

THE HERBAL ALCHEMY

TRAINING SESSIONS



Lesson One: ALCHEMY DEMYSTIFIED

Alchemy. The word itself has dwelled in mystery since its inception. This is partly because it has been an aspect of the great esoteric traditions, the mystery teachings and was *required* to be kept secret from the uninitiated- as alchemy holds a great power, and with that power comes a responsibility to do only good with it.

In our modern world, this nebulous quality of Alchemy persists. It's amazing to see how many different contexts the word Alchemy is commonly used- from yoga retreats to simply putting gem essences in a tincture- the only thing in common about the way Alchemy is mentioned in our modern world is that it rarely has *anything* to do with what Alchemy *really* is!

What's important to understand about Alchemy, it is that it is a specific traditional lineage that holds specific principles and practices that make it what it is. While the process of transformation is critical to our understanding of what Alchemy is, the mere act of turning one thing into something else, or combining different things together to make something new is *not* what Alchemy is.

So what exactly *is* Alchemy then?

In order to answer this question we have to take a balanced approach. This is traditionally achieved by 2 primary facets that are critical in alchemy: theory and practice. There are foundational principles that are at the root of the alchemical tradition which comprise its philosophical foundation. There are also critical practices that are the essence of the applying those principles. One without the other is missing an essential piece, which makes the practice of **real Alchemy not possible.**

After all, if you have all theory and no practice, what's the point?! And if you have the practices in place, but little to no understanding of the underlying philosophy that guides those practices, then you won't see the deeper meaning *behind* the work, and it just turns into experimentation and tinkering.

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So, let's briefly take a look at the fundamental theory and practice that comprises alchemy. And to clarify, these are both *massive* topics that entire books have been written about- so here I will simply cover some of the basic concepts.

Natural Philosophy

The root of the alchemical tradition goes back to ancient Egypt, the old name of which of Khem, meaning the "black land." In Egypt, their sacred science or royal art was referred to as Khemia, a science of healing, initiation, and spiritual understanding of the mysteries of life. The tradition then spread throughout the Arabias and received the prefix "Al," which in the Arabias denotes something as sacred. Thus Khemia turned into Al-Khemia. As this sacred science spread into Europe it gradually turned into Alchemy, which is of course the root for the modern science of chemistry.

One of my first teachers in alchemy defined it thus as "the chemistry of God." This definition magically captures an essential root of alchemical philosophy, which is the union of the physical and the spiritual worlds, captured in the ancient axiom "as above, so below." In this regard, the foundation of alchemy rests upon a natural philosophy and the intersection between the natural world and the invisible spiritual world, or the Earth and the Cosmos.

This is critical for our modern times, for in the 21st century we are seeing a deep split both within human consciousness and the culture at large, one that sees us as separate from nature, that matter and spirit are not connected. Alchemy sees nature as unity, as interconnected, as being in a constant state of inter-relatedness. And us humans are an integral part of that natural framework. Unfortunately most of the world carries the illusion that we are separate from Nature.

The natural philosophy that is at the essence of Alchemy heals this split, through understanding that the Earth and Cosmos (the macrocosm) is reflected within each and every living thing (the microcosm). This theory has actually been scientifically validated through the holographic theory of nature- that each part contains the pattern of the whole. Thus, when we study nature externally, we are also studying nature internally- for they are

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Thus, when we study nature externally, we are also studying nature internally- for they are merely reflections of one another.

This is nicely summarized by the great physician, astrologer, magician and alchemist Paracelsus, “The physician must be educated by nature, we must ask, what is nature but philosophy? What is philosophy other than the invisible nature?” and “That is what philosophy is: things are in the human being in the same way they are outside, intangibly, as if one were looking at oneself in a mirror.”

When one gets into a deep study of Alchemy it can start to seem very intellectual and confusing, but it is important to understand that the crux of the tradition is founded upon a direct observation of the natural world- specifically the transformational cycles and processes of nature. Indeed, transformation is one of the most common ways people think of Alchemy. And it is true, Alchemy is a study of the transformations occurring both within nature and within ourselves, and then reflecting those processes in all of the laboratory work- that is, the creation of medicine.

From the growth cycles of plants, the process of human digestion, and the water cycle, to the movement of celestial bodies throughout the sky and the turning of the seasons, the ancient alchemists studied **how nature transforms and evolves itself**, and used this wisdom to influence how they created their medicines and understood healing. These medicines do not just heal the body, but are embodiments of the transformational processes of nature and when taken, bring about those cycles of transformation within us.

But Alchemy is not the only tradition influenced by a natural philosophy. In fact, most of the great medical and spiritual traditions of the world were formed through a direct observation and contemplation of the natural world. They were all followers and students of the Light of Nature. But the unique thing about the alchemical tradition is that it is not an isolated tradition- it has forever been influenced and integrated with other cultural models, cosmologies, systems and traditions.

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In this way, it can be considered a universal science, medicine and spirituality. One can literally study any system of medicine and find its reflection in Alchemy. The great cosmologies, creation stories, mythologies and pantheons have their place in the pattern of natural philosophy. Even modern science fits into the alchemical model, as many of the great scientists we learned about in school were also alchemists (we just don't learn about that aspect of their work), such as Isaac Newton. I mean after all, Alchemy is the foundation of modern chemistry and pharmacology!

