

## PRINCIPLES - THE ALCHEMY CONNECTION

### PREFACE

As post-modern pilferers, we knew immediately this one was just too good to pass over. And so it has proved as we researched the features of the alchemical tradition, spanning at least 2500 years as a complex network of schools and philosophical systems appearing in Egypt, India, China, ancient Greece, early Islamic and medieval and early modern Europe, and the following 22 points will readily dispel any notion that Humanistic Alchemy is a misnomer. Within alchemy we find innumerable mirrors reflecting and refracting the human potential development project we set ourselves. We invoke the power of analogy to set the scene for the HA course. At times the correspondence is literal, at times metaphorical. In keeping with the spirit of alchemy we will of course endeavour, some of the time, to be unclear as to which level we are playing. Read on and enjoy..

### SELF-TRANSFORMATION

1) The Arabic 'al-kimia' is the linguistic root from which the word alchemy derives. It translates as 'the art of transformation'. This exactly denotes the intended process and purpose of the HA course. Participants who complete the course will perhaps have difficulty recognising the person who enrolled two years before. To quote from Sean Martin's excellent overview "Alchemy and Alchemists" (2006):

Alchemy's mystique is still strong, and perhaps will always be so as it works first and foremost on our selves, it is a life's work and it is also the work of life.

There is a consensus that the true subject and object of alchemy was the alchemist himself. In the Chinese alchemical tradition this was always more visible than in European and Middle Eastern alchemy. The philosopher's stone and the production of gold from base metals were prominent, yet in the final analysis, ancillary motifs. Likewise, the individual workshops in HA are auxiliary to the overall personal experiment undertaken.

### THE INTEGRITY OF NATURE

2) The alchemists spoke of experience and observation as the true keys to nature. As the symbolism attests, for them human and non-human nature formed a unified field in which they translated freely back and forth. The alchemists of antiquity and the medieval era were deeply respectful of the integrity of nature. The manner in which their work proceeded in alignment with, in approximation to and with appreciation of natural forces (including the movement of other planets) is amply documented in their astonishing tradition of pictorial art, the function of which was to simultaneously reveal and conceal.

It is not overstating it to say that today, the very survival of the human species depends on a massive and extensive resumption of this unified field perspective to which modern ecology also bears

witness, and which the corporate industrial-growth model flies in the face of. When will the media stop treating us to its prognostications of a 2 per cent rise or fall in 'growth' in the third quarter? A corresponding necessity is the abandonment of the erroneous and hubristic proposition that human beings are outside of nature. Consider Monsanto's perverse dedication of its laboratories to the development of sterile GM seed in order to enforce dependency on itself as the supplier for next year's crop. Consider, too, that if the current die-off of bees continues, it is predicted that human life on this planet will have only four further years past the point of the bee's extinction. Humans cannot scientifically replicate the efficiency of the bees' fertilising functions for all plant and crop life. The ecological information just highlighted is in keeping with the pervasive references in alchemical art and literature to reproductivity.

#### AS ABOVE, SO BELOW

3) The alchemists believed fervently in a universe held together by the relationship between the macrocosm and the microcosm. Their well known aphorism 'as above, so below' sums up this belief. Their preoccupation in this context of attaining the elixir of life, the medicine necessary to prolong it, acquires an eerie contemporary relevance if we consider the already referred-to potential fate of ourselves as a species. The essence of alchemy lies in the perception of a correspondence between the material and the spiritual. In HA this correspondence is developed through the energising function of bodywork linking matter and spirit. A transformed mind is premised on the energised or animated body. Work with the concrete body is essential if symbolic speech is to transcend its inherent abstractedness and become truly connected.

#### CRAFT AND APPRENTICESHIP

4) The roots of alchemy in antiquity appear to have been practical craft traditions, especially among metalworkers and miners of minerals. The roots of HA are in practitionership as a craft to be transmitted through personal exposure that involves working within intense and 'hot' conditions to courageously reforge the self, and mine the depths of one's person. The pathway for the transmission of the art of alchemy was always the apprenticeship model. From the earliest times the initiated studied under adepts. HA lays claim to a kindred process.

