

# SPIRITUAL ALCHEMY

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*In this article, Christian Bernard, Imperator of the Rosicrucian Order, AMORC, inspires us to participate in the Great Work on ourselves, through the transformative power of Spiritual Alchemy.*



If there is really one essential thing for mystics in general and Rosicrucians in particular, it is spiritual alchemy. This form of alchemy amounts to one of the foundations of philosophy, and sets out the path we must follow in order to fulfill our inner evolution. Herein, indeed, lies the Great Work that each human being must accomplish in order to discover the Philosopher's Stone that is to be found in the deepest part of themselves, and achieve the perfection of their own nature.

Material alchemy, also called "operative alchemy," has for centuries fascinated scientists and mystics too, but what is essential must remain for us the transmuting, the perfecting, and hence the evolving of our inner being. Whereas operative alchemy transmutes base metals into gold, spiritual alchemy transforms our soul. Before moving on to the latter, I would like to go over what comprises material alchemy.

Generally speaking, its aim was to transmute base metals, usually lead or tin, into gold. This transmutation was not, however, carried out directly upon the metal in question, but on a *materia prima*, that is to say on a primary or raw material, referred to as the "stone material" in some alchemical writings. It is difficult to say exactly what this *materia prima* was, because the descriptions given of it are confused, and they vary from author to author. According to certain sources it consisted of a naturally-occurring ore, composed essentially of sulphur, salt, and mercury combined in precise proportions. It would seem that this ore was rare and could be found only in places known to the alchemists, which they kept a most closely-guarded secret.

Having obtained the *materia prima*, the alchemists would place it in a container to

which they gave the name of "philosophical egg," partly because of its oval shape, and partly to echo their belief that the whole of Creation arose from a universal "egg," within which it existed in a latent, or seed, state. From here they put the *materia prima* through several consecutive stages.

In the course of these stages, the *materia prima* took on various colors, until it appeared as a red magma. Upon cooling, this magma gave rise to a somewhat bulky stone of the same color: the Philosopher's Stone. This is the reason that transmutation aimed at obtaining gold was called "the red work." The process aimed at making silver, usually out of iron, was designated by the name "the white work," and also consisted of several stages.

The final stage of the Great Work was to reduce the Philosopher's Stone to a perfectly homogenous powder. Once this powder was obtained, the alchemist would cast it into the molten base metal, which on contact would gradually transform itself into gold.

This was the basic principle of material alchemy. We also need to be aware that it was practiced according to two methods. The first, designated the "damp method," gave precedence to the processes of dissolving and distilling. It lasted several weeks or even months, and required the use of retorts and stills. The second was called the "dry method" and favored the processes of heating and combustion, mainly involving the use of ovens and crucibles. This second method was the quicker of the two, but also the more dangerous, involving as it did the risk of explosions. It did sometimes happen that alchemists would get injured in the practice of their art or, even worse, would get killed.

We know that the alchemists worked in special laboratories which were used for nothing else. Most often this was a cellar, an attic, or other building that was not well lit, as most of the necessary operations could not be carried out in daylight. The adepts also made use of various accessories. As well as the retorts, stills, ovens, and crucibles referred to, they also used scales, different sorts of pincers, pestles, bellows of various sizes, and even musical instruments.

The main furnace, called the athanor, was generally crude in shape and usually made of fireproof earth. For different situations, its fire would be provided by wood, charcoal, or sometimes even oil, allowing better control of its intensity during the most delicate procedures.

If you are wondering why the alchemists used musical instruments during their work, it was because by playing certain notes or combinations of notes, they produced vibrations which had a specific effect on one phase or another of the Great Work. From what we know, they mainly used string instruments such as the violin and guitar. Sometimes they used wind instruments though, such as the trumpet or a small organ. It is also likely that they intoned vowel sounds, although we have no proof of this. This was certainly the case with the Rosicrucian alchemists. The purpose of this was one and the same, to create vibratory conditions favorable for this or that procedure. We can also assume that at times it was to raise themselves to the state of consciousness required for their work.

In the case of the red work and the white work alike, the alchemists did their work by day or night, depending on the operation they had to carry out. While they always worked in a dimly-lit room, they thought that certain stages had to take place when the Sun was in a certain position in the sky, or when the moon was in a certain phase of its cycle.

It is also known that they attached great importance to eclipses, believing that they had a particular influence on alchemical procedures. They considered this influence to be

either negative or positive in different situations, which then governed what they did. There is no doubt at all that alchemy drew on both astronomy and astrology. It is certainly not mere chance that the alchemists held there to be a precise correlation between the metals and the planets of our solar system. They also had a good knowledge of chemistry.

The question we may ask ourselves is whether the alchemists really succeeded in making gold. Judging from the accounts they have left us, there is no doubt whatsoever about this. Many authors too state that this was the means by which Jacques Coeur, Jean Bourré, Nicolas Flamel, and Cagliostro—to name just the most well-known—acquired their wealth. If we accept this as true, it is of note that these individuals were known for their generosity and altruism, which suggests that they were practicing their art in order to help the poorest in society and to pay for projects for the common good, such as hospitals, roads, bridges, and so on. Apart from these testimonies, however, we do not have absolute proof that the adepts of the Great Work really managed to achieve their goal or became wealthy by this means. We must each therefore form our own view on this point.

To know whether the alchemists of the past succeeded in transmuting base metals into gold is incidental. The most important thing is the fact that they were convinced that human beings have the power, not to take the place of nature, but to emulate it. In accordance with this conviction, they studied the laws of nature with the greatest respect. What is more, most of them were deeply spiritual, and used alchemy as an aid to their mystic quest. This is why their laboratories always included an oratory, meaning a place set aside for prayer, meditation, and for the study of divine laws generally. Usually the oratory consisted simply of a chair and a table with candles, objects for rituals, and esoteric books.

