

THE HERBAL ALCHEMY

TRAINING SESSIONS



Lesson Two: THE THREE PHILOSOPHICAL PRINCIPLES OF SPAGYRICS

The Three Philosophical Principles form the crux of herbal alchemy, for it is these principles that you work with in order to produce the wide variety of alchemically prepared medicines. Whether making simple Spagyric Tinctures or Essences, or the complex preparations such as the Quintessence or the Plant Stone, it is these Three Philosophical Principles that you are directly working with in laboratory alchemy.

An important term that I haven't discussed in much detail yet, is *spagyrics*. This word is used to describe the alchemical works primarily concerned with plants- whereas Alchemy in and of itself is oftentimes concerned with the preparation of mineral and metallic medicines. We can think of it as a subcategory, or a specific branch of Alchemy.

Spagyrics is a combination of 2 Greek words that mean "to separate and recombine" or more accurately "to separate and reawaken." In all spagyric practices, a plant is separated into its 3 Philosophical Principles, called Sulfur, Mercury and Salt, each being purified and exalted physically and spiritually through various laboratory processes. The process is completed by recombining the parts back together into what is considered a more holistic, evolved state of its medicine. In this way, all of spagyrics can be boiled down to three basic words: separation, purification, and recombination- all of which is being done to these 3 Principles in the plants.

Because the Sulfur, Mercury and Salt is present in the medicine, it will operate upon the human Soul, Spirit and Body together as one, initiating a process of deep transformational healing. We will explore these 3 Philosophical Principles in more detail below.

The spagyric process can be thought of as the cycle of life: birth, death and re-birth. A plant is taken through a rite of passage, an initiation, where it leaves its body behind as its Soul is volatilized into the heavenly realm through distillation. Then moving into the underworld as the body is slowly fermented, putrefied, decayed, and gradually gives up its volatile Spirit through the generation of alcohol. This spirit is resurrected through rectification, the alcohol being subsequently distilled, further exalting the plant physically and spiritually. The Body is then purified through Fire, Water, and Earth in order to yield a pure, crystalline mineral salt.

These 3 purified principles of the plant are then re-united, where the life of the plant is reborn and reawakened as it went through a process of transformation. Not just a process of

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TRAINING SESSIONS



Lesson Two: THE THREE PHILOSOPHICAL PRINCIPLES OF SPAGYRICS

transformation, but *the* process of transformation that everything in life goes through in order to further its evolution. The way I see it, this process is actually healing the archetype of the plant. Traditionally, this process is usually described as bringing that particular species to a greater state of perfection.

Now a lot of people get triggered here. Isn't the plant already perfect and pure the way nature makes it? To that I say, "of course!!" All of nature is perfect in and of itself. But when we are going to utilize something from nature, we can work with it in ways to make it more suitable for our use.

For example, you can take all of the wool off of a sheep and pile it on top of you to use as a blanket, but that cannot compare to wool that has been washed, carded, spun, dyed, and woven into a beautiful blanket! Just because we take wool and weave it into a blanket doesn't mean that the wool in its raw state is imperfect or bad. It's just that we can take it from a raw state and refine it into something beautiful and functional for our usage. The same is true with plants and this is essentially how I think of the spagyric process- **it is artistry.**

Most practitioners of alchemy think the process is complete once they put these 3 Principles of the plant back together. But I disagree. This is simply the outer stage of the work. The process is only complete when you *take that medicine yourself*, allowing the plant to take **you** through that same cycle of transformation it went through. Separating that which is not true to your nature out, purifying you down to your essential parts, and recombining you back together into a more conscious, loving, caring, purposeful human.

Each step in the spagyric process is a reflection of the processes all of nature goes through in her cycles of transformation. It is exactly how we go about enacting change and healing in our own lives. Each process reflects a certain stage of development, a certain phase of life that we all go through- each of which is necessary in order to refine us into the human we were destined to become. Some people learn the lesson of each stage, others get stuck somewhere in the process. The mere act of practicing alchemy gives you insights into these life cycles, and doing the work directly accelerates your movement through them- again, helping to consciously assist your evolution.

