

What Alchemy Really Is

Webster's International Dictionary defines alchemy as: "The medieval chemical science, whose great objects were the transmutation of the baser metals into gold, and the discovery of the universal cure for diseases and means of indefinitely prolonging life." This, the commonly accepted exoteric definition of alchemy, gives a partial and therefore distorted idea of the significance of Hermetic science and practice. Our first lesson will therefore be devoted to a consideration of the true meaning of the Hermetic doctrine, its real objects, and the field of its practical operations.

The literature of alchemy is difficult because it is intentionally cryptic. Alchemical authors use a complicated and obscure system of symbolism. They continually resort to blinds, enigmas, cryptograms, and other devices intended to conceal their real meaning from uninitiated readers. Never do they actually lie, but it has been said that when they seem to speak most openly the wary reader should be most ready to suspect a hidden meaning.

The difficulty of getting at the real import of the alchemical literature is further increased by the fact that there are three distinct classes of alchemical books. The first contains the works of the true sages, who were in the chain of the oral tradition of Hermetic science. The second class consists of books written by persons who misunderstood the writings of the genuine adepts, and supposed them to be explanations of purely physical processes having to do with the modification and transmutation of ordinary metals by means of crude chemical experiments. The third class comprises many volumes written by charlatans and pretenders, who took advantage of popular interest in alchemy to line their pockets at the expense of their dupes.

Fortunately, the oral tradition of Hermeticism has never died out. It is because the School of Ageless Wisdom has become a link in the chain of that tradition that we are able to present this body of knowledge concerning the inner secrets of Hermeticism. We possess the keys to the

cryptic symbols of the adepts. We shall use them to give you a clear exposition of the teaching, free from the intentional concealments which were necessary in less enlightened ages.

We know that our claim will be ridiculed by the world. It will be denied, too, by some who have established themselves in the public eye as authorities, by reason of their voluminous commentaries and exposition upon occult and mystical topics. The fact remains that the alchemical teaching given here is by no means the opinion of one person, or group of persons, arrived at after the perusal of ancient tomes. As in our expositions of Tarot and Rosicrucianism, what we give you here is a faithful transmission of instruction received from the Inner School, and confirmed by our own personal experience. Whether you accept it as such just now is not the important thing. We know that if you put this instruction to the tests of reason, intuition, and practice, you will be able to demonstrate its truth beyond the shadow of a doubt. Furthermore, if you carry the work to its final stages, you will be able to make your own personal contact with the adepts of the Inner School.

The bulk of alchemical literature now extant was written during the Middle Ages, but the beginnings of the Hermetic science and practice may be traced to a much earlier period. For example, a fundamental tenet of alchemy is the declaration of the *Emerald Tablet*: ‘That which is below is as that which is above, and that which is above is as that which is below, for the performance of the miracles of the One Thing.’ There can be little doubt that the *Emerald Tablet*, as we have it, is a relatively modern work, although it is attributed to Hermes Trismegistus; but exactly the same doctrine is taught in the Hindu *Katha Upanishad*: ‘As below so above, as above so below; he passes from death to death who finds here the least shadow of variety. There is no variety in THAT. It should be grasped by the mind alone. He, indeed, passes from death to death who here finds the least shadow of variety.’

Swami Vivekananda writes: “In India there was a sect called the *Rasayanas*. Their idea was that ideality, knowledge, spirituality and religion were all very right, but that the body was the only instrument by which to attain to all these. If the body broke now and then it would take so much more time to attain the goal. For instance, a man wants to practice Yoga, or wants to become spiritual. Before he has advanced very far he dies. Then he takes

another body and begins again, then dies, and so on, and in this way much time will be lost in dying and being born again. If the body could be made strong and perfect, so that it would get rid of birth and death, we should have more time to become spiritual. So these *Rasayan*as say, first make the body very strong, and they claim that this body can be made immortal. Their idea is that if the mind is manufacturing the body, and if it be true that each mind is only one particular outlet to that infinite energy, and that there is no limit to each particular outlet getting any amount of power, why is it impossible that we should keep our bodies all the time? We shall have to manufacture all the bodies we shall ever have. As soon as this body dies we shall have to manufacture another. If we can do that why cannot we do that just here and now, without getting out? The theory is perfectly correct. If it is possible that we live after death, and make other bodies, why is it impossible that we should have the power of making bodies here, without entirely dissolving this body, simply changing it continually? They also thought that in mercury and in sulphur was hidden the most wonderful power, and that by certain preparations of these a man could keep the body as long as he liked.’ – *Raja Yoga*, pages 207 - 208.

