

Alchemical Concepts

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Introduction



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Alchemy has always had a bad reputation, but at the same time it also has had an irresistible attraction. Many people have gotten involved in alchemy, each in their own way, with their own practice. For some it was a spiritual quest, others were looking to make gold and get rich, some made chemical discoveries, and others were philosophers. Alchemy has been, and continues to be, a stimulus for many people to seek, to wonder, to philosophize, and to learn more about what Nature has to offer us. It is a universal way of discovery and we find it in many cultures.

In its origins and in its essence, alchemy is spiritual. The search for the alchemical gold is the search for wisdom, light, perfection, and enlightenment. In past times there was no separation between science and religion/spirituality, and thus we find alchemy mixed with other areas of 'science'. In Western Europe, alchemy used many symbols from chemical science, probably to disguise their actions during times of persecution by the Catholic Church. But it also allowed them to use a language to express spiritual experiences for which there was no vocabulary.

Over time many people, misunderstanding its essence, got involved in their own 'alchemy', only looking to make physical gold. Some were indeed charlatans and the reputation of alchemy became clouded. When reading numerous alchemical texts, one easily gets lost in the manifold symbols, contradictions, claims, processes, and so on. It is obvious that each writer, for as far as he was honest, had their own interpretation of what alchemy was, or what the symbols meant. Some alchemists made their texts intentionally confusing, so only an experienced colleague knew what the writing was about. But other writers were very clear, and with almost no obscure symbolic language wrote about their experiences. From those writings it is obvious that alchemy is about the discovery of the spiritual

nature of man, of nature and of the cosmos, and especially about one's own development.

There were alchemists who used alchemical symbols for their chemical work, therefore one has to know if a text is philosophical or purely chemical. To find out read his text and see what the symbols he was using meant. Remember, however, there is a basic common language, as I have tried to explain this in this article. Keep in mind that any symbol can be approached from many sides and can have a number of interpretations. It is more important that you get a 'sense' of what it is all about, than it is to fixate yourself on the meanings of particular symbols. The central idea in alchemy is that matter and spirit are one whole unity. They are inseparable and one works on the other. "With the aid and help of God, she (alchemy) reveals all hidden energies of the whole wide world. As the vine grower grafts the vine to the elm and espalier, thus the magician, the alchemist, marries and unifies heaven and earth, the lower and the higher energies." (Pic de Mirandole).

The alchemist must purify himself in this material-spiritual world. Alchemy was an art that was more refined than any other art or science, because alchemical transmutation demanded more than skill and knowledge. Spiritual qualities were necessary. Only when one had attained the highest state of perfection one could make the philosopher's stone. Therefore one must unify himself with the divine, resulting in a new 'birth' or new state of consciousness.

Franciscus Kieser (16-17th century) explained that there is Wisdom, a light that is the breath of the divine energy. This Wisdom is a ray, a brilliance, a mirror, and is the manifestation of the divine energies. It moves everything. it rules over and emanates Nature; it is invisible and a maintaining fire, an inscrutable power of the uncreated interior. When it leaves the creations it immediately goes to the grace of God, to the Holy Spirit. This is what the true alchemists were after. It is found both outside and inside oneself.

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1. The Great Work

*Jesus said: "Let him who seeks
continue seeking until he finds.
When he finds,
he will become troubled.
When he becomes troubled,
he will be astonished,
and he will rule over the All."
The Gospel of Thomas, verse 2*

1.1 Vitriolum

*...and as long as you do not have the wisdom,
die to become,
you will only be a sad guest on this dark earth.
Goethe
He who wants to enter the divine realm,
first must enter his mother's body,
and die herein.
Paracelsus*

Carl Gustav Jung said: " He who looks in the mirror of the water, first sees his own image. He who looks at himself, risks to meet himself. The mirror does not flatter, it shows accurately what is reflected in it, namely that face that we never show the world because we hide it by the persona, the mask of the actor. This is the first test of courage on the inner path, a test, which is enough to frighten most people, because the encounter with oneself belongs to those unpleasant things, one avoids as long as one can project the negative onto the environment." The acronym V.I.T.R.I.O.L.U.M., used in alchemical literature, is formed by the Latin expression "Visita Interiora Terrae Rectificando Invenies Occultum Lapidem Veram Medicinam", what means "Visit the interior of the earth, and by rectifying you will find the hidden stone which is the true medicine".



The alchemist mining the earth. Mining or going inside the earth is the first step in the alchemical process. The earth is the body or oneself. Going inside the earth is equal to going into your inner self.

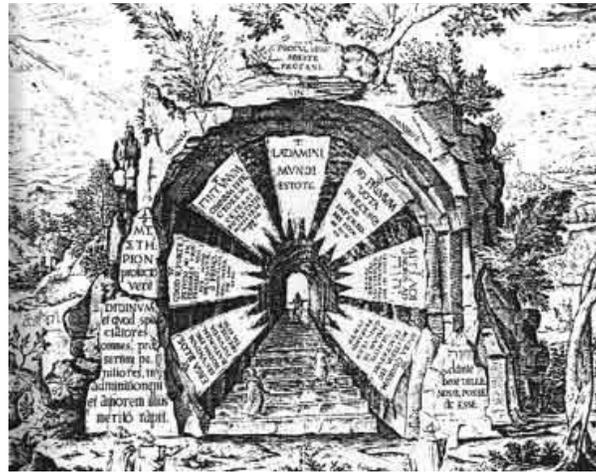
Thus we are invited to descend into the earth, into the underworld, or the unconscious. The earth is the symbol of physical man. Man needs to become conscious of his inner world, who he is, what he is doing, what his motives are, and so on. Once attention is directed inwards, a whole new world opens: the underworld of Hades, the dark realm of shadows and monsters.

This descent is also called 'regressus ad uterum', 'the return into the uterus', a term often used in initiation rites. It is a symbolic return to a particular primal state of being that every man is carrying in his collective unconscious. Deep inside man, in the darkness of his psyche, are the causes or origins of man's actions. Therefore the 'regressus ad uterum' is a necessary condition to enter the moonlit area of death, and subsequently experience rebirth. Terra Mater, Mother Earth, has always been connected with birth, with the connection between man and woman (=the conscious and the unconscious), from which new life springs up after death.

Primitive people performed their initiations in darkness or under the ground, like in caves. In Egypt initiations were performed in the pyramids or in underground crypts of the temples. In Persia it was mostly in caves, with native Indians in special huts. The Mythras mysteries were conducted in temples built underground. The initiation itself was symbolized by the penetration of the belly of the Great Mother, or of the body of a sea monster or wild animal.

In Greek mythology Orpheus descended into the Hades to look for Eurydice (=symbol of his lost soul). The Indian god Krishna descended into the hells to look for his six brothers (=the six chakras, Krishna being the crown chakra).

There is a legend that after his death Jesus descended into the realm of Satan to save the soul of Adam (=the pure man).



The Gate to Eternal Wisdom (Heinrich Khunrath, Amphiteatrum Sapientiae, Hanau, 1604).

In alchemy, the entrance into the unconscious is represented by the entrance into caves, by reports of travels to the underworld or strange parts of the world.

Another important representation is the king who is taking a bath. The conscious is the king, and the bath or bath water is the unconscious. By bathing he enters into the unconscious. In alchemical terms he is being permeated by the water (aqua permanens) or quicksilver.

Another symbol is the 'coniunctio' (conjunction) or 'conceptio' (conception) that primarily takes place in water, in a spring or a fountain. The queen then represents the feminine, water, the unconscious.

The descent into the unconscious is not without dangers. In the psychological sense it can result, for example, in schizophrenia. In mythology the hero penetrates the underworld to fight monsters and demons. The Great Mother appears to him in the image of a terrible being, often as the Ruler of Death. For his courage and bravery, the Great Mother, as goddess of fertility, offers him great knowledge and wisdom.

In alchemy, when working with (symbolic) metals, lead is used as initial material. The alchemists say that in lead there is a demon that can cause insanity. Lead as a metal is under the rulership of Saturn, the god of melancholy, who causes ailments and devilish visions.

Lead, the most impure metal, needs to be transformed into the pure metal, gold. In general, lead means impurity, the impure body, or impure man.

After the alchemist has entered the earth, he must rectify (rectificando). What does this mean? A text from the modern syncretistic Taoism: "That is why Buddha Jou-lai (Tathagata), in his great mercy, has revealed the method, the alchemical work of Fire, and taught people to rectify their true nature and fullness."



