

The Alchemical Process of Transformation

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1985

The Origins of Alchemy

Alchemy traces its roots back to the Egyptian civilisation where it emerged as a practising art and science and an expression of the Egyptian religion. Thus it was that the Egyptian Thoth, the god of mathematics and science, became the inspirational source for the Hellenistic figure of Hermes Trismegistus, who in turn became the model for the medieval Mercurius. The Greeks learned their Alchemy in the fourth century BC, whilst in Egypt. Several Greek philosophers, scientists, and mystics were initiated into the ancient Egyptian mysteries at this time. The Alchemists of the Middle Ages learnt their art from the Arabs in Spain and Southern Italy, who in turn had adopted it from the Greeks. Thus it was that by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries alchemy had already appeared in Western Europe via Sicily and Spain. Typical places of study were at the Universities of Palermo, Toledo, Barcelona, and Segovia.

Understanding Transmutation as the Basis of Alchemy.

Alchemy is best known for its belief that lead can be transmuted into gold. However, the transmutation of non-precious metals into gold is simply a metaphor for the soul being freed from a "dead, leaden state of mind," to that of realising its own light nature and that is derived from pure spirit.

The alchemists believed that the basis of the material world was a *Prima Materia*, or prime chaotic matter, which might be actuated into existence if impressed by "form." The "forms" arose in the shape of the elements, earth, water, fire, and air. The Alchemists deduced that the limitless varieties of life were created out of the blending of the elements in particular proportions. Aristotle distinguished the four elements from one another by the four qualities of fluidity, dryness, heat and cold. Each element possesses two of these primary qualities. Thus the four possible combinations are:

hot + dry --> fire;
hot + fluid (or moist) --> air;
cold + fluid --> water;
cold + dry --> earth

One of the two qualities predominates in each element. In earth, dryness; in water, cold; in air, fluidity; in fire, heat.

Transmutation is thus possible. Any element may be transformed into another through the quality that they have in common. Thus fire can become air through the medium of heat, just as air can become water through the medium of fluidity. Also two elements may become a third element by removing one quality from each. By parting with the dry and cold qualities, fire and water can become air; by parting with the hot and fluid qualities, the same elements can give rise to earth. Consider the simple example of the transmutation process a piece of green wood undergoes when heated. Drops of water form at the cut end of the wood, therefore wood contains water; steam and

vapours are then given off, therefore wood contains air; the wood then burns, demonstrating the fire element; and when we see that only ash is left we realise that the wood contains earth. Alchemists viewed other materials, particularly metals, in much the same way, i.e. that a metal owes its specific form of nature to its specific proportioning of the four elements. A modern day review of the psychological states and problems that clients present with also shows the presence of the elements, but in distorted proportions; e.g. an over-stressed mind could be described alchemically as excess fire (hot + dry). Nature tries to intervene by releasing water (tears), thereby relieving the overheated mind which could then "cool off." However, more often than not our will interferes and we block the tears, thereby increasing the stress.

A similar theory, derived from the theory of the four elements, was the sulphur-mercury theory. This theory presented the two opposed or contrary elements, fire and water, in a new way. Fire became "sulphur" and water "mercury," the former being composed of the primary qualities of hot and dry, the latter of the primary qualities of cold and moist. In general, sulphur stood for the property of combustibility, or the spirit of fire, and mercury for that of the fusibility or the mineral spirit of metals.

When sulphur and mercury united in different proportions and in different degrees of purity, the various metals and minerals took shape, according to the sulphur-mercury theory. If sulphur and mercury were perfectly pure, and if they combined in the most complete equilibrium, the product would be the most perfect of metals, namely gold. Defects in purity and, particularly, in proportion, resulted in the formation of silver, lead, tin, iron, or copper. But, since these inferior metals were essentially composed of the same constituents as gold, the accident of combination might be rectified by suitable treatment and by means of elixirs.