So long ago as 1879, Dr. William A. P. Martin, a missionary to China, published an article in the *China Review*, in which he offered evidence to show that alchemy was known and practiced in China at least three hundred years before the Christian Era, and that it entered Europe by way of Byzantium and Alexandria. He cited many ancient texts, which include the following points of similarity between Chinese alchemical literature and that of the West: (1) The doctrine that there is a seed of metals; (2) the idea that there is in all things an active principle whereby they may attain to a condition of higher development; (3) the fact that alchemy was perpetuated in China chiefly by oral tradition, supplemented by books written in figurative language; (4) Chinese alchemy, like that of Europe, is inseparable from astrology and magic; (5) the combination of the idea of the transmutation of metals with that of the making of a universal medicine; (6) the secret of making gold was regarded as being inferior to that of the Elixir of Life; (7) success in the work required self-culture and self-discipline; (8) the metals were all regarded as being composite; (9) the true matters of the work were concealed by names also used in the West, including lead, mercury, sulphur, and cinnabar; (10) the same symbolic terms appear in Chinese as in Western alchemical texts—such as, the

‘Radical Principle,’ the ‘Green Dragon,’ the ‘True Mercury,’ the ‘True Lead,’ and so on; (11) there were two alchemical processes, the first inward and spiritual, the second outward and material, and there were two elixirs, a greater and a lesser.

We have condensed this account of Dr. Martin’s essay from A. E. Waite’s *Secret Tradition in Alchemy*. Mr. Waite is obliged to include it in his book, because it cannot be ignored, but he does what he can to minimize its importance. This, because the evidence conflicts more or less with his thesis – which is that the bulk of alchemical writings are the product of sordid lust for gold, written by deluded men who had in view no other end than the hope of sudden wealth. As usual, Mr. Waite is an indefatigable and successful miner for facts and information, but his every page demonstrates his lack of the keys of oral tradition which unlock the treasure-houses of Ageless Wisdom.

The Western literature of alchemy can be traced back to the days when Alexandria was the meeting-place for that group of adepts of the Inner School who later transferred their activities to Fez, and from that city issued the earliest versions of Tarot. In much of its doctrine, the Hermetic and alchemical philosophy is definitely Neo-Platonic, and as Neo-Platonism is tinged with ideas brought to Alexandria by wandering teachers from India, we can understand how there came to be a mixture of Hindu thought, Egyptian magic, and Greek philosophy in the Hermetic teaching set forth in the symbols of alchemy and Tarot.

Authorities disagree as to the derivation of the noun *alchemy*. Plutarch supposed it to be a combination of the Arabic definite article *al* with the Greek *chumein*, signifying ‘to pour.’ An opinion prevailing today is that the true derivation is from *Khem*, an Egyptian noun meaning “black, fertile soil,” in contrast to barren sand. *Khem* was the name given by the Egyptians to their country, and even Plutarch knew this, for he mentions it in his *Isis and Osiris*. The derivation of alchemy from *Khem* is further confirmed by the fact that old alchemical books allude to Hermetic practice as “the Egyptian Art.”

The esoteric doctrine received by us is that the noun *alchemy*, like many other words in the Western literature of Hermetic science, is derived from Hebrew. It does not follow from this that alchemy is of Hebrew origin.

Rather should it be understood that for certain purposes the Inner School adopted the Chaldean-Hebrew language to preserve and transmit esoteric doctrines, just as modern scientists use Latin and Greek for similar purposes.

In Hebrew the word is ALChMH. It is a combination of the Semitic god-name AL, El, signifying ‘strength,’ with ChMH, *Khammaw*, the Hebrew poetical noun for “sun.” Thus “alchemy” may be interpreted as meaning “strength of the sun,” or “God the Sun.” Both interpretations are in harmony with alchemical doctrine.

