link: the plate's relationships as a training ground — and a demonstration that the aim is not to win the exchange but to remain present in it. Do not sentimentalise it to a class; he chose the difficult horse on purpose.*

3. Joseph and His Brothers — *Biblical (Genesis 45, 50)*

The brothers who threw him in a pit and sold him to a caravan came to Egypt years later to buy grain, and did not recognise the official they were bowing to. He tested them, and wept in another room, and then cleared everyone out and said: "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" They could not answer him, they were so terrified. He said: come near. It was not you that sent me here. And when their father died they came back convinced he had only been waiting to take revenge, and he wept again, and said: "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good — to save many people alive."

> *The link: the plate's hardest case. The relationship that did him the greatest damage is the one that put him where he needed to be — and he says so without pretending the brothers were innocent.*

Plate 03-08 · The Seven Deadly Sins

Psychological defects and their opposing virtues.

1. Pandora's Jar — *Greek (Hesiod)*

The gods made a woman and gave her every gift — beauty from Aphrodite, skill from Athena, and from Hermes a shameless mind and a deceitful nature. They sent her down with a great jar and told her not to open it. Prometheus's brother married her, though he had been warned to accept nothing from the gods. She lifted the lid, and out came everything: sickness, hard labour, old age, grief, envy — which had never been in the world before and now cannot be got out of it, and which wander about silently, because Zeus took away their voices so they can come at a man without warning. She got the lid back on with only one thing left inside: hope.

> *The link: the plate's defects — and the detail that earns its place in a class is the silence. They arrive without announcing themselves, which is exactly why the work has to be observation and not merely resolve.*

2. The Three Poisons at the Hub — *Buddhist*

At the centre of the wheel of life, painted at the door of every Tibetan monastery, there are three animals biting each other's tails in a circle. A pig: ignorance. A snake: hatred. A cock: greed. They are at the hub, and everything else in the picture — the six realms, the whole spinning wheel of births — is drawn *around* them, turning because they turn. Some versions have the pig spitting out the other two; all versions have them chasing each other in a ring with no beginning.

> *The link: pair with the plate's enumeration to show the structure underneath it. The seven can be traced back to three, and the three back to the pig — because hatred and greed both need ignorance to keep them plausible.*

3. The Tongue-Cut Sparrow — *Japanese*

An old man kept a sparrow he loved. His wife, in a temper, cut out its tongue for eating her starch, and it flew away. He went looking, and found it, and its family fed him and danced for him, and when he left they offered him two wicker baskets, one large and one small. He was old and the road was long, so he took the small one, and at home it was full of gold and silk. His wife, hearing this, went straight off to the sparrows' house, demanded a present, and took the large basket. She could barely lift it. Halfway home she could not wait, and sat down on the road and opened it — and out came snakes, and horned demons, and every kind of monster.

> *The link: one sin, followed all the way through, and a class will feel it. The plate names greed; this story shows that greed's punishment is simply getting what it asked for and having to open it.*

Plate 03-09 · The Level of Being

Your level of being attracts your life.

1. The Traveller and the Two Cities — *Sufi*

A man came to the gate of a city and asked the old man sitting there: "What are the people like in this place?" The old man said: "What were they like where you came from?" "Thieves and liars, every one of them. I could not wait to leave." "You will find them much the same here." Later another traveller came and asked the same question and got the same question back. "They were kind. I was sorry to leave them." "You will find them much the same here."

> *The link: the plate's law, in a form nobody can argue with. Both men will be right about the city, and the city is not the variable.*

2. One River, Three Sights — *Buddhist (Yogacara)*

Bring a god, a human being and a hungry ghost to the same river. The god sees a stream of nectar, jewelled, and drinks and is delighted. The human being sees water — useful, ordinary — and washes and drinks. The hungry ghost, with its needle throat and swollen belly, sees a channel of pus and blood and filth, or sees the water dry up as it approaches, and cannot drink at all. Nothing was done to the river.

> *The link: the plate's principle stated as perception, not fortune. The class's ordinary complaint — my circumstances are difficult — meets the question: which of the three is looking?*

3. "We Were as Grasshoppers" — *Biblical (Numbers 13)*

Twelve spies went into the land and came back with a cluster of grapes so heavy it was carried on a pole between two men. Ten of them reported: the land is good, and we cannot take it — the people are giants, and *we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight.* Two of them, Caleb and Joshua, saw the same giants and the same walls and said: we are well able. The nation believed the ten, and spent forty years in the desert until that generation was gone.

> *The link: the plate at its sharpest. The clause to read twice is in our own sight — the assessment of their own being came first, and the giants' opinion was supplied by them afterwards.*

Plate 03-10 · Herd Behaviour

From The Revolution of Dialectics, ch. 19.

1. The Brahmin and the Goat — *Indian (Panchatantra)*

A Brahmin was carrying a goat home on his shoulders for a sacrifice. Three rogues saw him and spread out along the road. The first stopped him: "Sir, why is a man of your standing carrying a dog?" "This is a goat." He walked on. Half a mile later the second: "Reverend sir, it is not proper for a Brahmin to carry a dead calf." He set the goat down and looked at it hard, and picked it up again, less sure. The third, further on: "Sir, carrying a donkey pollutes you — put it down and

bathe." He put it down, bathed, and went home; and the three of them cooked the goat.

> *The link: the plate's mechanism precisely. He can see the goat the whole time. Three unrelated confirmations were enough to overrule his own eyes, and note that no one ever argued with him.*

2. The Emperor's New Clothes — *Danish (Hans Christian Andersen)*

Two swindlers offered the Emperor cloth so fine that it was invisible to anyone stupid or unfit for their post. He sent his most trusted old minister to inspect the looms; the minister saw nothing at all, and reported that it was exquisite. Everyone else did the same, each one certain he was the only fool in the kingdom. The Emperor walked in the procession in his underwear, the crowd cried out how beautiful it was, and then a small child said: "But he hasn't got anything on." The father repeated it. It went through the crowd in a whisper, and then everybody was saying it — and the Emperor thought to himself that they were probably right, and drew himself up and walked on, and his chamberlains carried the train that was not there.

> *The link: the plate's herd, with both halves: nobody was deceived and everybody was silent, and the ending shows that even after the truth is out, the procession finishes.*

3. Aaron and the Golden Calf — *Biblical (Exodus 32)*

Moses was up the mountain longer than expected, and the people came to Aaron in a body and said: make us gods to go before us; as for this Moses, we do not know what has become of him. Aaron — the priest, the older brother, who had stood in front of Pharaoh — did not refuse. He asked for their gold earrings, threw them into the fire, and out came a calf, and they said: these are your gods, O Israel. When Moses came down and asked him what happened, Aaron said the gold went into the fire "and there came out this calf" — as though nobody had made it.

> *The link: the plate's warning aimed high. The crowd carried the priest, and afterwards even he could not say who had done it. A useful question for a class: what has the group decided lately that no individual in it would defend alone?*

PART IV — Meditation and Practice

Plate 04-01 · The Ten Rules of Scientific Meditation

The conditions that make meditation work.

1. Sona and the Lute — *Buddhist (Vinaya, Mahavagga)*

Sona had been a rich young man with famously delicate feet, and when he took up the practice he walked up and down meditating until his feet bled and the walk was smeared with blood like a slaughterhouse, and still nothing came. Sitting alone, he thought: nobody strives harder than I do, and I have got nowhere; perhaps I should go back to my money and make merit that way. The Buddha came to him and asked: when you were at home, were you good with a lute? Yes. And when the strings were too tight, was it in tune? No. Too slack? No. And when they were neither too tight nor too slack? Then it played. "It is the same with effort. Too much and you become restless; too little and you become idle. Tune yourself evenly."

> *The link: the plate's rules exist because sincerity is not enough. The man bleeding on the walkway was not lacking effort; he was out of tune.*

2. Arjuna and the Eye of the Bird — *Indian (Mahabharata)*

Drona hung a wooden bird high in a tree and called the princes one at a time. Each was to aim, and before releasing, answer one question. Yudhishthira came first. "What do you see?" "I see the tree, the branch, the bird, my brothers, you, the sky." "Step aside." One after another they answered the same way. Then Arjuna. "What do you see?" "I see the bird." "Describe it." "I cannot. I see only its head." "And now?" "I see only the eye of the bird. I do not see the tree, or the bird, or you." "Shoot." He shot, and the head came off.

> *The link: the plate's concentration rule, and the reason it comes before everything else. All the princes could use a bow. Only one had removed the room.*

3. Odysseus and the Sirens — *Greek*

Circe warned him: the Sirens sing, and every man who hears them steers for the rocks, and the meadow is heaped with the bones of men rotting in their skins. He wanted to hear the song anyway. So he made the rule *before* the water: he softened beeswax and stopped every man's ears, and had himself lashed upright to the mast, and gave the standing order that if he begged to be released they were to tie him tighter. They rowed in. The song came over the water, personal, addressed to him by name, promising knowledge of everything that happens on the earth. He struggled and shouted and worked his eyebrows at the crew, and they leaned on the ropes and pulled them tighter, and rowed on until it was quiet.

> *The link: the plate's rules are made by the clear-headed man for the man who will not be clear-headed in twenty minutes. Also the honest note for a class: he still heard the song. Discipline is not the same as avoidance.*

Plate 04-02 · The Five Stages of Meditative Mastery

The stages of the ascent.

1. The Ox-Herding Pictures — *Chinese and Japanese Zen*

Ten pictures, in order. A boy in the grass, lost, searching for an ox he has never seen. Then footprints. Then a glimpse of the hindquarters through the trees. Then he has it by the rope, and it is wild and drags him about. Then he leads it, the rope slack. Then he is riding it home, playing a flute, not steering. Then the ox is gone and the boy sits alone by his house. Then a bare circle — boy gone, ox gone. Then the world without either of them: the river flows, the flowers are red. And the tenth: the man walks back into the marketplace with a wine gourd and dirty hands, and everybody he meets becomes enlightened, and nobody notices anything remarkable about him.

> *The link: the plate's stages, laid out so a class can locate themselves. The most useful teaching in the sequence is that the ox disappears in the middle, and that the last picture is the marketplace, not the mountain.*

2. The Conference of the Birds — *Sufi (Attar)*

All the birds of the world assembled to find a king, and the hoopoe told them they already had one — the Simurgh, who lives beyond the mountain of Qaf. The journey crosses seven valleys: Search, Love, Understanding, Detachment, Unity, Bewilderment, and finally Poverty and Annihilation. The excuses started at once. The nightingale could not leave his rose; the parrot wanted only his cage and his sugar; the owl loved his ruins and his buried treasure. Thousands set out. They died in the valleys, of thirst, of fear, of heat. Thirty birds arrived. And in the presence of the Simurgh they saw that *si murgh*, in their own language, means "thirty birds", and what they were looking at was themselves.

> *The link: the plate's stages with the ending intact. The pun is the whole doctrine, and the losses on the way are not decoration — most of the flock turned back at the excuses stage, before the first valley.*

3. Jacob's Ladder — *Biblical (Genesis 28)*

Fleeing from his brother, he stopped at nightfall in an ordinary place, took a stone for a pillow, and slept. He dreamed of a ladder set on the earth with its top reaching heaven, and the angels of God going up and coming down on it. And he woke and said: "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not." He was afraid, and said: this is none other than the house of God — and he took the stone he had slept on and set it upright and poured oil on it.

> *The link: the plate's degrees, with two details worth a class. The traffic goes both ways — ascent is not the only direction on the ladder. And the place was already holy while he was asleep on it; the stages are stages of his waking, not of the ladder being built.*

Plate 04-03 · Mo-Chao — Serene Reflection

Silent illumination.

