

**Dr. Laleh Bakhtiar Ph.D.**  
**The Sufi Enneagram Interview**

**Jim Gomez**

'I think you will agree that if we could only establish where Gurdjieff found the Enneagram, we would understand where he found what is most important about the content of his teaching. It would tell us where he found that which is missing in the Western Tradition.'

- J.G. Bennett; in *Gurdjieff: A Very Great Enigma* (1984)

**Why the Sufi Enneagram?**

Personally, I felt that I stopped finding answers about the meaning of the enneagram in work circles a number of years ago. Instead, I found studies which, although ingenious and at times elaborately complex, were essentially repetitions of the material presented by P.D. Ouspensky in *In Search of the Miraculous*. I was interested in real insights into the hidden meaning of the symbol - or into the mystery it represented to me. I remember a statement made by one of the senior pupils in the work which I could relate to, that after many years in groups he had to admit that he didn't really know what the enneagram meant but still felt it must be important! I felt there was something missing or incomplete about the way I had come to understand the enneagram, and was not satisfied with the explanations or interpretations which were then available.

Almost instinctively, I began to study 'sacred geometry' and particularly traditional Islamic geometry following the work of the English architect Keith Critchlow, whom I first encountered through books - *Order in Space* (1969); *Islamic Patterns: An Analytical and Cosmological Approach* (1976) - and then through personal contact from 1989. Later, in 1993, I relocated to London to study with Dr. Critchlow at the Prince of Wales's Institute of Architecture. The two studies - Gurdjieff and Tradition - continued in parallel for some time and often seemed to be related, but I could find no real bridge between them until I discovered Laleh Bakhtiar's research into the Sufi Enneagram, first published in her three volume work *God's Will Be Done* (Kazi Publications, 1994). I discovered Dr. Bakhtiar's work in 1995, and since then I have been concentrating on her research and its implications for a deeper understanding of both the enneagram symbol and the spiritual life in general.

In my opinion, Dr. Bakhtiar's work on the Sufi Enneagram is the most interesting and significant study on the symbol since P.D. Ouspensky's recount of Gurdjieff's own words in *In Search of the Miraculous*. In relation to the difficult question of the origins of Gurdjieff's teaching, and particularly the origins of the enneagram, the common assertion within groups has been that we will never know and simply can't know the origins. This position has never been of interest to me. Instead, a search for origins has always seemed to be necessarily related to a search for inner meaning - as almost an obligation rather than an impossibility. Dr. Bakhtiar's work, like no other study I had encountered, immediately presented itself as a key in this search-for-truth, carefully and beautifully disclosing the Sufi Enneagram as a symbol of the way of moral healing, self-knowledge and the return to God.

**An Interview with Laleh Bakhtiar**

**JG:** Dr. Bakhtiar, thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for *Stopinder: A Gurdjieff Journal for Our Time*, and I hope we can discuss matters which will be of interest and make a real difference for people who are or have been involved with Gurdjieff's teaching.

**Dr. Bakhtiar:** Thank you for asking me.

**JG:** How did you come to your research on the Sufi Enneagram?

**Dr. Bakhtiar:** I had been a writer of books on Sufism while living for 20 years in Iran - *The Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*, w/ Nader Ardalan, (1971) and *Sufi Expressions of the Mystic Quest*, (1976) - and as a grandmother I moved to the States with two of my freshmen college children and decided to go [to college] with them. I entered graduate school at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque to get an M.A. in Philosophy with a Concentration in Religious Studies. Within a few months of the program, I was informed that I would be unemployable

with this degree so I decided to get an M.A. in Counseling Psychology as well. One day in Group Counseling class, it was the end of the class and I was walking out the door when the Professor said, "Oh, there is one more method of group counseling you may be interested in. It is called The Enneagram and it has Sufi origins." That was my wake-up call. I felt like it was somewhere where my knowledge could be put to use. I began to research the Sufi origins. With the combination of an MA in Philosophy and one in Counseling Psychology, and having been a student of the sufi teacher Seyyed Hossein Nasr for many years, I went to traditional Islam. I was amazed as I began to uncover what I called 'traditional psychology' which had been called practical wisdom (*marifah*) in Islamic studies, and faculty or common sense psychology in the West. As I had been married to an architect for 16 years and co-authored a book on architecture, I was fascinated by the geometry of the Enneagram symbol as much as by what it symbolized. I saw that it was a total system that had both principle and process, yin and yang, darkness and light.