Because ChMH, *Khammaw*, is derived from the root ChM, *Khem*, ‘the black one,’ which, as we have said, was given by the Egyptians to their own country, and by Egyptian priests to a certain aspect of the father-god, Osiris, alchemy is truly the Egyptian Art, and it is also the Science of God, the Black One, that is, the Hidden One. It is the science of the hidden essence which is veiled by solar energy. It is also the Osirian Art, because it is the system of practice which enables us to control the hidden powers of the “underworld” which, according to the Egyptian doctrine, is governed by Osiris. This hidden realm of Osiris is the world of occult forces and laws concealed beneath the superficial appearances of the world which is perceived by the greater number of human beings.

As this lesson is intended for affiliates of the School of Ageless Wisdom who have had the preliminary training given in the Basic Tarot Course, we may also apply to the word ALChMH the knowledge to be gained from the Tarot Keys. Thus we find that the Hebrew letters of the word correspond to the following Tarot sequence:

Letters	A	L	Ch	M	H
Key Nos.	0	11	7	12	4

This may be read in many ways, and you should try to find readings for yourself. Here is one: (A:0) Alchemy is the Art of using the Life-Breath in accordance with the fundamental postulate that no matter how far the physical manifestation of that Life-Breath may have been carried by evolution, further progress is always possible. (L:11) In the practice of this art, one of the great secrets is that of the balance of forces by their opposites, hence it is written that equilibrium is the basis of the Great

Work. (Ch:7) Furthermore, alchemical practice is made possible by the fact, alluded to in our quotation from Vivekananda, that each personal mind is one particular outlet to infinite energy - that is to say, that every person is a “House of Influence,” receiving and specializing the currents of inexhaustible celestial energy. (M:12) This being rightly understood, it becomes evident that the business of the alchemist has much to do with the reversal of the mental attitudes and ways of life followed by the masses. (H:4) Finally, alchemy aims at nothing less than complete control over all physical conditions, because its object is to make the personal mind an unobstructed channel for the Constituting Intelligence which already exercises precisely that control.

By adding the numbers of the foregoing Keys, we get 34, and since there is no Tarot Key bearing that number, we add the digits and got 7. Thus we learn from the Key numbers corresponding to the letters of ALChMH that the essential meaning of the word is summed up by Key 7, *The Chariot*. In this connection it is interesting to note that one of the celebrated alchemical texts is named *The Triumphal Chariot of Antimony*. It is one of the subtlest of alchemical books because it teaches the spiritual side of the art while at the same time devoting much space to the medicinal and other virtues of the actual metal antimony. Its author, Basil Valentine, clearly indicates his knowledge of the doctrine conveyed by Key 7, in his instructions concerning the preparation of the student for laboratory practice, wherein he recommends:

“Invocation of God, with a certain heavenly intention, drawn from the depths of a sincere heart and conscience, liberated from ambition, hypocrisy and all other vices which are in affinity with these, including arrogance, boldness, luxury, petulancy, oppression of the poor and similar evils. All these are to be eradicated from the heart, that when a man desires to prostrate himself before the Throne of Grace, in order to obtain health, he may do so with a conscience free from unprofitable weeds, so that his body may be transmuted into a holy temple of God and purged from all uncleanness.”

By numeration of letters, ALChMH is 84, and this is a significant number because it is 7 x 12, indicating the working of the seven alchemical metals or planets through their twelve spheres of manifestation, which are represented in astrology by the twelve signs of the zodiac. We shall come to these metals and their real meaning before the end of the lesson.

Furthermore, in Qabalah the number 84 represents these words: AGP, *Aggaph*, a chosen troop; DM, *Dammam*, was silent; OhLVM, *Khalome*, a dream; ChNVK, *Enoch*, signifying ‘initiation;’ and IDO, *Yawda*, to know. The slightest acquaintance with alchemical literature suffices to show that the adepts of Hermetic science are indeed a chosen troop; that they maintain strict silence as to the innermost secrets of the art from all who have not proved their fitness to receive that instruction; that one of their ways of communication is through direct action upon that mode of human consciousness which forms the imagery of our dreams that Hermetic science is the essence of what is taught in all systems of initiation; and, finally, that this science is not mere speculation or theory, but definite and demonstrable knowledge. Thus you may see that even the name of this ancient art, when interpreted in accordance with ancient occult methods, gives a clear statement of what alchemy really is.