1. The Fighting Cock of Chi Hsing-tzu — *Chinese (Zhuangzi)*

Chi Hsing-tzu was training a gamecock for the king. After ten days the king asked if it was ready. "Not yet — he is vain and confident and full of his own spirit." Ten more days. "Not yet. He still reacts to shadows and sounds." Ten more. "Not yet. He still glares and swells up when he sees another bird." Another ten days. "Nearly. Another cock crows, and he does not react at all. Look at him and he might be made of wood. His power is complete. No other bird will dare to face him — they will turn and run."

> *The link: the plate's serenity is not passivity. Each stage removes a reaction, and what is left is not a weaker bird but an unopposable one. Good for anyone who thinks stillness means going soft.*

2. Elijah at Horeb — *Biblical (1 Kings 19)*

He was exhausted and hunted, and he was told to go out and stand on the mountain, because the Lord was about to pass by. A great wind tore the mountain and broke the rocks in pieces — but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind, an earthquake — not in the earthquake. After the earthquake, a fire — not in the fire. And after the fire, *a still small voice*; and when he heard it he wrapped his face in his cloak and went and stood in the mouth of the cave.

> *The link: the plate's whole method. The three spectacular events are not decoys sent to fool him — they are what a man in crisis expects revelation to look like. He has to sit through all three.*

3. The Tea Master and the Ronin — *Japanese*

A tea master, travelling with his lord, was wearing a sword he had no right to wear, and a ronin picked a quarrel and challenged him. He could not refuse without disgracing his lord. He went to a nearby fencing school and asked the master there to teach him how to die well. The fencing master asked him first to make tea, one last time. He watched him do it: the cloth, the whisk, the bowl, the water — every movement complete, nothing else in the room. "You do not need lessons in swordsmanship. Go to the duel in the state you were in just now, making tea. Set your mind on the cloth, and draw as though you were lifting the ladle." The next morning he did exactly that, and stood with the sword up and his eyes quiet, and the ronin looked at him for a long time, apologised, and went away.

> *The link: the plate's reflection carried into action. The tea master had nothing to fight with except a mind that had been trained to be entirely in one place.*

Plate 04-04 · Blue Time / Rest Therapy

The deliberate pause.

1. The Bow That Was Always Bent — *Greek (Aesop)*

A neighbour found the hunter playing games with his children and mocked him for it — a serious man, wasting his afternoon. The hunter said nothing, took his

bow, unstrung it, and laid it on the ground. "Explain it," said the neighbour. "If it lies there unstrung, it will serve me when I want it. If I keep it always strung and always taut, it will snap when I need it most, and not before."

> *The link: the plate in twenty seconds, and it answers the objection the plate always meets — that the pause is time taken away from the work. The unstrung bow is not resting from archery; it is the reason archery is still possible.*

2. Come Apart and Rest a While — *Biblical (Mark 6)*

The apostles came back from being sent out two by two and gathered round him, full of it, telling him everything they had done and everything they had taught. And the place was crowded — people coming and going constantly, so that they had no leisure so much as to eat. And he said to them: "Come apart into a desert place by yourselves, and rest a while." So they went away privately by boat. It did not work, in the end — the crowds saw them go and ran round the shore on foot and got there first — but the instruction was given, in the middle of the most urgent work any of them would ever do, and it was given because the work was going well.

> *The link: the plate's pause, prescribed at exactly the wrong moment by every ordinary measure. They were succeeding, the demand was enormous, and that is when he pulled them out of it.*

3. Cook Ding's Knife — *Chinese (Zhuangzi)*

Cook Ding cut up an ox for Lord Wen-hui, and every touch of his hand and shift of his shoulder went in time, like a dance. The lord marvelled at his skill. "It is not skill — it is the Way. A good cook changes his knife once a year, because he cuts. An ordinary cook changes his once a month, because he hacks. I have had this knife nineteen years and cut up thousands of oxen, and the blade is as if it came off the whetstone today, because I go where there is space. And still — whenever I come to a complicated joint, I see the difficulty, I hold back, I look hard, I slow right down, I move the knife barely at all — and the whole thing falls apart like a clod of earth. Then I stand there holding the knife and look around, satisfied, and wipe it and put it away."

> *The link: the plate's pause inside the work, not only after it. He stops at the hard joint, which is the exact opposite of what an anxious worker does — and stopping is why the blade is not worn out.*

Plate 04-05 · The Story of Master Meng Shan

A Chan master's own account of great doubt and breakthrough. The plate is already a story — here are three companions.

1. Hakuin and the Hermit Hakuyu — *Japanese Zen*

Hakuin pushed his practice so hard that he broke down. His heart burned, his feet were like ice, his ears roared, his eyes ran, and he sweated and shook and could not concentrate on anything at all — "Zen sickness". No doctor helped. He heard of a hermit called Hakuyu living in a cave in the mountains, went up, and was ignored for a long time before he was seen. Hakuyu took his pulse and told him he had pushed the fire of his heart upward and burnt himself out with his own ambition to attain, and gave him a practice of drawing the energy down and

pooling it below the navel, as though a lump of soft butter were melting on the crown and running down through him. Hakuin did it for three years, and recovered completely, and taught it for the rest of his life.

> *The link: the natural companion to Meng Shan's illness, and a corrective. Both men were wrecked by intensity; both recovered by a change of method, not by more sincerity.*

2. Jacob Wrestles Until Daybreak — *Biblical (Genesis 32)*

The night before he had to meet the brother he had cheated, he sent everyone he owned across the ford and stayed on the other side alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he could not prevail against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh and put it out of joint, and said: "Let me go, for the day is breaking." And Jacob said: "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me." He was asked his name — the same name he had lied about to get the blessing years before — and this time he said it: Jacob. And he was given a new one, Israel, and blessed there. The sun rose on him as he passed over, and he was limping.

> *The link: the great doubt held to the end. He is injured in the middle of it, does not let go, gets the blessing, and walks with a limp afterwards — which is the most honest detail in the story.*

3. Six Years, and Sujata's Milk-Rice — *Buddhist*

He starved himself for six years, until, as he described it, his backbone could be felt through his belly and his scalp shrivelled like a green gourd dried in the sun, and if he touched his stomach he took hold of his spine. He came to the edge of death and had not attained. Then he remembered sitting under a rose-apple tree as a child, quiet and clear and at ease, and thought: *that* was the way. He accepted a bowl of milk-rice from the village girl Sujata and ate it. His five companions, disgusted at the backsliding, walked out on him. That night he sat down under the tree, and by morning it was done.

> *The link: the companion Meng Shan's story needs most. The breakthrough came after he stopped punishing himself, and the people who had been practising alongside him left in disgust at the very moment he got it right.*

PART V — Energy, Alchemy and the Divine Mother

Plate 05-01 · What Are Hydrogens 24, 12 and 6?

Grades of matter and energy, and the refinement between them.

1. The Churning of the Ocean — *Indian (Puranic)*

The gods had lost their strength, and were told the nectar of immortality lay at the bottom of the ocean of milk. They could not do it alone, so they made a truce with the demons. They used the mountain Mandara as the churning stick and the great serpent Vasuki as the rope, and the tortoise held the mountain up from below, and gods pulled one end and demons the other, for a very long time. What came up first was not nectar. It was halahala, a poison black enough to destroy the three worlds, and everybody ran. Shiva came and drank it and held it in his throat, which turned blue, and he did not swallow it and did not spit it out. Then came the cow, the goddess, the moon, the physician of the gods — and last, the pot of nectar.

> *The link: the plate's refinement, with the sequence in the right order. The higher substance is not the first thing that comes up out of the work, and somebody has to be able to hold the poison in the throat without swallowing it.*

2. The Refiner's Fire — *Biblical (Malachi 3, and the silversmiths' telling)*

"He shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver." Silversmiths explain what the image means. The metal is held in the middle of the fire, at the hottest point, because that is where the dross comes to the surface — anywhere cooler and it stays in. The refiner cannot leave it there; too long and the silver itself is destroyed. So he sits, and does not move, and watches it the entire time. And he knows the work is finished at the moment he can see his own face in it.

> *The link: the plate's grades of matter, and the test of arrival. Not "when the silver is bright" — when the image appears in it.*

3. Masamune and Muramasa — *Japanese*

Two great swordsmiths, and the story told to compare them. Muramasa's blade was set upright in a stream, and everything the current carried into it was cut in two — leaves, fish, the lot. Then Masamune's blade was set in the same stream, and the leaves drifted up to the edge and floated round it, and the fish swam past unharmed. The onlookers said Muramasa's was clearly the better sword. A monk watching corrected them: Muramasa's is bloodthirsty and cuts indiscriminately, without asking what it is cutting. Masamune's is the finer blade — it does not needlessly destroy what is innocent.

> *The link: the plate is about the quality of an energy, not the quantity. Two blades of the same steel, both extremely sharp; the difference between them is what they do to what comes near.*

Plate 05-02 · The Transformation of Energy

Turning one thing into another.

1. The Chickpea in the Pot — *Sufi (Rumi)*

A chickpea leaps up out of the boiling pot. "Why are you doing this to me?" The cook knocks it back down with the ladle. "Don't you try to jump out. You think I am torturing you. I am giving you flavour, so you can mix with spices and rice and become the life of a human being. Remember when you drank rain in the garden? That was for this." The chickpea says: then boil me, and hold me down with your ladle — I have no one else to do it. And the cook says: I was once like you, green and fresh from the ground, and I boiled through time and through the earth, and now I am the one holding the spoon.

> *The link: the plate exactly, and the emotional truth of it — from inside, transformation is indistinguishable from being cooked. The cook's last line is the part to say slowly: he has been in the pot.*

2. The Carp and the Dragon Gate — *Chinese*

Every spring the carp come up the Yellow River in their thousands and gather below the falls at the Dragon Gate. Most mill about in the pool. Some try and fall back, and try again, and fall back. And a carp that gets over the top of the falls is not a very successful carp — it is transfigured, and comes down the other side as a dragon.

> *The link: the plate's transformation is a change of kind, not a change of degree. Worth pressing to a class: no amount of excellent swimming turns into a dragon. Only the leap does, and most of the fish never leave the pool.*

3. Water Into Wine — *Biblical (John 2)*

The wine ran out at a wedding, and his mother told him. He said his hour had not come. She turned to the servants and said: do whatever he tells you. There were six stone jars for the ritual washing, holding twenty or thirty gallons each. He said: fill them with water. They filled them to the brim. Draw some out now and take it to the master of the feast. He tasted it, did not know where it came from — though the servants knew — and called the bridegroom over to complain that everyone serves the good wine first and the cheap stuff once people have drunk a while, "but you have kept the good wine until now."

> *The link: the plate's transformation, with three details a class can use. It happens in the vessels used for purification. The servants who did the carrying are the only ones who know. And what came out was better than what the transformation was replacing.*

Plate 05-03 · The First Conscious Shock

From mechanical reaction to self-remembering, at the moment of the impression.

1. "Is That So?" — *Japanese Zen (Hakuin)*

The Zen master Hakuin was praised by his neighbours as a man of pure life. A girl in the village became pregnant, and under pressure from her parents she named him as the father. They came and abused him. He said: "Is that so?" When the

child was born it was brought to him, and by then he had lost his reputation entirely, but he took the baby in and got milk for it from the neighbours and looked after it. A year later the girl could not stand it any longer and told her parents the truth — the father was a young man who worked at the fish market. They went to him full of apologies and asked for the child back. He handed it over and said: "Is that so?"

> *The link: the plate's shock applied twice, at the two impressions that would move anyone — disgrace and vindication. The second "Is that so?" is the one that proves it.*

2. Epictetus and the Broken Leg — *Greek (Stoic)*

Epictetus was a slave before he was a philosopher, and lame all his life. The story told of him is that his master, in a fit of temper, took his leg and began to twist it. Epictetus said, quite calmly, "You will break it." The master kept twisting, and the leg broke. He said, in the same voice, "There. I told you you would break it." What he taught afterwards was one distinction: some things are up to us and some are not. The event is not up to us; the judgement we add to it, in the moment, is.