#### CULTURAL REFLECTIONS

5) Alchemy is a topic of more or less universal fascination, as attested by the writing, it is estimated, of 100,000 books on the subject, perhaps more historically than on any other subject. In Britain, Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tales' features him scoffing at a 'false' alchemist, while Shakespeare's plays are full of alchemical references, metaphors and understandings, and Ben Jonson satirised alchemy in his play 'The Alchemist'(1610). Both Sir Isaac Newton (secretly) and William Blake were deeply absorbed in alchemical studies. In Europe, to name just a few well-known modern figures engaged with alchemy, from Germany there was Thomas Mann and Herman Hesse, and from France Honore de Balzac and the surrealist Marcel Duchamp. Opera, conceived as 'the ultimate art form', from its

beginnings around 1600 was associated with alchemy, with Monteverdi known to have been a practising alchemist. Rock musicians Dire Straits named an album 'Alchemy'. One could go on with further names. Suffice to say that European cultural history is thoroughly immersed in alchemy. HA sits honourably in this context.

#### INNERSTANDING

6) Poem, meaning 'thing made', underlines the alchemical potentials of imaginative language deployed in a non-logical mode. In alchemy, the typical text is non-logical, aiming for intuitive comprehension or innerstanding rather than rational understanding. As with music, the alchemists understood the potential in poetry to bring together heart and mind. In HA we are as interested in participants's poetry, song, music and dance as we are in their prose productions. Allegorical dream sequences are part of alchemy's literature. Similar productions, descriptive of the passages, twists and turns of the spiralling course of the HA journey, are to be expected and are welcomed.

#### THE LANGUAGE OF THE BIRDS

7) As in traditional alchemy's texts, which are replete with riddles, puns and assonance, HA will feature word-plays, double entendres and much else in a trickster's vocabulary. In a manner that reflects our understanding of the process of reversal, as when dreaming, we will sometimes state the exact opposite of what we intend to convey. In alchemy this was known as the Language of the Birds. Try reading the HA website with this caveat in mind. If you had noticed this already, then you may want to tell it to the birds. Watch out for irony, the preposterous, occasional flashes of shocking naivety, all of course in the service of exerting a press on your assumption that we do or don't know what we're talking about.

#### FOUR ELEMENT THEORY

8) Central to ancient Greek and later alchemical thought was the proposition of the 5th Century BC philosopher Empedocles that the four elements of earth, air, fire and water were governed by the twin principles of love and strife. Building on this, Aristotle described the four elements as each having two qualities. Earth is cold and dry, air is hot and wet, fire is hot and dry, and water is cold and wet. These were the philosophical building blocks for a theory of change according to properties the elements have in common with each other, e.g. fire becomes air through heat. For HA's purposes, the relevance lies in these equations as metaphors of transmutation,- though we should mention that modern physics has confirmed that through the manipulation of its atomic structure lead can theoretically become gold (fortunately this is not an economic proposition).

In HA the four strands bodymind, ecosocial, expressive arts and the transpersonal roughly correspond with a simplified schema of earth, water, fire and air. You may well ask do we have a Hadron Collider (the modern continuation of alchemy) at our disposal? The modern mind is easily provoked into concrete thinking, literal-mindedness. The medieval mind, strange as it may seem,

where the elements were concerned, was more sophisticated and had no trouble holding a more dynamic, paradoxical and dialectical view.

## RECONCILING OPPOSITIONS

9) Alchemical thought posited a series of opposing forces in nature. The Sun/ the male/ sulphur/ volatile: The Moon/ the female/ mercury/ fixed. In both laboratory and inner alchemy an idea at the foundation of the work was to bring opposing forces together. In HA bodywork this principle is replicated; for instance the four elements reappear experientially in a biosynthesis procedure for their embodiment. The three alchemical principles of sulphur, mercury and salt can be translated as soul, spirit and body respectively, an acknowledgement that the body is integral to the process of transformation. In HA, the bodymind strand is the crucible within the laboratory of the group.

Can you take any more of this, take a further step with us, in a spirit of enquiry with no requirement for assent to any proposition? If so then let's hear again from Aristotle, who proposed Ether as the quintessential fifth element created through the interaction of the other four, and understood as the eternal and unchangeable, the Prime Mover of the Universe. Within HA, ether could be seen as corresponding with the encounter with the ineffable, the unutterable that arises through the already mooted flux of love and strife between the four elements, and this theme is particularly held within the transpersonal strand. If this is going too far back in time or is really too 'far out' for you, then rest assured that HA also takes account of more modern psychological and political oppositional thinking, e.g. Freud's theory of ambivalence (accounting for contradictory impulses or emotions experienced towards the same person) and Marxist dialectical thinking, especially concerning alienation as it resurfaced through the 1960s situationists Vaneigem and Debord. All of this and more will be found within HA.

