

## LESSON 43

## AN INTRODUCTION TO ALCHEMICAL THEORY

Whenever the subject of alchemy is discussed the inevitable question of how does it differ from modern chemistry arises, so the first aspect that should be studied is what alchemy exactly does mean. The Oxford Dictionary considers that the word alchemy relates to chemistry of the middle ages, especially in the pursuit of the transmutation of the baser metals into gold. A further investigation into the name alchemy shows that it is closely allied to the Greek word khemia, which is the name for Egypt, is often used in trying to relate alchemy to an Egyptian source. Unfortunately this appears to be a blind as the real focus of attention should be on the Greek word Khumeia which means pouring. It is found that around the third or fourth century A.D. Khumeia or chemeia was used to describe the work of what could be described to-day as metalurgists. Some 400 years later chemeia or khumeia was altered under Arabian influence by adding the prefix Al, forming alchemia as it was then called. Al is a prefix which injects universal force into a word, the divine, and is from the Persian root  $\text{آ}$ .

Another interesting story on the root meaning of the word alchemy comes from the Alexandrian Greek alchemist by the name of Zosimos (4th century) who considered its origins lay in the legends of the Book of Chemu which reputedly contained the secrets of the angels and was later given to man. This of course

runs parallel with the biblical book of Enoch which the traveller, Bruce, brought back from Abyssinia in the 18th century.

Alchemy, as a science, not only developed in ancient Europe and Arabia but in India and China (where it developed independently from Western influence) as well. It is in China however that the Taoist doctrines combined the practical task of transmutation of metals (as shown by Marco Polo in his travels) but devoted themselves to spiritual alchemy as well. India also had similar concepts though their overall teachings went more to the spiritual side and like the Taoists involved the study of inner transmutation (by manipulation of the chakra centres in the etheric body). At this point, when referring to the theory of the ancients in connection with metallurgy there is a very fine line between alchemy and chemistry as we know it today. Alchemy is transmutation through consistent heat over long periods of time, sometimes years, on just one experiment.

Though alchemy is most commonly associated to metals it does in fact cover the three basic worlds of animal, vegetable and mineral. The animal world is man and relates to organic transmutation through meditative means and this is called spiritual alchemy. The vegetable world is one what could be described as herbalism but differs considerably from the mundane meaning of the word. In the vegetable world we find our first major alchemical division. This is the practical use of transmutation of base herbs and their extracts without the spiritual qualities used in the animal world, and the practical combined with the spiritual

(using meditation and or ritual for the impregnation of the vital forces of nature). In the mineral world we come to the mecca of the alchemist who, like his predecessor, uses both practical and practical/spiritual concepts in his work. It has been said that the highest aspiration of the alchemist in this world is to turn base metal into gold, however the main goal of the alchemist is the elixir of life, for in the physical life, as man, there is nothing so precious as immortality.

In Egypt, alchemy of a sort did exist though no one is certain how advanced they were save for the series of documents binded together under the title of the Leyden Papyrus which contained an approximate total of 75 processes which mainly deal with the mineral world. It is here that alchemical terminology such as mercury, quicksilver, powdered earth, blood of the serpent, seed of Hercules etc are first noticed in any quantity which shows that the processes were more than just standard chemical reactions.

Though early developments in alchemy are obscure, their terminology is multifaceted. Not only can it apply equally to the precise moment of an experiment, or to transmute a substance, but it can also be used in psychology as well. Both Carl Jung's mammoth works on alchemy and psychology and Israel Regardies book 'Philosophers Stone' use a psychological approach which can be tied in with Western hermetic philosophy.

When studying many of the old alchemical texts the student will constantly find himself in a maize of symbology which is

often, contradictory due to the fact that (a) alchemists often used their own sets of private symbols, which if compared with other sets of alchemical symbols would show overlaps, and in many instances the same figure would have a number of different meanings, and (b) certain alchemical manuscripts were written about a particular stage an experiment was at, and the student will have to guess what it is or reach it himself on a practical level before he can understand it correctly.

A good example of this are the various steps and stages cited by alchemists. Some use a seven, eight or a twelve stage system but this depends entirely on the alchemist and the experiment, seven and twelve stages are the most common though these even differ in step allocation when placed side by side with other alchemical texts. At first glance one will think that they cannot all be right but most of them do work, but the step allocation is often due to astrological timing which applies not only to the time the experiment starts but also must harmonise with the astrological birth time of the alchemist as well.