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THE HERBAL ALCHEMY

TRAINING SESSIONS



Lesson Two: THE THREE PHILOSOPHICAL PRINCIPLES OF SPAGYRICS

The Three Philosophical Principles

Throughout these training sessions so far, I've mentioned this concept of the wholeness of the plant being used to treat the wholeness of the person, and that this can only be achieved by having a whole living medicine.

But what exactly *is* the wholeness of a plant? How can you understand a plant through the alchemical perspective? And how do you actually get down to the nitty gritty of preparing plants in a way that embodies this wholeness?

This brings us to a core teaching in plant based Alchemy, or spagyrics, which are called the "Three Philosophical Principles." These form the pillars that all of practical alchemy stands upon and understanding them is critical to successfully practicing Herbal Alchemy.

While these principles are expressed universally throughout multiple traditions from around the world, in Alchemy they are referred to as **Sulfur, Mercury, and Salt**. We see these universal principles pop up in Chinese Medicine, Ayurveda, Astrology, the great mythologies and pantheons of the world, even modern science. Sulfur, Mercury and Salt are said to infuse themselves into all of the natural world. In fact, nothing is able to exist in our world without the presence of these fundamental principles within them.

What I would like to do with you here to share some of the correspondences and patterns associated with each Philosophical Principle, their reflections in plants, as well as people, so you have a holistic understanding of what they are and their universality.

This framework is one level of what I refer to as "**energetic architecture**," which I am going to teach you in more detail in the next Training Session. What's important to understand about these 3 Philosophical Principles, is that they are *core underlying patterns in nature* that are a part of the invisible and visible worlds. This means that they are a sort of translation mechanism; a way of understanding how spirit is infused into matter and how matter is reflective of the spirit. This immediately shows you how to see the subtle properties of plants directly in their form, their medicinal properties and other virtues.

An important consideration here is that while the terms used to denote these philosophical principles are the names of chemicals, we are not *just* speaking of the chemicals! The

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THE HERBAL ALCHEMY

TRAINING SESSIONS



Lesson Two:

THE THREE PHILOSOPHICAL PRINCIPLES OF SPAGYRICS

chemicals are merely physical representations of a much larger archetypal force that is being discussed. So with that, let's jump into our discussion on Sulfur, Mercury and Salt.

Sulfur 

The first philosophical principle is Sulfur, which is said to be related to the Soul of any being. Chemical sulfur as you may know, has a distinctly pungent smell (like rotten eggs) and a bright yellow color. The alchemists saw this as a representation of the light of the soul (yellow color), as well as its relationship to the Fire Element (pungent/spicy smell). It is also unique in that it is a mineral- some of the most fixed or dense forms of life- that has a distinctly aromatic nature. In this way, it revealed that the substance exists “outside of its body” and is not contained by its material crystalline structure.

This paints a unique picture for us in the modern world as to how the alchemists perceived nature as a symbolic language and related chemicals to energetic, esoteric, or spiritual life principles.

Sulfur has the qualities of being light, volatile, aromatic, pungent, hot and fiery in nature. Energetically it is said to move up and out, and be of a dynamic quality. It is considered pure energy, or force. But energy or force cannot do anything on its own, it stays in its lofty etheric heights without having a body to operate through.

The Sulfur of any thing, or its Soul, is said to be its core, essential nature. Its own unique reflection of the Source, the Light of Nature, an expression of the Oneness that is All- as if a piece of the Sun broke off and put its light at the center of every living thing. Sulfur can be equated to consciousness, not necessarily the undifferentiated consciousness of God, but rather our own unique embodiment of consciousness. In this way, our own Soul is unique, individual- unlike anything else in the created world. Within us it is our own unique gift, path and purpose. Some refer to it as the “Secret Fire” within our heart.

Whether you believe in God or not does not matter, we can use the word Source, Big Bang, the Quantum, the Light of Nature- whatever terminology you prefer is fine. The point here is that Sulfur is a direct reflection of the unnamable Source from which we all come from.