*(Solomon Trismosinus, Aurum vellus, Hambutg, 1708)
In the outer circle is the Latin sentence of vitriolum.*

The sun and the moon are the opposites in man that have to be united. The chalice is the alchemical 'vas' or vat, symbol for the body. The planetary signs represent different stages of the alchemical process. The double eagle is Mercury, the lion is Sulfur and the star is Salt, the three ingredients of the process. The left globe with clouds is the microcosmos; the right globe with the stars is the macrocosmos.

'Rectificando' in the middle of the acronym VITRIOLUM means 'to put right' in the moral sense, to reinstate the true nature, the purification of negative emotions and so on. It is to straighten that what has grown crooked during our lives. The alchemist must purify himself of all 'dirt', of all his 'dross'. He has to wash 'the body' to ameliorate and improve it. The metals have to be purified from the 'external, impure and destructive elements'. The metals here can be seen as the emotions.

Taoism stresses the importance of purifying the egotistic tendencies which distance man from his eternal nature. A man who strives for the Tao must give up all lusts and desires, and become a child joining the Tao. By this purification rebirth happens. Therefore an alchemist has to shy away from the masses, and start the process of 'meditatio', self-reflection, in silence.

Buddhism also teaches purification. Man can reach salvation by disconnecting himself from the temporal things that make him stray off the true path. He sees that life is temporal and is by itself not satisfying. Man is unsatisfied because his desires are limitless. He has to unchain himself from his desires.

Going into the unconscious also means to go into the collective unconscious we all share. In Greek mythology there was Tartaros, a name originally used for the entire underworld. Tartaros is the psychic world deep in man where all those

nasty emotions reside, like the lust for murder and destruction, thirst for blood, fear, hate, revenge, the lust for power, melancholy and so on. It is not easy to admit to oneself, but they all reside in ourselves. Because we don't like it, we have cut ourselves off from being aware of this dark realm. We have repressed all our dark emotions into this deep realm of Tartaros. This is the heritage of man, dating from ancient times.

The task of man is to feel and be responsible for all his emotions, not to repress them, but to change and transmute them into higher feelings. Repression chains man to the very objects of repression, but purification will transmute them positive elements bringing him closer to his true essence. As long as we do not take up the Great Work, pain and misery will disturb our lives. We have to face the mythical monsters in the depths of our unconscious and shed light on them. As they are part of being human, we cannot discard them, but we can control them, master them, learn from them, and transform them into servants of the Divine. The monsters are not monsters by themselves. They are just characteristics of human nature that have become distorted. We can rectify them and make them shine in their original beauty.

This task is not for the would-be initiate. It is only for the brave who dare to face the darkness of the soul. Many will fail in their courage and return home. Thus the pilgrim is not going on an easy path, as the world of pleasure is not his anymore. He has chosen the path of Arete (=goddess of Virtue), leading him to many dangers and difficult paths, in solitude and starvation, but eventually he will become immortal. He who will lose life, will gain it.

*If you are really determined
to find Tao,
you can do that even when you are in a city
and have a high position in worldly affairs.
That is not contradictory.
The work is easy and close by,
the secret is so simple,
that, if it were disclosed,
laughter would be all around.*

1.2 The Dragon

*The stilling of the heart
is the true alchemy
which turns mercury into silver.
Inayat Khan*

*While common man
looks to blame other people
and blame fate,
noble man
looks for the fault*

within himself.
I Ching

In alchemy the dragon corresponds closely with what Carl Gustav Jung called the Shadow. The Shadow is the name for a collection of characteristics and impulses which could be conscious, but which are denied. At the same time we recognize and see them in other people. Some examples of the Shadow are: egotism, laziness, intrigues, unreal fantasies, indifference, or being obsessed by money and possessions. The Shadow is the inferior being in us that desires what we do not allow ourselves because it is uncivilized, because it is incompatible with society's rules and with the image of our ideal personality. It is all that what we are ashamed of.



(Johann Daniel Mylius, Philosophia reformata, Frankfurt, 1622)

To the right we have the alchemist with a dark face what relates to the first phase of Nigredo during which the dragon is killed, that is transformed by the penetration of the secret fire (the arrow) of the archer. The drawing is based on the myth of Apollo who killed the python of Delphi. The lion is the image of the animal passions.

The dragon always resides in caves, and thus in the earth, the underworld, and the unconscious. When the dragon leaves his cave he devours virgins. It is our inner emotional dragon that destroys our virgin consciousness, as when he appears in the conscious, expressing negativity, like envy, jealousy, hate and so on.

The dragon is never satisfied. He ever wants more treasures, more virgins. Is this not a true image of common man? Consciousness and alertness are enchanted by the dragon. The mythological dragon has the power to enchant, to hypnotize with his voice the brave knight who dared to challenge him. The dragon can also

impose riddles in which the knight gets lost.

If we want to save the pureness of consciousness (=the virgin), then the dragon has to be killed. Actually this expression is not quite right. In a few tales where the dragon is conquered and made tame, he is penetrated by a lance with an iron point. Iron was always regarded a special metal, as it was found in meteorites. As the metal associated with Mars, iron has an active, destructive force. The lance, as a phallic symbol, is the alchemical 'secret fire'. The penetration of 'the body' (here the dragon) with a lance is the penetration of physical matter with the alchemical fire. In the same manner the Greek god of the sun, Apollo, penetrated the Python of Delphi, with arrows, and let the Python rot away next to the temple. Since then this place is called Pytho (=putrefaction). Putrefaction is the first phase of the great Work.

The dead dragon undergoes a transmutation. The dead dragon is not an end, but the beginning of the Great Work. From the dead dragon, vapors and volatile substances arise, often seen in alchemical images. In other terms, the earth is partly being transformed into water, it ascends as vapor.

Some sources say that in the head of the dragon is a stone, a clear reference to the rough stone, or 'prima materia' (=first matter).

Killing the dragon also refers to a cosmic happening. It is the penetration of the 'prima materia' as primal ocean, or primal chaos by the secret fire or the divine spirit. The fiery serpent emanated fire and light into the primal waters. When the dragon (or serpent, as the cat of Ra the sun god cut off the head of the serpent Apophis), is killed, the original chaos ceased and the process of cosmic evolution started.

In Greek mythology the hydra of Lerna was also a kind of dragon with similar symbolism. Hercules killed the hydra in the second of his twelve works. The hydra of Lerna lived in a swamp, the residence of primal instincts, passions, lusts, desires. Anyone who gets involved with these emotions gets into a swamp in which he drowns. Therefore Hercules shot fiery arrows (the alchemical fire) to get her out of her hiding place. First he cut off the hydra's heads, but they grew back. A energetic approach is not the right way. Then his nephew Joales comes to rescue. He starts to singe the cuts with flaming tree trunks, so new heads cannot be formed. It is a systematically, patient, reflective and profound attitude that is required.

When the alchemists talk about the Green Dragon then they are talking about the universal spirit that is present in everything, it is not the same as the dragon of the underworld.

1.3 Nigredo - Blackness

*The wise man is not surprised by death
he is always ready to leave.*

La Fontaine

*This melancholic state is so powerful
that, according to scientists and doctors,
it can attract demons to the body,*

*even to such an extent
that one can get into mental confusion or get visions.
Agrippa*

Nigredo, or blackness, in the alchemical sense, means putrefaction, decomposition. By the penetration of the external fire, the inner fire is activated and the matter starts to putrefy. The body is reduced to its primal matter from which it originally arose. This process is also called 'cooking'. The black earth is closed up in a vessel or flask, and heated.



(Basilius Valentinus, Azoth, Paris, 1659)

The Body is to be decomposed, that is one shifts one's awareness to the inner self. The planets are both stages of the process and energies in the body to be transmuted. The Saturn star is black as Saturn reigns over Nigredo. Sun and Moon are the opposites to be united, and fire and air are the elements stimulating the decomposition. The black crow is another symbol for Nigredo. The two birds coming out of the body are the soul and the spirit. One needs to become aware of one's soul and spirit. The circle emphasizes the idea of union or unification.