Alchemy, then is misunderstood if it be thought to be no more than a crude precursor of modern chemistry. Its true adepts sought other results than those aimed at by the modern chemist. The instruments of their work had nothing in common with the apparatus of our laboratories. True, they described such apparatus. They even published illustrations of it in some of their books. They did so as part of their plan to prevent uninitiated readers from discovering their real secret. For, as we have already said, the alchemical books were written as supplements to oral instruction. They were aids to memory, rather than complete expositions of Hermetic practice. Thus they were so arranged that none but those who were duly and truly prepared might guess the real meaning from a perusal of their strange, cryptic pages.

The Hermetic art has to do with processes carried out in a *hidden* laboratory. In the works of genuine adepts, the vessels of the art are invariably described as being *secret*. So are the processes. Thus Bernard of Trevisan writes: “Dissolution is the whole mystery of the art, and is to be accomplished, not as some have thought, *by means of fire*, but in a *wholly abstruse manner*, by the help of Mercury.” Here the adjective “abstruse” has the now obsolete meanings: “concealed, or hidden.”

Thomas Charnocke gives a hint to the same effect when he says, in his *Breviary*: ‘I think few potters within this realm have made at any time such cunning ware, as we for our science do fashion and prepare.’

Can anything be plainer than this continual repetition of such words as *secret, hidden, abstruse*? Even the adjective ‘Hermetic’ has come to have this meaning, as when we say that a vessel is “hermetically sealed.” Alchemical practice is primarily an interior operation.

At the same time, although we have said that alchemy is not crude chemistry, and that all its instruments are contained in a hidden laboratory, you must not jump to the conclusion that it is a pure metaphysical process. It may be correctly described as being a psycho-physiological operation. The Hermetic practice is a method of psychological transformation directed by the conscious mind of man. This is the mode of human consciousness personified by the Egyptians as Thoth, by the Greeks as Hermes, and by the Romans as Mercury. Thus it becomes evident that what Bernard of Trevisan means by saying that the operation is performed by the help of Mercury is little more than a paraphrase of what we have quoted from the Katha Upanishad: It should be grasped by the mind alone.”

Dissolution is said to be the whole mystery of alchemy, because Hermetic practice enables us to control those functions of our bodies which dissolve, or break down into their constituent elements, the forms of materials taken from our environment. The laboratory of the alchemist is his own personality. The secret vessels therein are organs in his own physical body, together with their astral and etheric counterparts.

The principal piece of alchemical apparatus is a furnace, called an “athanor.” Eliphas Levi says: “We are all in possession of the chemical instrument, the great and sole athanor which answers for the separation of the subtle from the gross and the fixed from the volatile. This instrument, complete as the world and precise as mathematics, is represented by the sages under the emblem of the pentagram, or five-pointed star, which is the absolute sign of human intelligence. I will follow the example of the wise by forbearing to name it; it is too easy to guess it.”

Today there is no need for even the slight concealment which seemed advisable when Levi wrote. The athanor is the human organism. Its name, like many other alchemical terms, is derived from Hebrew. In that language it is *Ath-Ha-Nour*, which means ‘Essence of Fire.’ Thus Bernard of Trevisan is correct when he says that the Great Work is not performed by means of fire, and so are the other sages who insist that the fire employed

by them is “no common fire.” It is the essence of fire, manifested as the human organism, which provides us with the instrument for the Great Work. Hence the athanor is defined as a “self-feeding, digesting furnace, in which an equable heat is maintained.” Is not this a fairly good description of the human body?

Some reference to the significance of the pentagram has been made in other publications of the School of Ageless Wisdom. It is intended, however to publish as soon as possible a series of texts on magic, in which the arcane meaning of this august symbol will be fully dealt with.

For the present it is enough to say that Levi’s own interpretation of the pentagram includes these two points: (1) that the five-pointed star is a figure of the human body; (2) that it expresses the mind’s domination over the elements. Here he plainly states the Hermetic position, which is the same as that of the Hindu adepts mentioned by Swami Vivekananda. The mind of man can, and does, dominate all the forces of nature, through the instrumentality of the body. Hence the primary work of the alchemist is directed toward the purification and perfection of this chemical instrument.

