

The Path of Gandalf

Gandalf has already been alive for some two thousand years at the time of Bilbo's birthday party. The wizards (Istari), according to Tolkien, came out of Valinor. They are Maiar beings, or lesser Valar beings. Although we are told there were five of them, we only know the name of three: Saruman the White, Gandalf the Grey, and Radagast the Brown. "They came therefore in the shape of Men, though they were never young and aged only slowly, and they had many powers of mind and hand. They revealed their true name to few."¹

Gandalf's name carries the *Alf* of Elves. *Gand* is associated with wizardry or sorcery. So the whole would make him *wizard elf*. Tolkien also tells us that his true name is *Olorin*, though he does not offer us a precise meaning. Among Men, *Olorin* is known as "the elf of the wand."² In short, Gandalf is in this middle sphere between Ilúvatar, the supreme deity, and his emissaries the Valars above him; Elves and Men below him.

One of the first tests that will meet Gandalf is announced by his long-ranging awareness. As in many other places, he is able to sense the future: "There are many powers in the world, for good or for evil. Some are greater than I am. Against some I have not yet been measured. But my time is coming. The Morgul-lord and his Black Riders have come forth."³ And a real test is indeed not far from coming.

At the Council of Rivendell, just before the fellowship forms, Elrond calls Gandalf to speak, "for it is the place of honour, and in all this matter he has been the chief."⁴ The great Elrond subordinates himself to Gandalf, and so does Aragorn later. At the Council Gandalf points out that when Sauron was sent out of Dol Guldur, the time coincided with the finding of the Ring. And Gandalf comments that this could hardly be a coincidence. However, Gandalf falls in with Saruman's reassurance that the Ring would never be found in Middle Earth.

¹ Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, Appendix B, 1059.

² Flieger, "Missing Person," in *Green Suns and Faërie*, 226–27.

³ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 214.

⁴ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 243.

Nevertheless, for safe measure he decides to inquire more deeply into the history of the Ring and finds documents in Gondor. In one of these he finds mention of the inscription it carries.

Soon after, through the detour of a meeting with fellow wizard Radagast the Brown, Gandalf learns that the nine Ringwraiths are moving westward towards the Shire, and have taken the form of black riders. Radagast directs Gandalf to Saruman, but not before Gandalf asks him to alert the animals and birds that are allied to him. This means informing Gwaihir the Windlord as well. Upon coming to Isengard, Gandalf realizes he is afraid. Saruman seems not to respond to the title "White," but prefers "Saruman the Wise, Saruman Ring-Maker, Saruman of Many Colours." His robes, which had seemed white, were in reality woven of all colors. Gandalf challenges him by saying that he preferred them white, and what follows is a dialogue central to the book:

"White!" he sneered. "It serves as a beginning. White cloth may be dyed. The white page can be overwritten; and the white light can be broken."

"In which case it is no longer white," said I [Gandalf]. "And he that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom."⁵

Saruman turns down Gandalf's advice and announces that a new age is coming in which people like him must have dominion over the world of Men. He explains that a new power is rising that Men and Elves will not be able to oppose. Showing scorn for Men, whom he sees as hindering the work of wisdom, he pressures Gandalf to yield to the coming power of Sauron in the illusion that it can be controlled for the higher purpose of "Knowledge, Rule, Order." Saruman further presses Gandalf to reveal where the Ring lies, to get hold of it. When Saruman tellingly refers to it as "the precious thing," Gandalf has no choice but to oppose the fellow wizard, thus becoming his prisoner. Gandalf is confined to the pinnacle of the Orthanc tower, with little hope of escape, there passing bitter days. He is rescued after a time by Gwaihir, lord of the Eagles. This test is the prelude to a stronger ordeal against an even stronger opponent who stands in the way of the fellowship.

Gandalf plays a role even without meeting the fellowship. Soon after his release from Orthanc he goes to the Shire, then to Bree, where the Black Riders were directed. When he knows that Frodo has left with Strider, to whom he is relieved to relinquish leadership,

⁵ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 252.

Gandalf gallops to Weathertop, reaching it two days after leaving Bree. The Black Riders try to attack him, but he protects himself with fire. In so doing he has drawn behind him four Black Riders, and diverts them from attacking Frodo and Aragorn.

In Rivendell Elrond announces the forming of the fellowship, and declares: "With you and your faithful servant, Gandalf will go; for this shall be his great task, and maybe the end of his labours."⁶ Gandalf is truly the head of the party, Aragorn a close second; but to Frodo falls the central task of the quest. Interestingly, and in an uncharacteristically boastful way, Gandalf says, "Someone said that intelligence shall be needed in the party. He was right. I think I shall come with you."⁷ But he leaves this suggestion open to Elrond's advice.