"Putrefaction is so effective that it destroys the old nature and form of the rotting bodies; it transmutes them into a new state of being to give them a totally new fruit. Everything that has live, dies; everything that is dead putrefies and finds a new life." (Pernety, 1758)

On the mythological level, nigredo signifies the difficulties man has to overcome

on his journey through the underworld. Nigredo is sometimes called 'blacker than the blackest black'. Hercules had to accomplish twelve, almost impossible, tasks. The pilgrim traditionally encounters shadows, monsters, demons. In the ancient mysteries the candidates had to undergo difficult, sometimes painful and even dangerous initiation tests.

In alchemy, one of the symbols of nigredo is the 'decapitation', and also the 'raven's head' (caput corvi). Those symbols refer to the dying of the common man, the dying of his inner chaos and doubt because he is unable to find the truth in himself. In one of his works, Hercules cleanses the Augias stables. It is the cleansing of all the impurities in oneself.



(Johann Daniel Mylius, Philosophia reformata, Frankfurt, 1622)

A monk in meditation in an earth crevice, shows that alchemy was in first instance a spiritual practice. The two bird-figures are the soul and spirit to become aware of.

Psychologically, nigredo is a process of directing oneself to find self-knowledge. A problem is given full attention and reduced to its core. This is not done so much in an intellectual way, but especially by feeling the emotions. By really going into it, one causes putrefaction, the decomposition of that in which one had been stuck. The confrontation with the inner reality is often painful, and can lead to depression. But once in the depth of the darkness, with the discovery of the seed of the problem, the seed in the 'prima materia', the white light is born (=albedo, whiteness, the next phase). A state of rest arises. Insight into the problem has been gained, it has been worked out emotionally, and knowledge arises on how to handle it in a more positive way and to build a more pure attitude.

Alchemists talked about unraveling 'the mixture' (=man with all his complexities) in order to return to the germ. "That from which a thing has been made in a natural way, by that same thing it must return to a dissolved state into its own nature. Everything has to be dissolved and reduced into that form from which is arose." (Anton Joseph Kirchweger, 1728)

'Matter' has to be stripped of its superfluities in order to arrive at the center,

which contains all the power of 'the mixture'. The seed is the essence and contains all the essential powers of the body. One has to go to the center of his problems, to the center of his emotions, to the center of himself. There is the power of transformation.

Saturn is the planet that rules nigredo. Saturn as an alchemical symbol is used, like Mercurius, as a symbol of chaos, the prima materia as rough stone, and as the philosopher's stone. These are all symbols for man at the beginning of the alchemical process. Saturn, with his traditional scythe and hourglass, is the god of death and putrefaction, from which new life will arise. The scythe is another tool for penetration, as is the lance and the sword. Saturn is the philosopher's lead. He is the god that can cause melancholy and devilish visions. 'Melancholia' is another term for nigredo. As melancholy can arise when alchemically working on oneself, the alchemists advised the use of music to lift the soul.

Saturn is also a god of fertility. Therefore "our black earth is fertile earth", an alchemical expression to express the transformation of death into new life, which is also clearly depicted in the thirteenth tarot card. The putrefaction is a necessary phase to start a new beginning. Life itself is a cycle of death and birth, ever creating new life, giving man the opportunity to work on himself and strive to improve his condition.

The alchemists say that nigredo lasts forty days. Forty days has a symbolic value. Jesus fasted for forty days in the desert. There are forty days of fasting between Easter and Ascension Day. The Israelites wandered for forty days in the desert. Saint Antonius spent forty years in the Sahara desert, being plagued by visions of extreme erotic scenes and devils.

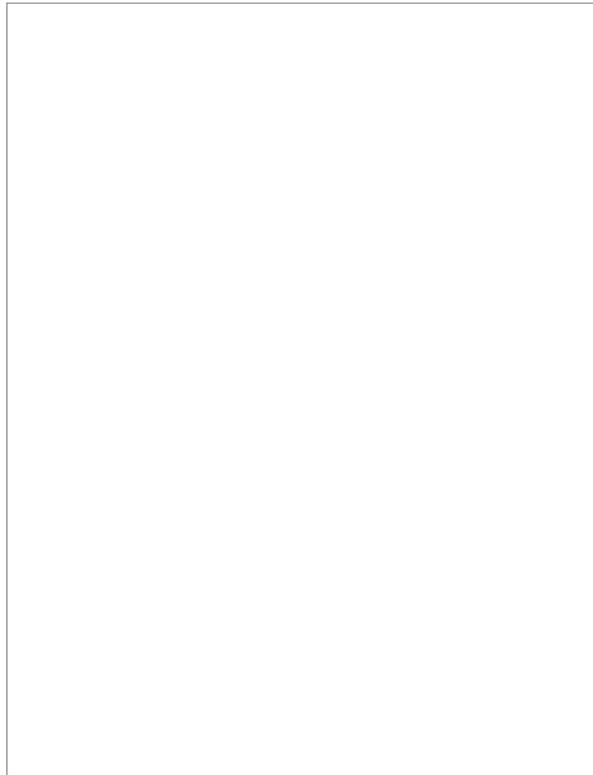
1.4 The Peacock's Tail

"What hinders men from seeing and hearing God, is their own hearing, seeing and willing; by their own wills they separate themselves from the will of God. They see and hear within their own desires, which obstructs them from seeing and hearing God. Terrestrial and material things overshadow them, and they cannot see beyond their own human nature. If they would be still, desist from thinking and feeling with their own self-hood, subdue the self-will, enter into a state of resignation, into a divine union with Christ, who sees God, and hears God, and speaks with him, who knows the word and will of God; then would the eternal hearing seeing and speaking become revealed to them. "

Jacob Boehme (1575-1624 C.E.)

'Cauda Pavonis', the peacock's tail, or the peacock itself, is a phase in which many colors appear. Many alchemists place this phase before albedo, whiteness, although some of them place it after albedo. Gerhard Dorn (16th century): "This bird flies during the night without wings. By the first heavenly dew, after an uninterrupted process of cooking, ascending and descending, it first takes the shape of a raven's head, then of a peacock's tail; its feathers becoming very white and good smelling, and finally becoming fiery red, indicating its fiery character."

The colors refer to the three stages of the Great Work, with rubedo, or redness, being the last one.



*(18th century manuscript from the Collection of Dr.C.Rusch, Appenzell)
The drawing represents Distillatio, 'distillation'. At a certain point in the distillation the peacock('s tail) will appear.*

The symbol of the peacock's tail was chosen because of the many colorful and brilliant 'eyes'. It is said that originally they were the eyes of the Greek Argus, whose name means 'he who sees everything'. Argus was a very strong giant with a hundred eyes, of which at all times fifty were open and fifty were sleeping. He was decapitated by Hermes. Hera, the mother goddess, placed the eyes on the tail of her favorite bird, the peacock.

The phase of the many colors was also symbolized by the rainbow, or the goddess of the rainbow: Iris, the messenger of the gods, especially between Zeus and the mortals.

The peacock's tail can have two meanings in the Great Work. It can be the collection and totality of all colors in the white light. Remember, the white light refers to the second stage, albedo, or whiteness. In this sense the peacock was seen as a royal bird in ancient times, and it corresponded with the phoenix.

The second meaning is that it represents the failure of the alchemical process. When the conscious enters the unconscious "each part of a thought can take shape and become visible in color and form", according to a Chinese text about yoga exercises. One starts seeing all kinds of forms which look real and which look like they have an independent life. But one cannot go into it as it leads to discord of the mind, and possibly to schizophrenia. The alchemist is seeking unity,

expressed in the white light.

It is known that during meditation exalted feelings and unusual observations can happen. In essence there are two kinds of observations. The first one is wanting to escape the discipline of meditation, which Zen practitioners call *makyo*. *Makyo* are illusions we project onto reality in order to escape the guidelines of meditation. For example, the object of meditation is starting to radiate with a wonderful light or color, or it expands and contracts rhythmically. One starts to feel lighter or heavier, or one feels pleasant energies going through the body. All kinds of sensations can happen. Many meditators are readily distracted by these phenomena, and even take great interest in them, thereby neglecting the real purpose of their meditation. One needs to be aware of this.

A second cause of distraction is a change in consciousness whereby we look at the world in a different way than we did in the past. It can be quite a shock reverberating on the psychic or bodily level. The accompanying feelings can be quite wonderful. But the advice is: enjoy it, do not take it seriously, and continue with the meditation.

Visions are also distracting. Many wise men and mystics have pointed to this kind of danger. "We should not long for or expect visions. With all our power we should refrain from them and look at them with suspicion." (Ignatius of Loyola). They always stress that visions of lights, of angels, yes even of the great masters, should be neglected, because they block inner progress.