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THE HERBAL ALCHEMY

TRAINING SESSIONS



Lesson Two: THE THREE PHILOSOPHICAL PRINCIPLES OF SPAGYRICS

Within the plant realm, Sulfur is the consciousness of the plant- it's own unique morphogenetic field that has been passed down throughout time, creating its own distinct qualities and characteristics. When you are sitting with a plant and seeking to connect to it spiritually, the goal is to unite our own Sulfur with the Sulfur of the plant- a sort of merging of consciousness- so that you may come to a deeper level of connection and relationship with it. In fact, that is how you go about learning the plants from the plants!

But each Philosophical Principle in plants also has a particular physical manifestation as well. The Sulfur of the plant is reflected in the essential oils, or volatile oils. These compounds are so lightweight that they easily evaporate into the air, which the alchemists saw as the part of a plant closest to this Source energy. When you heat up a plant, this is the first component of the medicine to “lift off” or to say it alchemically, to volatilize into the Heavens.

Each essential oil of a plant is distinct in its nature. Clove is very different from Rosemary, which is very different from Cinnamon, which is altogether quite different from Lavender. The unique Sulfur signature of a plant is expressed through the nature of its volatile oils- they are all individual- in the same way that *your* Soul is uniquely different from anyone else's!

But what about Nettles or Cleavers or Dandelion leaves? They don't have any essential oils... are they soulless?

In alchemy there is said to be a prime polarity, which is expressed as **volatile and fixed** qualities, or more “airy” and “earthy” qualities. Essential oils are an expression of *volatile Sulfur*, as they evaporate into the air and in a sense, can actually exist outside their body! (Visualize standing next to a Lavender bush and you can smell it from a foot away.) Plants that do not have essential oils are said to have a more *fixed Sulfur*, which is expressed as a thick resin that can be extracted from the plant through other spagyric techniques.

Through a core alchemical doctrine, called the Doctrine of Sympathy [aka Doctrine of Similars], it is said that the Sulfur of a plant has an affinity for the Sulfur of a person, and that plants with a greater amount of philosophical Sulfur (or essential oils) will tend to have

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THE HERBAL ALCHEMY

TRAINING SESSIONS



Lesson Two:

THE THREE PHILOSOPHICAL PRINCIPLES OF SPAGYRICS

a stronger healing affinity for the Sulfur, or Soul, of the person. This is one way we determine the properties and affinities of a plant for a person, which helps you to get specific in your remedy selection and formulation.

I find it interesting that in the essential oil world, many discuss the correlation of the sense of smell to the limbic system and the way in which it unlocks our *emotional memories*, and thus have the ability to heal old traumas and wounds to the Soul. This is a direct reflection of the Sulfur principle in plants and their affinity for the Sulfur principle in people.

But Sulfur is unable to act on it's own in nature. It is lofty, etheric, ungrounded, unable to actually influence the physical world without the presence of the other 2 Principles. Hence from the alchemical perspective, the use of pure essential oils is against the natural order of things- because in order for the essence of Sulfur to be fully utilized, it needs to be carried through the other 2 Philosophical Principles.

Mercury

Our next principle is Mercury. Chemical mercury is an interesting substance, for it is a liquid metal that has a highly volatile nature- meaning that it can turn into a gas quite easily. Solid, liquid, and gas are the 3 states of matter according to science, and mercury is interesting in that it can transition between the 3 swiftly and with ease. This is why the classic glyph of the Mercury Principle contains the crescent, the circle and the cross, which is symbolic of its ability to move between these 3 states of matter as well as the upper, lower and middle worlds. The alchemists perceived this and saw it as a direct reflection of the Spirit, which acts as the bridge between the Soul and the Body.

Now let's first clarify the difference between the Soul and the Spirit, because the words are oftentimes used interchangeably in the English language and people often think of them as being the same thing.

The easiest way to understand the difference, is that the Soul is the unique and individual essence, whereas the Spirit is the universal life force, the animating factor that instills intelligence and language within all things. So there is your own embodiment and expression of consciousness, which is your Soul, and then there is the vital force which animates and

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THE HERBAL ALCHEMY

TRAINING SESSIONS



Lesson Two:

THE THREE PHILOSOPHICAL PRINCIPLES OF SPAGYRICS

anchors the Soul into the body. Mercury can be thought of as the web of life, the one spirit that moves through all things.