It is important to realize that Islamic culture and civilization embraced every tradition which preceded it that did not go against the belief in the Oneness of God. This meant the Jewish and Christian traditions, as Islam is but a logical extension of them, all three tracing their roots back to Adam and Abraham. But it also included the Greek heritage of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle as well as aspects of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and Zoroastrianism.

While traditional psychology is a part of the religious tradition, it was most clearly expressed in the Greek philosophical tradition. There emphasis is on the four virtues of Wisdom, Courage, Temperance and Justice and the vices being too much or too little of these virtues. As these virtues were expressed in the Islamic tradition, the self was described as a circle with a center point which creates the circle and without which there would be no circle. The circle is then described as being divided into three parts (brain, heart, gut) and the circumference as having too much or too little of a virtue which causes an imbalance in the self. This gives 6 points (the line of the spirit or change moving through the 6 points). It was when I got to the 13th century and the work of Nasir al-Din Tusi that the 6 points became 9. He was a Muslim Neo-Platonist and said that in addition to too much or too little of a virtue, which are quantitative descriptions, there can also be a complete lack of a quality of a virtue. This then was the Enneagram that Gurdjieff had described.

The center point represents zero for the Sufi, the one who has lost all ego-centricity, the person who is able to hold Wisdom (Reason), Temperance and Courage (the Passions) in moderation becoming a fair and Just person as long as someone else confirms that fairness and justice has ensued. For the Sufi this is the point at which the self is now ready to enter through the center, the zero point, leave the world of reason behind - being morally healed, being balanced - and enter the world of intuition. It is a great struggle (*jihad al-akbar*) to have attained balance in most situations (in the Sufi view none of us are perfect; only God is Perfect) and the reward is to be able to enter into the world of intuition with the assurance that one will not be tossed back out to the circumference if one has been relatively victorious in the greater struggle. Once through the center, one has to leave everything of the world of reason behind because as Rumi says, "To take reason into the world of intuition is like taking a lit candle (reason) into the noon day desert sun (intuition)." It is the world of direct experience and true knowledge (*gnosis*).

**JG:** How is your view of the Sufi Enneagram different from the enneagram typological systems which are currently so popular?

**Dr. Bakhtiar:** There are several very important differences with the Enneagram as it is being developed today. First of all, there is no reference to the center point in present day enneagram groups. Secondly, there is no way to heal and leave the circumference of the circle. It is like an eternal treadmill. Thirdly, by forming groups of 3s, 4s, 5s, etc. where people get together and discuss how they make decisions, etc. one is reinforcing the negative, the vices - so there is no way to spiritually grow. As long as I am attached to being a 3 or a 4 or a 5 or any of the numbers from 1 to 9, I will not heal; I will not grow; I will never enter the world of intuition because these numbers and my attachment to any one of them is but a veil which covers me from the Divine Source. There may be brief flashes of intuition and understanding of mysteries, but it is limited and I will continue to return to the circumference of the circle.

**JG:** Do you see the origins of the enneagram in Sufism alone, and how do you see Gurdjieff in relation to this?

**Dr. Bakhtiar:** Sufism is technically one of the origins of the Enneagram. It developed out of many traditions but it was the Sufis, I believe, who perfected it and this is what Gurdjieff learned when he went to Central Asia.

**JG:** Could your work on the Sufi Enneagram have a direct relation to non-Islamic religious traditions such as Christianity?