## THE CLOSED GROUP

10) Metaphorically, the psychopractitioner group is the alchemical laboratory, the group members through bringing themselves and their 'stuff' into play as fully as possible, constitute the material to work with. As did the alchemists, HA works in closed groups, 'underground', in conditions of secrecy (for which read 'confidentiality'). HA groupwork, again like alchemy, proceeds with elements of ritual during a process, calling for a certain discretion. In both settings, the work is for the most part esoteric, somewhat unintelligible to most outsiders, and prone to being mocked and misunderstood beyond the circles of the initiated. Both processes feature the paradox of open concealment (don't say we didn't warn you) through gnomic phrases and the use of multi-level symbols.

## HOLISM

11) The humanistic principle of holism was present in the thought of perhaps the best known of all the alchemists, the healer Paracelsus (1493-1541), often regarded as the father of holistic medicine, who believed that to treat an illness one had to treat the whole person. With his view of the human

body itself as an alchemist by virtue of its natural processes of digestion, excretion, gestation and birth, he was anticipating the insights of HA's humanistic bodymind therapies by more than 500 years. The word 'healing' is etymologically related to 'wholing'. HA takes care and compassion for the other as the axiomatic corollary of concern with one's own development. This position is well summed up in a statement by a mid-14th century alchemist, John of Rupescina, who declared that "the only real purpose of alchemy is to benefit mankind".

#### FINDING THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

12) Running through medieval Western alchemy is the idea that the philosopher's stone is in everyone's possession but almost nobody recognises it. Blow us down if this isn't a pure blast of human potential thinking! In ancient Eastern alchemy, generally less esoteric (it did not need to hide itself from a Christian church obsessed with heresy), with its obvious links to tantra and yogic breath control, there is a more explicit connection between the release of energies latent within the body and progress towards enlightenment. In HA, the bioenergetic and core-energetic perspectives carry forward the soma-psyche and body-spirit connections respectively.

#### CATHARSIS, CONTAINMENT, COMMUNICATION

13) An alchemical principle is that oppositions are to be held in creative tension if the work is to succeed. Following in the footsteps of both laboratory and spiritual alchemists, HA proceeds through alternations of 'volatilising the fixed' (catharses; - let's not forget the medieval Cathars, a sect persecuted as heretics) and 'fixing the volatile' (containments), along the narrative of each participant's personal development trajectory. The component of communicating the results of experiments within the group means that HA adds a third element that accelerates development of the group as a working entity. Put in terms of modern energy supply and transmission, energy within the group is conceived as hydraulic (the charging and discharging of volatilising), and solar (the holding and reflecting of fixing), with the third element being electric (the communicating and reaching out, the movement from esoteric to exoteric). Put dialectically, this three-phase process is one of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, each synthesis providing the next thesis.

#### BE HERE NOW

14) Alchemy has always been understood as an inherently fragile process, one that could go wrong at any moment through a lapse of attentiveness. This mirrors the importance in humanistic psychology and HA of here-and-now present-time awareness as processes of psychological change unfold, in order that developments are integrated rather than not noticed or split off.

## AFTER JUNG

15) Jung, in 'Psychology and Alchemy', and his colleague Marie-Louise von Franz with 'Alchemy: An Introduction to the Symbolism and the Psychology', have put forward a modern purely psychological reading of Alchemy. If, at times, they seem to be subordinating the ancient, medieval and pre-modern texts of the alchemists to analytical psychology's postulate of an individuation process through which the analysand achieves balance and wholeness, then at least we at HA are in good company as we subpoena the same tradition to a humanistic psychology project.

## BASE MATTERS

16) Experimentalism was always one of alchemy's hallmarks. The alchemist had to get his hands dirty. HA starts with the same expectation of engaging with the 'prima materia' or base matter, the body and its emotional 'stuff'. Are you prepared to work with your 'shit', we would ask? If not, then it almost goes without saying that HA is not for you.

## MONEY AND CYNICS

17) As rationalism gathered Western Europe into its grip 17th century painters began to depict alchemists working in the disorder of dark workshops and emphasised the poverty that stemmed from sinking all resources into a futile quest for gold. HA participants should be in a position both to pay for the course and ward off more contemporary forms of monetary cynicism.

## THE INNER CHARLATAN

18) The gay community, in its retrieval, reinvention and revalorisation of the word 'queer', anticipated an HA manoeuvre. HA presents its alchemy unashamedly, ready to celebrate the association with charlatanism. The point here is that in HA we confront the inner charlatan, whereas much of the straight(faced) psy field appears unable to get beyond projecting theirs onto 'unregistered' outsiders and other 'queer' folk on the fringes of the psy field, in a dynamic that is astonishingly similar to homophobia.

