

The Inner Gold of the Alchemists

[Return to the list of articles](#)

Julian Scott

Alchemy seems to be an almost universal science. Not only do we find it in Medieval Europe, but also in China and India, amongst other places. This is perhaps because it is not just a primitive forerunner of modern chemistry, but a sacred science in its own right, which was studied wherever esoteric knowledge has appeared.

The first thing I would like to do is to sweep aside the false image of the bumbling medieval alchemist who tried vainly to turn lead into gold, as a way of getting rich. If there was not some substance behind alchemy, surely people would not have been so universally foolish as to spend the best part of their lives pursuing a mere chimera.

As in all the magical arts, there are fakes and fools alongside saints and sages. Alchemy is no exception. But the names of eminent alchemists include the greatest scientists and intellects of the Middle Ages.

Although Western Alchemy first appeared in late classical times, and probably had its origin in Egypt ("Al-Kem", Kem being the Egyptians' word for Egypt), the first cited Alchemists appear in the Arab world, from where this science passed to the West. One of the most famous Arabian alchemists was Avicenna (980-1037), a man of immense knowledge and reputation, equivalent to a Plato or Aristotle in Greece. Extraordinary stories about him abound. It was believed, for example, that all the Spirits of the Elements were subject to him. There is also a tradition that, owing to his knowledge of the Elixir of Life, he still lives, as an adept who will disclose himself to the profane at the end of a certain cycle. At the opposite end of the scale, he was said to have drunk so excessively that he was sacked from his job as Grand Vizier and died in comparative obscurity. In view of his enormous literary output and skill as a doctor, this seems rather unlikely, but the point is this: would such a great scholar and sage have wasted his time on a superstition?

In Europe, alchemy is represented by such towering figures as Roger Bacon, "Doctor Mirabilis", who invented spectacles and predicted many phenomena such as aeroplanes, microscopes, steam engines and telescopes. The long list also includes Paracelsus and John Dee. Both of the latter were again extremely powerful minds, John Dee being a genial mathematician and Paracelsus a brilliant doctor. Such people cannot be dismissed as charlatans, quacks or eccentrics, because their results speak for themselves. Paracelsus, for example, was once accused of being an impostor and "not a real doctor". He thereupon challenged his accusers to hand over to him some of their own "incurable" cases. In a very short time he had cured them all, a fact which was then testified to by several witnesses at the town hall.

The external aim of alchemy is to transmute base metals into gold, an aim which is commonly thought to be impossible. Nowadays, however it is possible, by altering the atomic structure of an element. But this requires such intricate knowledge of the nature of the atom and such sophisticated equipment that it is presumed impossible for medieval alchemists to have achieved it.

The evidence is against such a presumption. There are many testimonials from alchemists and others of cases of genuine transmutation. Even in our own times, we hear of a French alchemist who in 1969 produced gold and had it analysed by German and Swiss laboratories. It was declared by them to be "a new state of matter".

So how did these alchemists in the "pre-scientific age" achieve such extraordinary results? The only explanation that I know of is that these men were well versed in "occult science"; that is, they studied in a tradition of knowledge which gave access to a deep understanding of nature, visible and invisible.

This occult science has several fundamental principles, one of which is that matter does not only consist of the visible elements, but also of normally invisible elements, more subtle states of matter visible only to clairvoyant sight. Another principle is that the more dense level of matter (the physical) is only a materialisation of the more subtle levels of matter. In terms of scientific research, this means that if you can look into the subtle planes of nature, you get a clearer and more real view of the nature of things and you can deal with their causes. So, for example, if you are a doctor, you can find the causes of an illness on the subtle planes, and cure it at its root, rather than its symptom.

But to see on these planes and to work on them effectively, you have to purify and work on yourself so that you awaken consciously on those inner planes. This requires training yourself to be aware of subtle elements and to control and direct them. We all know how difficult it is to control a feeling; and even more difficult to control a thought. It is also difficult (though less so) to control our energy levels, to the extent that we can overcome tiredness for example. These are the subtle planes of nature (The alchemists called them the Four Elements) and as we work upon them we become increasingly conscious of them until eventually we

start seeing things clearly in those regions and our control over them becomes perfect: we can work on them as easily as a sculptor can work on stone.

So the alchemist does the same: he seeks the root of matter, the "Prima Materia" (an invisible and formless matter on the most subtle plane of nature) and out of this, through a long and painstaking process he forms what is known as "the Philosopher's Stone", a (physical?) object with apparently miraculous, transformative and healing properties. With this Stone, or Tincture, he can transmute baser metals into purer ones, heal diseases and increase longevity.

What the Alchemist is doing, then, is following the process of natural creation. Thus, Paracelsus speaks of "Natural Alchemy": "Natural Alchemy causes the pear to ripen and produces grapes on a vine. Natural alchemy separates the useful elements from the food that is put into the stomach, transforms it into chyle and blood, into muscles and bones, and rejects that which is useless. A physician who knows nothing of alchemy can only be a servant of nature... but the alchemist is her lord."

The teacher of Paracelsus, Johannes Tritheim, Abbot of Spanheim, speaks of the process of materialising subtle elements in alchemy:

"The art of divine magic consists in the ability to perceive the essence of things in the light of Nature, and by using the soul-powers of the spirit to produce material things from the unseen universe... You will learn the law by which these things are accomplished, if you learn to know yourself... Gold is of a threefold nature, and there is an ethereal, a fluid, and a material gold. It is the same gold, only in three different states; and gold in one state may be made into gold in another state."

