

What Is Alchemy?

by Dennis William Hauck

Author of [The Complete Idiot's Guide to Alchemy](#)



What is alchemy? Why are the obscure symbols and arcane principles of this ancient craft getting so much attention in modern times? How can the teachings of alchemists have such a strong influence in such diverse contemporary areas as psychology, spirituality, the arts, literature, business, filmmaking, gaming, and sciences like medicine, biology, geology, cosmology, chemistry, and physics?

The answer to these questions lies in the universal nature of alchemical operations. Alchemy can be defined most simply as the "art of transformation," and it concerns itself with the underlying principles of how things evolve through time and what is the basic process of changing one thing into another.

From its origins over 5,000 years ago in Egypt, alchemy has had a singular focus on the most fundamental principles of change in Nature. Since time immemorial, alchemists have sought to isolate the most basic essences of matter to create higher forms. This spiritual technology was so powerful that it was kept secret from the common people and expressed only in secret writings or concealed in the architecture of sacred buildings for enlightened people to intuitively recognize. That tradition was carried on during the heyday of alchemy in the Middle Ages in secret ciphers, symbolic drawings, and in the sacred architecture of cathedrals.

The ultimate goal of the alchemist is to find the *Prima Materia* (First Matter), the common heart of all materials, the dark, chaotic, unformed stuff of creation that is "hidden in plain sight" throughout the universe. Through alchemical processes, the alchemist transforms the *Prima Materia* into the Philosophers Stone, which has the ability to instantly perfect anything.

The Great Work of alchemy has always been to speed up this natural process of perfection – to resurrect the spiritual ideal and activate the hidden energies that can be used to bring that ideal to manifestation. The gold of alchemy, according to this deeper tradition, is simply hastened perfection in the substance at hand, whether that be a lifeless lump of lead or the human soul.

Every human being participates in alchemy, whether in a conscious manner through intentional transformation or through the unconscious alchemical processes at work in our lives. On the personal

level, alchemy is the Science of Soul, a unique discipline based not only on logic but also on intuition, personal gnosis, and wisdom.

So alchemy is also an art, and as every artist knows, true art can only be practiced by those who are in possession of the inspired presence and purified imagination necessary for creative transformation. While the manipulations required for alchemical preparations may, like an ordinary chemical process, be taught to anybody, the results that such a person could accomplish would be without life – an alchemical still-birth. Only the person in whom the true life has awakened can in turn awaken it from its slumber in matter and cause latent forms to grow and manifest.

The key to understanding alchemy is to learn to work on all three levels of reality simultaneously: the physical, the mental, and the spiritual. The alchemists believed that no transformation would be lasting or complete unless it succeeded on all three levels at once.

The alchemists saw spirit and matter as two opposite poles of the eternal One, and they believed that all matter was alive. The alchemist's job was to reveal this inner life or archetypal essence and feel and understand that inner life so that a deep relationship with matter can be created. Modern quantum physicists are familiar with this idea, and they seem to agree with the alchemists that consciousness is a force in nature. In fact, anyone who has lived long enough to see how their attitudes effect the reality around them knows this to be true.

Alchemists walk the fine edge between science and religion using methods from both cultures to work with deeper realities that transcend the superficial definitions people have given them over time. In trying to penetrate the mysteries of matter, the alchemists discovered the very foundations of creation and being, which is the common ground of all religions, sciences, philosophies, and psychologies.

The golden thread of alchemy weaves in and out of the tapestry of human history, probably dating as far back as the discovery of fire. And today, this ancient craft is resurfacing today in a wide variety of modern applications:

Spirituality

The most popular reason for studying alchemy today is to reconnect with the fundamental spiritual realities in the universe. In this approach to alchemy, the gold of the alchemist is not the common gold but an inner spiritual gold, and the operations of alchemy are performed in the inner laboratory of the spirit and soul. Even in the laboratory, the spiritual component is a necessary ingredient. *Ora et Labora* (pray/meditate and work) is one of the mottos of the alchemists.