1.5 Albedo - Whiteness

*Je ne craignais pas de mourir
mais de mourir sans être illuminé.
(I was not afraid to die,
but to die without having been enlightened)
Comte de Saint-Germain, La Très Sainte Trinité*

*The herald of the light
is the morning star.
This way man and woman approach
the dawn of knowledge,
because in it is the germ of life,
being a blessing of the eternal.
Haji Ibrahim of Kerbala*

*Lucifer, Lucifer stretch your tail,
and lead me away, full speed through the narrow passage,
the valley of the death,
to the brilliant light, the palace of the gods.
Isanatha Muni*

Being deep in nigredo, a white light appears. We have arrived at the second stage

of the Great Work: albedo, or whiteness. The alchemist has discovered within himself the source from which his life comes forth. The fountain of life from which the water of life flows forth giving eternal youth.

The source is one: male and female are united. In alchemical images we see a fountain from which two streams of water flow into one basin.

Albedo is the discovery of the hermaphroditic nature of man. In the spiritual sense each man is a hermaphrodite. We can also see this in the first embryonic phase of the fetus. There is no sex until a certain number of weeks after conception.

When man descended into the physical world his body entered a world of duality. On the bodily level this is expressed by the sexes. But his spirit is still androgen, it contains duality in unity. Its unity is not bound to space, time or matter. Duality is an expression of unity in our physical world. It is temporal and will eventually cease to exist. When male and female are united again, one will experience his true self. Conscious and unconscious are totally united.

Albedo happens when the Sun rises at midnight. It is a symbolic expression for the rising of the light at the depth of darkness. It is the birth of Christ in the middle of the winter. In the depth of a psychological crises, a positive change happens.



(L'Aurore, Henri de Linthaut)

Albedo, symbolized by Aurora, by the dawn, the morning star (Venus-Aphrodite), and by the sun rising up from the Philosopher's Sea.

Albedo is also represented by Aurora, the Roman goddess of the dawn. Her brother is Helios, the Sun. With a play of words aurora was connected with aurea hora, 'the hour of gold'. It is a supreme state of conscious. Pernety (1758): "When the Artist (=Alchemist) sees the perfect whiteness, the Philosophers say that one has to destroy the books, because they have become superfluous." Albedo is also symbolized by the morning star Venus/Aphrodite. Venus has a special place in the Great Work. In ancient times Lucifer was identified with the planet Venus. Originally Lucifer has a very positive meaning. In the Bible we find 2Petrus 1:19 "...till the day arrives and the morning star rises in your hearts". In Revelation 12:16 Christ says: "I am the shining morning star". Here Christ identifies himself with the Lucifer! We find the same in mystic literature. In ancient times Lucifer was a positive light being. It was just one man who changed all that: when a certain Hieronymous read a phrase from Jesaja 14:12 (Jesaja talking to a sinful king of Babylon): " How did you fall from heaven, you morning star, you son of the dawn; how did you fall to earth, conqueror of people". Hieronymous used this phrase to identify Lucifer with the dragon thrown out of heaven by Michael. By the interpretation of this one man, Lucifer was tuned from a shining light being into the darkest devilish being in the world. We find Lucifer in alchemy associated with impure metals polluted by rough sulfur. It means that the light being Lucifer in ourselves is polluted by what the alchemists call 'superfluities', 'dross', caused by man himself. Mercury and Lucifer are one and the same. One talks about Mercury when he is pure, it is the white sulphur, the fire in heaven. As 'spiritus' he gives life. As 'spiritus sapiens' he teaches the alchemist the Great Work. Lucifer is the impure Mercury. Lucifer is the morning star fallen from (the golden) heaven. He descended into the earth and is now present in all humans. Lucifer is Mercury mixed with impure elements. He dissolved 'in sulfur and salt', 'is wrapped with strings', 'darkened with black mud'. Keep in mind we are always talking about our consciousness. Lucifer represents our everyday consciousness, all the (psychological and other) complexes have clouded our pure consciousness, Mercury. The light of Mercury that appears to us as Lucifer, because of the distortion caused by the impurities, gives the impression of what the alchemists called 'red sulfur'. The red sulfur of Lucifer, as traditional devil, is actually an illusion. It does not exist by itself because it is only an image, a distorted image of Mercury. We ourselves caused the impurities, the blackness that veils our true light being. Red sulfur is the same as what is called Maya in eastern philosophies. Maya is the world of illusions, or the veil that prevents us from seeing and experiencing true reality, where the eternal light is. By the impurities of Maya, man has become ignorant. He has forgotten his origin and thinks he is in a world which in actuality is an illusion.



(Les Rudiments de la Philosophie, Nicolas de Losques, Paris, 1665)

The union of Hermes and Aphrodite. The moon is above the retort, indicating this is the stage of Albedo. The sun above is the next stage of Rubedo. At the same time sun and moon are again the opposites to be united. Aphrodite has two torches. One pointing down, representing the lower passions to be transmuted.

The upside down torch is the purified energies. Aphrodite is standing on a tetrahedron, the perfect three dimensional body, as all corners are equally distant from each other, resulting in a lack of tension.

As we mentioned above, Aphrodite/Venus as the morning star is a central image for the albedo phase of the Great Work. Aphrodite was born from the foam that arose when the genitals of Uranus (cut of by Chronos, out of hate and jealousy) fell into the sea. The cutting of the genitals represents repressed and tormented love. The sea, symbol of the soul, however will bring forth the love goddess. Liberation will happen when we become conscious again of the contents of the soul. As Aphrodite is born from the sea, she is the guide through the fearful world of the unconscious (the sea, or the underworld). The alchemist descends into these depths to find the 'prima materia', also called the 'green lion'. The color green refers to the primal life forces. Venus also has the green color. An important characteristic of Aphrodite is that she helps us in our human shortcomings. She gives ideals and dreams to fulfill. But she also gives frightening images in order to make man aware of his lower nature. "By her beauty Venus attracts the imperfect metals and gives rise to desire, and pushes them to perfection and ripeness." (Basilius Valentinus, 1679) Liberation can only

happen by becoming conscious of the lower nature and how we transmute it. In Jungian psychology Venus/Aphrodite is the archetype of the anima (in alchemy also the 'soror' or 'wife' of the alchemist). The anima is the collective image of the woman in a man. It is an image especially tainted by his first contact with his mother. The anima represents all the female tendencies in the psyche of a man, such as feelings, emotions, moods, intuition, receptivity for the irrational, personal love and a feeling for nature. She is the bearer for the spiritual. Depending on the development of the man she can also be the seductress who lures him away to love, hopelessness, demise, and even destruction. Other alchemical images for albedo are baptism and the white dove, both derived from Christianity. Baptism symbolizes the purification of both body and soul by 'living water'. 'Living water' was regarded as the creative force of the divine. It allowed the soul to be received into the community of the holy spirit. Thus baptism allows the purified soul to bring forth the resurrection of Christ in oneself. This is the 'hieros gamos', the 'sacred marriage' between the soul and Christ. Christ here represent our own inner divine essence. There are many other symbols in alchemy for the second phase, or albedo: the white swan, the rose, the white queen, and so on. As lead is the metal of nigredo, silver is the metal of albedo, transmuted from lead. As silver is the metal of the moon, the moon was also a symbol for albedo. Alchemists also talk about the white stone or white tincture. They all means basically the same thing, although one has to understand them in the context in which they were written.

1.6 Rubedo -Redness

*The alchemical process
is a method for self knowledge
that the soul undergoes
far outside its realm of existence.
Marry Anne Atwood*

*The jewel has been lost in matter
and everybody is looking for it.
Some look for it in the east
and some in the west,
some in water
and some among stones.
But the servant Kabir
has found its value
and has it wrapped with care
in the seam of the mantle of his heart.
R. Tagore, Kabir 72*

Albedo is a phase of which the meaning was kept secret for many centuries. The meaning of the third alchemical phase, rubedo or redness, is even more secret and not easy to explain or understand.



(Philosophia reformata, Johann Mylius, Frankfurt, 1622)

The union of the Red King with the White Queen, symbolic of the union of male-female, albedo-rubedo. In other words, when after having attained albedo (having discovered the divine light in oneself), the 'spirit' must be fixated (the descending eagle), resulting in rubedo. The two lions with one head signifies the unified nature that has been attained. Out of its mouth flows the water of life.

