

## *Classification of Astrological Elements*

**T**HE ELEMENTS have traditionally been divided into two groups, fire and air being considered active and self-expressive, and water and earth considered passive, receptive, and self-repressive. These two groups are the same as the basic divisions of Chinese philosophy: yin (water and earth) and yang (air and fire). They are also identical with the Greek conception of two expressions of energy: Apollonian (fire and air, which actively and consciously form life) and Dionysian (water and earth, which represent forces that manifest more unconsciously and instinctively)....[W]e are dealing now with the basic principles alone and a reference to water and earth, for example, as “self-repressive” or “unconscious” does not in any way indicate that people whose charts contain much emphasis on these elements are necessarily limited in awareness or particularly more “repressed” than any others.

These terms refer more to the mode of operation of these energies and to the method of self-actualization than to a specific generalization which can be haphazardly applied to all people in a certain category. For example, the water and earth signs are more self-repressive than the fire and air signs in the sense that they live more within themselves and don't allow themselves to project their essential energy outwardly without a good deal of caution and forethought. The fire and air signs are more self-expressive since they are always “get-

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Engraving, *The Book of Job*, William Blake (1757-1827), British Museum

*In the margins of the above illustration, Blake has drawn vignettes of the days of creation and the genesis of elements—light, firmament, water, and earth. Developmentally, man grows from below, gaining consciousness through a preponderance of the chemical ether, which gives form to physical atoms, and life ether, which insures vitality and the perpetuation of life. Later, light and reflecting ethers are evolved.*

ting it out,” pouring forth their energies and life-substance unreservedly: the fire signs by direct action and the air signs by social interaction and verbal expression.

Marc Edmund Jones, in an effort to classify the elements in a modern way that would not be misunderstood like the older terms “positive” and “negative,” has written that air and fire are

“manipulative and extensional” expressions of energy, whereas earth and water are “sustaining and intensive.” Jones’ definitions would be highly appropriate explanations of the Greek terms Apollonian and Dionysian as well. The elements fire and air have also been correlated with activity and with “levity,” since air and fire tend to spread out and rise, extending toward a perimeter in space. Earth and water have been associated with “gravity” and inertia, since these elements tend to be under the influence of gravity and therefore to concentrate and collect at the lowest level.

This classification of elements, and the fact that the signs of the same element and of the elements in the same group are considered to be generally “compatible,” is of the greatest importance not only in the interpretation of individual charts but also in the art of chart comparison, with which we will deal later.

It should also be pointed out that these principles of “levity,” “gravity,” and so forth are descriptive of a real flow of energy which may be perceived by those who are psychically sensitive, or at the very least felt in an immediate way by anyone relating closely to a person of different attunement.

### **The Element Fire**

The element fire refers to a universal radiant energy, an energy which is excitable, enthusiastic, and which through its light brings color into the world. This element has been correlated with the dynamic core of psychic energy by C.G. Jung, that energy which flows spontaneously in an inspired, self-motivated way. Marc Edmund Jones equates fire with “experience centered in personal identity,” and this explains why people with the fire signs dominant in their charts are so self-centered and usually rather impersonal. They feel themselves to be channels for “life” and they cannot easily hide their pride about this fact.

The fire signs exemplify high spirits, great faith in themselves, enthusiasm, unending strength, and a direct honesty. They need a great deal of freedom in order to express themselves naturally, and they usually ensure themselves that space by their unremitting insistence on their point of view. Fire signs also are able to direct their will power consciously

(although not always consistently) better than other signs. Their will to be and to express themselves freely is rather childlike in its simplicity, a quality which at times appears endearing to others but at other times seems offensive to those who are more cautious and sensitive. The faults of the fire signs rarely manifest as a result of bad intentions, but more often simply through a lack of self-control and sensitivity to others. They may come across as rather willful, even overpowering at times, rushing into things with such haste that they unintentionally cause destruction or hurt feelings in others.