**Dr. Bakhtiar:** The Sufi Enneagram works with all religious traditions because it is a universal Truth and the basis of it as 6 and the line of the spirit are described in detail by St. Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica* and in Martin Luther, among others, as well as by Moses Maimonides, the great Jewish theologian who lived in Muslim Spain and wrote in

Arabic. It is universal because it requires each and every individual, from whatever religious tradition, whether part of a religious tradition or not, to work on himself or herself with the goal of becoming a fair and just person, and then each group and each community, each nation to become a fair and just group, community or nation.

**JG:** How is traditional psychology different from modern psychology, and is traditional psychology still relevant for modern times?

**Dr. Bakhtiar:** I believe that traditional psychology is very relevant for modern times. It contains what so many people are searching for, the soul and spirit within our body. It differs from modern psychology because it is wholistic, syncretic and not analytic. What modern psychology has brought to the table is techniques, but the principle belongs to traditional psychology and this is the greatness of Gurdjieff. The psychology of his day was traditional psychology - pre-Freud, Jung, Skinner, etc. He preserved the soul (*psyche*) of psych-ology which modern psychology has eliminated. Therefore psychology is a misnomer for what the modern world has developed in this science.

**JG:** What do you mean by the phrases 'moral healing' and 'spiritual chivalry'?

**Dr. Bakhtiar:** Moral healing is to become a balanced person, centered in fairness and justice by having one's reason and passions held in moderation in all situations in which one finds one's self. This concept is the basis for spiritual chivalry, Nasir al-Din Tusi being one of the major exponents of it through his book on ethics. Spiritual chivalry is the first stage of Sufism. It can be attained with or without a spiritual master while it is after this stage that one must have a spiritual master when one is ready to enter the world of intuition. God has provided us with all the equipment we need to become centered. It is our nurturing process which fails to give us the necessary motivation to pursue the greater struggle.

**JG:** Why are mathematics and geometry so important in your study?

**Dr. Bakhtiar:** All of the traditional sciences participate in the Sufi Enneagram. Among them are alchemy, astrology, mathematics and geometry. The image itself, however, is most indebted to mathematics and geometry which contribute so much to its universal nature. This is what I believe that you, Jim, have found in your research.

**JG:** How does the Sufi Enneagram relate to sacred art and particularly to your work on spiritual hermeneutics?

**Dr. Bakhtiar:** The Sufi Enneagram is itself a work of sacred art. It is the symbol which indicates a road map to the seeker who himself or herself become the artist and the work of art once fairness and justice have been achieved. Such a person contains all the harmony of a traditional work of art and is able to understand the meaning (hermeneutics) behind each and every form.

**JG:** Is it possible for us to use the Sufi Enneagram as part of our inner practice, and do we need to be under the guidance of a Sufi teacher?

**Dr. Bakhtiar:** I think I answered this above. The Sufi Enneagram is a universal symbol which requires no more than what God has given to each and everyone of us. There is no need for a spiritual guide to morally heal. If one has one, it may make the struggle less arduous but it is not a requirement. Each person can morally heal himself or herself without any excuse of "I haven't found a teacher yet."

**JG:** How are you planning to continue your research in the future, and is there a way that interested people can learn more about your work?

**Dr. Bakhtiar:** I am working on a Computer Based Course which I hope to have available by the summer where people can study and learn more about the work. The website is [www.sufienneagram.com](http://www.sufienneagram.com)

**JG:** Is there anything else which you would like to say for this interview?

**Dr. Bakhtiar:** I feel very blessed to have been involved with the Enneagram work and while I strongly disagree with the direction the Enneagram is being taken, I know that the Truth of it is there for those who wish to pursue it.

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### **For background information:**

All of the works of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Rene Guenon, Frithjof Schuon, Martin Lings, Titus Burckhardt.

