



Alchemical Transformation

By

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Abstract

Ancient alchemy is difficult to piece together as time has obscured our complete understanding of it; however, there are enough traces left to gain a glimmer of the process. Most often, alchemy is understood as a chemical process to change one element into another such as lead into gold or base metals into the philosopher's stone. Prima materia is the main task of the alchemist. It is where the work begins. In order to proceed with the opus or the work, this mysterious substance must first be available. This truth applies to psychological transformation as well. Alchemy, as a chemical process is outdated and outdistanced by modern science but as a metaphor of psychological transformation it becomes meaningful, potent and a source of guidance fleshed out and interpreted by great minds such as Jung, Edinger and others. This paper will attempt to illustrate the alchemical steps and their psychological meaning and give an example of this type of process.

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The Journey

Interpretations of the word psyche go back to the ancient philosophers but the description by Jung is compelling and helpful in its application therapeutically. Jung saw that the transformation needed, was to achieve union with God. This connection is desired whether the individual is conscious of it or not as it is generated by a force deep within the self. The journey of individuation or the unification of psyche is a lifelong one of reaching for wholeness. It is a natural process but it can be difficult because we have an ego that is threatened by this process as it struggles to establish a firmer grip on its own identity. It is this aspect of the self where the passions of desire and grasping emanate. So this is the opus, the transformational work beckoning or shoving us into the deeper levels of the psyche that long for reunion with the self and with the many divided aspects of the self-waiting to be adopted back into oneness.

Thumbnail Sketch of the Psyche

Underlying everything is the psychoid level. Here nothing is differentiated. It is irrepresentable and could find its physical parallel in the world of the quantum. The term psychoid could be applied to any of the archetypes or at least their source. Essentially, the psychoid level is transcendent and beyond human imagination.

The collective unconscious is the level of the archetypes. It is here that the unitary substance becomes split into two poles. An archetype can manifest as either a negative or a positive depending on the life experience of the individual. The collective unconscious is the home of the anima-animus and of the shadow self.

The personal unconscious is where patterns of universal experience are of importance. All of the events in one's life comprise of the personal consciousness of the

person. All of our experiences including memories and understanding are reflected in the personal consciousness.

Ego consciousness is the point of our awareness or “organ of awareness and consciousness” according to Jung. It is here that part personalities, complexes, sense of self and the subjective sense of self resides.

The Stages of Alchemical Process

Calcinatio

“The fire of the calcinatio is a purging, whitening fire. It acts on the black stuff, the nigredo, and turns it into white.” (Edinger, Sixth printing 1994) In chemical terms, calcinatio entails the burning of a solid in order to purge it of all constituents that will vaporize with heat. What is left is fine, white powder often referred to as slaked lime to produce quicklime.

In psychological terms, Jung describes the prima materia as whatever is bottled up in the client. Desirousness is the fundamental ingredient whether it is self-indulgence, sensuous pleasure, attachment and instinctual drives that are not being fulfilled. This desirousness is exactly what Buddhism describes as the main reason for suffering. This is the prima materia and it is a transcendent substance. According to Jung, it is whatever we have bottled up. These drives of rage, anger, passion etc., are put to the fire of frustration. Frustration causes the complexes arising from these desires to dry out as it were, but if too much heat is applied there is a risk of the bottle exploding. In other words, in the psychological context, the client must be willing or ready to transform on this level and the level of frustration must be managed well by the therapist in order to avoid either a rebellion or the collapse of giving up: in other words, the explosion of the bottle. As the prima materia is found in the shadow, this material can be experienced as revolting, despicable, painful and haunting. It is for exactly for these reasons that it needs to find a way into consciousness where it can reach the light of day and at least

give a level of relief to the client. With the purging of the ego, inspiration is allowed to blossom. The psychotherapist may use methods that frustrate the client but this takes great skill. Skill to make sure that the right substance is being calcinated and that the process is monitored carefully. Generally, the issue itself or the complex comes with its own heat and can be accessed by the client focusing inward.

Solutio

Solutio means to be made water, to dissolve, to turn a solid into liquid. In psychological terms, it means to return to an undifferentiated state, to transform back to. This is a reduction process that takes the element back to prima materia. It is disputable which stage comes first; solutio or calcinatio. Often, this dissolution process happens naturally due to difficult tests, great loss or induced in psychotherapy. If the ego is well formed and more rigid, the process is more painful and may feel like dismemberment. The difficulty for those with a more immature ego is that they easily dive into the process and it is hard to get them back out.

There are many solvents as mentioned above but basically suffering provides an opportunity for transformation. It is important for the therapist to enter into the Solutio process with the client and this is where transference is so important. The creation of safety for the client in an environment of trust and regard helps this process of death and rebirth. Solutio may be experienced as mortificatio because there is often some ego death involved. The king representing the ego must die if there is to be a rebirth. Sometimes experiences with users of LSD are described in these terms. They recount how painful and scary it was to metaphorically jump off the cliff but how necessary it was in order to go to the light or enlightenment symbolized as closeness to God.