In the mines of Moria, Gandalf walks in front of the group, and, silent and determined, Aragorn in the rear. It is always Gandalf who has the last word, while Aragorn shows his complete trust in him, even in the most trying moments:

"Do not be afraid!" said Aragorn. . . . "I have been with him on many a journey, if never on one so dark. . . . He will not go astray—if there is any path to find. He has led us here against our fears, but he will lead us out again, at whatever cost to himself."⁸

Before leaving the mines of Moria, Gandalf indicates they have to go across a bridge. When they get to the bridge they see that it is narrow and dangerous, without curb or rail. Below is a wide chasm. Pursued by a frightful creature, a Balrog, the company can only cross in single file. To protect the fellowship, Gandalf takes a stand against the Balrog. Gandalf and the Balrog are both Maiar spirits; they are equal, but the Balrog served the defiant spirit Melkor already in olden times. In defiance of the Balrog Gandalf proclaims his allegiance to another power: "I am a servant of the Sacred Fire, wielder of the flame of Anor."⁹ Anor is a name for the Sun deity. The Balrog nevertheless leaps unto the bridge. Gandalf's staff is torn from him. The bridge breaks and the Balrog falls downwards, dragging the wizard along. Aragorn takes command of the fleeing fellowship.

⁶ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 268.

⁷ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 266.

⁸ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 303.

⁹ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 344.

Only much later can Gandalf explain in part what was the nature of his initiation. After being dragged down by the Balrog, Gandalf fell for a long time. First he was wrapped in fire, then they both fell in the deep and dark water. “Long I fell, and he fell with me. His fire was about me. I was burned. Then we plunged into the deep water and all was dark. Cold it was as the tide of death: almost it froze my heart.”¹⁰

The magician came to the bottom, “beyond light and knowledge,” still with the Balrog at his heels. The two fought in the entrails of the earth, “where time is not counted.” At last the Balrog fled into dark tunnels, and in utter despair Gandalf realized that following his enemy was his only hope. The Balrog carried him back to the heart of Khazad-dûm to the “Endless Stair.” After ascending the seemingly endless spiral he found himself at last in Durin’s Tower, in a high, narrow, and inaccessible place, far from the world.

The Balrog burst into flame again. The mountain looked crowned with storm and thunder roared, lightning flared. Gandalf managed to hurl his enemy against the mountain, where he ran to his ruin. He concludes, “The darkness took me, and I strayed out of thought and time, and I wandered far on roads that I will not tell.” The rest is better retold verbatim:

Naked I was sent back—for a brief time, until my task is done. And naked I lay upon the mountain-top. . . . I was alone, forgotten, without escape upon the hard horn of the world. There I lay staring upward, while the stars wheeled over, and each day was as long as a life-age of the earth. Faint to my ears came the gathered rumours of all lands: the springing and the dying, the song and the weeping, and the slow everlasting groan of overburdened stone.¹¹

It is once more Gwaihir, Lord of Eagles, who bears him to Lórien in the presence of Galadriel for healing.

Pia Skogemann indicates that Gandalf is initiated first through the sphere of the elements in the entrails of the earth: fire and heat, water and cold, earth, stone; and finally through an ascent into the air that involves the same elements anew: fire in the lightning, water in the ice and rain, earth in the rock. He meets this initiation through the Balrog, another Maya being, like himself.

¹⁰ Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 490.

¹¹ Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 491.

As Skogemann indicates, that Gandalf is sent back into the world naked means that he has been able to greatly transform his physical body. This is why Gwaihir calls him “light as a swan’s feather.” But he still needs healing, and that is why Galadriel calls him to Lórien. Later Gandalf can say that no weapon can hurt him because his physical body is like none other. In battle he needs no helm nor mail to protect himself, and his white robes and snowy long hair make him look as radiant as the sun.

When the party with everyone except Frodo and Sam meet with Gandalf again, the wizard is so transformed that even his companions fail to recognize him at first, and he reacts with some surprise to his own name. At first the companions confuse him with Saruman, then Legolas is the first to shout *Mithrandir*, Gandalf’s Elven name. They notice that “his hair was white as snow in the sunshine; and gleaming white was his robe; the eyes under his deep brows were bright, piercing as the rays of the *sun*; power was in his hand.”¹² (emphasis added) Indeed Gandalf proves in his appearance that he is the servant of the sacred flame of Anor, the flame of the Sun. He indicates to the companions that none of their weapons can hurt him at present. This is because he has gone through some degree of death and resurrection.