### **websites:**

The Sufi Enneagram Website - [www.sufienneagram.com](http://www.sufienneagram.com)

The Seyyed Hossein Nasr Website - [www.nasrfoundation.com](http://www.nasrfoundation.com)

Kazi Books, books on Sufism and Islam - [www.kazi.org](http://www.kazi.org)



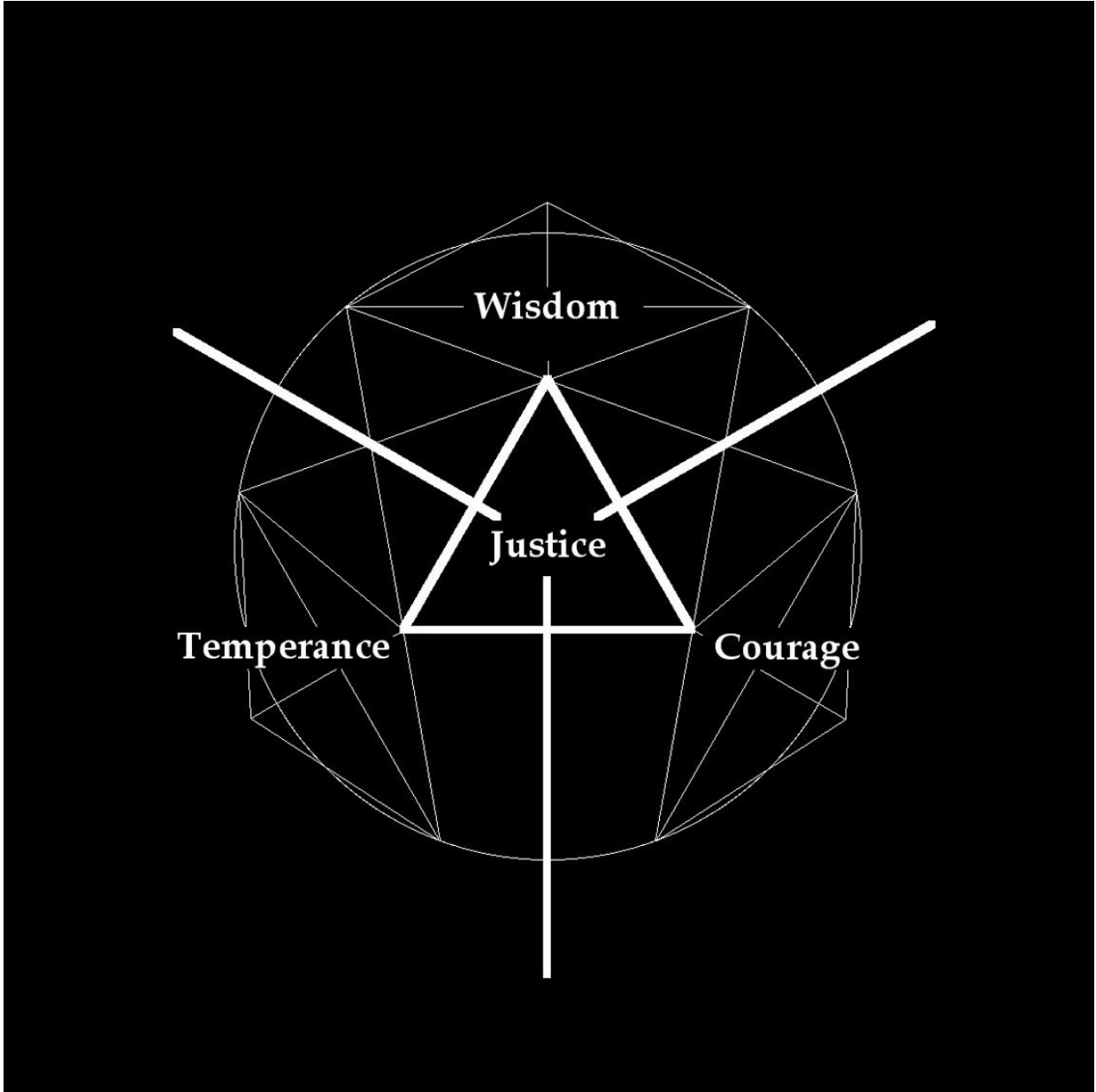


illustration 2  
The four Virtues

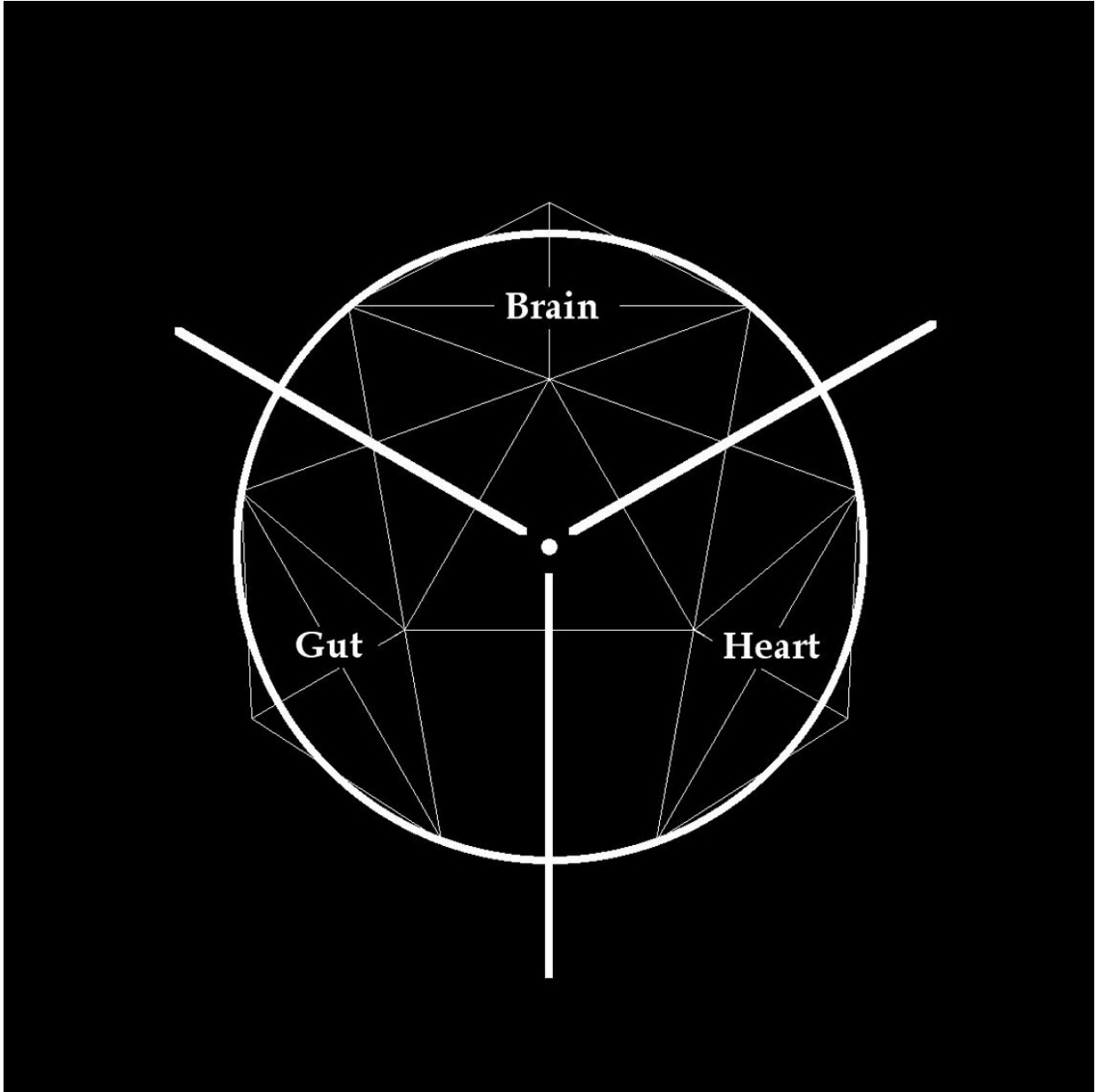


illustration 3  