It is perfectly true that the alchemist seeks to transmute the baser metals into gold. When he speaks of the seven metals, however, he means something other than the common products of the mine. Thus George Ripley warns his readers (in his *Compound of Alchymie*) against fruitless experiments with various substances, including “meane Mettalls dygged out of the Myne.” And the other sages make the same distinction, speaking always of ‘our’ Mercury, ‘our’ Sulphur, ‘our’ Gold and Silver, so as to make it plain that they are mentioning something peculiar to the Hermetic operation. The alchemical metals bear the names of the sun, moon, and the five planets known to the ancients, as follows:

LEAD	SATURN	♄
IRON	MARS	♂
TIN	JUPITER	♃
GOLD	SOL or SUN	☉
COPPER or BRASS	VENUS	♀
SILVER	LUNA	☾
QUICKSILVER	MERCURY	☿

In many alchemical texts and formulas, the astrological symbols of the heavenly bodies named above are used to represent the metals. Elsewhere in the instruction issued by the School of Ageless Wisdom we have explained the correspondence of these planets to seven “interior stars” located within the human organism. The seven stars are the same as the seven chakras, or lotuses, of the Yoga philosophy. They have been identified with seven centers of the human nervous system, as follows:

SATURN	SACRAL PLEXUS
MARS	PROSTATIC GANGLION
JUPITER	SOLAR PLEXUS
SOL or SUN	CARDIAC PLEXUS
VENUS	PHARYNGEAL
LUNA or MOON	PITUITARY BODY
MERCURY	PINEAL BODY

The transmutation of the baser metals into gold is the process whereby the vibratory action of these interior stars is so modified that the lower rates of vibration are transmuted, (literally, ‘changed across’) and sublimated, or lifted up. This transmutation of the subtle force which works through the seven interior stars or alchemical metals has a triple consequence. It leads to spiritual illumination. It enables the perfected adept to exercise powers which remain latent in most men. It gives him perfect bodily health.

The adept’s health is the result of the perfect combination of all the chemical and electrical energies whose coordinated activities maintain the form and functions of his physical body. This state of radiant vitality is

communicable. When it is attained, the alchemist can project his own rate of vibration upon other persons, and by inducing a similar rate in their etheric bodies, can heal their diseases. The alchemist's mental and spiritual vibration is also communicable. By projecting his own state of consciousness upon the mind of another, he can raise the level of that person's consciousness. Of such spiritual contagion there are many examples in the Bible, and in the sacred writings of other nations,

An actual force is projected. The alchemists call it the powder of projection, by means of which, they say, the baser metals may be changed into gold. But Ripley warns us against misuse of the powder. He points out that the metals upon which projection is made must first be properly cleansed.

What is meant is obvious when we understand the figurative language of alchemy. The work of projection refers to the transmutation of the minds and bodies of the adept's disciples. Upon this projection the perfection of the art depends, and it is by this projection of an unwritten something from the consciousness of one who knows to the mind of a properly prepared pupil that the inner secret of alchemy is transmitted, for it is never committed to writing. Indeed, it cannot be, for it goes beyond words.

Alchemy, then, aims at a state of consciousness which is reflected into the physical plane as perfect vibratory equilibrium. That equilibrium already exists in nature, and it is the business of the alchemist to manifest it through his own personality. Thus we are told that equilibrium is the basis of the Great Work, and admonished by all books on Hermetic practice to "imitate nature."

The higher, perfectly balanced state of personality is none other than the "new mind" of the injunction: "Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind." It is a new understanding of life, based upon a new kind of first-hand experience.

A prominent characteristic of this experience is that it is permeated with the quality of eternity, hinted at in the Rosicrucian inquiry: "Were it not an excellent thing to live always so as if you had lived from the beginning of the world, and should still live to the end thereof?"

Yet alchemy is not exclusively concerned with consciousness. What is aimed at in the performance of the Great Work is more than a belief, more than a state of mind, more than a metaphysical realization. When we say that the Great Work unfolds a new kind of consciousness, we mean you to understand that he in whom this unfoldment takes place is thereby enabled to express all the powers that go with it. He does actually find himself able to command the spirits of the elements, the subtle forces whose interplay of activity produces all the appearances of the physical world. This command enables him to transform his corruptible body into a body incorruptible. By this same mastery he also exerts over the physical forms in his environment such control that he can alter their appearance, and even change their atomic structure, by raising or lowering their rates of vibration. Thus the alchemical mastery does, in the end, enable its adepts to perform actual physical transmutations.