Personal Transformation

The ancient art of alchemy offers viable methods of changing oneself and living life fully. This kind of alchemy focuses on the use of simple alchemical techniques and operations on the personal levels of body and mind to perfect one's character and personality. The alchemists called this working with the inner metals or changing one's temperament.

Psychology

Alchemy gave birth to not only chemistry but also modern psychology, and the alchemists were the first to treat psychological problems as chemical imbalances in the body. Alchemical psychology deals with the clinical treatment of character disorders in the tradition of Dr. Carl Gustav Jung.

Arts & Literature

No matter in which medium and artist works, he or she is trying to transform raw dead matter into something living that speaks to those who experience it. Whether it is the sculptor's block of stone, the painter's canvas, or the writer's or musician's empty page, the magic of alchemy is what's behind the artist's impulse to create.

Films & Gaming

Films like "2001," "The Fifth Element," "The Matrix," and "Harry Potter," are just a few examples where producers made conscious use of alchemy in the plotline. Many young people are being introduced to alchemical principles in films and software games and want to learn more.

Business

A surprising number of business leaders are applying the principles of alchemy in the fields of finance, human resources, marketing, and research and development. These innovative leaders realize the power of the universal paradigm of alchemy to streamline and energize their company and products.

Government

Change is the new theme in government, and alchemy offers tried and true methods of dissolving outmoded structures and building new paradigms. Modern practitioners are working to dissolve bureaucracy and show government workers how to come alive at work to everyone's benefit.

Alternative Healing

Most alchemical bodywork modalities like chiropractics, Rolfing, Feldenkrais, bioenergetics, and polarity therapy have their origin in the work of nineteenth century alchemists seeking to isolate the life force. More ancient Oriental alchemical arts like yoga, aikido, tai chi, chi kung, tantra, acupuncture, and reiki have seen a profound increase in Western culture. Most modern holistic disciplines like homeopathy, naturopathy, ayurveda, Chinese medicine, aromatherapy, and reflexology trace their origin in ancient alchemical teachings

Medicine

The physicians' logo (the caduceus) is an ancient symbol of Hermes, the father of alchemy, and alchemists have always provided natural remedies for a wide variety of ailments. They possessed a powerful arsenal of herbs and mineral compounds with detailed knowledge of how they acted in the body, and alchemists were the first to prescribe drugs to cure disease.

Practical (Laboratory) Alchemy

Practical alchemy is concerned with producing tinctures, tonics, oils, compounds, and elixirs that capture healing energy. Such unique laboratory work is being undertaken by more and more people around the world.

Science

According to quantum physicist Dr. Fred Wolf, Quantum Physics is the "New Alchemy," and the two disciplines share many fundamental principles including the idea that consciousness is a force in nature. But alchemy has also had a tremendous influence in other sciences such as geology, botany, biology, and of course chemistry.

Religion

No religious zealot ever tried harder to get closer to God than the medieval alchemists, and a very spiritual form of Christian Alchemy evolved at that time. The most basic task of the alchemist is to center himself within the consciousness of the divine creative presence so that he or she can leap beyond themselves and humbly assist in the work of God, which is the Great Work of the universe.

Fraternal Organizations

Students and initiates of alchemy and the Hermetic Arts, as well as other practices related to it such as the Kabbalah and Tarot, share a long and secret tradition that is still continued in contemporary organizations such as the Freemasons, Golden Dawn, Rosicrucians, Gnostics, and many other membership groups and mystery schools.

Social Alchemy

Alchemy has become a rallying point for a variety of movements driven by the human desire to change adverse conditions and change slavery into freedom, poverty into wealth, fear into courage, war into peace, and totalitarianism into democracy.

Everyday Life and Relationships

Every one of us participates in alchemy, whether in a conscious manner (through manifesting one's higher nature) or through the tumult and suffering of worldly experiences that finally lead to increased awareness of the alchemical principles at work in the world and ability to discern the hidden signatures of people and events.