The synergy of science, medicine and spirituality is another way that alchemical philosophy helps to heal the split and separation that we see in our modern culture. It gives us an integrated model of life that is equally inclusive of the physical (science) and invisible (spiritual) aspects of life, and brings them together in a way that is focused on bringing healing (medicine) to people, culture and planet. This puts science, spirituality and medicine in alignment with one another, which focuses on advancing the evolution of consciousness in a way that is in balance with the Earth and forces of life.

This gives our system of western herbalism a cosmology, a connection to something sacred, to the underlying pattern of nature, the Earth, and cosmos. It gives us a model of true holistic medicine that equally encompasses the physical, energetic and spiritual aspects of healing. In short, Alchemy is a natural philosophy of the wholeness of life and we can utilize that pattern in a healing manner. And the way in which this is achieved is through the creation of truly holistic medicines.

Spiritual Pharmacy

While the theory of Alchemy is founded upon natural philosophy, the way in which that philosophical foundation is practically applied is through the creation of medicine. In my opinion, the rightful use of alchemical theory is the creation of living medicines from the Earth that facilitate in rejuvenative healing for the body, clarity and inspiration for the mind, openness of the heart, and the evolution of consciousness. In this way, it is a model of pharmacy, or medicine making, that equally addresses the material and the spiritual aspects of both the medicines we utilize (be it mineral and botanical) and the people we are using them for.

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My primary teacher in Alchemy, Robert Bartlett, (author of the books *Real Alchemy* and *The Way of the Crucible*) was taught by his teacher, Frater Albertus, that at its root the practice of Alchemy can be defined as **consciously assisted evolution**. This is a beautiful definition that captures both sides of the process of spiritual pharmacy: the preparation of the medicines, and the virtues, or properties, of those medicines.

Practical plant Alchemy, or spagyrics, is founded upon laboratory work, whereby the material and subtle potencies of plants are extracted, purified and concentrated into a truly holistic form of medicine. Each and every process that a plant undergoes in the spagyric process is a reflection, or a mirror image, of the exact processes nature goes through in her cycles of transformation. The direct study of nature which is at the foundation of natural philosophy, informed the alchemists of old how the Earth and Cosmos is evolving and in a constant state of transformation from one state to another. This vision of the natural pattern of Life informed them on how to craft healing medicines in accordance with the inherent processes of transformation that *everything goes through*.

In this way, the medicines hold this potency and power of transformation within them.

According to Alchemy, everything in Life is striving and evolving back towards a state of unification with the Divine Source of life. In the macrocosm (nature), this process takes quite some time, for example looking at the cycle of a plant as it germinates, grows, flowers and fruits, and dies, returning itself to the Earth. Each of these cycles is said to be taking it closer and closer back to this divine union, which can take hundreds to thousands of years.

The practice of spagyrics, or plant based Alchemy, is that you as the alchemist are consciously assisting the evolution of each species in its process of transformation. You are guiding that plant through the exact cycles that nature is taking it through, only at a significantly faster rate, thus speeding up the evolution of that species. This is achieved through various spagyric processes which effectively separate and purify the essential elements within a plant to create a living medicine.

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In a way, I like to think of it as providing a healing for the archetypal forces that dwell within each unique species of plant. We are supporting the healing cycles in nature.

So on the one hand, you as the alchemist is consciously assisting nature in her evolutionary cycles. But the flip side of that equation is also true. *Nature is consciously assisting you in your evolutionary process.*

In lab work, we support nature, but in healing work, nature is supporting us. In this way, the entire alchemical process is reversed and balanced; you take a plant through a cycle of transformation to support its evolution- rendering a whole, complete medicine in the process. When this process is complete and the medicine is prepared correctly according to alchemical theory, the other half of the work begins.

Now the plant now guides *you* through the exact same process that you guided it through. It begins to move through your body, spirit and soul, separating out the true from the false, purifying the essential parts of the self from the conditioned parts of the self, and ultimately recombining you back into a refined, evolved state of being. In short, the plants help you to let go of who and what you are *not*, and support to rejuvenate and enliven who you *really are*.

This is the ultimate goal of spiritual pharmacy and herbal alchemy. The way in which it is achieved is by equally working with the physical properties of the herbs- their chemistry, organ affinities, medicinal actions, etc., while at the same time working with their subtle, esoteric, energetic, or spiritual properties- the way in which they influence the mind, emotional patterning, and the teachings they hold for us spiritually. Thus alchemically prepared medicines are said to equalize the chemistry, energetic, and evolutionary properties of plants.

In this way herbal alchemy provides for you a truly holistic model of herbalism, as you are able to prepare a medicine that contains the *wholeness of the plant* which will operate upon the *wholeness of the person*. This bridges the separation within modern herbal medicine making, where it is common to have certain types of preparations (infusions, decoctions, powders,

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tinctures, etc.) that are used for physiological complaints, and a whole other type of medicine (homeopathics, flower essences, etc.) that are used for psychological or emotional complaints.

Alchemy recognizes that the emotional, psychological and physical levels of being are in fact **not separate**, with each level influencing the others. Thus psychological imbalances may have a physiological root or vice versa. Either way, in order to have an authentically holistic model of healing, you must not only be able to recognize the interconnectedness of the spiritual and physical levels within both people and plants, **but also have a holistic medicine that will address the wholeness of the person.**

That, is the essence of Alchemy.

Be sure to tune into the second Herbal Alchemy Training Session, where I'll be taking you into my spagyrics laboratory and show you how to extract the #1 missing component in all modern herbal extracts.

So keep an eye on your inbox- I'll send you an e-mail with a link for the next Training Session soon!

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