The Three-fold Division

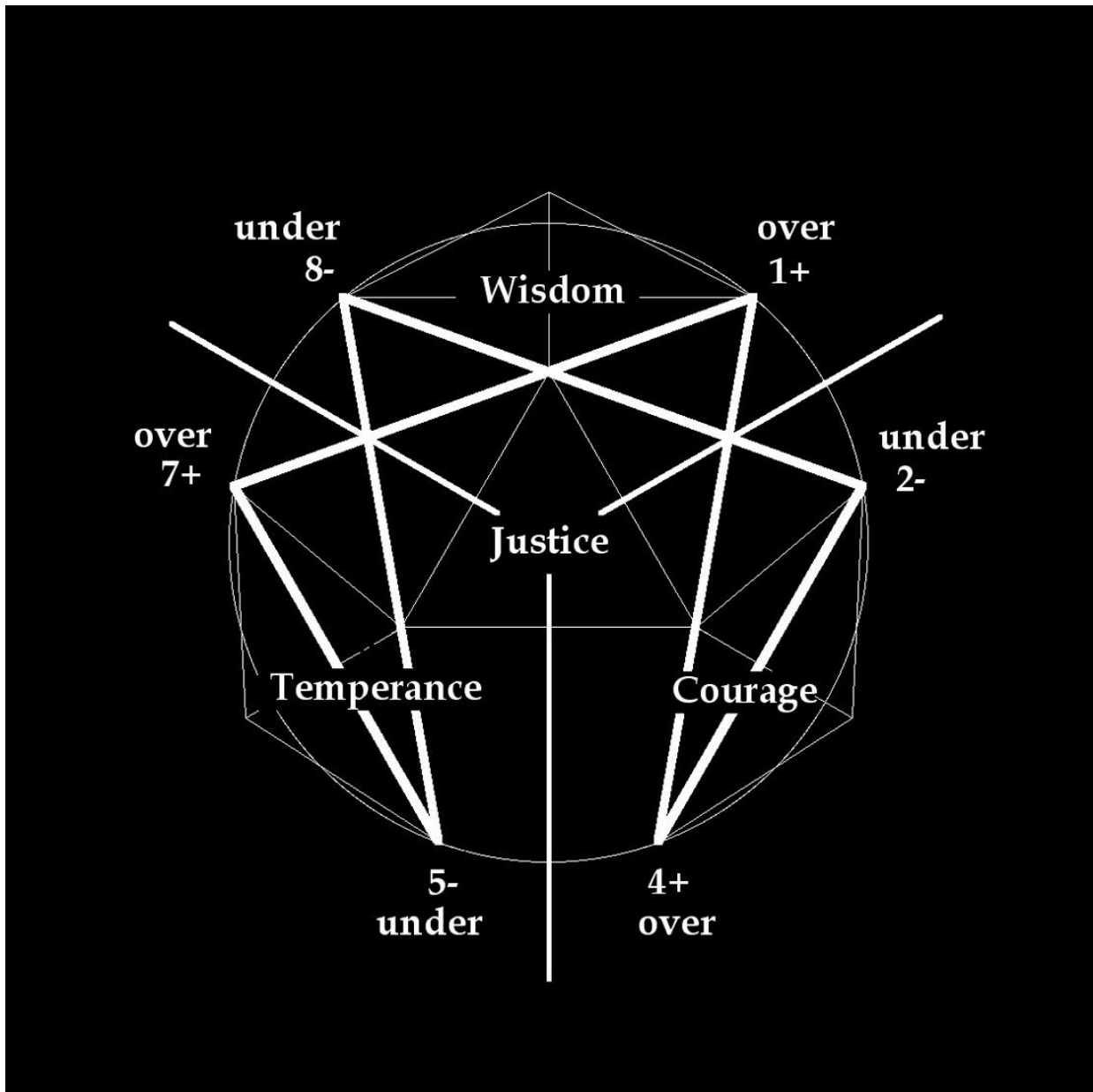


illustration 4

*'too much or too little of a virtue...'*

the line of the spirit or change moving through the 6 points  
(quantitative aspect)