> *The link: the plate's gap between impression and reaction, held open under conditions where nobody would blame him for closing it. Do not present it as coldness — he did not deny the pain; he declined to add anything to it.*

3. The Three Temptations — *Biblical (Matthew 4)*

He had been forty days in the wilderness and was hungry, and three impressions came, one after another, each one reasonable. Make these stones into bread — you are hungry, and you can. Throw yourself from the temple, since it is written that the angels will hold you up. And from a high mountain, with all the kingdoms of the world in view: all of this is yours, if you will bow down once. Each time the answer is short, immediate, and comes from a place that was decided before the offer arrived — *it is written* — and there is no negotiation and no lingering over the offer.

> *The link: the plate's mechanism at every level: appetite, the desire to be spectacular, and power. Note that the second temptation quotes scripture at him; the impression is not always crude.*

Plate 05-04 · Egyptian Christic Pranayama

The seventeen points of the practice; the breath.

1. Isis and the Breath of Osiris — *Egyptian*

Set killed Osiris and cut him into pieces and scattered them the length of Egypt. Isis went and searched, alone, for years, and gathered them one by one — every part but the one the fish had taken. She bound the body together and made the missing part herself. Then she turned into a kite and hovered over him, and beat her wings, and with the wind of her wings she put breath into him, and he stirred; and from that she conceived Horus. Osiris did not stay in the world — he went to be king of the dead — but the son was got, and the line was not broken.

The link: the plate's practice, in the tradition it names. Breath given by the Mother's wings over a body that has been broken and reassembled — and what comes out of it is a son, not a repair.

2. The Breath Into Adam — *Biblical (Genesis 2)*

The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground — and dust is all he is at that point, complete in shape, correct in every part, lying there — and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; *and man became a living soul.* The word used for that breath is the same word used for wind and for spirit.

The link: one line, and it is the plate's premise. The form was finished before the breath came. What made it a soul was not more clay.

3. The Senses Argue — *Indian (Chandogya and Prasna Upanishads)*

The powers of the body fell to quarrelling over which of them was the greatest, and went to their father to settle it. He said: whichever of you leaves, and the body is worst off without, is the greatest. Speech went away and stayed away a year, and came back and asked how they had managed. "As the dumb manage — not speaking, but breathing, seeing, hearing, thinking." The eye went for a year: "As the blind manage." The ear: "As the deaf." The mind: "As children manage." Then the breath began to leave — and as it went, it pulled all the others up with it like a great horse pulling up all the tent pegs at once, and they came running and said: sir, stay. You are the greatest of us. Do not go.

The link: pair with the plate to explain why the practice works on the breath and not on something else. The breath is not one of the powers. It is the one they are all pegged to.

Plate 05-05 · Light, Heat and Sound

Three faces of one energy.

1. Ptah Speaks the World — *Egyptian (Memphite Theology)*

Other cities said the world was made by hand, or by a god's sweat and tears. Memphis taught that Ptah made it in his heart and on his tongue. He conceived the shape of every thing in his heart, and named it with his tongue, and by that it existed — the gods, the towns, the shrines, the food offerings, every living thing. The teeth and lips of Ptah are what the names are made with, and the heart is what does the thinking, and the world is the speech of a god still standing there.

The link: the plate's sound as the creating agent, from the tradition the booklet's alchemy plates already draw on. Say it plainly to a class: on this teaching, the universe is a word that has not stopped being spoken.

2. The Trumpets at Jericho — *Biblical (Joshua 6)*

The city was shut up tight; nobody went in or out. The instruction was: march round it once a day for six days, the armed men in front, seven priests with rams' horns behind them, and the ark behind those — and no one is to say a word. Not a shout, not a sound out of your mouth, until I tell you. Six days of walking round a wall in silence while the city watched from the top of it. On the seventh day they went round seven times, and at the seventh circuit the horns sounded and the people shouted, and the wall fell down flat.

The link: the plate's sound with power in it. And the part that is really about practice: six days of accumulating silence before one sound was allowed to be made.

3. Amaterasu Comes Out of the Cave — *Japanese (Kojiki)*

The sun goddess, insulted and frightened by her brother, shut herself in a cave and rolled a rock across it, and the world went dark — the plains of heaven and the whole earth, and every kind of calamity came with the darkness. Eight hundred gods gathered by the river to think. They hung a great mirror and jewels on a tree outside the cave, and set the cocks crowing, and then Ame-no-Uzume turned over a tub, climbed on it, and danced — and her dance became so wild and so comical that all eight hundred gods roared with laughter until heaven shook. Amaterasu, inside, could not bear not knowing what was funny. She pushed the rock a crack and asked how they could be laughing in the dark. "Because we have a goddess greater than you." She leaned out to see, saw her own face in the mirror, came further out to look — and a strong god took her hand and pulled her out, and another put a rope across the entrance behind her, and the light came back.

The link: light, sound and heat in one story: she is drawn out by noise and laughter, and what actually moves her is seeing herself. Good against a solemn class — the gods do not pray her out; they throw a party.

Plate 05-06 · The Five Aspects of the Divine Mother

The Mother in her different faces.

1. Durga and the Buffalo Demon — *Indian*

Mahishasura had a boon that no man and no god could kill him, and he had taken heaven. The gods, beaten, stood together and poured out their anger, and the light of it took shape as a woman — Shiva's power made her face, Vishnu's her arms, and each god gave her his own weapon, so she stood with ten arms full of everything the gods had, riding a lion. The demon laughed and offered to marry her. The battle went nine nights. He changed shape constantly — buffalo, lion, man with a sword, elephant — and each time she cut through it, and at the last, as he came half out of the buffalo's body, she pinned him with her foot and ran the trident through him.

The link: the plate's terrible aspect, and it is not a contradiction of the gentle one. Every weapon she carries was given to her by someone who could not use it himself against this particular enemy.

2. Isis and the Seven Scorpions — *Egyptian*

Isis, hiding and pregnant, travelled the marshes with seven scorpions as her escort. At evening she came to the house of a wealthy woman, who saw the scorpions and shut the door in her face. A poor fisherman's wife took her in. But one scorpion had poured its poison into the sting of another and slipped under the rich woman's door in the night, and stung her son, and the boy was dying and she ran through the town crying with nobody helping her. Isis heard her. And she said: the child has done nothing — and she put her hands on him and called the poison by name, each of the seven, and commanded it out of him, and he lived.

The link: the plate's compassionate aspect, with teeth. She heals the child of the woman who shut the door on her, and she does it by naming the poison — which is precisely what the inner work asks of a defect.

3. Miao Shan — *Chinese Buddhist (the origin of Kuan Yin)*

Miao Shan refused to marry, and her father the king punished her, set her to the hardest labour, and finally had her killed. Years later he fell ill with a disease no doctor could touch, and a monk told him the only cure was a medicine made from the eyes and hands of one who gives them without anger. There was, he said, such a person on a certain mountain. Messengers went. She gave them her eyes and her hands. The king was cured, and went to the mountain to thank whoever had done it, and recognised his daughter. In some tellings she is then restored with a thousand arms and a thousand eyes, so that she can reach in every direction at once and see every creature that is suffering.

The link: the plate's Mother as the one who gives what cannot be replaced, to the person least entitled to ask. The thousand arms are not decoration — they are what the giving turned into.

PART VI — Nature, Health and the Elements

Plate 06-01 · The Elementals

The five elements in nature and in the human being — nature as inhabited.

1. Erysichthon and the Grove — *Greek (Ovid)*

Erysichthon despised the gods and went into the sacred grove of Demeter with an axe to cut down her great oak, which was hung with garlands and votive tablets from everyone whose prayers it had answered. His own men refused. He took the axe from one of them and struck, and the tree bled, and a voice came out of the wound: "I am the nymph who lives in this wood, and I tell you as I die that your punishment is coming." He cut it down anyway. Demeter sent Famine to him in his sleep, to breathe herself into him. From then he ate and ate and was never fed — he ate his house, his herds, his fortune; he sold his daughter, and sold her again; and at the end, with nothing left, he began to eat himself.

> *The link: the plate's elementals as beings, not resources — and the punishment fits the crime exactly. A man who could not see life in a tree ends up unable to be filled by anything.*

2. The Willow Wife — *Japanese*

A young man loved a willow that grew near his house, and defended it when the village wanted it felled. Later a woman came to the village, homeless, and he married her, and they had a son, and lived quietly for years. Then an order came from the capital to build a temple, and the finest timber in the district was that willow. She grew pale. On the day the men came with their axes, she cried out that she was in pain, and clung to her husband, and told him what she was, and said goodbye to the child — and as the tree came down she went with it, and her shadow slid away along the floor and was gone.

> *The link: the plate again, but felt from the other side. The class will not forget it, and it opens the question the plate is really asking: what is present in a plant that a person can be married to for years without noticing?*

3. The Descent of Ganga — *Indian*

The Ganges was a river of heaven, and Bhagiratha stood on one foot for a thousand years to bring her down, so that his ancestors' ashes could be redeemed. She agreed, and then said the plain truth: if I fall from that height the earth will not survive the impact. So Shiva stood in the way of the fall and took the whole weight of the river on his head, and let her wander in the coils of his hair for years until she came out gentled, in streams, and could be received by the ground.

> *The link: the plate's elements as living powers with their own scale. Water is not a substance here; it is an intelligence that has to be mediated before a human being can stand in it.*

Plate 06-02 · The Journey of the Five Elements

The elements moving through nature and through us.

1. Dust From the Four Corners — *Jewish (Midrash)*

When God made Adam, the sages say, he did not take the dust from one place. He gathered it from the four corners of the earth — so that wherever a man dies, the ground will receive him and no place can say to him, you do not belong here, go and be buried elsewhere. And he took it in different colours, red earth and black and white and pale, so that no one afterwards could claim a better clay than his neighbour's.

> *The link: the plate's journey, with the return built into it. Earth goes out to the four corners, becomes a man, and every corner is entitled to receive him back.*

2. Empedocles and the Fire — *Greek*

Empedocles taught that everything there is comes from four roots — earth, water, air and fire — combined and separated endlessly by love and strife, and that nothing is ever born or destroyed, only mixed and unmixed. He also claimed to have been, in earlier lives, a boy, a girl, a bush, a bird, and a fish in the sea. The legend of his death is that, wanting to prove he had become divine, he climbed Mount Etna and threw himself into the crater — and the mountain, in the unkindest version, threw one of his bronze sandals back out.

> *The link: the plate's cycle, and a warning attached at no extra cost. The doctrine is sound; the man who forced his own return to the element made himself ridiculous.*

3. The First Mound Rises From Nun — *Egyptian*

Before anything, Nun: dark water, without limit, without surface, not empty but formless. Out of it the first mound of dry land rose — the primeval hill, the ground the temple is built on the model of. On it the creator stood, the first place there was to stand, and from that the sun came up for the first time, and out of the sun's work, air and moisture, and out of those, earth and sky, which had to be held apart. And the water was never destroyed; it is still there, under the world and around it, which is why the Nile rises every year, and why the dead go back down.

> *The link: the plate's sequence, in Egyptian order: water, then land, then light, then the separation of air. Useful for showing a class that the elemental journey is not a metaphor bolted on afterwards — it is how the tradition actually described the world coming to be.*

Plate 06-03 · Plants and the Four Elements

The plant as a meeting of earth, water, air and fire.

1. The Barren Fig Tree — *Biblical (Luke 13)*

A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and came looking for fruit on it and found none. He said to the gardener: three years I have come to this tree and got nothing. Cut it down; why should it use up the ground? And the gardener said: sir, leave it this year too. Let me dig round it and put dung on it. If it bears fruit next year, good — and if not, then cut it down.