Now we do not have to adopt the medieval alchemists' view of the physical world, but instead by interpreting it metaphorically, we can extract two very important a priori postulates which formed the basis of alchemical reasoning:

1. The unity of nature as expressed by the idea of the *prima materia* from which all bodies were formed and into which they might again be dissolved and
2. The existence of a potent transmuting agent capable of promoting the change of one kind of material into another. This imagined agent became known as the "philosopher's stone," the most famous of all alchemical ideas.

If we view the *prima materia*, the original state of matter, as being the original, pure, raw state of consciousness, from which all states of consciousness emerged, i.e. mineral, vegetable, animal, and human, and if we view the philosopher's stone as the state of illuminated consciousness whilst in the earthly body, then both the above premises become useful to our work in psychotherapy.

Now apart from a few of the most enlightened alchemists, most practitioners in medieval times believed that they could literally transform lead into gold. The literature shows that the frustrated would-be goldmakers became entangled in a subterranean labyrinth of fantasies, hallucinations, visions, and dreams. Thus, what appeared to be the greatest mistake of the majority of "alchemical hopefuls" turned out to condition their greatest achievement: in the darkness of their blind alley the "sons of Hermes" had come to discover, through their activated imaginations, the **unconscious**.

Carl Jung discovered that many of the dreams and states of consciousness that his clients reported corresponded remarkably to the descriptions recorded in the alchemical texts. Jung subsequently felt that the knowledge of Alchemy could be used in understanding the process of psychological and spiritual transformation as a tool for use in psychotherapy.

Projection and Unconscious Imagery in Alchemy

The work of the alchemist was a slow, laborious one in which free association, projections, and visions of the unconscious occurred not only in their dreams but also whilst staring into their furnaces and working with their equipment. Some examples of this follow:

Hoghelande recounts: "They say that different names are given to the stone on account of the wonderful variety of figures that appear in the course of the work, inasmuch as colours often come forth at the same time, just as we sometimes imagine in the clouds or in the fire strange shapes of animals, reptiles or trees. I found similar things in a fragment of a book ascribed to Moses. When the body is dissolved, it is there written, then will appear sometimes two branches, sometimes three or more, sometimes also the shape of reptiles; on occasion it also seems as if a man with a head and all his limbs were seated upon a cathedra."

Raymond Lully writes: "You should know, dear son, that the course of nature is turned about, so that without spiritual exaltation you can see certain fugitive spirits condensed in the air in the shape of diverse monsters, beasts, and men, which move like the clouds hither and thither."

Finally in Waite's "Introitus apertus" he writes: "The substance of the vessel will exhibit a great variety of forms; it will become liquid and again coagulate a hundred times a day; sometimes it will present the appearance of fishes' eyes and then again of tiny silver trees with twigs and leaves. Whenever you look at it you will have cause for astonishment, particularly when you see it all divides into beautiful but very minute grains of silver, like the ray of the sun. This is the whole tincture..." These examples show the imaginary nature of psychological and spiritual phenomenon.

The practice of alchemy changed profoundly in Europe from the 12th century, when it was first introduced by the Arabs, to the 16th century, when the alchemical laboratories evolved into psychological laboratories and the alchemical work into explorations of the inner universe. The purgations and transformation of metals were translated into symbolic procedures concerned with the purification and transformation of souls. Thus the meeting between the alchemists and the unconscious had a revolutionary impact on the alchemical work, which by the end of the Middle Ages had begun to develop into a systemised mystical process of transformation, known as the *opus alchymicum*. However, with the emergence of the rational spirit in the 17th century, the science of chemistry destroyed the basic concepts and theories of alchemy and replaced them with a rational system from which our science of chemistry has arisen.

It was not until the 20th century and the emergence of Depth Psychology that the way was paved for Alchemy to re-emerge and take its place as a source of knowledge that could inform and influence the teaching and practice of psychotherapy.