Rubedo is the continuation of albedo. That is why they are often seen connected to each other, like the White Queen and the Red King. Once the inner light has been discovered it must be made into the only reality in our consciousness. After having descended into the unconscious, into the darkness, into the underworld, we found the Light, we found the volatile Spirit. Now the volatile Spirit, or quicksilver, has to be fixated or coagulated. This means that our conscious, or attention, must completely penetrate our unconscious, or soul, or everything that lies hidden in ourselves. By doing this we fixate (that is bring it into the conscious) the volatile and make it durable. When everything in ourselves has been purified and the Light appears, we have to fixate this Light and make it durable so it remains always present.

White sulfur, attained during albedo, is also called: "the bodies composed of pure essence of the metals". The metals are the contents of the soul, and now they have been reduced to their pure essence. Now that the soul has been penetrated with the pure light, the alchemist has to make it permanent.

In the eastern philosophies rubedo corresponds with the formation of the 'diamond body', an term fitting for the pure and permanent Stone of the Philosophers.



(Scrutinium cinnabarium seu triga cinnabriorium, Godfred Schulz, Halle, 1680)

The resurrected alchemist stepping from the shadow into the Light.

In Christianity, rubedo corresponds with the resurrection of Christ. Jesus 'fixates' the light garment of Christ. Jesus has left behind the old body and brought his inner divine self, the Christ body, into his consciousness, and made it his own reality. What Jesus did two thousand years ago, each of us can do the same, because we are all sons and daughters of the divine, and we all carry the divine essence, or the Christ body, within ourselves.

When rubedo has been realized the alchemist has accepted his spiritual inheritance. He has become what he always has been, but never knew he was. He has realized his divine essence while still in his physical body. It is the same as what the gnostici called pneuma, the divine spirit in each man that is concealed in the deep darkness of the world, but can be made conscious again. When rubedo has been manifested man is master over both the physical as the spiritual world. He has become a King master over himself.

When the unification of all energies of the four aspects of totality has been achieved, a new state of being arises that is no longer subject to changes. Chinese alchemy calls it the 'diamond body' which corresponds with the 'corpus incorruptibile' (untouchable body) of the European alchemy. It is also the same as the 'corpus glorificationis' (glorified body) of the Christian tradition.

In yoga traditions, rubedo corresponds with the unification of the spirit of man, called atman, with brahman. Atman is a part of brahman. Brahman is the soul of the All, it is the breath or the energy flowing through you and giving you life and consciousness. Atman is the individual self, brahman is the univerself self.

"As the body used to be slow, rough, impure, dark and destructible because it lacked power and energy, so rebirth unifies it with the soul and spirit, vivified and volatile, light and penetrating, pure, refined and clear, overflowing with energy,

indestructible and full of energy, and it is able to maintain this." (Franciscus Kieser, +/-1600).

"Ascend above any height, descend further than any depth; receive all sensory impressions of the created: water, fire, dryness and wetness. Think that you are present everywhere: in the sea, on earth and in heaven; think that you were never born and that you are still in the embryonic state: young and old, dead and in the hereafter. Understand everything at the same time: time, place, things: quality and quantity." (Corpus hermeticum, 1460).

*I feel that all stars
shine in me.
The world is breaking as flood
through my life.
The flowers are opening in my body.
Youthfulness of earth and water
is burning like incense in my heart,
and the breath of all things
is playing as on a flute
through my thoughts.*

1.7 Gold

*In heaven there is an upside down fountain.
In it a flame is burning day and night.
This flame is burning eternally
and does not need a wick or oil.
Day and night the flame is burning,
the entire year,
every season,
and does not know change.
Paltu Sahib*

The attainment of rubedo, or redness, is symbolized by the transmutation into gold. The alchemists often talk about 'living gold'. The 'living gold of the philosophers' is the pure fire that is in the philosopher's stone, or in quicksilver, or in the root humidity of nature which is completely penetrated by the fire. The living gold is the fixated seed that vivifies the philosopher's quicksilver and the matter of the stone, that is the root humidity of metals. It is a light that is clothed by a perfect, pure ethereal body. It all sounds mystifying, but read it again and know that the living gold is actually pure consciousness, or pure awareness.



(Actorum Laboratoriichici Monacensis, seu Subterraneae, Johann Joachim Nercher, Frankfurt, 1669)

The alchemist has been reborn as the Sun which is equal to Gold. He has been enlightened, he has become light himself, and now he rules over the three kingdoms of nature.

A description of what alchemists understood by the term gold is found in a manuscript, called 'La Lumiere sortant des Tenebres' (The Light coming forth from the Darkness) (remember that sulphur and gold are always about consciousness, awareness): " The philosophers have given sulfur, or fire, the name gold not for nothing, because it is truly gold both in essence and in substance, but much more perfect than common gold. It is a gold that is completely sulfur, or rather a true sulfur of gold, a gold that is entirely fire, or the true fire of gold that develops; in philosophical caves and mines; a gold that cannot be changed or surpassed by any element, because it is itself the master of elements; a very fixed gold in which is only fixity; a very pure gold, because it is purity itself; a very powerful gold because without it everything else pines away; a balsamy gold, because it preserves all bodies against decomposition; an animal gold because it is the soul of elements of the entire lower nature; a vegetable gold, because it is the principle of the entire vegetation; a mineral gold, because it is sulfury, quicksilvery, and salty; an ethereal gold, because it is of heavenly nature and it is a true earthly heaven that is veiled by another heaven; finally it is a solar gold, because it is the rightful son of the Sun and the true Sun of Nature; its power gives force to the elements of which the warmth vivifies the souls and of which the movement of the entire Nature is brought into movement; from its influence the power of things arises, because it is the influence of the light, a part of the

heavens, the lower Sun and the Light of Nature, without which even science would be blind; without its warmth reason would be stupid; without its rays imagination would be dead; without its influences spirit is sterile; and without its light intellect renaming in eternal darkness."

Sometimes the alchemists talk about three kinds of gold. The first one is an astral gold, the center of which is in the Sun, it transfers this gold by its rays and with its light at the same time to all the lower planets. It is a fiery substance and it is a constant emanation from the stellar bodies, which permeates the entire universe. Space, the atmosphere on the planets, and the planetary bodies themselves are completely filled with it. We constantly absorb this astral gold by our breath. The astral gold particles then spread themselves all over our bodies. This alchemical description corresponds very well with what is called 'prana' in the eastern philosophies.

The second kind is the elementary gold. It is the purest and most fixated part of the elements, and of all substances that are made thereof. All living beings of the three nature realms have this priceless elementary gold within themselves. It is also called the central fire of the earth.

The third kind is the common metal gold.

The alchemists also say that the elementary gold (pure consciousness) is the philosopher's stone made pure and perfect by the Great Work.

Gerhard Dorn (16th century) describes the alchemical gold as the divine, creative influence present in all matter. "Gold is the medicine that in its original workings is tempered by the art of alchemy, and therefore it can influence all other earthly and material things in a positive way...Gold is the form that has been separated or taken away from its exterior body, and it is so penetrating that by its heavenly form, it influences every exterior thing. Gold is the divine seed that is concealed in all things, not only in metals, but in all material things, and it can be made visible by heating. And just like in the beginning, when God created the world and had a creative influence on matter, with this gold (that you have obtained from matter) you have that which repeats Gods' creative work - with that you have a little bit in your own hand. With this, from God derived power, one can create and transform things. Gold has its power because it has the virtue of being one. Even vegetable things can bring forth a medicine that one can use in this manner."

1.8 The Philosopher's Stone

*You will not find
the philosopher's stone
until you are perfect.
Grillot de Givry*

*As there is oil in sesame seed
and a spark in flint
thus your Beloved is in your body.
Wake it if you can.
As the pupil is in the eye*

*so is the creator in the body.
The fool does not know this secret
and runs outside
looking for it in vain.
That what you seek
is in the four corners of the earth.
It is inside,
you do not see it,
because it lives behind the veils of illusion.
Kabir Sahib*



From the 12th century on, alchemists talked about an 'agens' that is necessary for the transmutation. This agens had many names but the most well-known is the 'philosopher's stone'. Other names are: the philosophical powder, the great elixir, the quintessence. This philosopher's stone could transmute metals into gold. In the Great Work, the philosopher's stone is man himself, being at the beginning of the Great Work, or at the very end of it. In general the stone is the universal spirit, present in everything that has been created, and thus also in the alchemist himself.