The link: the plate's care of a plant as a discipline in four parts: the digging is earth and air to the root, the dung is what breaks down into food, and the gardener asks for time, which is the element nobody lists. Also the clean parallel to the inner work — one more year, and better conditions, not a harder demand.

2. Demeter and Triptolemus — *Greek*

When Demeter was searching the world for her stolen daughter she came to Eleusis, exhausted, disguised as an old woman, and sat down by a well. The royal household took her in and treated her kindly. Afterwards, when her grief was settled and the seasons had been arranged, she gave that house her gift. She took the boy Triptolemus, taught him the whole art of grain — the ploughing, the sowing, the seasons, the harvest — and gave him a chariot drawn by winged serpents, and sent him out across the whole earth to teach it to everyone. Agriculture was not discovered. It was handed over, by the mourning mother, to the household that had been kind to her.

The link: the plate's plants as a teaching received rather than a technique invented — and Demeter's grief and the grain's cycle are the same cycle.

3. The Tulsi Plant — *Indian*

The story is told of Vrinda, a woman whose devotion to her husband was so complete that no power could touch him while it held. When it was broken — by a god who came to her in her husband's shape — her husband fell in battle the same hour. In her grief and her anger she cursed the god who had deceived her, and he accepted the curse without defending himself, and then honoured her: she would become the plant tulsi, and no offering to him anywhere would ever be complete without a leaf of her. To this day the plant grows in the courtyard, is watered in the morning, and is not casually cut.

The link: the plate's plants as beings with biography. Whatever a class makes of the theology, the practice it produces is exactly what the plate asks for: you do not take a leaf without knowing what you are taking it from.

Plate 06-04 · Sacred Plants and Planetary Correspondences

Plants that carry a power, and the planet behind it.

1. Moly — *Greek (Odyssey)*

Odysseus's men went to Circe's house and were fed and turned into pigs, with the minds of men still in them. Going after them alone, Odysseus met Hermes on the path, who pulled a plant out of the ground and gave it to him: black at the root, with a milk-white flower. "The gods call it moly. It is hard for mortal men to dig, but the gods can do anything." He told him exactly what to do: drink what she gives you — the drug will not work — and when she strikes you with the wand, draw your sword and go at her as if to kill her. He did it, and she fell at his knees, and the men were restored, and were younger and taller than before.

The link: the plate in one image. A plant given by the planetary intelligence itself, hard to dig, that does not prevent the encounter with the enchantress but makes it survivable.

2. Hanuman Brings the Mountain — *Indian (Ramayana)*

Lakshmana was struck down in the night battle and would be dead by sunrise. The physician named four herbs, growing on one mountain in the Himalayas, and said they must be brought before dawn. Hanuman flew north. He found the mountain and the herbs were there — but they glowed, and there were many, and he could not tell which four, and he had no time to learn. So he put his arms around the mountain, tore it out of the range, and carried the whole thing back through the sky, and set it down, and the physician picked what he needed.

> *The link: the plate's correspondences, and a joke a class will enjoy: when you do not know which herb, bring the mountain. Under the joke is a real point about brute devotion succeeding where insufficient knowledge would have failed.*

3. The Mandrakes of Reuben — *Biblical (Genesis 30)*

Reuben went out in the wheat harvest and found mandrakes in the field and brought them to his mother Leah. Rachel, who had no children, said: give me some of your son's mandrakes. Leah, who had children and no husband's attention, said: is it a small thing that you have taken my husband, and now you want my son's mandrakes as well? So they traded — Rachel got the plants, and Leah got Jacob for the night, and went out to meet him and said, you are with me tonight, I have hired you with my son's mandrakes. Leah conceived that night. Rachel, with the mandrakes, did not conceive until later, and then not because of them.

> *The link: the plate's plants with real power attached in the tradition — and an honest caution to give a class. The plant was famous, the trade was real, and the outcome went to the woman who gave the plant away.*

Plate 06-05 · Foods According to Their Qualities

Food carries a quality, and the quality goes in with it.

1. Bhishma and the King's Food — *Indian (Mahabharata)*

Draupadi was dragged into the assembly and shamed in front of the elders, and Bhishma — the grandfather, the most upright man in the hall — said nothing that stopped it. Later, lying on the bed of arrows and dying, he was asked why. He said: I had eaten Duryodhana's food for years. A man's mind takes the quality of what he eats, and I had been eating the food of a wicked man, and my mind was clouded by it. Now that Arjuna's arrows have let out the bad blood, my mind is clear and I can speak the truth.

> *The link: the plate's claim in its strongest form, from a man who does not use it as an excuse — he uses it as a diagnosis, and he blames himself for the eating.*

2. Daniel and the Pulse — *Biblical (Daniel 1)*

The best young men of Judah were taken into the palace to be trained, and enrolled on the king's own diet: his meat and his wine, every day, for three years. Daniel asked to be excused. The steward was frightened — if you four look worse than the others, the king will have my head. Daniel said: test us for ten days. Give us pulse to eat and water to drink, and then compare us with the young men who eat the king's food, and deal with us according to what you see. At the end of ten

days their faces looked better and they were in better flesh than all of them, and the steward quietly took away the king's meat and kept giving them pulse.

> *The link: the plate's argument as an experiment, with a control group and a ten-day term. Worth pointing out that Daniel does not demand to be believed. He asks for a trial.*

3. Dogen and the Old Cook — *Japanese Zen*

Dogen, newly arrived in China and still a young monk, met an old tenzo — a monastery cook — who had walked a long way in the heat to buy mushrooms. Dogen invited him to stay and talk about the teaching. The old man said he had to get back; nobody else was doing the cooking. "But surely there are others who can cook. Why should an old man like you do this hard work instead of sitting and reading the sutras?" The old man laughed at him. "My good foreign friend, you do not yet understand practice, and you do not know what words mean." Another time Dogen saw an old tenzo laying out mushrooms to dry in the fierce midday sun, with no hat, his back bent, sweating. "Why not wait until it is cooler? Why not have an assistant do it?" "I am not other people. Other people are not me. And if not now, when?"

> *The link: the plate's food raised to practice. Two lines a class will take home: I am not other people, and if not now, when — said over a tray of mushrooms.*

Plate 06-06 · The Five Causes of Disease

Where illness actually comes from.

1. Bian Que and the Marquis of Cai — *Chinese*

The physician Bian Que saw the marquis and said: there is an illness in your skin. Treat it now, or it will go deeper. The marquis said: I have no illness — and told his court afterwards that doctors like curing healthy men so they can claim the credit. Ten days later: it is in your flesh now. The marquis was displeased. Ten days later: it is in your stomach and intestines. The marquis was angry. Ten days later Bian Que looked at him from across the room and turned round and walked out. The marquis sent someone to ask why. "In the skin, a poultice reaches it. In the flesh, needles. In the stomach, medicine. When it is in the marrow, it belongs to the Director of Fates, and there is nothing a doctor can do." Five days later the marquis was in pain and sent for him. Bian Que had already left the state. He died.

> *The link: the plate's causes and their stages, with the real cause named quietly at the end: the illness was treatable three times, and each time it was denial that let it go a layer deeper.*

2. The Second Arrow — *Buddhist (Sallatha Sutta)*

When an untrained person is touched by a painful feeling, they sorrow and grieve and beat their breast and become distraught — so they feel two pains, one in the body and one in the mind. It is as if a man were struck by an arrow, and then struck immediately afterwards by a second arrow, and felt the pain of both. The trained person, touched by the same painful feeling, does not add the second. They feel the bodily pain, and one pain only.

The link: the plate's psychological causes. The first arrow is nature, karma, an accident, a virus — mostly not chosen. The second is fired by the patient, and it is the one that keeps going in.

3. "Sin No More" — *Biblical (John 5)*

There was a man at the pool of Bethesda who had been ill thirty-eight years. He was asked a strange question — *do you want to be made well?* — and did not answer it; he answered a different one, explaining why it had never been possible: I have no one to put me in the water, and while I am coming, someone else goes down before me. He was told to get up, pick up his bed and walk, and he did. Later, meeting him in the temple, Jesus said: you are well — sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you.

The link: the plate's moral cause, held carefully. Note the question he was actually asked, and that he did not say yes. Thirty-eight years is long enough for an illness to become a position.

Plate 06-07 · Diseases and Karma

The debts that arrive as illness.

1. The Death of Moggallana — *Buddhist*

Moggallana was the Buddha's disciple with the greatest psychic powers — he could travel to other realms and read minds. Bandits were hired to kill him. Twice he simply vanished as they came. The third time, he found he could not; something in him would not lift. He let them in and they beat him and left him for dead, and he pulled himself together by will long enough to go and take leave of the Buddha. Asked how a man of such attainment could end that way, the answer given was that long ago, in another life, he had been persuaded to kill his own blind parents, and this was the last of that debt arriving — and it arrived *because* he was about to be free, not in spite of it.

The link: the plate's connection between illness, injury and karma, from a tradition that does not soften it. And the detail worth a class: attainment did not cancel the debt; it collected it.

2. The Man Born Blind — *Biblical (John 9)*

They passed a man blind from birth, and the disciples asked the question everybody asks: "Master, who sinned — this man or his parents — that he was born blind?" It is a closed question; both answers are cruel. The answer they got refused both: neither this man nor his parents, but that the works of God should be made manifest in him. Then he spat on the ground, made clay, put it on the man's eyes, and told him to go and wash — and the man came back seeing, and the argument that followed was not about karma at all but about who was allowed to do such a thing on a Saturday.

The link: the essential companion to the plate. A class that has understood karma will start using it to explain other people's suffering; this is the story that takes the tool out of their hands.

3. The House of Atreus — *Greek*

Tantalus served his own son to the gods to test them, and was punished forever in water he could not drink. His line inherited it. His son Pelops won a bride by bribing a charioteer and then killing him, and was cursed by the dying man. Pelops's sons, Atreus and Thyestes, fought over the throne, and Atreus killed his brother's children and served them to him at a banquet. Thyestes's surviving son later killed Atreus. Atreus's son Agamemnon sacrificed his own daughter for a wind to Troy, and was murdered in his bath by his wife when he came home, and their son Orestes killed his mother for it, and was hunted mad by the Furies — until at last a court was convened in Athens, and the case was tried, and the chain was cut by judgement instead of by blood.

> *The link: the plate's karma running down a family line, and — importantly — how it ends. Not by anyone taking their turn correctly, but by the first person who stops and submits the whole thing to a higher court.*

PART VII — Symbols and Sacred Stories

These plates already carry a story. What follows are companions — a story from another tradition teaching the same thing, so the two can be twinned in one class.

Plate 07-01 · Gnostic Symbolism of Animals, Part 1

Animals as forces, in nature and in us.

1. The Contendings of Horus and Set — *Egyptian*

Horus and Set disputed the throne for eighty years, and the tribunal of the gods could not decide. So they fought it out in shapes. They became hippopotami and went under the water to see who could stay down three months. They fought as men and Set tore out Horus's eyes and buried them, and they grew into lotuses; Hathor healed the sockets with gazelle's milk. Set attacked him in the night; Isis caught the seed and put it on a lettuce that Set ate, so that when the gods were asked to judge, the seed of Horus answered from inside Set's own body and came out of his forehead as a golden disc. In the end Horus was given the throne and Set was given the storms.

> *The link: the animals on the plate are not symbols standing for qualities from outside — they are the shapes the forces take when they fight. Note the ending: Set is not destroyed; he is given a job.*

2. The Scorpion and the Frog — *Persian and Indian*

A scorpion asked a frog to carry him across the river. "You will sting me." "Why would I? We would both drown." The frog thought that was sound, and let him on his back, and swam. Halfway across the scorpion stung him. As the poison went in and they both began to sink, the frog got out one question: why? The scorpion said: I am sorry. It is my nature.