The Contribution of Alchemy to Modern Psychotherapy

Modern studies of alchemy, the most notable being Jung's "Psychology and Alchemy", have changed our understanding and interpretation of dreams. In 1946 his work on the "Psychology of the Transference Interpreted in Conjunction with a set of Alchemical Illustrations" revealed a very different light on transference in psychotherapy, which until the time of this publication was influenced mainly by the writings of Sigmund Freud, i.e. that transference was simply a phenomenon that reflected the influence of the parent-child relationship. Jung's work on alchemy showed instead that the transference dreams and experiences of his clients were principally concerned with an inner process of individuation. This process does of course acknowledge the

importance of the experience of bonding with and separating from the parental figures, but it also goes way beyond this by envisaging life as a continual process of development. Thus the projections of the clients onto the therapist reflect something of their own inner psychic world rather than Freud's view that the client was basically experiencing the therapist as a parent figure.

The greatest contribution that alchemy makes to psychotherapy is its understanding of the process of transformation. It is applicable on the one hand to the simple process of undergoing a change in the way we see the world and at the other end of the scale it provides vital background knowledge to the understanding of the process of spiritual transformation. Jung's texts "Alchemical Studies" (1931 - 54) and "Mysterium Coniunctionis" (1956) are classical studies on the subject of Symbolism and Alchemical Process of Transformation.

The Stages of Transformation

The alchemical process of transformation has been variously described, according to the text that is consulted, as being a six-stage process, 12 stage, 20, 22, 50, and even 75 stage process! However, it is possible to understand the alchemical process in terms of four basic stages, this being most useful when starting out as an "alchemical beginner" and in trying to relate it to the psychotherapeutic process.

The "Four Stage" Version

The process can be basically described in four stages as **nigredo, albedo, citrinitas and rubedo**. At each stage the alchemist is subjected to an increasingly intense purification, which is followed by a union with the fire of that stage (alchemical marriage), a rebirth of a new sense of self and then the death of that sense of self (in order to proceed to the next stage). At each stage the fire is twice as intense as the preceding fire. The fire could also be seen as awakening four degrees of fiery love in the heart of the alchemist by his *anima* or "inner female soul mate" (in the case of a man) or by her *animus* or "inner male spirit" (in the case of a woman).

In alchemy the anima (in men) and the animus (in women) therefore pass through four stages of development corresponding in turn to the four steps of the alchemical marriage. At each stage the experience of this "fiery love" purifies and awakens the alchemist, in order that a greater sense of self be realised and a vaster reservoir of feeling open up in his or her heart. Fire therefore is the fuel of the alchemical work and the main agent of its continuous process of transmutation. Once kindled, the alchemist's fire is maintained without interruption until the completion of the process.

Stage One: Nigredo or "Blackening".

In the first stage the fire is "slow and mild" as of the flesh or "embryo," gradually helping to bring about the first stage of the work, culminating in the earthly nigredo or "blackening." This stage involves a purification of the earthly nature in us.

The work begins with a seeking for the "Prima Materia," a condition the alchemists coined to represent that original, pure, uncorrupted state of the matter that is the basis of nature, i.e. out of the Prima Materia the elements emerged. They also recognised that all nature is renewed after dying away and that in order to grow, an organism must first die. An apple, for example, has to

putrefy before its seed can take root and produce more apples. Of course, this "putrefaction" applies not only to the material but also to the spiritual world. Just as material death is necessary for the material rebirth of things, so spiritual death is necessary for the spiritual rebirth of man. Thus the much sought-after act of rebirth is always preceded by a return to the source of life - regeneration depends on a "reduction to the primal matter," and fire is a most important element needed to achieve this.