Descriptions of it are many and not always the same. Paracelsus called it fixed and dark red; Berigard of Pisa said that its color is that of poppies, Raymond Lulle said that its color resembled that of carbuncles; Helvetius claimed that it was brilliant yellow. Although many alchemists gave their own, and often contradicting descriptions, Khalid summed it up as "The stone unifies in itself all colors. It is white, red, yellow, heavenly blue and green." The transmutation is a highly personal process, and thus each alchemist is having a different view on it. Some alchemists were talking about physical substances.

The philosopher's stone is a symbol of perfect man, the end result of the philosophical work. Although it is often connected with quicksilver and sulfur, the philosopher's stone is difficult to describe with words. We just do not have the proper language for it. "One has never been able to understand what the ancient

philosophers meant with the philosopher's stone. One can not answer this question before one realizes that the alchemists directed their attention on something from the unconscious. Only the psychology of the unconscious can explain the secret. The theory of the unconscious teaches us that as long as this projection is directed onto that something, it remains inaccessible. Therefore the works of the ancient alchemists reveal so little of the secret of alchemy." (Carl Gustav Jung). One should also consider that alchemists often used symbolic language. Symbols are means to convey information, but it demands a whole different approach of understanding, something we have difficulty with in our modern society.

"Almost everybody who has heard about the philosopher's stone and its power, asks where it can be found. The philosopher always answers twofold. First, they say that Adam has taken the philosopher's stone with him from Paradise, and that it is now present within you, within me, and within everybody, and that the birds of far countries has taken it with them. Second, the philosophers answer that it can be found in the earth, in the mountains, in the air and in the river. Now what way should one seek? To me, both ways; but each way has its own way." (Michael Maier, 1617).

"The philosopher's stone is first and for all the creation of man by himself, that is the entire conquest of his potentials and his future; it is especially the complete liberation of his will, that will give him the absolute rulership over the Azoth and the realm of magnetism, that is the absolute power over the universal magnetic force." (Eliphas Levi, 19th century).

The philosopher's stone is also present in the Grail legends. There it is the grail chalice filled with chivalrous and good deeds, that will give back the fertility to the realm of the King. The King in these legends is our higher self, our divine self, the spirit, the heavenly man or Adam Kadmon, that had been cast down into the earthy worlds. Finding this stone, or the divine in oneself and working on oneself to bring it to the surface, will give us access to the Palace of the King. Wolfram von Eschenbach called the Grail a precious stone and the bearer of rich fruit of Wisdom and Purity.

The philosopher's stone can also be seen in relation to the life force. On some alchemical engravings water flows out of a stone. The stone is the philosopher's stone which is the source of the elixir of life 'the is like fire but flows like water". We all have it within us.

Meister Eckhart once met a beautiful young boy.

He asked him where he came from.

"From God", he answered.

"Where did you leave him?"

"In virtuous hearts."

"Where do you want to go?"

"To God."

"Where do you find him?"

"Where I left all creations."

"What are you?"

"A King."
"Where is your kingdom?"
"In my heart."
"Be aware that nobody shares this with you."
"I am."
Then Meister Eckhart brought him into his cell:
"Take any robe you want."
"Then I would not be a King anymore."
And he disappeared.
It was God himself.
And he had made a joke with him.

1.9 The Elixir and the Tincture

*He who drinks from the water
that I will give him
will never be thirsty anymore
because the water that comes from the divine
will become like a spring in them
rising to eternal life.
The Gospel of the Holy Twelve, 28:10*

In alchemical terms, the body is reduced into a quicksilver water from which the elixir is then made. In other words a vivifying spirit is made. The elixir is the same as the philosopher's stone, but the alchemists use the term elixir to talk primarily about its energetic and healing properties.

According to some alchemists, the elixir is the second phase in the Great Work, while the tincture is the third phase. As the second phase is albedo, or whiteness, the tincture is also called white tincture. It is the state of cooked or digested matter that has now gained a white color. When it is projected onto metals it changes them into silver. It is a medicine for plants and minerals. We are talking here about a purified spirit (of man) that, although it is only in the second stage, is already healing to body and soul.

The red elixir corresponds with the third phase, rubedo or redness. The red elixir is the perfect stone. The Arab alchemists just called it elixir, meaning 'yeast'. Yeast makes dough rise, what in the philosophical sense means 'multiplication'. In relation to the elixir, it makes spiritual energy multiply and therefore it works in a healing way in living beings. The elixir cures all ailments, and makes all imperfect metals (like the organs, cells...) perfect (it makes them healthy again).

The term tincture is used for its penetrating quality. The tincture is the last degree of transmutation of the natural bodies. It brings all imperfect things to their perfection. Paracelsus calls the tincture a very noble substance that colors all metallic and human bodies, and changes them in a much better essence. It penetrates all bodies and let them 'rise' as with yeast.



(Rosarium philosophorum, Frankfurt, 1550)

The tincture or elixir is sometimes also depicted as the water of life flowing forth from a fountain, the fountain of youth.

Artephius (12th century) wrote in his 'Secret Book' that he had been living for a thousand years due to the elixir. Similar statements were done by other alchemists. It is said that the well-known Comte de Saint-Germain (17th-18th century) did not age because of the elixir. Remember this is not about a physical substance, but it is the divine energy within the alchemist that has been brought forward and that keeps the body young.

It always has been a strong idea that there was some kind of liquid, or drink that could prolong the life span and give the body a (near) immortality. Unfortunately common man took this often literally and tried to create a physical liquid. This liquid, or water of life, is a symbolic term for what is present within man himself. In the ancient scriptures of the Hindus (the vedas and the Puranas) one finds the concept of Amrita. Amrita is the drink or food of the gods. It is the food that gives immortality. It was made out of the ocean of milk. The Greek gods drank Ambrosia or Nektar, which had the same characteristics.

The alchemists and cabalists speak of the water of life in terms of for example the Ab-e-Hyat or 'prickling, fiery essence'. More commonly it is called the 'alkahest' or common solvent. The alchemist makes his tincture by purifying his body, his emotions and his thoughts, until he identifies himself with his divine essence. When the divine essence has been realized, the water of life pours forth and takes away all remaining dross, leaving pure gold.

The elixir or tincture makes a new man from the alchemist. He is reborn and immortal. He partakes of divine wisdom and unity with the Source of all. He has become a heavenly king.

2. One Operation

*Every effort goes with mistakes
as fire goes with smoke.
Therefore one should not give up
the work that corresponds with ones nature
because it is full of defects.
Bhagavad-gita 18:48*

The alchemists often repeat that the entire alchemical work is only one process, requiring only one simple action. This action is named with different terms depending on the point of view one takes. It is called purification, washing, cleaning, warming, cooking, distilling and so on. Some alchemists put all those terms in a seemingly chronological order.



(Atlanta Fugiens, Michael Maier, Frankfurt, 1617)

The whole work is nothing but warming, cooking, one of the many symbols to show that the entire alchemical process is nothing but one continued action. You can call it meditation, or clear awareness, but it needs to be done continuously. This is the only way purification of body and soul will result in uncovering the true divine nature of the practitioner.

In the beginning of the work it is called dissolution because the central fire, that has been stirred, is transforming the earth into water. The dissolution is the reduction of the fixed and dry into the essence of water. The fixed has been made fluid. The fluid is also called quicksilver and prima materia or first matter. Pernety (1858) says about the dissolution: "The philosophical solution is the transformation of the fixed root humidity into a watery body. The origin of this dissolution is the volatile spirit which is enclosed in the first water." One could say that your true consciousness that is always there but kind of hidden in yourself, is working by the action of your will, to bring your everyday consciousness (the

fixed) into the unconscious (water). One could also say that you become more aware of what happens inside you, especially your feelings and subtle energies, both of which are often compared with water.

By this continuous warming or cooking, distillation happens. The water evaporates and become more subtle with each cycle of distillation. The vapors cool and condense. The condensed water descends and penetrates the earth. The process is repeated again and again.

After distillation fixation or coagulation happens. Fixation is the inseparable union of the fixed and the volatile, or sulfur and quicksilver, into a matter that that is so durable that it is unassailable to the fire. But in the mean while one continues the warming of the matter.

One can say that the entire process is nothing but warming. The fire needs to be maintained (that is one`s attention needs to be kept focused).

The distillation or purification is actually the continuously improving of oneself, to root out, for example, every egotistic action or negative emotion. For this a continuous vigilance and diligence is necessary.