A great stumbling-block in the way of would-be alchemists is that so few of them perceive that man himself is the *primary* subject of the art. No secret formula can enable you to control the processes of nature unless you begin by learning to control them within yourself. Your mind must be changed, so that you perceive and understand things hidden from the uninitiated. Your body must be changed, too, before you may safely employ it to specialize and transmit the high-tension currents of the Essence of Fire, which would destroy the physical organism of the average person.

Thus it is evident that alchemy is not, as some have supposed, merely a curious veil for religious mysticism. It is true that some alchemists have been mystics, like Jacob Boehme and Thomas Vaughan. It is true also that certain alchemical writings lend themselves easily to such a moral interpretation as was attempted by General Ethan Allen Hitchcock when he wrote his *Remarks on Alchemy and the Alchemists*, Concerning this book, A. E. Waite justly says:

“It renders alchemical literature ridiculous by representing it as veiling in allegory and illustrating by symbols the most familiar principles of ethics, the ordinary laws of conduct and counsels of thinking in the heart – in other words, the daily matters of public teaching, not only by schoolmen and theologians but by mendicant friars in the booths and marketplaces.”

Mrs. Atwood's *Suggestive Inquiry into the Hermetic Mystery*, originally printed in 1850, only to be withdrawn in a few weeks because its author feared she had said too much, and then republished in 1920, after her death, offers yet another interpretation. Mrs. Atwood's thesis is that the alchemical operation is none other than the procedure we know today as hypnosis or mesmerism. She made a valiant attempt to defend her position, and her book is interesting, but not convincing, even to those who have not entered into the chain of the oral tradition. She and her father believed that the First Matter of the alchemists was identical with the magnetic fluid postulated by Mesmer to account for his cures. They were convinced that the alchemical process was a method for separating this subtle vital fluid from the gross body of man. By this means they believed it possible to heal diseases, awaken clairvoyant powers, and raise the consciousness of the mesmeric subject to higher levels.

As a variant of this interpretation, S. Foster Damon, in an article published some years since in the *Occult Review*, advanced the opinion that the First Matter of the alchemists is the ectoplasm supposed to be the basis of spirit materializations. He reached this view from his study of the writings of Thomas Vaughan.

Now, the three interpretations cited above have all some part of the truth. The observance of certain fundamental ethical principles is insisted upon by all genuine Hermetic authors. The Great Work does include practices akin to those of Mesmer, although they are far in advance of his inadequate technique. It may even be admitted that the First Matter is the substance employed by genuine mediums for the production of their phenomena, although it should be noted that to admit this is not quite the same as to say that the First Matter is ectoplasm.

The fact is that alchemy is really a Western variation of what Hindus call Yoga. This point we shall endeavor to make clear in the remaining pages of this lesson.

We have already called attention to the identity between the alchemical metals and the chakras of the Yoga system. We have also shown the remarkable similarity of thought and expression between the *Emerald Tablet* and a passage from the *Katha Upanishad*. We may continue these parallels considerably beyond these beginnings.

Fundamental in Hermetic science is the doctrine that all things whatsoever are manifestations of three principles, called SULPHUR, MERCURY, and SALT. They are not the common physical substances. Their names indicate three ways in which the One Thing manifests itself. One of these may be identified by a quality like a quality possessed by sulphur. Another has characteristics like those of quicksilver. The third has properties which resemble those of salt.

Sulphur or brimstone burns easily, and has choking fumes. It has been associated for centuries with the fires of hell, and with the soothing passions which those fires typify. Mercury is liquid and flowing, and the surface of each globule of this metal is a mirror reflecting its environment. Its rapid movement, like that of a living creature, accounts for the name quicksilver, in which “quick” means both living and rapid, as we may see from the French *argent vive*, literally, ‘living silver.’ Salt crystallizes in perfect cubes, which have been types of earth since the time of Pythagoras; and its property is to arrest dissolution, or disintegrative chemical change. The quality of sulphur, then, is fiery and passionate. That of mercury is vital and reflective. That of salt is arrestive and binding.