The fire signs tend to be impatient with more sensitive or gentler people, especially those who are dominantly water and earth. The fire signs feel that water will extinguish it and that earth will smother it, and they often therefore resent the heaviness and emotionalism of these signs. The air signs, on the other hand, fan the flames of fire by providing new ideas that the fire sign person can act on. For this reason, fire is generally considered compatible with air, but it should be pointed out that the fire signs are often too flagrant and impatient for the delicate nervous system of the air signs to tolerate for long. In fact, although the fire signs will often be stimulated by the air signs, they easily become tired and bored with intellectual observations that can’t be acted upon rather quickly.

### **The Element Air**

The element air is the life energy which has been associated with breath or what the yogis term “prana.” The air realm is the world of archetypal ideas behind the veil of the physical world, the cosmic energy actualized into specific patterns of thought. It is associated with geometric lines of force functioning through the mind, the energy which shapes the patterns of things to come. Whereas the fire signs are concerned with willing something into being, the air signs focus their energy on specific ideas which have not yet materialized, and by concentrating on these ideas ensure that they eventually will materialize. Hence, although the air signs are often accused of being impractical dreamers, they are playing a part in the actualization of creation on the broadest social

level, for their ideas can eventually touch the lives of millions of people.

Marc E. Jones writes that the air signs deal with “experience in its concern over theoretical relations.” The emphasis on theory and on concepts in the life of air sign people leads to their finding the most compatible mode of expression in art, words, and abstract thought. The air signs have the ability to detach themselves from the immediate experience of daily life, thus enabling them to gain objectivity, perspective, and a rational approach in everything they do. This detachment also enables them to work effectively with all sorts of people, for they don’t feel the need to get heavily involved with the other person’s worries or emotions. The air signs are in fact the most social of all signs in the sense that they can objectively appreciate the other person’s thoughts regardless of whether they agree with them.

Naturally, if the air signs become too occupied with their abstract ideas and theories, they can become mentally unbalanced and given to all sorts of eccentricity and fanaticism. They often lack deep emotion and an acceptance of the limitations of the physical body. They can over-value intellectual competence and refuse to face the fact that ideas must be tested to see if they work before they can be given great value.

Thought is such a dominating force in the lives of air signs that they are most easily threatened if their opinions are ignored or the quality of their intellect disparaged. And, of course, the water and earth signs are the most likely to devalue the air signs’ ideas, for those ideas don’t usually meet the test of emotional depth or practicality that water and earth insist upon. For their part, the air signs don’t want to be confined by the limitations of the earth, nor do they wish to have their light freedom saturated by the feelings and reservations of the water signs.

Fire signs, on the other hand, stimulate the air signs toward more freedom of expression and give the air signs a sense of confidence and strength that they can find with no one else. Although the air signs admire the fire signs in many ways, they will still insist upon their right to think things over before committing themselves, a habit that can

become increasingly annoying to the fire signs.

### **The Element Water**

Those with the water element strongly activated in their charts realize from birth that various intangible factors play a greater role in life than is commonly believed. The water signs are in touch with their feelings, in tune with the nuances and subtleties that many others don’t even notice. The water element represents the realm of deep emotion and feeling responses, ranging from compulsive passions to overwhelming fears to an all-encompassing acceptance and love of creation. Since feelings by their very nature are partly unconscious, the water signs are simultaneously aware of the power of the unconscious mind and are themselves unconscious of much of what really motivates them. When they are in tune with the deeper dimensions of life with full awareness, they are the most intuitive, psychically sensitive signs. In that case, the water signs are in touch with the oneness of all creation and are able to help others by means of an empathetic responsiveness to the feelings of fellow beings. When, however, they are not fully aware of their own feelings, they find themselves prompted by compulsive desires, irrational fears, and great oversensitivity to the slightest threat.