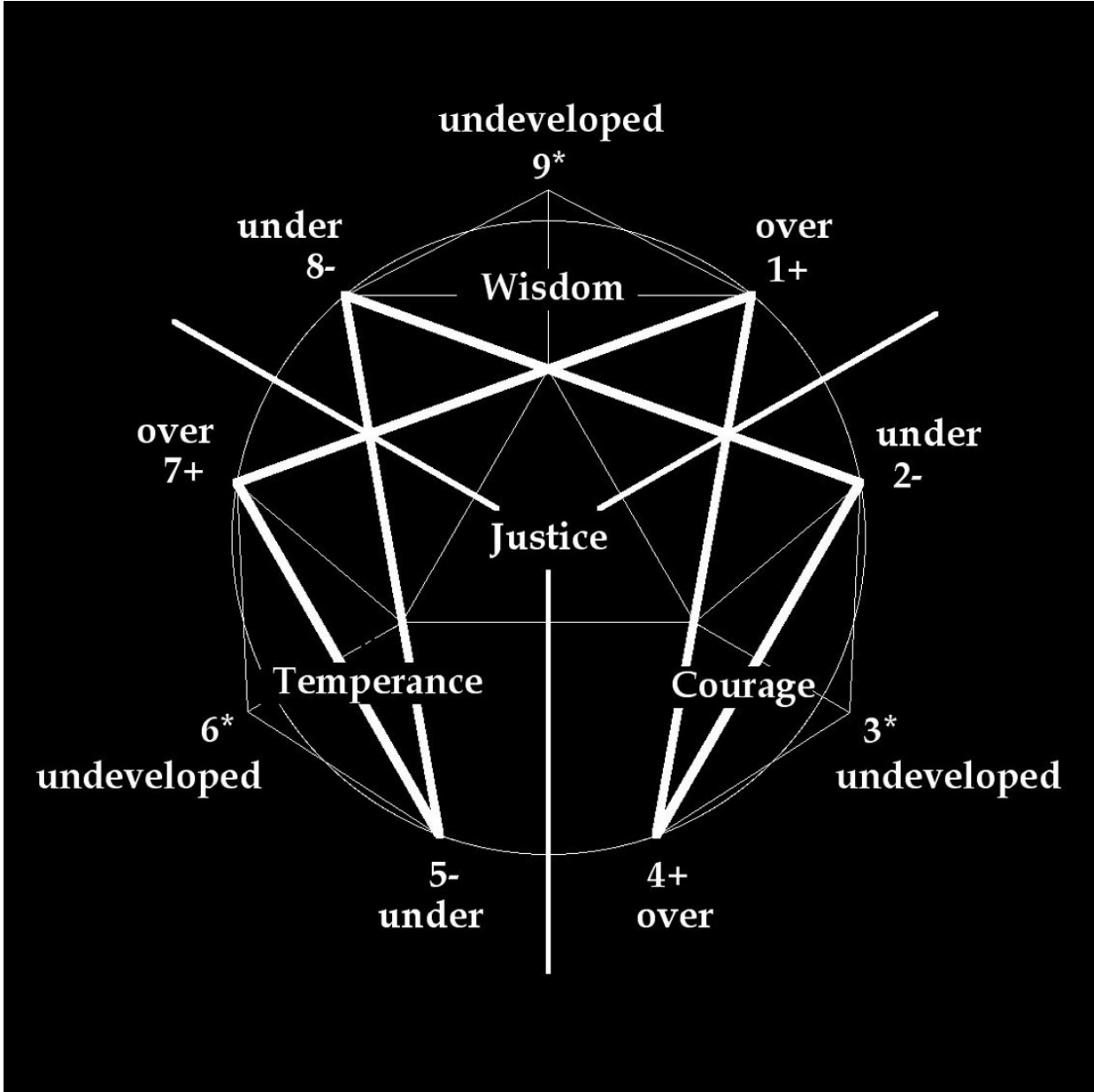


illustration 5

*'too much, too little, and a complete lack of a virtue...'*

The system of 9 points  
 (quantitative and qualitative aspects)