Compare these alchemical doctrines with the Yoga teaching. Hindu philosophers declare that three qualities, or *gunas*, enter into the composition of all things. Wherever there is a form, there are the three qualities. Their names are *Sattva*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas*. In the fourteenth chapter of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the characteristics of these three qualities are fully described. There we are told that *Rajas* is the embodiment of desire, and the producer of thirst and relish; that it ties the ego through attachment to action; that from it are born such things as greed, initiation of action, energy in great worldly achievements, unrest, and thirst. We learn also that *Sattva* is illuminative; that it is transparent, or light-transmitting, that it ties the ego through attachment to happiness and knowledge; that when it is dominant there is the illumination of knowledge at every gate of the body, and thus the senses and faculties attain the fullest manifestation of power. Finally, *Tamas* is said to be born of insensibility; to tie up the ego by means of heedlessness, laziness, sleep; to veil the power of discrimination; to be the cause of spiritual blindness. We might represent

these three qualities by three English words: Desire-force (Rajas); Intelligence (Sattva); Inertia (Tamas). The same three words could be used in place of sulphur, mercury, and salt.

Again, the alchemists recognize five underlying phases of manifestation, or five classes of expression for the One Thing. The first of these is the Quintessence, or Fifth Essence, so named because it is a fifth thing, extracted in the alchemical operation from the four grosser elements. Yet Hermetic writers are agreed that this Quintessence is really the root or source of the four elements, Fire, Water, Air, and Earth.

Their teaching exactly parallels that of the Yogis, who call the five classes of expression the five Tattvas. These are: Akasha (Quintessence); Tejas or Agni (Fire); Apas (Water); Vayu (Air); Prithivi (Earth). Furthermore the Yogi philosophy definitely states that the five Tattvas are the subtle principles of sensation; that each Tattva has its own peculiar property; and that there is a cyclic ebb and flow of the Tattvas, in regular sequence, through all things and creatures.

One of the most important Yogic practices aims at control of this cyclic flow of the Tattvas. Similarly, in alchemy, we hear of the Wheel of the Elements, with the Quintessence at the center. It is illustrated in Key 10 of Tarot, Concerning it Ripley writes:

*“But first of these elements make thou rotation,
And into Water thy Earth turn first of all;
Then of thy Water make Air by levigation;
And Air make Fire; then MASTER will I thee call
Of all our secrets great and small:
The Wheel of Elements thou canst turn about,
Truly conceiving our writings without doubt.”*

— *Compound of Alchymie, Sec. I:17*

The preparation for the practice of yoga is the same in all essentials as the preparation for the practice of alchemy. Evil tendencies are to be overcome, and positive virtues developed. The gross functions of the body are to be purified, and then comes the finer purification of the interior centers. The

object of all these yoga practices is precisely that which is mentioned by Basil Valentine, namely, that the yogi's body "may be transmuted into a holy temple of God and purged from all uncleanness."

Again, the fire of alchemy is said to be a secret fire, which is often compared to a serpent or dragon. Likewise in yoga, the active principle of the operation is a fiery force coiled in the Saturn center at the base of the spine. It is known as *Kundalini*, the coiled serpent-power.

The aim of all yoga practice is to raise this serpent-power, stage by stage, through the seven chakras which we have identified with the alchemical metals. Thus the practice of yoga is really a process of sublimation, which lifts up and brings into active manifestation the hidden powers of the subconscious life of man. In other words, yoga calls forth the powers of the Osirian "underworld." In alchemy we have exactly the same kind of practice.