> *The link: pair with the plate's animal forces. The scorpion is not lying at the start and not lying at the end. What a class should take is that these forces do not deceive us with a plan — they simply are what they are, and we are the frog, negotiating.*

3. The Two Wolves — *modern, commonly attributed to Cherokee or Lenape teaching*

An old man tells his grandson: there are two wolves fighting inside me. One is anger, envy, greed, arrogance, self-pity, resentment, lies. The other is joy, peace, humility, kindness, generosity, truth. The same fight is going on inside you. The boy asks: which one wins? The old man says: the one you feed.

> *A note before you use it: this story is genuinely good and almost certainly not old. It appears in print in the twentieth century, its Native attribution is disputed by Cherokee sources, and the earliest versions look like Christian sermon material.* ***Tell it as a modern parable, not as an ancient teaching*** *— the class will trust the rest of the material more, not less, for hearing you say so.*
>
> *The link: the plate's animals as competing natures, and the practical instruction the plate implies: not killing the wolf, feeding the other one.*

Plate 07-02 · Gnostic Symbolism of Animals, Part 2

1. Balaam's Ass — *Biblical (Numbers 22)*

Balaam rode to do a job he had been warned off, and an angel with a drawn sword stood in the road, and the man saw nothing. The donkey saw, and turned into a field, and he beat her back onto the path. The angel stood in a narrow place between two walls; she crushed his foot against the wall, and he beat her again. Then the angel stood where there was no room to turn at all, and she lay down under him, and he beat her with his staff. And the donkey spoke: "What have I done to you, that you have hit me three times?" He answered her, furious, in the middle of the road, without apparently noticing that his donkey was talking. Then his eyes were opened, and he saw the sword, and fell on his face — and the angel said: if she had not turned aside, I would have killed you and let her live.

> *The link: pair with the plate. The animal sees what the prophet cannot, and is punished three times for saving him — and the man's first reaction to a miracle is to keep arguing.*

2. The Crane Wife — *Japanese*

A poor man freed a crane caught in a trap. That night a woman came to his door out of the snow, and stayed, and married him. They had nothing, so she shut herself in the back room and told him never to look in while she worked, and came out with a bolt of cloth so fine it sold for a fortune. He wanted more. She wove again, and came out thinner. He wanted more still, and a merchant pressed him, and while she was working he slid the door open — and there was a crane, plucking out her own feathers and weaving them into the loom, nearly bare. She looked at him, and became a woman one last time to say goodbye, and then flew away.

> *The link: the plate's animal nature, treated as a source of supply. The prohibition was not a test; it was the only condition under which the gift could continue.*

3. The Talkative Tortoise — *Indian (Panchatantra / Jataka)*

A tortoise in a drying lake had two goose friends, who offered to carry him to a better lake. They took a stick between them, one at each end, and he bit the middle, and they told him plainly: whatever happens, do not open your mouth. They flew. People in the town below looked up and shouted and pointed at the extraordinary sight — a tortoise flying between two birds — and someone laughed and said it must have been the geese's idea. And the tortoise opened his mouth to say that it was *his* idea.

> *The link: the plate's animal symbolism turned on the tongue. He was already flying. He had already won. What killed him was the need to correct the record.*

Plate 07-03 · Theseus and the Minotaur

1. Momotarō — *Japanese*

An old couple found a boy inside a giant peach that came down the river, and raised him. When he was grown he told them he was going to Onigashima, the island of demons, who had been raiding the coast for years. His mother made him

millet dumplings for the road. On the way he met a dog, a monkey and a pheasant, and each asked what he was carrying and what he was doing, and each took a dumpling and came with him. They crossed the water. The pheasant flew over the wall and pecked at the demons' eyes; the monkey went over the top and clawed; the dog went in at the gate and bit. Momotarō fought the demon chief and beat him, and the demons wept and handed back the treasure, and he brought it home.

> *The link: the same journey as the plate — go across the water into the demons' own house and finish it there — but with a detail Theseus does not have: he could not have done it alone, and each of the three animals attacks in a different way. Worth twinning them directly.*

2. Beowulf and Grendel's Mother — *Anglo-Saxon*

Grendel had emptied the hall for twelve years. Beowulf killed him bare-handed and tore off his arm, and there was rejoicing — and that night the thing's mother came for the reckoning, and took a man, and the hall was as bad as before. So he had to go after her: down through the haunted mere, where the water burns at night and a stag pursued by hounds will die on the bank rather than go in. He swam down most of a day. In the hall under the water his famous sword would not bite her at all, and he was thrown down, and what saved him was an old giant's sword hanging on the wall — a weapon that was already there, not the one he brought.

> *The link: the plate's labyrinth as the mere. Two things to twin: killing the monster in the hall is not the end, because there is always something underneath that made it; and the weapon that works down there is not the one that worked upstairs.*

3. Krishna and Kaliya — *Indian*

The serpent Kaliya lived in a deep pool of the Yamuna and had poisoned it — birds fell dead over the water, cattle drinking at the edge died on the bank. The boy Krishna climbed a tree beside it and jumped in. The serpent came up with all its hoods and wrapped him and held him under, and the whole village stood on the bank in despair. Then he swelled until the coils had to let go, and came up, and began to dance on the heads — and as he danced on each hood in turn it went down, and the ones that reared up he trod down too, until the serpent's wives came up and begged for its life. He gave it, on one condition: leave the river, and go to the sea.

> *The link: the closest companion the Minotaur has. The monster is in the water everyone drinks from; the hero goes in alone and is held under first; and the many heads are subdued by dancing on them one at a time — which is a better picture of the work on the ego than killing.*

Plate 07-04 · The Tax Collector and the Pharisee

1. Moses and the Shepherd — *Sufi (Rumi)*

Moses overheard a shepherd praying: "God, where are you? I want to help you — to mend your shoes and comb your hair and wash your clothes and bring you milk and kiss your little hands and rub your little feet and sweep your room out at bedtime." Moses was horrified and rebuked him: who are you talking to? God has no feet, no shoes, no room. This is blasphemy; put a cloth in your mouth. The

shepherd tore his clothes and ran off into the desert. And then God spoke to Moses: "You have separated me from one of my own. I did not send you to divide. I gave each person a way of speaking and a way of seeing. What is wrong for one is right for another; what is poison to one is honey to another. I am not made greater by praise or purified by anything they say. I look at the burning, not at the words."

> *The link: the same reversal as the plate, but aimed at the reader — because the Pharisee is easy to despise, and Moses is not. Twin them and the class has to notice that the correct man is correct.*

2. The Shepherd Boy's Flute — *Hasidic (told of the Baal Shem Tov)*

On the Day of Atonement the congregation prayed all day, and the Baal Shem Tov, who could see such things, felt the prayers pressing against a closed gate and not getting through. At the back of the synagogue was a shepherd boy who could not read a word of the prayers and had come with his flute in his pocket. All day the longing built in him. At the very end, unable to bear it, he pulled it out and blew one long note, and the congregation was scandalised. And the master said: that whistle opened the gate, and carried every prayer in this room up with it.

> *The link: the plate's contrast at its most tender. The room was not full of hypocrites — they were praying properly, all day. The gate simply did not open for correctness.*

3. Angulimala — *Buddhist*

Angulimala was a murderer who wore a necklace of his victims' fingers, and the country was terrified of him. The Buddha walked deliberately down the road where he was waiting. Angulimala ran after him with his sword, and could not close the distance, though the Buddha was walking. He shouted: "Stop, monk!" And the answer came: "I have stopped, Angulimala. It is you who have not stopped." He threw the sword away, and became a monk, and later an arahant — and afterwards, going for alms, the villagers who remembered him threw stones, and he came back bleeding, and was told: bear it. This is your karma, arriving where you can carry it.

> *The link: twin with the plate. The man everybody in the story is right to condemn goes further than the men who are right about him — and the story does not pretend the debt was waived.*

Plate 07-05 · The Coachman and the Carriage

From Plato's allegory to a Gnostic reading.

1. The Chariot of the Katha Upanishad — *Indian*

Know the Self as the lord of the chariot, and the body as the chariot. Know the intellect as the charioteer, and the mind as the reins. The senses, they say, are the horses; the objects of the senses are the roads they run on. When a man has no understanding and his mind is never held, his senses are like the vicious horses of a charioteer, and they run away with him. When he has understanding and his mind is held, his senses are like good horses, and obey. The man without understanding, careless and impure, never reaches the goal and goes round and

round. The one with understanding, attentive and pure, reaches the end of the road — and that is the highest place.

> *The link: the direct Eastern twin of the plate's own image, older than Plato and structurally identical. Read the two side by side and let the class hear that nobody borrowed it; it is what the human being looks like from inside.*

2. King Milinda's Chariot — *Buddhist (Milindapanha)*

King Milinda asked the monk Nagasena his name. "I am called Nagasena, but it is only a designation; no person is found here." The king objected: then who wears the robes, who does good and evil? He pressed him — is the hair Nagasena? the bones? the feeling? the perception? No to all. Then is Nagasena something apart from these? No. "Then there is no Nagasena, and you are lying." Nagasena asked: did you come here on foot? "By chariot." "Then tell me what the chariot is. Is the pole the chariot? The axle? The wheels? The frame? The yoke? The reins? All of those together? Something apart from them?" The king said no to every one. "Then, your majesty, there is no chariot, and you are lying." And the king admitted: "chariot" is a word that comes to be dependent on the parts.

> *The link: the sharpest possible companion to the plate. First the chariot teaches you that there is a driver. Then this asks: is there? Use it with an experienced group — it is the second half of the same lesson.*

3. The Chariot of Fire — *Biblical (2 Kings 2)*

Elijah and Elisha walked and talked, and Elisha would not leave him. Elijah asked what he wanted before he was taken, and Elisha asked for a double portion of his spirit — and was told it was a hard thing, but if you see me when I am taken, you will have it. "And it came to pass, as they still went on and talked, that behold, there appeared a chariot of fire and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder, and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And Elisha saw it." Then he took up the cloak that had fallen, and went back to the river, and struck the water with it, and it parted.

> *The link: the last stage of the plate's image. The carriage that was a machine, then a question, is finally a vehicle of fire — and note that the successor gets nothing except by watching to the end.*

Plate 07-06 · The Little Prince — Nothing Changes Until You Change

1. The Rabbi's Dream of the Treasure — *Jewish (Rabbi Eisik of Krakow)*

Rabbi Eisik, son of Yekel, of Krakow, was very poor, and dreamed three nights running that there was a treasure buried under the bridge that leads to the king's palace in Prague. So he walked to Prague. The bridge was guarded day and night and he could not dig. He hung about it so long that the captain of the guard finally asked him what he wanted, and he told him about the dream. The captain laughed at him. "Dreams! If I believed in dreams, I would be on the road right now to Krakow, to dig under the stove of some Jew called Eisik son of Yekel, because I dreamed three nights that there is a treasure there." He bowed, walked home,

dug under his own stove, and found it — and built a house of prayer with the money.

> *The link: the plate exactly. The journey was not wasted: he had to go all the way to Prague to be told about his own kitchen, and there was no way of hearing it at home.*

2. The Musk Deer — *Indian (Kabir's image, told as a story)*

The musk deer smells something extraordinary on the wind — the finest scent in the world — and goes looking for it. It runs through the forest, into the ravines, up onto the rocks, following the scent wherever the wind carries it, and it is always just ahead and never quite there. It runs itself to exhaustion. And the musk is in a gland under its own skin, and it has been carrying it the whole time, and it will die on the mountain looking for it.

> *The link: short, and it hurts in the right way. The seeking is not fake and the scent is not imaginary — the direction is the only thing wrong.*

3. Riding the Ox in Search of the Ox — *Chinese Chan*

A monk asked his teacher how to find the Buddha-nature. The teacher said: you are like a man riding an ox and looking for the ox. The monk said: and once a man knows he is riding it? The teacher said: then he is like a man riding the ox all the way home.