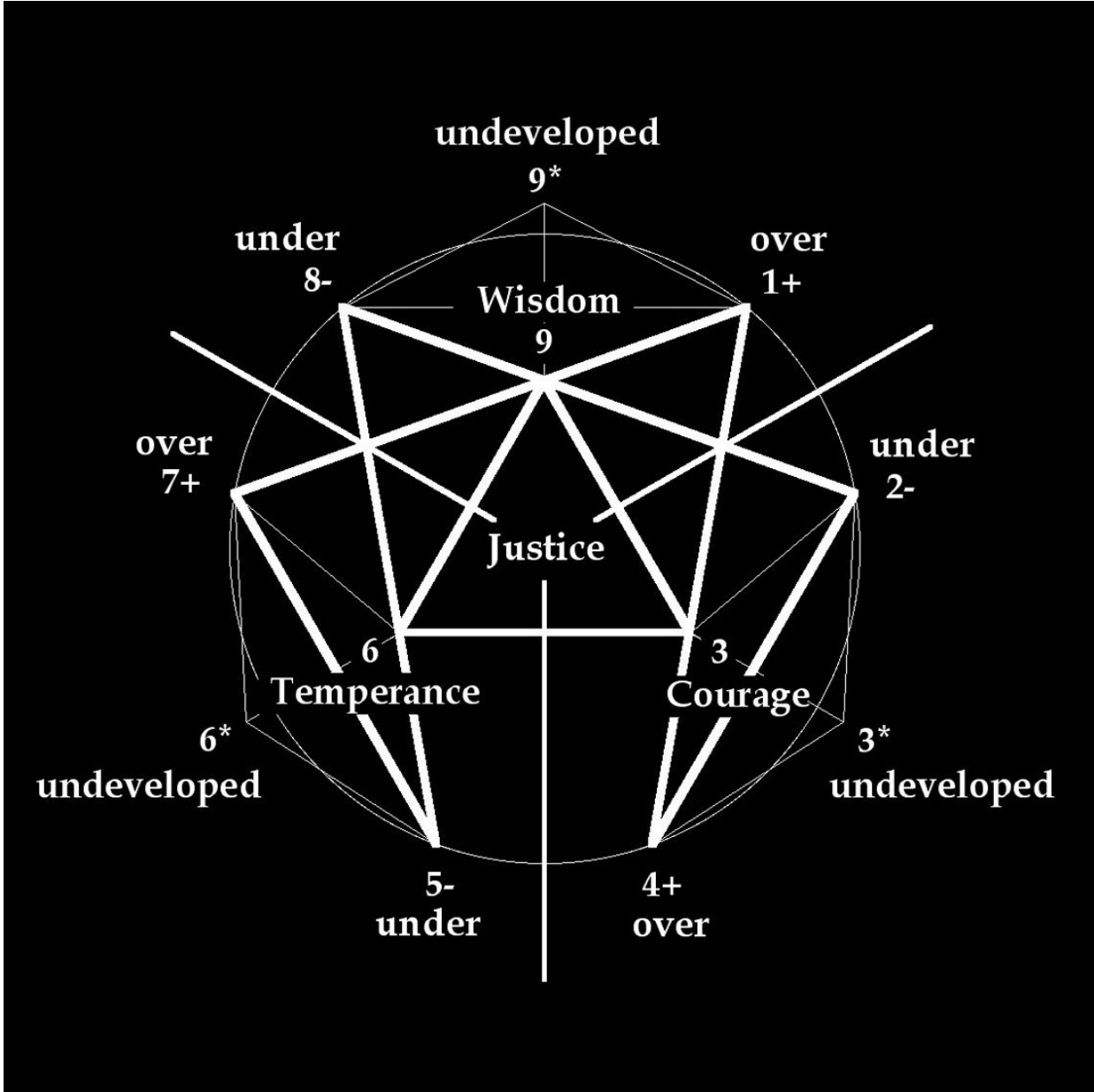


illustration 6

The Sufi Enneagram or Sign of the Presence of God

*'too much (+), too little (-), none at all (\*), and the state of balance in Wisdom (9), Courage (3), Temperance (6) and Justice (0)...'*