To the party Gandalf now announces the coming of the great storm. In what becomes a theme through the book, he proclaims:

“Yes, I am white now,” said Gandalf. “Indeed I am Saruman, one might almost say, Saruman as he should have been. . . . I have passed through fire and deep water, since we parted. I have forgotten much that I thought I knew, and learned again much that I had forgotten. I can see many things far off, but many things that are close I cannot see.”¹³

Then he offers an understanding of the Enemy and how he can be defeated. Sauron lives in angst that someone else would be availing himself of the Ring in his stead, seeking to overthrow him. What he could not possibly fathom is that someone would simply want to destroy the Ring. And the fellowship has this advantage over him—that their plans defy his understanding.

¹² Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 484.

¹³ *Ibid*

Now armed with new power, Gandalf enters the Hall of Edoras as if by storm, defeating Grima/Wormtongue who has subjected Théoden's mind to Saruman's influence. After openly defying Grima, Gandalf raises his staff, and thunder rolls and the hall turns dark. Théoden is reawakened after a long spell under the subjugation of his counselor, and is ready to lead his army in battle.

In Minas Tirith Gandalf assumes leadership of the city after Denethor relinquishes it, prey to his growing madness. In Gandalf's presence Men recover courage. But as soon as he passes, they lose it. Now the attackers come with renewed strength, and spurred by the Black Captain, the gate at the entrance of Gondor breaks. Behind the gate stands Gandalf, ready to challenge him. The Captain says, "Old fool! . . . Old fool! This is my hour. Do you not know Death when you see it? Die now and curse in vain!"¹⁴ Gandalf does not move. At that moment a cock crows, welcoming the dawn that breaks through Sauron's darkness. And in answer come the sounds of the horns of the riders of Rohan.

After victory is achieved in Gondor, because Sauron's attention is completely drawn towards the assembled company, Gandalf wants him to keep doing so. All of his energy is devoted to the service of the seemingly humble Hobbit Frodo. Gandalf wants to induce Sauron to empty Mordor of his forces, and offers his forces as a bait, goading him to believe he can capture the Ring hidden among them. Thus Gandalf asks his allies to walk into a trap with little other than hope, knowing that they could perish. Gandalf's stance could summarize the nature of the transition to the new age. In his own words, it is "better [to risk death without warranties] than perish nonetheless—as we surely shall, if we sit here—and know as we die that no new age will come." And he sums up: "We come now to the very brink, where hope and despair are akin. To waver is to fall."¹⁵ Once this mad wager is over, Gandalf's task for the aeon is completed.

In order to ensure Frodo's mission, Gandalf sacrifices himself in the ordeal against the Balrog, which leads him to an underworld journey, a death and resurrection. He knows at that moment what could be in store for him, and he does not shrink from it. This is what leads him to the transformation from Gandalf the Grey to Gandalf the White. Among the three main

¹⁴ Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 811.

¹⁵ Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 862.

characters of the trilogy, he is the only one able to oversee all the threads of the odyssey. In a Jungian sense Gandalf represents the positive archetypal spirit that shows that “living nature, of course, is not opposed to the spirit but is a part of it.”¹⁶

To Denethor Gandalf says, “But all worthy things are now in peril as the world now stands, those are my care. And for my part, I shall not wholly fail of my task, though Gondor should perish, if anything passes through this night that can still grow fair and flower again in days to come.”¹⁷ Gandalf wrestles to rescue what can be carried into the future. He works out of an intuition of the future, as is made clear in his approach to Saruman; even a black magician can hear the words of the spirit, and these can mature at some later point in his soul.

As exalted as Gandalf can be, he is still subjected to the laws of Middle-earth. He is already afraid upon meeting Saruman in Orthanc, and only the more so with the Balrog. Likewise, when Faramir remembers his first encounter with Frodo and Sam and recounts it to Gandalf, Pippin notices that Gandalf’s hands tremble and realizes that the wizard himself is shaken and afraid. The same happens at the Black Gate, when Gandalf parleys with the Mouth of Sauron, who brings him a bundle containing Sam’s sword, a grey cloak, an Elven brooch, and the *mithril*-mail coat worn by Frodo. Those near Gandalf see the anguish in his face but, even when all seems lost, Gandalf can summon some hidden reserve of true spiritual strength.

Gandalf is the image of the self in the realm of the spirit. He is the one whose consciousness spans all realms of earth, the one who can speak to everyone their own language. He is the one who calls to higher awareness and therefore is seen as a bringer of doom by those who are unprepared to take the next evolutionary step. When people meet higher aspects of the spirit, they react in the measure of their development, as in the case of Saruman or Denethor. If they are torn in themselves, they feel shame, and this turns to anger or aversion. Théoden is ready for change, and his healing is almost immediate; Denethor has only loathing towards Gandalf and sinks deeper into his madness.

¹⁶ Skogemann, *Where the Shadows Lie*, 129.

¹⁷ Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 741–42.

In Gandalf the divine aspect stands in the foreground; he is first and foremost a Maia. His body is secondary; after his initiation, for all intended purposes, he has known and overcome death and cannot be defeated in the body.