> *The link: the plate's principle put as a single joke. Pair it with the ox-herding pictures from Plate 04-02 and a class will see that the whole search happens on the animal's back.*

Plate 07-07 · Hades and Persephone — Descent and Rebirth

1. The Descent of Inanna — *Sumerian*

Inanna, queen of heaven, set her mind on the great below and went down to the realm of her sister Ereshkigal, in her full regalia, having told her servant: if I am not back in three days, go and make a noise for me. At the first gate the crown was taken. At each of the seven gates something else was removed — the rod, the necklace, the breast-stones, the ring, the breastplate, the robe — and to each protest the gatekeeper said only: *quiet, Inanna. The ways of the underworld are perfect. They may not be questioned.* She came before her sister naked and bowed low, and was struck dead and hung on a hook on the wall, and rotted there like meat. On the third day her servant went for help. Two little creatures were made from the dirt under a god's fingernail, and they got in through the cracks and did nothing but sit with Ereshkigal in her pain and echo her groaning — and out of gratitude she gave them the corpse.

> *The link: the elder version of the plate's descent, and richer in the mechanics: you go down in your full regalia and arrive with nothing, and what finally raises the dead is not power but somebody willing to sit with the grief and echo it.*

2. Izanagi in Yomi — *Japanese (Kojiki)*

Izanami died giving birth to fire, and her husband Izanagi went down after her to the land of Yomi. She met him at the entrance, in the dark, and said: how I wish

you had come sooner — I have already eaten the food of this place. But let me go and ask; wait here, and *do not look at me.* He waited a long time, then broke a tooth from his comb, lit it as a torch, and went in. She was rotting, with maggots in her, and eight thunder-gods grown in her body. He ran. She sent the hags of Yomi after him, and then the thunders, and then came herself, and he threw down his headdress, which became grapes, and his comb, which became bamboo shoots, to delay them; and at the pass he rolled a boulder across the entrance that it took a thousand men to move, and they said their parting words to each other through the rock.

> *The link: the plate's descent with the same prohibition as Orpheus and the same failure. The detail for a class is what he sees: not a monster — the person he loves, in the condition the dead are actually in.*

3. Isis Gathers Osiris — *Egyptian*

Set shut his brother in a chest and threw it in the river, and it went out to sea and lodged in a tamarisk that grew round it and became a pillar in a foreign king's palace. Isis went and found it, and brought him home. Set found the body again and cut it into fourteen pieces and scattered them. So she went out a second time, with her sister, and searched the whole country, and found every piece but one. She bound them together in the first mummy, and revived him long enough to conceive, and he went down to be the king of the dead — and their son grew up and took the throne from Set.

> *The link: the third face of the plate's descent. Persephone is taken, Inanna goes deliberately, and Osiris is dismembered — and it is the searching that repeats. In all three, what comes back up is not what went down.*

Plate 07-08 · The Decalogue

The Holy Scriptures — the living letter and the dead letter.

1. Hillel on One Foot — *Jewish (Talmud, Shabbat 31a)*

A gentile came to Shammai and said he would convert if he could be taught the whole Torah while standing on one foot. Shammai drove him off with a builder's measuring rod. He went to Hillel and asked the same thing, and Hillel said: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. That is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary — go and learn it."

> *The link: the plate's living letter, and the balance in it. Hillel does not abolish the commentary; he tells the man to go and learn it — after he has been given the thing it is commentary on.*

2. Grain on the Sabbath — *Biblical (Mark 2–3)*

His disciples were hungry and pulled ears of grain as they walked through the fields on the Sabbath, and the Pharisees said: look, they are doing what is not lawful. He answered them with David eating the show-bread when his men were hungry, and then: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." Then he went into the synagogue, and there was a man with a withered hand, and they watched to see if he would heal on the Sabbath, so they could accuse him. He told the man to stand up in the middle, and asked them: is it lawful to do good on

the Sabbath, or to do harm — to save a life, or to kill? And they said nothing at all. He looked round at them, angry and grieved at the hardness of their hearts, and healed the hand.

> *The link: the plate's distinction, with the temperature it actually had. And the silence in the middle is the most damning part — they had no answer and did not change.*

3. The Monk Who Carried the Woman — *Japanese Zen*

Two monks were travelling and came to a river crossing where a young woman in fine clothes stood, unable to get over. Tanzan picked her up and carried her across and set her down, and walked on. Ekido said nothing for hours, and finally could not hold it: "We monks are not to go near women, especially not young and beautiful ones. Why did you do that?" Tanzan said: "I set her down at the river. Are you still carrying her?"

> *The link: twin with the plate. The rule was real. One man kept it in the letter for a whole day's walk and broke it inwardly the entire time; the other broke it for thirty seconds and was free of it.*

PART VIII — The Lineage

Plate 08-01 · From Inner Slavery to Immortality

Julio Medina Vizcaíno (V. M. Gargha Kuichines).

1. Milarepa — *Tibetan Buddhist*

Milarepa's father died when he was a boy, and an uncle and aunt took everything and put the family to work as servants. His mother sent him to learn black magic, and told him not to come back without revenge. He learned it well. He brought a house down on a wedding feast and killed thirty-five people, and then sent a hailstorm that destroyed the valley's harvest. Then he understood what he had done, and went to find a teacher. Marpa took one look at him and refused to teach him anything. Instead he made him build a tower, alone, by hand — and when it was finished, told him it was in the wrong place and to pull it down and carry every stone back. Three times. His back was one open sore. He nearly gave up twice, and Marpa's wife smuggled him food. Only when the debt was worked off was he taught — and he attained in that same lifetime, in a cave, on nettles, and sang.

> *The link: the plate's arc without a single step skipped. He does not get absolution, he gets a tower to build three times — and the teacher who refuses him is the one saving his life.*

2. On the Road to Damascus — *Biblical (Acts 9)*

Saul was the most effective enemy the young church had — present at the stoning of Stephen, holding the coats; going house to house dragging people out; and now travelling to Damascus with letters of authority to arrest any he found there. On the road a light came round him and he fell down, and a voice said: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." He got up blind, and had to be led by the hand into the city like a child, and did not eat for three days. And the disciple sent to him objected — Lord, I have heard about this man and how much harm he has done — and was told to go anyway.

> *The link: the plate's turning, with both halves of the difficulty. The persecutor is not gently corrected; he is knocked down and blinded. And the community he is sent to has every reason not to open the door.*

3. The Pyre of Heracles — *Greek*

Heracles finished the twelve labours and then died of a shirt. His wife, meaning to keep his love, had soaked a robe in what she believed was a love charm — the blood of the centaur Nessus, who had told her it would work, dying, as revenge. The poison went into him and could not be got out; it burned in his flesh and he tore the skin away with the cloth. So he had a pyre built on Mount Oeta, climbed onto it, and lay down on his lion skin, and asked to be lit — and no one would do it, until a passing shepherd took the torch. The fire burned away the mortal part he had inherited from his mother. What was left was the part from his father, and it was taken up.

> *The link: the plate's title in an image. What the fire consumes is what was borrowed; it cannot touch the rest — and the labours by themselves did not make him immortal. The pyre did.*

Plate 08-02 · The Prophecies of the Sierra Nevada

Memories of V. M. Gargha Kuichines about the words of Samael Aun Weor.

1. Jonah at Nineveh — *Biblical (Jonah 3–4)*

Jonah was sent to Nineveh with one sentence: forty days, and Nineveh is overthrown. He ran the other way first, and had to be brought back by a very direct route. Then he walked into the city and said it. And the people believed it — from the greatest to the least — and put on sackcloth, and the king got off his throne and sat in ashes and made a decree that even the animals were to fast, and said: who can tell? God may turn and repent. And God saw what they did, and did not do it. And Jonah was furious. He went out and sat on a hill east of the city to watch what would happen to it, and told God to his face: this is exactly why I ran — I knew you were merciful, and I knew you would go back on it, and now I look like a fool.

> *The link: the plate's prophecy, and the thing that must be said about all prophecy of this kind: it is a warning, which means it can fail, and its failure is its success. The prophet is the last one to be pleased about it.*

2. Markandeya and the Deluge — *Indian (Puranic)*

At the end of an age the waters came up and covered everything, and there was no earth, no sky, no direction, no sun — only water, going on forever. The sage Markandeya, who had been given long life, was swept about in it for what seemed like ages, exhausted, grieving, with nothing to stand on and nothing to look at. And then he saw, floating on the water, a single banyan leaf, and lying on the leaf a little child, shining. The child opened his mouth, and Markandeya was drawn inside — and in there he found the whole world, unharmed: the mountains, the rivers, the cities, the people going about their business, the stars. Then he was breathed out again, and there was only the water, and the leaf, and the child, smiling at him.

> *The link: the plate's prophecies about the end of an age, without terror. The world is not lost during the flood; it is held somewhere, in something very small, and given back.*

3. Ragnarök and the Two in the Wood — *Norse*

It is foretold in detail: three winters of war and no summer between them, brother killing brother, the wolf swallowing the sun, the stars going out, the earth shaking so hard that every tree comes out of the ground. The serpent comes out of the sea and the ship of the dead sails, and the sons of Muspell ride over the rainbow bridge and it breaks under them. Odin is killed by the wolf, Thor kills the serpent and walks nine steps and falls, and the fire-giant throws fire over the whole world and it sinks into the sea. And then the earth rises again, green, out of the water. The eagle catches fish on the falls. The sons of the dead gods come back and find the old golden chess pieces lying in the grass. And a man and a woman, Líf and Lífthrasir, who hid in a wood and lived on the morning dew, come out and are the parents of everyone after.

The link: the plate's cycle, told by a tradition that stared straight at the end and still put a wood in the middle of the fire. The survivors are not heroes and are not named among the gods — they hid, they ate dew, and they came out.

SUPPLEMENT — THE NORTHERN AND CELTIC STORIES

A fourth story for the plates where a Norse, Irish, Welsh or Druidic tale genuinely earns its place — not to replace what is already there, but to give a class a colder, older register when the room wants one. Twenty-five plates; the other twenty-nine are not forced.

Plate 01-01 · What Is Gnosis?

The Druids' Twenty Years — *Druidic (Caesar, Gallic War VI)*

Caesar, describing the Druids of Gaul, says that young men came to them in great numbers to be taught, and that some remained in training for twenty years. They learned an enormous number of verses by heart. And though they used Greek letters for almost everything else — public accounts, private business — they held it unlawful to write the teaching down. He gives two reasons they offered: that they did not wish it made common, and that those who rely on writing stop cultivating the memory, since men who can look a thing up let their attention go slack.

> *The link: the plate's distinction, enforced as policy by a whole priesthood. Twenty years, and none of it on a page — because a teaching that lives on a page has stopped living in a person.*

Plate 01-04 · Initiation

Mímir's Well — *Norse*

Under one root of the world-tree lies a well, and in it are wisdom and understanding, and Mímir who owns it drinks from it every morning. Odin came and asked for a drink. Mímir would not give it for nothing. The price was an eye — and Odin put out his own eye and dropped it into the water, and it lies at the bottom of the well to this day, and he drank, and went away one-eyed for the rest of the world's life.

> *The link: the plate's threshold with the account settled in public. He is not tricked and does not haggle. And what he pays with is half of his ordinary sight — which is the trade the plate is actually describing.*

Plate 01-05 · The Four Conditions for Becoming a Theurgist

Baldr and the Mistletoe — *Norse*

Baldr dreamed of his own death, and his mother Frigg went through the whole world and took an oath from everything in it — fire, water, iron, stones, earth, trees, sickness, beasts, birds, poison, serpents — that none of them would harm him. Then it became the gods' entertainment to stand him up at the assembly and throw things at him, and nothing would touch him. Loki, in a woman's shape, asked Frigg whether she had truly asked everything. She said: there is a young shoot west of Valhalla called mistletoe; it seemed to me too young to ask an oath of. He pulled it, and put it into the hands of the blind brother, and guided the aim.