## MARKETISED THERAPY

19) Replicating a key distinction between alchemy and chemistry the emphasis in HA is on the subject's personal transformation, whereas elsewhere in the psy field, especially where a business-led model prevails, the focus is on change in the client as the object of therapy. In this respect, 'true' alchemists have always had to contend with the wannabee or 'false' alchemists, generally known as 'puffers'. These people's sole interest was the production of literal gold, and they regularly blew themselves up or were poisoned by noxious fumes. The moral for what we have come to see as marketised, medicalised, academised therapy should be clear, especially for those 'researchers' who set out with an agenda to prove that the practitioner's engagement in personal therapy for

themselves has no bearing on positive outcomes for their clients. Common sense would suggest that the necessary client-side identification will be missing or minimal and the working relationship thereby compromised. Market sense would suggest that it will be a lot easier to sell a course with no requirement for prior personal therapy of the applicant. HA takes it as axiomatic that in the absence of sufficient preliminary transformation of the potential practitioner as subject, the potential for the transformation of their potential client - (actually also a subject) as the object of therapy - is exceedingly limited. Dwelling on the contemporary manifestation of the 'puffer' need not prevent a proper acknowledgement that it was the efforts of the historic 'puffers', far more than those of the 'true' alchemists, that by and large laid the foundations of modern organic chemistry.

#### PERVERSE GROWTH

20) Perhaps more urgently capitalism needs to be identified as a form of false alchemy pursuing transformation without limit, 'the enemy of nature' as argued by the radical psychoanalyst Joel Kovel. Its rampant profit motive and consequent commitment to economic growth are increasingly revealed as irreconcilable with the survival of the human, animal and other species, ultimately with life on this planet. When will we reach that threshold where there is no one left to sell to, the window that opens when no one is buying and no one is buying into it anymore? Many now begin to recognise that an extraordinary shift in consciousness on a mass level will be necessary if catastrophe is to be averted. HA is conceived as a micro-level intervention to consolidate this consciousness ('con scio' means to know together).

#### TAKING AVOIDING ACTION

21) The medieval alchemist Albertus Magnus (1193-1280) listed the qualities that the genuine alchemist must possess. Eighth and last, he warned that "he should avoid having anything to do with princes and noblemen". At HA we would agree. In today's language, this means that the HA process should be kept well away from those in the business of holding or seeking power over others. The adoption by HA of the alchemy motif is an intentional retort. Recent and continuing attempts to ingratiate and integrate the psy field into the apparatus of the state (e.g. the now annual Savoy Conference) are rebuffed by HA through shifting the definition of psychopractice towards the domain of the ridiculed, the absurd, the unfathomable, the impenetrable. HA, in its small way, will consolidate the necessary Beyonding (see webpage), also known as the parting of the ways.

#### THE ALCHEMISTS NIGHTMARE

22) Alchemy in medieval and early-modern Western Europe survived successive attempts by both church and state to ban it, mostly centred around economic and political anxieties regarding the independent production of gold. The church, as ever, was more concerned with the spread of heretical doctrines linked to the esoteric aspects of alchemy. D. Postle's paper "The Alchemists Nightmare" refers to the contemporary anti-alchemical forces within the psy field that invoke a vain fantasy that the protection of the public (as opposed to the protection of their own economic

interests) can be enforced by the engagement of the state. If proof were needed of the playwright George Bernard Shaw's assertion that the professions are a conspiracy against the laity then here it is. Were this anti-alchemical project to be successful it could have the net effect of driving lived alchemical processes within the psy field underground. Full circle, one might add, alchemy once again hermetically re-created in a rerun of the Dark Ages, in the modern equivalent of the vaults of the monasteries. Pending such a sad day, HA will openly bring psychopractice alchemy back to the body, back to the natural, back to the social, while maintaining alchemy's association with the arts and the transpersonal. This account of The Alchemy Connection concludes with a quotation from Sean Martin, author of 'Alchemy and Alchemists' (2006):

Alchemy could therefore be described as 'the art of possibilities', as its practitioners were not living in a world limited by materialism and empiricism. Alchemists have always known that nothing, including ourselves, is immutable, and that change is a natural process. With openness, imagination and perseverance, everything could be changed into something of greater worth. Alchemy has always stressed that the inner and the outer must be joined together, the body with the mind or spirit, and the individual with nature. Hence the importance of the physical side of alchemy; it is a profound engagement with matter that is also a profound engagement with the self.