From a psychological standpoint, this stage is experienced as entering a dark and chaotic unconscious inner world. St John of the Cross has referred to this as the first of two dark nights, the dark night of the mind, which is an encounter with the darker aspects of our self (that which Jung called "the shadow"). At first nothing appears to make sense, indeed all the therapist can do at this stage of the process is to be fully present and empathise with the client, who in the process of articulating their experience, facilitates it further. The therapeutic setting, i.e. the therapy room, becomes the hermetically sealed vessel and the inner chaos that the client enters into is symbolised by the reactions of opposing forces struggling against each other. That is to say the client's own psyche reveals its submerged inner conflicts to the conscious mind. As the client begins to experience the inner world to be more real, the process intensifies (the fire increases) and often anger, fear, frustration, and a desire to "escape from it all" is experienced. To pass through this stage requires patience, humility and acceptance not only of the client, but also of the therapist, who through experiences knows that a process of purification is in progress and that one by one the inner conflicts will gradually become resolved until a completely new inner state of clarity and freedom is achieved. Then the client will be reconciled with his or her inner earth nature - in alchemical terms they will have united with their "earth nature."

Throughout the first stage, the encounter with the earth nature necessitates a freeing of the sense of self from its identification with the elements earth and water. What we are concerned with is removing the veils of unconscious attachment to the world so as to get a clearer sense of who we are in this world. For example, I am not my family, nor my job, nor my status that people acknowledge in the world. The identification of the self with the earth element is experienced in terms of our attachment to worldly objects (our body, material objects, parental figures, etc.) and so long as we remain attached to the worldly objects we remain separated and divided inside. In letting go of the attachments we can turn within to discover inner guidance and our inner animus or anima, for which a passion (and later love) is awakened, leading to the first alchemical union or marriage.

The water element symbolises the emotions that we experience in encountering and letting go of such attachments - fear, anger, grief, etc. - emotions we need to encounter and survive, experiencing them in order to become free of them and so move on to the next stage. Thus it is that when the unconscious earth nature in us is first awakened we initially experience negative thoughts and feelings. Once we have overcome the unconscious identifications, the thoughts and feelings become positive, i.e. the world no longer threatens our real self because we are free of it and we can choose when and how we integrate the world into our self (rather than our self becoming absorbed and lost in the world). When we enter the unconscious we often experience these emotions in terms of water images such as the sea, or a lake or a river. This is also a sign that we are beginning to "flow along" with our inner process, i.e. we have let go of our attachment to the solid outer world (earth element) and are following our feelings.

A sign of having worked through these earthly attachments and their corresponding emotions is the positive encounter with our inner anima (for men) or inner animus (for women). At the point when physical union with the inner anima or animus is experienced, then the union or "marriage with the earth nature" has been achieved. The anima at this stage is symbolised by Eve, the object of sensual love. The animus is symbolised by the physical "Tarzan" figure. This union paves the way for becoming free of the unconscious influence of the earth nature. The very act of becoming

free of this nature is seen by the alchemists as awakening of the air element through sublimation, leading to the freeing of the soul nature.

The first freeing of the soul nature is accompanied by child-like images appearing in the client's dreams. This signals the first rebirth of the self. In women, the Rebirth image is sometimes preceded by dreams of being pregnant.

Completion of the first stage is now experienced as a death, which is in fact a complete letting go of the old sense of self that was identified unconsciously with the earth nature. Images of fire and burning often accompany the images of death and endings. Now we are ready to enter the second stage. So far we have described the union of opposites (alchemical marriage), Rebirth of the new self and the death of the old self. All the while, purification, principally by means of the fire element has been a continuous part of the process.

Stage Two: Albedo or "Whitening".

Just as stage one is called the earthly encounter, so stage two is called the stage of the moon. This requires a further purification of our psyche and a receptivity to our soul nature, which originally incarnated free of worldly impressions, of the family, the environment, and society. Becoming conscious of our soul nature is the first real step in answering the question "who am I?" Alchemical texts speak of the soul now becoming conscious of itself by becoming aware of its own light nature - the reflected light, symbolised by the moon, and discovers the source of its life and light, which is pure spirit. It is this "spirit," sometimes referred to as the "waters of life," which enables the neophyte to transcend through the realms of the psyche and to enter the angelic realms.