The link: the plate's conditions. Every requirement but one was met, and the one that was skipped was skipped for a reasonable-sounding reason — it seemed too small to matter.

Plate 02-03 · Four States of Consciousness

Thor at Utgard — *Norse*

Thor and Loki came to the hall of Utgard-Loki, and were told that no one stays who cannot do something remarkable. Loki was set to eat against a man and lost. Thialfi ran against a boy and lost. Thor was given a drinking horn and told most men empty it in one draught; he drank three enormous draughts and the level barely moved. He was asked to lift a grey cat off the floor and got one paw up. He was offered a wrestle with the giant's old foster-mother and was forced down on one knee. In the morning, walking them out, Utgard-Loki told them the truth: the eater was wildfire, the runner was thought, the horn's other end was in the sea and they had drunk the tide down, the cat was the serpent that circles the world and they had pulled it off the earth, and the old woman was old age, which throws everyone in the end. "And now that you know, we shall not meet again." And the hall was gone.

The link: the plate's second state exactly. Everything they had seen was true and none of it was what it appeared to be — and the giant only tells them once they are outside the wall.

Plate 02-06 · Return, Recurrence and Reincarnation

The Wooing of Étaín — *Irish*

Étaín was the second wife of Midir, and his first wife, a druid's daughter, turned her by spells into a pool of water; the water became a worm, and the worm a purple fly of extraordinary beauty, whose humming was music and whose company cured the sick. Midir kept her with him for years in that shape. Then a wind was raised against her and she was blown about Ireland for seven years, exhausted, until she fell into a golden cup in the hand of the wife of an Ulster chieftain — and was swallowed with the drink, and conceived, and was born again as a woman, a thousand and twelve years after her first birth. She grew up knowing nothing about any of it, and married the High King. And Midir came for her.

The link: the plate's return, without any comfort in it. She is the same being through every shape, and remembers none of it, and the debt from the first life comes walking into the hall of the last.

Plate 02-08 · Awakening Consciousness

Oisín in Tír na nÓg — *Irish*

Niamh of the golden hair took Oisín away on a white horse to the Land of the Young, and he lived there in happiness for what felt like three years. Then he wanted to see his father and the Fianna again. She let him go on the horse, and told him one thing: whatever happens, do not put your foot on the ground of Ireland. He rode across it and found the raths empty and the great hall a ruin and small men trying to shift a stone; three hundred years had gone. He leaned from

the saddle to help them, and the girth broke, and he touched the ground — and three hundred years came into him at once, and he was a blind old man in the grass, and the horse was gone.

> *The twin: this is the same story as Urashima Taro at Plate 02-08, told at the other end of Europe. **Do not use both in the same term** — use whichever suits the room, and if the class is one that enjoys such things, mention that the two traditions arrived at the identical warning independently.*
>
> *The link: the plate's sleep, priced in years. The three hundred were always owed; they were only waiting for his foot.*

Plate 02-09 · The Psychological Ego

The Binding of Fenrir — *Norse*

The wolf grew until only Tyr dared feed him. The gods made a strong fetter and the wolf let them put it on for sport, and broke it at the first kick. They made a second, twice as strong; he broke that too. So they sent to the dwarves, who made Gleipnir out of six things that do not exist: the sound of a cat's footfall, a woman's beard, the roots of a mountain, the sinews of a bear, the breath of a fish, the spittle of a bird. It was soft as a silk ribbon. The wolf looked at it and said he saw no fame in breaking such a thread, and suspected a trick, and would only allow it if one of them put a hand in his mouth as surety. They all looked at each other, and Tyr put in his right hand. The ribbon held. And Tyr's hand was bitten off.

> *The link: the plate's legion. Force fails twice; what holds is a thing made of nothing obvious, and it costs somebody a hand — freely given, knowing exactly what would happen.*

Plate 03-01 · Self-Observation

Huginn and Muninn — *Norse*

Two ravens sit on Odin's shoulders and say into his ear everything they see and hear. Their names are Thought and Memory. Every day at dawn he sends them out over the whole world, and every day they come back to him at breakfast, and that is how he knows what is happening anywhere. And he says: "I fear for Thought, that he may not come back — but I fear far more for Memory."

> *The link: the plate's two instruments, and the one the plate leans on. The god of wisdom is more afraid of losing memory than intelligence, because the observing is worth nothing if nothing comes home with it.*

Plate 03-03 · The Feeling of Being vs the Feeling of the Ego

The Song of Amergin — *Irish (Lebor Gabála)*

Amergin, the poet of the invading Milesians, set his right foot on the shore of Ireland and sang — and it is not a boast about himself. "I am a wind on the sea. I am a wave of the ocean. I am the roar of the sea. I am a stag of seven tines. I am a hawk on a cliff. I am a tear of the sun. I am fair among flowers. I am a boar for valour. I am a salmon in a pool. I am a lake on a plain. I am a hill of poetry. I am a god who forms fire for a head. Who levels the mountain? Who announces the ages of the moon? Who calls the cattle home from the sea? Who but I?"

The link: the plate's Being, and the whole test is in the tone. Every line is "I am", and not one of them is about a person. Read it aloud, then read the ego's "I am" beside it — I am tired, I am right, I am not appreciated — and the class will hear the difference without being told.

Plate 03-08 · The Seven Deadly Sins

Fafnir — *Norse*

Hreidmar had three sons and a great weight of cursed gold paid to him in compensation. Fafnir, the strongest of them, killed his own father in the night for it and drove his brother off with nothing. Then he took the gold out onto the heath, and lay down on top of it, and stayed there. And lying on it, year after year, he became a serpent — an actual dragon, breathing poison, so that nothing could come near the place — and he believed that the terror he inspired was strength. Sigurd dug a pit in the path he crawled along to drink, and stabbed up into him as he passed over.

The link: the plate's defects, followed to the end. Nobody transformed him. He lay down on the thing he loved and became the shape of it, and mistook what he had become for power.

Plate 04-02 · The Five Stages of Meditative Mastery

The Three Cauldrons — *Irish (The Cauldron of Poesy)*

The old Irish poem says every person is born with three cauldrons inside them. The Cauldron of Warming is born upright and working, and it keeps the body alive. The Cauldron of Motion is born on its side, and is turned upright by joy and by sorrow — and the poem is careful about which sorrows do it: not every grief turns it, only the ones taken properly. The Cauldron of Wisdom is born upside down in most people and stays that way their whole lives. In some it is turned by the great joys, and then a person begins to make and to understand. And the cauldrons are not filled from outside; what they hold is what has been cooked in them.

The link: the plate's stages, from a tradition that arrived at them independently and put them in the body. And the mechanism is the plate's own: the vessel is turned by what is comprehended, not by what happens.

Plate 04-04 · Blue Time / Rest Therapy

The Three Vats — *Irish*

When Cú Chulainn came back from his first raid he was still in his battle fury — his body turned inside its own skin, one eye sucked back into his head and the other standing out on his cheek, and a jet of dark blood standing up from the crown of his head. He would have killed everyone in Emain Macha. So the king sent out a hundred and fifty women, naked, to meet him, and while he covered his face they seized him and put him in a vat of cold water. The vat burst its staves and hoops apart. They put him in a second, and it boiled. They put him in a third, and it warmed to a bearable heat, and the fury went out of him, and he came out and was dressed and sat down.

The link: the plate's rest, prescribed as an emergency measure and applied in stages. Nobody reasons with him and nobody waits for it to pass; they cool him, three times, until he can be in a room again.

Plate 05-01 · What Are Hydrogens 24, 12 and 6?

Cerridwen's Cauldron — *Welsh*

Cerridwen had a hideous son and set out to make him wise instead. She put a cauldron on to boil that had to be tended for a year and a day, and set a boy, Gwion Bach, to stir it, and a blind man to keep the fire. At the end of the year three drops flew out and burned Gwion's thumb, and he put it in his mouth — and in that instant he knew everything that was and would be. And the rest of the cauldron, the whole year's brew, turned to poison in the same moment and burst the vessel and killed the horses in the stream below. Cerridwen came, and he ran: he became a hare and she a greyhound, a fish and she an otter, a bird and she a hawk, a grain of wheat and she a black hen, and she ate him — and nine months later bore him, and he was Taliesin.

The link: the plate exactly. A year's work yields three drops. The rest is not neutral leftovers — it is poison, and it destroys the vessel. And the one who receives the three drops does not get to keep the form he had.

Plate 05-02 · The Transformation of Energy

The Mead of Poetry — *Norse*

The gods made a man out of their own spittle, and called him Kvasir, and he was so wise there was no question he could not answer. Two dwarves murdered him and drained his blood into three vessels and mixed it with honey, and it fermented into a mead that makes a poet or a scholar of anyone who drinks it. They lost it to a giant, who hid it in a mountain under his daughter's guard. Odin went after it. He worked a summer as a farmhand for the giant's brother under a false name to be owed a favour, then had a hole bored into the mountain, turned himself into a snake and went through it, spent three nights with the daughter and was given three draughts — and drank all three vessels dry in three swallows, turned into an eagle, and flew for home with the giant behind him in eagle shape, and spat the mead into the vats the gods were holding out.

The link: the plate's transformation traced backwards through every stage: spittle to a man, a man to blood, blood to mead, and mead to poetry — nothing created, everything changed in kind at each step, and each step needing an agent willing to become something else to carry it.

Plate 05-05 · Light, Heat and Sound

The Dagda's Harp — *Irish*

The Dagda's harp was taken in a raid, and he went into the enemy's hall after it, and it hung on the wall and would answer no one else. He called it by its two names and it came off the wall to him through the room, killing nine men on the way. Then he played the three musics that were in it. He played the goltraí, the weeping strain, and the whole hall wept until the women's tears ran down. He played the geantraí, the laughing strain, and every one of them laughed until they

could not stand. Then he played the suantraí, the sleeping strain, and the entire host went down where they were, and he walked out.

> *The link: the plate's sound as force. One instrument, three strains, three complete changes of state in a room full of hostile men — and note that he had to name it before it would work.*

Plate 06-01 · The Elementals

Yggdrasil and What Lives In It — *Norse*

The ash is the greatest of trees, and its branches spread over the whole world and reach above heaven. Three roots hold it: one over the well of fate, one over Mímir's well, one over the spring in the cold. An eagle sits in the branches and knows a great deal, with a hawk between its eyes. The serpent Nídhögg gnaws the root from below, with more serpents than a fool can count. Four stags run in the branches and eat the shoots. A squirrel called Ratatosk runs up and down the trunk all day carrying insults between the eagle and the serpent to keep them at it. And the tree suffers more hardship than men know: the stag bites it, the sides rot, Nídhögg tears at it — and the Norns come every day and pour the well's water over it so that its limbs do not wither.

> *The link: the plate's world, populated at every level. Not a tree with animals near it — a living structure whose every part is somebody, including the small one whose entire job is to keep a quarrel going between the top and the bottom.*

Plate 06-02 · The Journey of the Five Elements

The Four Treasures — *Irish*

The Tuatha Dé Danann came to Ireland out of four cities in the north, and out of each city they brought one thing. From Falias, the Stone of Fal, which cried out under the foot of the rightful king. From Gorias, the spear of Lug, which meant that no battle was ever won against the one who held it. From Findias, the sword of Nuada, from which no one escaped once it was drawn from its sheath. And from Murias, the cauldron of the Dagda, from which no company ever went away unsatisfied.