The water signs, like the nature of water itself, have no solidity or shape of their own. They are therefore happiest when their fluidity is channeled and given form by someone else, particularly the earth signs who have the solidity that water can trust and rely on. The water signs tend to dislike those who are boisterous or who have strong personalities, such as the air and fire signs. They feel most comfortable with others who are rather secretive and self-contained, which gives them a greater feeling of protection and security. This secretive quality of the water signs, by the way, is rather deceptive; for, although they may be calm on the outside, there are constantly storms brewing on deeper levels and hidden undercurrents which can drag them down. In fact, the water signs can be sensationalistic at times, for they will unconsciously cultivate emotional storms and upheavals if their lives get too dreary.



The sensitivity of the water signs is so great and their vulnerability to hurt so pronounced that, if the emotional reactions are not controlled and channeled properly, it can lead to a state of emotional instability and a predisposition to being too easily influenced by the slightest wind that blows. The sensitivity of the water signs should not be considered weakness, however, for water has great force and penetrating power over a long period, especially when it is channeled in a concentrated way. A beautiful example of the power of this element is expressed by an 11th century Chinese scholar:

Of all the elements, the Sage should take water as his preceptor. Water is yielding but all-conquering. Water extinguishes Fire or, finding itself likely to be defeated, escapes as steam and reforms. Water washes away soft Earth or, when confronted by rocks, seeks a way around....It saturates the atmosphere so that Wind dies. Water gives way to obstacles with deceptive humility, for no power can prevent it following its destined course to the sea. Water conquers by yielding; it never attacks but always wins the last battle.”

*(The Wheel of Life, John Blofeld, p. 78)*

Lastly, the water element corresponds with the process of gaining consciousness through a slow but sure realization of the soul's deepest yearnings. The water signs know instinctively that they must protect themselves from outside influences in order to assure themselves the inner calm necessary for deep reflection and subtlety of perception. The realization of the true nature of their emotions and yearnings is a slow and often painful process, but as long as they are willing to face their real motives, they are assured of increasing inner contentment as the years pass.

### **The Element Earth**

An attunement to this element indicates that the individual is in touch with the physical senses and the here-and-now reality of the material world. The earth signs tend to rely more upon their senses and practical reason than upon the inspirations, theoretical considerations, or intuitions of the other signs. They are attuned to the world of “forms”

which the senses and practical mind regard as real, and their innate understanding of how the material world functions gives the earth signs more patience and self-discipline than other signs. They rarely have to be told how to fit into the world of making a living, supplying basic needs, and persisting till a goal is reached. All these qualities come naturally to those of the earth element.

Although the earth element is one of the passive or “receptive” elements, this element, like water, has strength of endurance and persistence that enables the earth signs always to look out for themselves. Although not particularly assertive, they will speak out when their “thing” is endangered or their security is threatened. And, due to their efficiency, they are apt not only to speak out but also to act in rather matter-of-fact ways to ensure that what they have worked for is not taken from them. The earth element tends to be cautious, premeditative, rather conventional, and unusually dependable. They are generally suspicious or dubious about more lively, agile-minded people, and they react to the air signs with some degree of reserve, although they may be somewhat fascinated by them. Nevertheless, they feel that the air signs are up in the clouds, playing childishly with impractical and unworkable schemes. They feel that the fire signs will parch the earth, storming through life much too quickly and forcefully to be trusted. The water signs, on the other hand, share their qualities of acquisitiveness, retentiveness, and self-protectiveness. The earth therefore feels that the water will refresh it and enable it to bring forth even more productivity.

The very attunement that supplies the earth signs with their power and special abilities can also be the source of their greatest faults. The involvement with the practical world can often limit their imagination if they rely too much on things as they are or as they appear to be. This can lead to a narrowness of outlook, an addiction to routine and order, and a total lack of ability to deal with the abstract and theoretical realms of activity. More than anything else, the earth signs need to open themselves to the reality of the unseen world and to commit themselves to specific ideals as guidelines for their activity. □