In the psychotherapeutic context, this is a period of withdrawing a little from life, participating just enough to keep things "ticking over," the main forces being inwards. This enables clients to experience sudden realisations about themselves and they often begin to question their life direction. It is easier to see, in a moment of insight, what is important and what is not. Alchemists sometimes refer to this a "sublimatio," much like the vapours that rise from the chemical vessel, which is undergoing heating, carrying the essence that is sought after and is to be extracted. This is a metaphor for the soul rising from the confines of the rich psyche, with the extraction of the essence representing the soul at last becoming conscious of itself. At this point, becoming soul conscious is realising who you are as an individual soul and what your qualities and gifts are. For those who pursue their therapeutic process thoroughly, deeply and persistently, this period leads to a heightened spiritual awareness and purpose.

The fire of stage two is considerably more intense than the preceding stage, even though it is described by alchemists as "moderate and temperate, as of the Sun in June." Correspondingly in life we are confronted with the necessity to be far more scrupulous, open, courageous and discriminating than ever before. The path is lonely as we journey inward, but to continue the process demands a tremendous integrity, strength and persistence.

As with stage one of the process, the point is reached in which the second alchemical marriage takes place. Here the anima figure corresponds to the moon woman, an object of romantic love. This is the goal of Eros, not of sex, a classical example being Helen of Troy. The corresponding animus figure (in women) becomes the romantic hero, the poet (Byron) the film star (Harrison Ford), author (Ernest Hemingway), explorer, political liberator, etc. Following the inner marriage a second Rebirth "of the lunar child" takes place. The baby-child, representing the newly acquired state of consciousness, is particularly fragile and innocent, reflecting the purely receptive state that the consciousness has reached. The sense of self now identifies with the soul nature.

Stage Three: Citrinitas or "Yellowing".

Alchemists refer to Citrinitas as the stage of the sun, or the dawning of the "solar light" inherent in our Being. Now the light is no longer reflective as in the lunar or soul light. Its nature is direct and it is all pervading (we do not experience it as having a source). This light is "great and strong, as of a calcining fire." It is sometimes referred to as the original Light or the Light that is pure, creative Intelligence. Some alchemical texts describe it as the Divine Intellect (as distinct from the human, mental intellect). It is said that the only true knowledge is revealed to us when this Light becomes conscious in us.

Now in describing the second stage, mention was made only of an alchemical marriage and a rebirth. Stage three begins with the "yellow death," i.e. there is a dying away of the "lunar light" to the point of complete darkness, which is in fact "black light," a light so bright we cannot see it as our inner sight is veiled and it appears as darkness. St. John of the Cross speaks of this in a personal account of his own "Dark Night of the Soul." This "death" is also described from a Buddhist point of view as a death of the sense of self as being a separate individual. It is a complete dying of the dualistic state of mind that perceives subject and object as separate.

It is hard to find the equivalent experience in the psychotherapeutic setting, but we do have a possible example when we consider the schizophrenic experience. Here the client can lose all sense of individuality and moves into a world that is almost totally subjective and there is little or no ability to be objective, i.e. for the client to separate him/herself from the experience.

The "yellow death" signals the end of the influence of the "lunar light," as the consciousness is transformed into "solar light." This "solar light" awakens the sense of revelation and revelatory knowledge. Inner knowing is not arrived at by study, reflection or deep thought; it is to be experienced as a direct revelation. Further descriptions of this stage become too metaphysical to be relevant and so we must proceed to the description of the third Alchemical Marriage. Purification at this stage focuses on the removal of the "watery" elements. This alchemical marriage reveals the anima figure as corresponding to the Divine Virgin, or heavenly woman, the object of spiritual love. This love is devotional in nature. One example of this would be Dante's Beatrice, who leads the poet on to the spheres of paradise and the marvels of heavenly love. The corresponding animus figure appears as the spiritual guide - the professor, clergyman, guru, who is seen as "elevated and spiritualised." The Rebirth is in terms of the birth of the Solar consciousness, a revelatory light.