> *The link: the plate's elements as the four powers, each with a city behind it — stone for earth, spear for fire, sword for air, cauldron for water. The same four turn up as the chalice, wand, pentacle and sword on the Tetragrammaton emblem in the booklet's own title page.*

Plate 06-03 · Plants and the Four Elements

The Tree Alphabet — *Irish (Ogham)*

The Irish letters are cut as notches along the edge of a standing stone, and the tradition names them for trees: birch, rowan, alder, willow, ash, hawthorn, oak, holly, hazel, apple, vine, ivy, reed, blackthorn, elder. To learn to read was to learn the trees in order, and the old glossaries give each letter a phrase — the alder is "the shield of warrior bands", the hazel is "the fairest of trees", the elder is "the reddening of faces". Whether a Druid ever taught it as a plant lore or a scribe arranged it that way afterwards is argued about; what is not argued about is that a whole people wrote its name in trees.

The link: the plate's plants as a language rather than a resource — and an honest note attached, because the "Celtic tree alphabet" is one of the most over-claimed things in circulation.

Plate 06-04 · Sacred Plants and Planetary Correspondences

The Mistletoe Rite — *Druidic (Pliny, Natural History XVI)*

Pliny, writing in the first century, reports it of the Gauls — he is describing, not attending. The Druids hold nothing more sacred than mistletoe and the oak it grows on, and they choose oak groves for that reason and use no branch of any other tree in their rites. Mistletoe on an oak is rare, and when it is found it is gathered with great ceremony, on the sixth day of the moon — because the moon is then of good strength but not yet halfway through her course. They call the plant by a name meaning "all-healing". They prepare a sacrifice and a feast under the tree and bring up two white bulls whose horns have never been bound. A priest in a white robe climbs, and cuts the mistletoe with a golden sickle, and it is caught in a white cloak so that it never touches the ground.

The link: the plate's correspondences, in a rite where every element is specified — the planet's exact phase, the host tree, the metal of the blade, and the rule that the plant must not touch earth between the cut and the use.

Plate 06-05 · Foods According to Their Qualities

Idun's Apples — *Norse*

Idun keeps in her box the apples the gods bite when they begin to grow old, and they become young again, and it will go on this way until Ragnarök. Loki, buying his way out of trouble with a giant, lured her out of Asgard with a story about better apples growing in a wood nearby, and told her to bring her own for comparison. The giant took her in eagle shape, apples and all. And the gods began to age — grey, stooped, slow — within days, and held an assembly about it, and worked out who had last been seen with her, and put Loki under threat of death until he went and got her back.

The link: the plate's claim at full strength. It is not that the food helps; the gods themselves are only as young as what they last ate, and their whole order comes apart in under a week without it.

Plate 06-07 · Diseases and Karma

The Children of Lir — *Irish*

Lir's second wife was jealous of his four children, and could not bring herself to kill them, so she took them to a lake and struck them with a druid's wand and turned them into swans — with their own voices and their own minds — for nine hundred years: three hundred on the lake, three hundred on the cold strait of Moyle, three hundred in the western sea. When her father learned what she had done, he asked her what shape she most feared in the world, and she said a demon of the air; and he struck her with the wand and made her that, and she is still in it. The swans sang for nine hundred years, and were found at the end by a monk with a bell, and became four ancient withered people, and were baptised, and died.

The link: the plate, on both sides of it at once. The children carry a suffering they did not earn, and the one who caused it is given precisely and immediately the thing she named as worst. The story does not reconcile the two, and neither does life.

Plate 07-04 · The Tax Collector and the Pharisee

The Salmon of Knowledge — *Irish*

The poet Finnegas lived on the Boyne for seven years, fishing for one salmon — the one that had eaten the nine hazelnuts that fell into the well of wisdom — because it was foretold that whoever ate it would know everything. Seven years. At last he caught it, and gave it to the boy who was serving him to cook, and told him not to eat a bite of it. The boy turned it on the spit, and a blister rose on the skin, and he pressed it down with his thumb and burned himself, and put his thumb in his mouth. He brought the fish in. Finnegas looked at his face and asked whether he had eaten any of it. "No — but I burned my thumb and sucked it." And the old man said: take the whole salmon and eat it. It was never meant for me. And he gave it to him.

The twin with the plate: the Pharisee's story ends with the reversal; this one goes further, because the man who did the seven years' work sees what has happened and hands over the rest of the fish. That is the harder virtue, and it is not in the parable.

Plate 07-07 · Hades and Persephone

Pwyll and Arawn — *Welsh (Mabinogi)*

Pwyll, hunting, drove another man's hounds off a stag and took the kill for himself, and the owner rode up — Arawn, a king of Annwn, the Otherworld. To make it good, Arawn proposed an exchange: they would take each other's shape and each rule the other's kingdom for a year, and at the end of it Pwyll would fight Arawn's enemy in single combat, and must strike him only once, because a second blow would restore him. So Pwyll went down and lived a year in the Otherworld in another man's face, in another man's court, and slept every night beside that man's wife with his back turned to her and said nothing to her at all. At the year's end he struck the one blow, and did not strike the second, and won. And they changed back, and each found his kingdom better governed than he had left it.

The link: the plate's descent as an exchange rather than an abduction — and the discipline it takes: a year below in a borrowed identity, one blow and not two, and a restraint nobody would ever have known about.

Plate 07-08 · The Decalogue

The Geasa of Cú Chulainn — *Irish*

A hero carried geasa — binding prohibitions, personal to him, absolute. Cú Chulainn had two among them. He must never eat the flesh of a dog, because the hound was his name and his kin. And he must never refuse hospitality offered him at a hearth. On the road to his last battle he came on three old crones roasting a dog on rowan spits, and they called him over and pressed food on him. To eat was to break one. To refuse was to break the other. He ate with his left hand, and put

the meat under his left thigh, and the strength went out of that whole side of his body, and he went to the fight already half-dead.

> *The link: the plate's dead letter at its most exact. Two rules, both real, both his, and a situation engineered so that keeping either one breaks the other. The letter cannot resolve it; only judgement can, and he had none left by then.*

Plate 08-02 · The Prophecies of the Sierra Nevada

Myrddin in the Forest — *Welsh*

Myrddin was a man of the court until the battle of Arfderydd, where his lord was killed and, in some tellings, his own nephews died by his hand. Something in him broke there. He went into the forest of Celyddon and lived in it for years, wild, sleeping under an apple tree, talking to a grey wolf and to a little pig, refusing to come back when they came looking for him, and in that state he began to speak the future — of kings not yet born, of the fate of his people, of what would come to the land after him. The tradition is consistent on the order of events: the ruin came first, then the wilderness, then the prophecy.

> *The link: the plate's prophecies and the shape of the person who carries them. The tradition never gives the future to a comfortable man, and it never presents the seeing as a reward.*

NOTES ON THE SOURCES

Read this before a class, not after one. Everything below is here so that nothing in this book can embarrass him in front of a room.

Stories that are not as old as they sound

These are all worth telling. They are not all what they are usually said to be, and a class that later discovers the difference will trust the rest of the material less.

The Two Wolves (07-01). Almost certainly modern. Its Native American attribution — Cherokee in most retellings, occasionally Lenape or Inuit — is disputed by Cherokee sources, and the earliest printed versions look like twentieth-century Christian preaching. Tell it as a parable, not as an ancient teaching.

The Scorpion and the Frog (07-01). Widely assumed to be Aesop or an old Persian fable. It is not in Aesop, and no version older than the twentieth century has been found. There is a genuine older relative — a scorpion and a tortoise, in Persian collections — where the scorpion stings out of the same nature. Say "there is a story", not "the ancients said".

Masamune and Muramasa in the stream (05-01). A fine teaching and not history: the two smiths lived roughly two centuries apart and never competed. Introduce it as a legend told about two famous swords.

The Three Vinegar Tasters (01-03). A painting motif from Chinese tradition, not a text with a story attached, and best known in the West through modern popular writing. Describe the picture; do not claim a scripture.

The refiner who sees his face in the silver (05-01). The line from Malachi is scripture; the silversmith's detail — that the work is finished when the refiner sees his own reflection — is a devotional illustration of much later date. It is beautiful and it is not in the text.

The Tea Master and the Ronin (04-03) and **Matajuro and the sword master** (03-06). Japanese teaching stories with several versions and no fixed source. Tell them as they are told.

The Traveller and the Two Cities (03-09). Told of a Sufi, of Socrates outside Athens, and of a dozen village elders. It belongs to everybody.

The Emperor's New Clothes (03-10). Andersen's, and he was working from an older Spanish tale in Don Juan Manuel's *El Conde Lucanor*, where the cloth is invisible to any man who is not his father's son. Worth mentioning — the older version is sharper.

Epictetus and the broken leg (05-03). The saying is old and attached to him early; the account of how he was lamed is disputed among the ancient sources themselves.

The Rabbi's Dream of the Treasure (07-06). Genuinely a Hasidic tale, best known through Martin Buber's telling — and it has close cousins in the *Thousand and One Nights* and in English folklore. The travelling is what everybody keeps.

The Ogham tree alphabet (Supplement, 06-03). The letters and their tree names are real and old. Almost everything sold as "the Celtic tree calendar" is twentieth-century invention, built on Robert Graves. Name the trees; do not hand out a zodiac.

The mistletoe rite (Supplement, 06-04). Pliny is a real first-century source and the passage is genuine, but he is a Roman reporting on a foreign priesthood, not a participant. Say "Pliny records" and the ground stays firm.

The three cauldrons (Supplement, 04-02). *The Cauldron of Poesy* is a genuine Old Irish text, and it is difficult and damaged, and translations differ considerably. The three cauldrons and their orientation are solid; anything more specific should be held loosely.

The same figure, twice

No story is used twice in these fifty-four. Some people are, in different episodes — so that two neighbouring classes do not both open with the same character:

- **Elijah** — 04-03 (Horeb, the still small voice).

- **Isis** — 05-04 (the breath over Osiris), 05-06 (the seven scorpions), 07-07 (the gathering of the pieces). Three different stories; do not run 05-04 and 07-07 close together.

- **Joseph** — 03-05 (the dreams), 03-07 (the brothers).

- **Jacob** — 02-07 (the goatskins), 04-02 (the ladder), 04-05 (the wrestling). The arc across the three is itself worth a class one day.

- **Heracles** — 01-02 (the crossroads), 02-09 (the Hydra), 08-01 (the pyre). Also an arc: choice, labour, fire.

- **The Buddha's own life** — 02-08, 04-01, 04-05, 06-06.

- **Demeter** — 06-01 (Erysichthon), 06-03 (Triptolemus).

- **Odysseus** — 02-06 (choosing his next life in the Myth of Er), 04-01 (the Sirens), 06-04 (moly).

- **Odin**, in the supplement — 01-04 (Mímir's well), 03-01 (the ravens), 05-02 (the mead of poetry), and already 01-04 in the main book (the tree). He dominates the Norse material because the Norse material about *seeking wisdom at a price* is almost all about him. Spread the four across a term rather than a month.

- **Oisín in Tír na nÓg** (supplement, 02-08) is the same story as **Urashima Taro** (main book, 02-08) — the identical warning, arrived at independently at the two ends of Europe. Use one or the other, not both; the pairing is itself worth mentioning to a class that likes such things.

Where the traditions fell

Across the one hundred and sixty-two entries of the main book: biblical, about a third; Indian and Buddhist together, about a third; Greek, a fifth; and the rest divided between Egyptian, Chinese, Japanese, Sufi, Jewish and Hasidic, Norse, Sumerian, Irish and Danish. Two Gnostic sources proper — the Hymn of the Pearl at 03-02, and the Egyptian material throughout Part V.

The supplement adds twenty-five more: ten Norse, nine Irish, two Welsh, four Druidic. Before it, the whole book held three Norse stories and one Irish; the northern and Celtic material now stands at roughly one plate in two.

If a block of classes starts sounding the same, the quickest correction is to take the third story in each entry rather than the first; they were chosen last and tend to come from further away.