Some alchemists place the planets with each successive stage of the Great Work. Although the distillation remains the same during the entire process, in symbolical terms, the alchemist ascends from the planet Saturn towards the planet Mercury. He starts with Saturn, the coldest and heaviest planet, the traditional evil-doer, the god of time and death. Mercury is the lightest planet and is next to the sun, bathing in the light and warmth of that star. Here the alchemist discovers eternal youth.

When the alchemist thus ascends throughout the planets, he transforms their characteristics in himself. Each planet corresponds with certain psychological characteristics.

The Great Work can be found in its entirety in the Egyptian myth of Osiris. Osiris was a god-king who was locked up in a chest by his brother Seth. Seth is the symbol of the powers of decomposition, the fire that causes putrefaction. The chest is the alchemical `vas`, or vessel. The chest was closed with nails and lead (lead is the metal of nigredo, or blackness). Then, Seth threw the chest into the ocean. The ocean is the alchemical water, or the second stage of the Great Work, when the earth has been reduced to water. The ocean itself is a symbol of the prima materia to which the matter has been reduced. The chest eventually washed ashore under a tamarind tree. The tamarind is also a symbol of the second stage, albedo or whiteness, because of its white blossom. Isis, the wife of Osiris finds the chest and brings it back to Egypt. This is the coagulation of condensation. By her magical powers she is able to receive the seed of Osiris and gives birth to Horus. Here the alchemical seed of matter has been found, and a new birth takes place, that of a pure consciousness. Horus is a sun god, thus the light has come through. When Set also finds the chest with the dead Osiris (Osiris is the symbol of the common man that has died) he cuts the body up in fourteen pieces and scatters them around. This again refers to the decomposition and sublimation, that needs to happen again and again, until everything is pure. Isis looks for all the pieces and buries each of them at the spot (the fixation). Only the phallus of Osiris she could not find because an oxyrhinchus fish had

swallowed it. This could mean that the sexual power has been transformed into a higher energy, and will nevermore express itself on a lower level. It is said that the lower expression of the sexual drive binds man to the physical world or the world of darkness. The phallus is no longer necessary because Horus has been conceived. Horus represents the reborn man. In his appearance as a child he is called Harpocrates, and corresponds with the boy Mercurius. Horus is also the resurrected Osiris. In alchemical terms, the old King has died and the young King is born.

Osiris is also the universal principle of life. He is the seed, like the wheat berry. The Egyptian would sow wheat berries on mummies, so they would sprout, symbolizing the resurrection of the dead. Osiris was also a god of fertility, and thus he had the name "the Great Green One". His skin color was often painted green. The alchemists talk about the 'green seed' in nature, that is the 'prima materia', or green dragon, the fertile energy of life that penetrates everything.

3. The Ingredients

3.1 Sulfur

*If you direct your heart
onto one point,
nothing will be impossible.
Buddha*

*Man is a thinker.
He is that what he thinks.
When he thinks fire
he is fire.
When he thinks war,
he will create war.
Everything depends
if his entire imagination
will be an entire sun,
that is, that he will imagine himself completely
that what he wants.
Paracelsus*



(Spiritus Sulphur, Quinta Essentia, second book)

Inside gold is the alchemical Sun. Inside the Sun is an active substance, sulfur. Sometimes alchemists equal sulfur with the Sun. Sulfur is the spirit of life. Sulfur is of a twofold nature: white and red sulfur. White sulfur is the substance of the Great Work at the phase of Whiteness, and red sulfur at the stage of redness. In general sulfur is the symbol for the active principle in the Great Work.

Sulphur, the fiery spirit that vivifies everything. The wings on his head and feet are the traditional representations of the god Mercury.

*But that (the fire) which comes from the sun,
which fire maintains*

every bodily thing

for as far as it is natural.

Nicholas Flamel (14th-15th century)

3.2 Mercury

Every child is an artist.

*The difficulty is to remain one
when you grow up.*

Picasso

Hermes is the Primal Source.

After so many injuries

*have been done to the human race,
I flow forth,
by divine decree
and assisted by the Art,
as a healing giving medicine.
He who is able to, drink out of me.
He who wants, purify himself in me.
He who dares, jump into my depths.
Drink, brother, and live.
Chymische Hochzeit, Christiani Rosencreutz*

No alchemical symbol is so confusing as Mercury. Here are some explanations of this mysterious substance. As sulphur is the symbol for the active principle, mercury is the symbol of the passive principle. Mercury is a term used for almost everything. It is the highest divinity, but also a devil. It is used to symbolize certain aspects of the alchemical work, but at the same time it is them all. It is ambiguous with many names and functions. The alchemists often speak about mercury in the form of the god Mercury, whom we encounter in their engravings and paintings. As the god Mercury he is often seen as having qualities that belong both to mercury and to sulfur.



(Anima Mercurii, Quinta Essentia, second book)

Mercury is symbolized here in its female form of the quicksilver soul, a reference to the soul of Nature.

Usually mercury is used in its chemical form, quicksilver. Symbolic of course, it

indicates volatility or fluidity, by which it is also named 'water of life' or 'root humidity'.

In his aspect of fire, Mercury is the sole fire in the entire process. He is the working force in the Great Work. He is an 'invisible, secretly working fire'. He is the fire of hell, the infernal fire in the earth. Mercury is the spirit of man that works in the lower aspects of being, and thus is looked upon as an infernal fire. In his air aspect, he is the spirit, the air, the wind that is present everywhere in Nature and vivifies everything. He is 'the spirit of truth hidden in the earth'. As hermaphrodite he unifies the sexes within himself. He is both the helper and trickster, Lucifer and Christ. When depicted as a dragon, he is flying and without wings. He is bride and groom. It is obvious that Mercury contains and unifies duality. He is Ouroboros, the serpent-dragon that bites in his own tail, representing the circle and unity, eternity, where the beginning and the end coincide. He is the alpha and omega.

He is called the 'prima materia', the chaos, the rough stone at the beginning of the Great Work. As Saturn he initiates putrefaction, but also gives immortality. At the same time he is the goal of the Great Work, the philosopher's stone, the elixir of life, the philosophical gold. Mercury is the process of transmutation.

In alchemical images Mercury is depicted both as a young man and an old man. As an old man he is usually in the form of Saturn, the common man, fixed in matter with his habits, prejudices, and other material chains. As a young boy, he comes forth from the 'coniunctio', the joining of the King and Queen, representing rebirth, and eternal youth.

Mercury is also called 'quadratus' because he contains the four elements, thus he is the quintessence. Another name for him is 'azoth' a word formed from the Latin letters A and Z, the Greek words Alpha and Omega, and the Hebrew words Aleph and Thau, all meaning the beginning and the end.

Here is a text from the Aurelia Occulta from the Theatrum Chemicum (1613), in which Mercury is talking about himself:

I am the poison-dripping dragon,
who is everywhere and can be cheaply had.
That upon which I rest, and that which rest upon me,
will be found within me by those who pursue their investigations in accordance
with the rules of the Art.

My water and fire destroy and put together;
from my body you may extract the green lion and the red.

But if you do not have exact knowledge of me,
you will destroy your five senses with my fire.

By the philosophers I am named Mercurius.

My spouse is the gold;

I am the old dragon found everywhere on the globe of the earth,
father and mother, young and old, very strong and very weak,
death and resurrection, visible and invisible, hard and soft;

I descend into the Earth and ascend into the Heavens,

I am the highest and the lowest, the lightest and the heaviest.

I am dark and light.

Often the order of nature is reversed in me.
I am known yet do not exist at all.
I am the carbuncle of the sun, the most noble purified earth,
through which you may change copper, iron, tin and lead into gold.
A waxing poison comes from my nose,
having brought to death many people.
Therefore, with the art,
you have to separate the course from the fine,
if you don't want to delight in poverty.
I give you the power
of the male and the female,
even that of heaven and earth.
With bravery and broadness of understanding,
the mysteries of my art are to be done,
if you want to conquer me with the power of the fire.
From which many have suffered in their potential and work.
I am the egg of nature,
that only the wise man knows,
who by piety and modesty
let the microcosm arise out of me,
what is destined to people by the most high God,
but what is given only to a few,
while most long for it in vain:
that they do well to those in poverty from my treasury
and that their soul will not cling to the transitory gold.
I am called Mercurius by the Philosophers;
my mate is the philosophical gold;
I am the old dragon, present everywhere on earth,
father and mother, young man and old man,
very powerful and very weak,
death and rebirth, hard and soft;
I descend into the earth and ascend into heaven'
I am the highest and the lowest,
the heaviest and the lightest;
often the order of nature in color, number, weight and measure
is being reversed in me,
I contain the light of nature (lumen naturale);
I am the dark and the light,
I come forth from heaven and earth;
I am known but do not exist;
all colors radiate in me
and all metals by the sun's rays.
I am the solar carbuncle,
the most refined, glorified earth,
by which you can change
copper, iron, tin and lead

into gold.