So we come now to the Inner Gold of the Alchemists. In Plato's Republic, Socrates suggests a myth that there are four different types of men, each of whom have a certain type of metal in their souls: Iron, copper, silver and gold. The men of gold are the Philosophers (in the true sense of Lovers of Wisdom, those who love wisdom more than fame or wealth). Paracelsus speaks of the philosopher in a similar way. He says: "We know that a lover will go a long way to meet the woman he adores - how much more will the lover of wisdom be tempted to go in search of his divine mistress!"

In alchemy, there is the idea that, in the metallic kingdom, the object of nature is invariably to create gold. The production of the baser metals is an accident of the process, or the result of an unfavourable environment. Gold is therefore the archetype or goal of the metallic kingdom, and in a similar way, the Man of Gold is the Archetype or Goal of the Human Kingdom. The idea is that one day, all metals will be gold and all men will be 'philosophers', pure and incorruptible, as luminous and giving as the Sun itself.

Plato also said of those philosopher-kings of his Republic, that, since they would have gold in their souls, they should have no desire for physical gold. And this seems to have been true of the great alchemists of the Middle Ages. People like John Dee and Paracelsus were not rich. Roger Bacon was a monk. Such people were obviously not motivated by the desire for gain, because they had sufficient wealth in themselves. As H. P. Blavatsky says in her "Isis Unveiled": "Illuminated with the light of eternal truth, these rich-poor alchemists fixed their attention upon the things that lie beyond the common ken, recognising nothing inscrutable but the First Cause, and finding no question unsolvable. To dare, to know, to will and REMAIN SILENT, was their constant rule..."

Another alchemist, Agrippa von Nettesheim, declared: "I could say much more about this art, were it not for the oath of silence usually taken by initiates into the mysteries".

The inner gold of the alchemists could therefore be defined as Wisdom, or Sophia. It is the knowledge of the full majesty of the universal creation in all its facets... and the experiential knowledge that that majesty is also expressed through oneself. As above, so below: Man is a microcosm of the macrocosmos. Man contains within himself the whole mystery of life. As the Greeks used to say on their temples: "Know yourself and you will know the universe and the gods".

What is the path towards this divine wisdom? One alchemical writer put it thus: "Patience is the ladder of philosophers, and humility is the key to their garden". Another (F. Hartmann, in his biography of Paracelsus), states: "The highest form of alchemy is the transformation of vices into virtues by the fire of love for the good, the purification of the mind by suffering, the elevation of the divine principle in man over the animal elements of his soul". Having achieved this process of sublimation, however, it is possible to return to the world of matter and improve it. For as the same author states: "By the power of the spirit, material elements may be sublimated into invisible (astral) elements, or invisible substances may be coagulated and become visible". It could perhaps be compared to Plato's myth of the Cave: the philosopher emerges from the cave of the senses into the light of truth, and then returns back into the cave to illuminate his fellow human beings. Alchemy is about this two-way process which is symbolised by the

three main stages of the work: the black (nigredo) of dissolution; the white of Sublimation (albedo); and the red of "exaltation", corresponding to the philosopher's stone which produces gold. Hence, returning to the men of gold in Plato's Republic, it is significant that they were not only philosophers, but kings (red being the royal colour), they were in the world, working for the good of humanity, but not of the world.

Many learned works have been written concerning the distinct phases of the work of alchemy and their significance, whether from a moral, psychological or physical standpoint. But I am purposely not going to go into detail on this matter, since it is a specialist field of study which in most cases is of a very speculative nature; and without the guidance of an initiated teacher, or a special illumination, as A.E. Waite points out, "the student is likely to be adrift and the Prima Materia will forever escape him". It is not possible to commence the work of Alchemy without this Prima Materia and, as it is never clearly specified exactly what it is (presumably because it refers to matter in a highly ethereal state), it is impossible to discover without such guidance. On this point there is a fascinating story told by the Italian Renaissance philosopher and alchemist Pico della Mirandola of "a good man who had not a sufficiency to support his family and was reduced to the last extremity of distress; with an agitated mind he went one night to sleep, and in a dream he beheld a blessed angel, who, by means of enigmas, instructed him in the method of making gold, and indicated to him, at the same time, the water he should use to ensure success. At his awaking he proceeded to work with this water, and made gold, truly in small quantity, yet sufficient to support his family. Twice he made gold of iron and four times of orpiment. He convinced me by the evidence of my own eyes that the art of transmutation is no fiction".

Alchemy should therefore be redefined as one of the lost spiritual sciences which, like its sister Astrology, combines the deep study of nature with the study of man, and enables the adept (he who has attained) to bring both man and nature to perfection. Paracelsus said that there were three qualities necessary for the work of alchemy: Prayer (meaning a strong desire or aspiration for what is good); Faith (not a blind faith, he says, but one which is based on knowledge, an unwavering confidence); and Imagination (which he describes as "being sunk into deep thought, drowned in his own soul").

The inner gold of the alchemists is the perfected individual and the philosopher's gold is the perfection of nature. Both man and nature are evolving towards this perfection, but man can help in the evolutionary process by understanding and working on himself and on nature. Working only on the material level is a very poor kind of science which, one day, will hopefully be expanded into the greater Science of Life (sometimes known as "Magic").

Far from being the deluded individuals which the history of science so likes to imagine, the true alchemists were great initiates who, in many ways, knew more of nature than our scientists of today. Masters both of nature and themselves, they always placed that mastery at the service of God and Humanity and never employed it for their own petty gain.

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