Since stage three has moved clearly into the mystical realms, it seems pointless to try to seek for examples from the psychotherapeutic setting that will give us a practical example of this experience - it is perhaps best left as it is, i.e. as a mystical experience. However, the intuitive knowledge that we often receive in life, whether in a dream or in a flash of realisation, gives us at least a hint of the power of the "revelatory light" or "solar light." It is true that there is a stage in the therapeutic process in which a particular dream, insight, or image that comes to us, can act as a crucial turning point in the therapy or it may sum up the whole purpose of our therapeutic process. In this sense, we could say that our intuition is an expression of the eternal mystical knowledge, a level at which everything is already known. This was referred to earlier as Pure Intelligence. Of course we are not aware of where the intuition comes from or how "it knows" and neither are we likely to experience this "mystical illumination" whilst in therapy. In order to know something of this stage we must rely on the illuminations of those exceptional few human beings who have recorded their experiences.

Stage Four: Rubedo or "Reddening".

In stage four, the alchemist awakens to the desire to return to the earth and to fully incarnate his or her state of "illuminated" consciousness into the mind and body. To achieve this, a purifying fourth fire, "burning and vehement, as of fusion," must be used to bring about a new coagulation of spirit and matter. The culmination of stage three leaves the alchemist completely free in a state of Pure Spirit, Pure Intelligence, beyond space, time and form but without a consciousness of body or mind. Thus the death or "Red death" at the start of stage four involves the death of the freedom inherent in this state and the death of the conscious state of Pure Spirit (and Pure Intelligence) as an individual soul that desires to be embodied without the sense of separation from its original pure state. It is only when the soul is finally incarnated in the mind/body (psyche) that it can realise its state of spiritual completeness. Heaven and earth in the alchemist are now united.

Furthermore the process is incomplete and inherently unstable at the end of stage three as there is no body or psyche as a vehicle to incarnate into, and the mind/body will suffer the fate of eventually regressing backwards towards its original impure, leaden state. However, spirit is not meant to incarnate into the old (leaden) state of mind/body as there would be no purpose in the process if this happened, i.e. the consciousness would revert back to its leaden state or worse still, split off from the psyche and the alchemist would be left in an internally split state. So the psyche needs to be awakened - "Materially spiritualised" is the term used - so that it can be an appropriate vehicle for the soul to incarnate into, i.e. the psyche can now express the soul's qualities and nature because the psyche has become of the same nature as the soul. This uniting of the spirit/soul with the mind/body represents the final and most important alchemical marriage. Now the anima becomes the Mother of God, or Consort of God, the object of mystic love. The corresponding animus figures are Illuminated Ones - Christ, Buddha, the Saints, etc. What this means is that God consciousness, in being born into the world of the earth, realises its Godlike nature consciously - as an enlightened, transcendental individual and in a state of oneness with the Cosmic whole. This then is the philosopher's stone that the alchemist has been seeking for. It is the grand culmination of the Great Work.

The psychotherapeutic equivalent to this is far easier to recognise, explain and understand by comparison to the complex mysticism of stage three. Quite simply, once the client has realised and transcended the nature of their problems or dilemmas, they are faced with the task of implementing it in their life. This involves a change in their personality that will accommodate and sustain their realisation. Thus the client who realises that his or her life has been a sham which has led to numerous problems, now sets about the process of changing it to be more in accord with his or her own true nature. The effort of accomplishing this is far greater than the effort of realising the need for this change in the first place.

The alchemical principal of "solve et coagula," or dissolve and coagulate, has been used at each stage of the process. In other words, the form the soul is caught in at the time (the self) must first be dissolved in order to free the soul so that it can rise (in consciousness) to experience a purer and subtler form, which can then be re-coagulated and experienced as the "new self." However, in stage four as the soul incarnates, or descends into the worldly body, the latter has been tempered to be a more suitable vehicle or psyche, which is then coagulated with the soul to form the "self" that has awakened the body and mind to express its nature (the spirit has been materialised and the material body spiritualised).