Coagulatio

Turning something back into earth is the metaphor for this stage. In chemical terms, the agents of Coagulatio are lead and sulfur. Lead is heavy and brings one down to earth. Sulfur is red with passionate desire. The alchemists discovered that some substances solidify when they have been stirred or churned up. This applies psychologically as well. Action and activity promote the ego and solidifies the personality. In alchemy, quicksilver is what needs to be solidified. It is a metal and although it is also a liquid, it can also coagulate. This is a mysterious substance and one that is a good example of the alignment of the ego with the transcendent Self.

The psychotherapeutic experience is a proper vehicle to explore how desire promotes coagulatio. There are two aspects to this coagulatio experience. It can be either positive or negative. For instance, if a client has just gone through a Solutio experience, it follows that the ego needs to now regroup itself into a better configuration and this is positive or if the person is not well grounded and not aware of their own desires, having a Coagulatio experience is a good thing, but if the person is driven by desire then there is a chance they could stay stuck in the material and need some other process to get unstuck. Sometimes Coagulatio can feel imprisoning or like struggle. This can be painful and indicate that the spirit is longing for liberation. Stress and difficulties such as this can also be the generator of transformation if the situation permits.

This poem by 16th century alchemical poet Henry Vaughn is fitting for this stage.

THE INCARNATION AND PASSION.

LORD, when Thou didst Thyself undress,
Laying by Thy robes of glory,
To make us more, Thou wouldst be less,
And becam'st a woful story.

To put on clouds instead of light,
And clothe the morning-star with dust,

Was a translation of such height
As, but in Thee, was ne'er express'd.

Brave worms and earth! that thus could have
A God enclos'd within your cell,
Your Maker pent up in a grave,
Life lock'd in death, heav'n in a shell !

Ah, my dear Lord ! what couldst thou spy
In this impure, rebellious clay,
That made Thee thus resolve to die
For those that kill Thee every day ?

O what strange wonders could Thee move
To slight Thy precious blood, and breath ?
Sure it was love, my Lord ! for love
Is only stronger far than death ! (Vaughn, 1896)

Sublimatio

This elevating alchemical process involves the change to a higher form. Steam for instance is the elevation of water as it rises. Objectivity is a mental activity that reflects elevation as is detachment. The spirit ascends upward after being bogged down in the mud of Coagulatio is an example of this process. Ascent and descent is what we experience in life. One minute we are down and distressed about whatever is happening and the next moment we can be lifted above the clouds of joy by an event. Balance is needed here. This would also entail the level of karma as so much of the outcomes we experience are related to it. Edinger describes Sublimatio in this paragraph in a way that makes its nature abundantly clear.

Sublimatio is an ascent that raises up above the confining entanglements of immediate, earthy existence and its concrete, personal particulars. The higher we go the grander and more comprehensive is our perspective, but also the more remote we become from actual life and the less able we will be to have an effect of what we perceive. We become magnificent but impotent spectators... (Edinger, Sixth printing 1994)

This paragraph reminds me of certain personality types. For instance, in Hakomi Therapy terms, there is the type called "sensitive analytical". This type seems disconnected at the neck from the rest of his or her body. She lives in her head and is not very connected to

anything concrete. They are the dreamers and the visionaries often but they never seem to follow through on their own schemes. It would seem that this type has way too much Sublimatio.

The greater Sublimatio however is longed for by mystics everywhere. While the lesser Sublimatio is always followed by descent, the greater culminates into a higher state. This type of Sublimatio is described by many accounts of visions, and other numinous experiences. Buddhist monks speak of it in their meditation work. In everyday life, both ascent and descent are needed for balance. In therapy, Sublimatio can be used to get above a problem and see it from a different perspective. Following is a dream I had years ago that manifests many of these stages.

The River Dream

I become conscious in my dream that I am stuck in the mud bank (Coagulatio) beside a narrow river. The river is singing, "going to the sea, going to the sea" with each wave.(Solutio) I tell the river that I want to go to the sea too. It responds by telling me that I must first get free. I try to get loose but the more I struggle, the more stuck I get. Finally the river tells me to relax and let the sun help me.(Calcinatio) I lie patiently and as the sun dries out the mud, I start to get released.

While I am in the process, I notice that there is a fellow hanging by his shirt tails on a branch across the river. Some are in the river fighting upstream, floating downstream and everything in between. Some are distressed and some are not. (Sublimatio for some)

At that point, a small sailboat comes down river. It has a giant orange sun on the sail and there is a Gandalf type figure on the bow. (Christ figure) He is joyful like a child with crooked stars around his head and anciently wise like stones are. He is the master boat builder who

teaches us how to build boats to get safely down the river. The next thing I know, I am in a small, green rowboat, rowing down river. (life)

There is a lot happening both in the water and on the shore that is fascinating. One scene I remember well is a congregation of farmers dressed in black long coats and tall hats. They believe that the river is evil yet they are attracted to it so they are always punishing each other. (Stuck in Coagulation) They also are so busy trying but they never get anything done. (law)

What I notice is that anything that fear or desire of anything on shore attracts one's boat there immediately and a whole process of detachment must be undertaken to get back in the river. (desirousness) After several of these, I find myself at the mouth of the river and before me is the ocean. It too is singing "I am the sea, I am the sea." At that point, I develop a leak in my boat and the next thing is a collision with a big rock that throws me and the boat up into the air. I land in the sea and much to my astonishment; I hear the sea song coming out of me too. "I am the sea, I am the sea." (the great Sublimation)

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