Material alchemy was just the outward expression of an infinitely higher transmutation, that of the soul itself; the cornerstone



of this transmutation is, purely and simply, spiritual alchemy. This mystic process consists in one transmuting one's faults by means of the crucible of life, urged on by the divine fire which burns within us. We are all imperfect, however the ultimate goal of our evolution is to attain that state of perfection which Rosicrucians call the "Rose-Croix state." This state can only come about, though, when we have purified our personality of its negative shortcomings; this entails awakening the virtues of the divine soul which is within us and which is seeking only to express its capacity for wisdom. But such a goal cannot be attained in one single lifetime, therefore we have to reincarnate for as long as we are imperfect.

To the extent that one has not awakened the virtues of one's divine soul, one manifests certain faults such as pride, selfishness, jealousy, intolerance, and so on. In return these same faults are detrimental to the person, for they generate negative karma which is expressed as trials of varying degrees in one's life. We therefore have at least two good reasons for perfecting ourselves: first, it is part of the process of evolution from which we cannot withdraw, whose ultimate goal is to attain perfection, such as we can demonstrate it as human beings; second, it allows us to "think" our behavior into being positive, and create positive karma for ourselves, which is expressed in our lives as joy in various forms, and is conducive to the happiness we are seeking. Surely what we ultimately want, after all, is to have as happy an existence as possible and to gain mastery of life.

There are several stages required to reach the sought-after goal in spiritual alchemy, just as with material alchemy. The first con-

sists in accepting the idea that we are imperfect and have faults to correct. When I say "accept," this means our own view as much as that of others. This involves both looking at ourselves as we are, in the mirror of our soul, and also paying attention to the image of ourselves that others send back to us. If we do not do this, we end up becoming blind to our real personality and give even more power to our faults, to the point where they generate negative conduct on our part and give rise to corresponding karmic tests.

If reading this article is interesting to you, it is probably because you started this spiritual alchemy at the same

time as you did your personal mystic quest. There is no question that if your experience of life has endowed you with a modicum of wisdom, it will also have brought you clarity of thought. You are therefore in a position to know and to recognize your weaknesses, and I am positive that you have within you the potential to transmute these. I can assure you for my part that I am well aware of my faults, deficiencies, and mistakes, and I am certainly endeavoring to improve myself. It is not from a position of detachment, therefore, that I am passing on my reflections to you, but rather as a human being to whom this alchemy also applies. If it is always easier to speak about good than to do good, the same can be said for the work and the betterment that we call for in others.

But accepting the concept of having faults is not enough to accomplish this inner transmutation. We must also want to correct them, and this constitutes a key stage in spiritual alchemy. In other words, we must have the resolve to become better, in the human sense. This is only possible if we truly have



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the conviction that humankind's goal is to evolve, which presents the whole question of the real meaning we attribute to life.

For my part I am convinced that anyone who strives to perfect themselves receives the support of the God of their heart and can find happiness, even if their faults are relatively numerous. If this is true, it is because karmic law always rewards any effort made in the same direction as the Good. Conversely, any person who has few faults but who lets themselves be controlled by them without ever striving to transmute them, attracts various problems and progressive trials to themselves for as long as they take pleasure in their weaknesses.

Once the decision to perfect oneself is taken, there comes another stage in spiritual alchemy. This consists in materializing our desire to become better by actually transmuting our faults. But to manage to do this, above anything else we must not attempt to fight against them, this unfortunately being our tendency. Fighting them like this in fact contributes to accentuating our faults, because our ego then uses this to give itself power and assert its hold over our conduct. On the contrary, we should disengage from the fault in question, and work on ourselves to acquire the opposite quality. To take an example, if a person is fundamentally overly proud and is aware of this, they should not try to fight against their pride, for in so doing they give it even more force and increase its ability to be harmful. They should endeavor to acquire the opposite quality, in this case, humility. This entails calling on the most divine within their nature.

But how do we acquire the opposite quality of a fault we are aware of? It seems to me that the best way of achieving this is to first define the manner in which the quality expresses itself in everyday life. Having

done this, we should make ourselves manifest it every time there is occasion to do so, until it is an integral part of our soul and becomes natural. Returning to the example of pride, anyone wanting to rid themselves of this fault needs to implement humility. How exactly? By making themselves stop highlighting their merits, demonstrating their intellectual or any other type of superiority, or seeking to draw attention to themselves, and making themselves act in the service of Good in a totally impersonal way, and so forth. With time, this determined effort to be humble ends up becoming habitual,

in other words, it becomes a law to the subconscious. Pride is then transmuted. This is the basic principle of the spiritual alchemy we should apply to each of our faults.

A mystic who has transmuted all of his or her faults into their opposite qualities then experiences the final stage of spiritual alchemy, Illumination. If not perfect, then he or she is at least very close to the state of perfection, to the degree that it can be expressed by human beings on Earth. The *materia prima* of their being, their soul, has then become pure and perfect. It is not just chance that the Rosicrucian alchemists symbolized the Great Work by a red rose, often with an aura of the color gold. Certainly, whoever has attained this state has brought about the celebrated "Chymical Wedding." In other words, they have accomplished the union between their human Self and their divine Self, symbolized in the language of alchemy by the marriage of the king and the queen, and by the union of sulphur and mercury. From that point on, they truly possess the elixir of long life, for they have become a pure agent of the Divinity, and are no longer obliged to reincarnate.

In your mind, in your heart, and in your life, may alchemy take place!