Finally, Paracelsus, like the rest of the sages, tells his readers that the Great Work is performed by the aid of Mercury, and that the only other agencies entering into the art are the powers of the sun and moon. In like manner, the yoga system recognizes two agencies. One, hot and fiery, is called *Prana* or *Surya* (Sun). The other, cold and moist, is named *Rayi*, and is always termed the lunar current. Let us conclude, then, by resuming these parallels in a table:

Yoga Philosophy	Alchemy
All things are expressions of one fundamental energy.	‘All things are from one, by the mediation of one.’
All things combine three qualities: SATTVA (Wisdom) RAJAS (Desire-force) TAMAS (Inertia)	All things combine three principles: MERCURY (Wisdom) SULPHUR (Desire-force) SALT (Inertia)
There are five modes of expression: AHASHA TEJAS APAS VAYU PRITHIVI	There are five modes of expression: QUINTESSENCE FIRE WATER AIR EARTH
There are seven principles of vehicles of action called lotuses or chakras: MULADARA (base of spine) SVADISTHANA (navel) MANIPURA (Solar plexus) ANAHATA (Cardiac plexus) VISUDDHI (Throat center) AJNA (Pituitary body) SAHASRARA (Pineal gland)	There are seven principle substances to be transmuted termed metals or planets: SATURN (Lead) MARS (Iron) JUPITER (Tin) SUN or SOL (Gold) VENUS (Copper) LUNA (Silver) MERCURY (Quicksilver)
There is a secret force, fiery in quality, which is to be raised from the lower chakras to the higher ones.	The lower metals, or their essences, are to be raised in to the forms and essences of higher ones by sublimation.
The Sun (Prana), Moon (Rayu), and Sattva (Wisdom) are the three main agencies of the work of the yogis.	All alchemists agree that the Great Work is performed through the power of the Sun and Moon, aided by Mercury.

Both alchemy and yoga aim at the illumination of the operator, at the transformation of his physical body, and at control of the subtle forces of nature.

Summing up this lesson, then, we may say that the basis of alchemy is the doctrine that man is the direct expression of the perfectly free, unmodified spiritual essence of all things. The alchemical work is the direction of the energy derived from that essence, according to the perceptions of awakened intelligence. This intelligence, the self-conscious mind of man,

though it is not the highest level of life expression, has this power: IT CAN PERCEIVE THE ORDER OF NATURE, BY DISCERNING THE PRINCIPLES BEHIND THE VEIL OF APPEARANCES. Furthermore, in its ability to discover principles, and in its power of control over the subconscious life of the human body, it combines the two greatest potencies known to us. For by the recognition of the principles upon which the body is built, and its environment brought into form, the intelligence of man is able to invent and carry into execution novel applications of those principles. Thus it is possible to bring about a finer adjustment, and a finer organization, of the human body itself.

The result of so doing is the production of a new kind of human being, capable of receiving the influx of forms of energy which would disintegrate the ordinary human body, and able to give expression to modes of consciousness which are not characteristic of the greater number of men and women.

The alchemist himself is the subject of the primary stages of his operation. The laboratory in which he works is his own personality. His practice enables him to demonstrate that his personality is the field of the Operation of the Sun. Step by step it gradually and gently alters the state of his mind and of his body until he reaches a stage of illumination in which he perceives that all his personal activities are in truth particular modes of a cosmic process.

This understanding enables him to reverse the mental attitude taken by most persons. It also enables him to exercise powers undreamed-of by the mass of humanity. In him is fulfilled the saying of Eliphas Levi: 'He who can master and direct the currents of the Astral Light may reduce the world to a chaos and transform its face.'

As the alchemist completes the Great Work, he comes to realize his inner identity with the One Power which is always dominant over all things, always the ruler of all forces, and always the determiner of the constitution of everything. At the end of the Great Work the alchemist has so transmuted his personality that he expresses nothing but the inwardly perceived impulses of that One Power in whatever he thinks, says, or does.

As a free channel for the dominant principle of the universe, his personality expresses dominion in works of power, and these works appear to be miracles when viewed by uninitiated beholders.

To this high goal we direct your inspiration. It may seem far beyond you now, yet the wisdom of the ages is agreed that whoever will persist in the Great Work, carrying it out perseveringly, stage by stage, will undoubtedly be able to complete it.

In this new age what has been known to the adepts of other generations may be told more openly than ever before. It may not *all* be told, because some of it is actually untellable. But here you will find no false leads, no willful distortions of the doctrine, no unnecessary concealments. Here is the essence of the Hermetic doctrine. Put it into practice, and you will certainly accomplish the Great Work.

Lesson 2 of this book deals with the FIRST MATTER of the Great Work. The discovery of the First Matter is preliminary to all other work in alchemy. Lesson 2 will show you how to make this discovery for yourself.