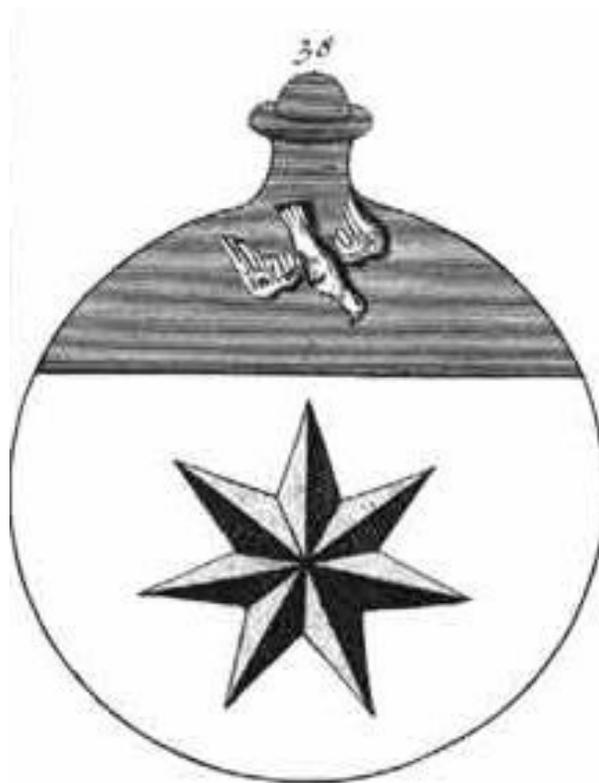
3.3 Salt

*He who wants to get insight and enlightenment in all truth,
think of God's birth in himself,
in the depth of his soul.*

*As soon as he will open himself for that,
all energies of the soul come to life,
and in one instant*

*he receives more wisdom
than anybody can teach him.*

Meister Eckehart



Salt is the third element in the trinity of the alchemical substances in the Great Work. As mercury is the water aspect, sulfur is the fiery aspect, so is salt the form aspect (salt is a crystalline form, or crystallized energy). So it is also a name for the 'prima materia', for the stone of the philosophers. The alchemists say that in its lower aspect salt is 'bitter'. Here salt is symbol for knowledge and wisdom. Self-knowledge is bitter, painful. Sometimes they speak of the bitter 'sea water'. As water or the sea stands for the soul, it is a reference to the same self-knowledge.

Salt is also seen as a symbol for the second phase of the Great Work, albedo, or whiteness, because here light breaks through, and thus also wisdom. Christ is called 'Sal sapientiae', the Salt of Wisdom'.

In the beginning of the Great Work, the salt is called impure. Here it equals the earth, the body, our every day consciousness or being. The impure salt has to be dissolved ('solutio') into the divine water (quicksilver, or 'prima materia'), by which it is purified. In albedo salt arises as a pure form and fixated, that is crystallized into a pure salt.

As symbol for wisdom, salt is the breath of the divine energy. This wisdom vivifies the invisible fire that energizes entire Nature. This fire controls life, movement, energy, the heavens, the planets. Paracelsus called this fire 'the light of Nature' a reference to the 'anima mundi', the soul of the world.

4. Sacred Marriage

When you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower, and when you make male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female, when you make eyes in place of an eye, a hand in place of a hand, a foot in place of a foot, an image in place of an image, then you will enter the Kingdom.

Gospel of Thomas, 22

The sacred marriage, the 'coniunctio' or 'coitus', refer to the union of our divine spirit with the soul, and finally with the body. By way of speaking we could say that in common man the spirit, soul and body are kind of separated from each other, although they are working with each other. But when the Great Work has been completed, the divine spirit has been brought 'down' to shine through the soul and body and unified itself with them, so they all form one and the same 'body'.



(Museum Hermeticum reformatum, Frankfort, 1678)

Some alchemists claim there are three coniunctio's, but coniunctio by itself can be interpreted in many ways.

Alchemy knows a lot of opposite images, like water and fire, dryness and wetness, warmth and cold, the volatile and the fixed, the bodily and the spiritual,

the Sun and the Moon, gold and silver, circle and square and so on. The union of these opposites already constitutes a coniunctio. Coniunctio is also the union of divine or spiritual energies with earthly energies.

In the mystical sense coniunctio is the understanding or experience of the unity of opposites or paradoxes, the experience of the unity that lies behind our world of duality. Our limited understanding can only see in opposites. In the far East one tries to transcend this limited understanding by koans, expressions that contain paradoxes. Alchemy has a similar approach as it uses expressions as fiery water, watery fire, water that does not wet the hands, fire that does not burn.

Coniunctio provides this transcendence into unity by the process of dissolution of the body into water. "As the dissolution dissolves the bodies, thus the doubts of the philosophers are dissolved by knowledge." (Gerhard Dorn, 16th century)

In alchemical manuscripts coniunctio is depicted as the union or coitus of King and Queen, of the red man and the white woman, or just by man and wife.

"Connect the slave with his fragrant sister and by themselves they will make the entire work; because as soon as the white woman has been married to the red man, they will hug themselves firmly and become one, they will decompose and perfect each other: from the two bodies they were before they will become one single body that is susceptible for perfection." (Donum Dei, early 16th century).

As it shows in this quotation coniunctio was often incestuous. We can also find that in other religions, like Sulamith and Adam Kadmon in the Cabala, Adam and Eve in Catholicism, Isis and Osiris in ancient Egypt. In alchemy it usually between mother and son. "Beya mounted Gabricius (her son) and locked him up in his belly, that well that he was not visible anymore. And she hugged Gabricius with such love that she took him completely into her nature and divided him into numerous parts." (Rosarium philosophorum, 1550). A bizarre union but it is entirely symbolic. Carl Gustav Jung says that this symbolic incest is the descent into or the penetration of the unconscious. The mother is the unconscious, the son is the conscious. It is a 'regressus ad uterum' or the return to the uterus of the mother. Penetration of the female is the same as the penetration of the water or the unconscious. Thus we see that the coniunctio is depicted as the coitus of man and wife, king and queen, but also by the king taking a bath, or drinking water. Sometimes the coitus between man and woman happens in water, in a bath or in a fountain. The water is also synonymous with mercury or quicksilver. The alchemist Gerhard Dorn spoke about the body, soul and spirit of man. The body (corpus) corresponds with what we now would call with the Jungian term 'the shadow'. The soul (anima) he considered to be a neutral life energy, the habits, wishes and desires. Spirit (animus) was the will, the ego concept. The spirit is always good and has higher mental potentials. In ignorant man they form a trinity, because man is not conscious of all three, but experiences them as just one.

Dorn said there are three coniunctio's. The first coniunctio happens with 'separatio' or 'distractio'. The soul separates itself from the body when man becomes conscious of those two. The soul and the spirit are uniting, which he calls 'unio mentalis'. As man is now conscious of his body as separated from his soul and spirit, it is a voluntary death of the body, for example one does not

express its negative impulses.

The second coniunctio is the unio mentalis combined with the purified body.

The third coniunctio is the combination of the spirit-soul-body with the ,unus mundus'. "The unus mundus is the potential world of the first day of creation when nothing existed 'in actu', that is in Two or multiplicity, but only of One." It is an entrance into unity, where one experiences everything as one.

In Hinduism the individual soul unifies with Brahman, which is the ultimate reality, the all unifying principle. He is the inner being of all things. He is limitless and cannot be understood by our intellect, nor expressed by words.

The alchemist Pernety (1858) also knows three coniunctio's: "The first one is called double coniunctio. It is between 'agens' and 'patiens', between the male and the female, the form and the substance, quicksilver and sulfur, the subtle and the gross. The second one is called threefold, because it unifies three things: the body, the soul and the spirit. Thus reduce trinity to unity. The third one is called fourfold, because it unifies the four elements into one, but also includes the three others."