In alchemy, Mercury is translated as the human spirit, but it is said to primarily manifest through our psyche- that is our thinking and feeling. If you think of someone saying, “they are in high spirits,” they are referring to that persons psychological and emotional disposition- they are feeling and thinking positively.

This corresponds quite closely to the planet Mercury in western astrology, which relates to the linear, rational mind, language and communication. Mercury, or Hermes, was the messenger of the Gods who could traverse between Mt. Olympus and the Underworld. The key word to understanding this principle is that it is the middle principle, the bridge between Soul and Body, inner and outer, macro and micro.

This is in fact *exactly* what language does! We are able to take our own internal world, our experiences, and translate it to another human outside of us. It is a mediation of the inner and the outer. In alchemy, this is what Mercury does- it takes the etheric messages of the Soul and translates them into the body via our thoughts and feelings.

From the botanical perspective, Mercury relates to the intelligence of the plant. Whereas we connect to the Soul of a plant through a deep experience of merging our consciousness with it, we connect to the Spirit of a plant more through non-linear modes of communication- subtle feelings in our bodies, emotional hues and tones, dreams, visions, colors, songs... these are ways the spirit of a plant communicates to our own spirits. It is how they touch our hearts and minds.

On the physical side, this intelligence of a plant manifests through its chemistry, which is the primary physiological means plants communicate to our bodies. We can think of plant constituents as a physical manifestation of their intelligence or language.

Traditionally speaking, the Mercury of a plant was said to be the alcohol that a plant generates through fermentation. It's quite brilliant actually. If you take any plant- barks, roots, seeds, leaves, grass clipping- *anything*- and place it in a bucket full of water and allow it to ferment, or putrefy, it will yield a certain degree of ethyl alcohol. *Every plant yields alcohol*, as they all contain sugars and wild yeasts- though in varying amounts.

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THE HERBAL ALCHEMY

TRAINING SESSIONS



Lesson Two:

THE THREE PHILOSOPHICAL PRINCIPLES OF SPAGYRICS

When this fermentation process is done to **any plant**, it gives up its Spirit in the form of alcohol. Thus the alchemists saw that alcohol is the universal spirit of the plant kingdom and thus the Mercury of the plant. Remember, Spirit is universal, Soul is individual. In the same way that the essential oils of plants are all *very* different (their individual Soul), yet all of those plants will universally generate ethyl alcohol (their universal Spirit). This is where we get the word “spirits” to describe distilled alcohols- it comes from alchemy.

In a more modern approach, many modern day alchemists describe the Mercury of a plant as the alcohol and water soluble constituents, or the chemistry of the plant which is extracted in alcohol. Mercury is said to be composed of the Air and Water Elements, which is related to alcohol (Air) and water (Water). This is why alcohol is the most common menstrum used to extract plants, because it draws out their intelligence.

Thus, most common herbal tinctures out there contain *at best* 2/3 of the principles of plants. They extract the essential oils (Volatile Sulfur) and the alcohol/water soluble constituents (Mercury), and thus contain the Soul and Spirit of plants. Plants that *do not* contain Volatile Sulfur (like Nettles or Horsetail) oftentimes are lacking the Sulfur principle completely in most tinctures, as the Fixed Sulfur is locked deep within the body of the plant and requires different techniques to extract it other than tincturing.

So as you can see, many herbal preparations out there on the market are not embodiments of the wholeness of the plants. And while some will have 2/3 of these principles, what literally *all* of them are missing these days, is the final philosophical principle: Salt.

Salt ⊖

The Salt principle is represented by common salt, or Sodium chloride. It is interesting to note that in alchemy, this principle is said to be a union of the Earth and Water Elements- and it is Sodium chloride that we get from seawater when it is evaporated down. Many cosmologies, mythologies and creation stories speak of the “primordial ocean” which was the mother to all of life, and that all physical life ultimately emerged from the Water Element. This Salt Principle could be thought of as the Earth contained inherently in the Water- an embodiment of the first physical matter.