In astrology you have the four elements, in alchemy you have the four stages which are denoted by their colourings and are analogous to each other. These are the blackening, reddening, yellowing (this stage was dropped about the 16th century in favour of only three because it was a transition stage and difficult to observe) and the whitening. For the purposes of balance the yellowing state has been reintroduced though modern alchemists consider it a part of the reddening.

The next step is a seven stage system made famous by Paracelsus who linked each alchemical step to the energies of the seven planets. Some of the steps have been placed in varying order by alchemists but this is mainly due to the fact that the steps apply to the workings on a particular metal which they start to transmute that have a direct bearing on the order of steps taken. If one started to transmute iron then copper he would adjust his preparation to start with the energies of the metal he is to start with. The following seven stage system is in fact an amplification of the previous four stage system. This can be identified by colour which showed that a more discerning eye was needed to identify the seven steps than the four.

1. Calcination
2. Sublimation
3. Solution
4. Putrefication
5. Distillation
6. Coagulation
7. Tincture

We now come to a twelve stage system of alchemy which is a further refinement of the seven stage system. Again colour identification is paramount and a twelve stage system even more complicated. These energies are allied to the zodiac signs which are as follows:

1. Calcination
2. Dissolution
3. Separation

4. Conjunction
5. Putrefication
6. Congealation
7. Cibation
8. Sublimation
9. Fermentation
10. Exaltation
11. Multiplication
12. Projection

In alchemy there are in fact three basic principles that all alchemy attains to and this is the separation of the sulphur, salt and mercury from the primea materia. This not only applied to the physical experiments but to the alchemist as well, because transmutation is a process of give and take with not only the primea materia of the experiment undergoing a change but also the director of that force which is of course the alchemist. In Kabbalistic terminology the Yechidah relates to Philosophical mercury, Chiah to salt and the sulphur to the Neshamah, all of which are quite apart from the four or twelve stages of alchemy.

Some years ago in the book Philosophers Stone, Israel Regardie expounded the magnetic theory of alchemy which in fact is the core essence of transmutation applying to what happens to the alchemist as well as the experiment. The alchemist of old when performing his experiment would start to revitalise and change part of his aura (i.e. its magnetic quality) which would literally pass on a magnetic charge to the metal or plant being manipulated and which would give the needed link between alche-

mist and experiment. This aspect of alchemy is vital and it is the control mechanism to transmutation. The forging of the magnetic link during the experiment was not always done on a conscious level by the alchemists of old, and in modern times alchemical ritual work has been introduced to establish this link on a conscious level to control and manipulate it. It is usually at this point that the failure occurs in an experiment even when astrological times have been carefully worked out before starting. From a simplistic viewpoint the aura can be broken down into seven sheaths (or twelve for that matter), and when the link during the experiment is correctly controlled (such as during ritual) each of these in turn establishes a rapport or link with the plant or metal to be worked on.

If one was using a metal like copper he would activate the part of the aura that would be in empathy with copper and the steps or stages would start from this point. The old alchemists usually unconsciously established this rapport at first during plant or metal selection as it was done with great care. The result being that the selected material would be cared for with tender care and devotion, and in many instances for the alchemist it became a living breathing organism that he named appropriately (which was usually a figure from mythology).

#### SUGGESTED READING LIST

Philosophers Stone by I.Regardie

Alchemists Handbook by Frater Albertus

Alchemy pre-Egyptian Legacy, Millennial Promise by R.Grossinger

Alchemy the Great Work by Cherry Gilchrist

Gold of a Thousand Mornings by Barbault

The Alchemist of the Rocky Mountains by Frater Albertus

Alchemists and Gold by Jacques Sadoul

Suggestive Inquiry into the Hermetic Mystery by Mary Anne Atwood

Metal Magic by Mellie Uyldert

Lexicon of Alchemy by Marin<sup>T</sup><sub>A</sub> Ruland

## MENTAL TRAINING

THOUGHT CONTROL (continued)

### exercise

By now you should be adept at controlling your thoughts at will, even to the stage of stilling your mind, and have taught yourself to focus on a single point, thought or image. Do not enter or loose yourself in that thought or image as that is weakness of Will, for you must make all movements or thoughts through Will alone. Now do the following exercise:

You must learn to still your mind and prevent any thoughts at all from entering. You must not occupy yourself with any intruding thought. They must be dissolved immediately until you attain a self invoked fully conscious blankness (stillness) of your mind with a total awareness and alertness. Set aside your own private time to practice this until you can invoke this state of mind at an instant. The following lectures will assist you in this exercise. Keep this exercise for the span of your life as it sharpens your mind, strengthens your memory, awareness and consciousness.