This philosophical principle is relatively simple to understand, as it is the physical body of any being. From an alchemical perspective, the body is the physical vehicle through which the Sulfur and Mercury (the Soul and Spirit, respectively) enter the material world. Without

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TRAINING SESSIONS



Lesson Two: THE THREE PHILOSOPHICAL PRINCIPLES OF SPAGYRICS

bodies, our world would be an etheric mishmash of commingling spirits and souls, with no distinction of self.

Within ourselves, Salt is our own physical bodies, with its cells that create tissues, which create organs, which connect to create organ systems, that ultimately form the entire complex anatomy and physiology that is our bodies. And while philosophically we speak of Salt, Mercury and Sulfur as separate entities, it is *crucial* in our holistic model that Mercury and Sulfur are infused and implanted into every aspect of Salt! They are not separate. Indeed, they are within every cell, every tissue, every organ. In this way, every layer and part of the body is said to contain intelligence and consciousness.

In plants, the Salt principle is the physical structure of the plant. The way in which we connect to the Salt of a plant is through our senses- observing it with our touch, smell, touch and most definitely taste. Any way that we physically interact with a plant is engaging with its Salt. Structurally speaking, it is the cellulose and fibers that comprise a majority of its physical structure, but more importantly are its minerals.

On a deeper level, the refined Salt of a plant is the alkali mineral salts, also referred to as the mineral matrix. Classically, these are called the purified “corpus” or body of the plant, which is the direct vehicle for the purified Sulfur (essential oils) and Mercury (alcohol) to operate through in order to influence the human organism. The presence of plant Salts within a prepared medicine drives it deeper into the physical tissues of the body, directing the Soul and Spirit of the plant to where it is needed within the person physically, energetically and spiritually.

From an alchemical perspective, a medicine missing the mineral salts is considered a “disembodied medicine,” meaning that the plant doesn’t have its physical body to work through. This is because the most common practice in herbal medicine making is to discard the plant material after it has been extracted- whether that’s in making a tincture, a tea, or any other form of extract- usually the plant itself is composted, and with it goes this essential principle!

When a medicine contains these alkali minerals, the intelligence and consciousness of the plant has their vehicle- their body- that enables them to have an influence on this physical world. The Salt Principle guides the Spirit and Soul to *exactly* where it needs to go into the body, typically at significantly lower doses than standard herbal extracts. They are more

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TRAINING SESSIONS



Lesson Two: THE THREE PHILOSOPHICAL PRINCIPLES OF SPAGYRICS

effective, more efficient, and have a significantly more powerful effect upon the mind, the emotions, and our perception.

Over the last decade as I've traveled across the country and administered spagyrics to literally thousands of people at the various herbal conferences, workshops, and events where I teach. When the proper remedy is selected, the medicinal and evolutionary effect of these types of extracts is oftentimes *immediate*, leading to a powerful physiological and emotional response. In fact, one of the most common responses I get when administering spagyrics to someone that has never taken them before is "wow I can actually *feel it working!!*"

This is not only important for the sake of administering remedies to people whom are sick and in need of healing, but also for you as an herbalist. This is because you have the opportunity to directly experience the medicinal and "initiatric" (or evolutionary) properties of the plants yourself.

Remember, the spagyric process is only complete when *you* have been consciously assisted in *your* evolution by the plants you work with. That is the essence of Alchemical Herbalism. You prepare medicines out of plants within the lab, and the plants prepare medicine out of you in your own Body, Spirit and Soul.

That is what the plant path is all about, cultivating an inner forest, an inner garden, an inner temple out of the vital intelligence of the Earth and Cosmos through these magical beings we call plants.

Be sure to download the other PDF's which show you the step-by-step process of how to extract the Salt Principle in your plants!!

Watch your inbox for the next Herbal Alchemy Training Session, you will learn how to specifically apply these unique forms of medicine through the Alchemical Herbalism Blueprint. This map integrates the great herbal and medical traditions of the world, shows the link between the physical and spiritual properties of plants, as well as how to relate symptoms of the body, psyche and soul.

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