

## Neo-platonism and Alchemy, the Forgotten Philosophy

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*First, I post here  
the revised, shorter  
version from the SJSU  
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[Click HERE](#) to read the earlier, longer version, which has some points omitted from the revised version.

Click [HERE](#) for a chart of the 3 parts of the soul and the 7 levels

Currently we live in a nation polarized between two extreme ways of looking at the world. Fundamentalist Christianity or the Religious Right believes that its religion has all the answers, while scientism and materialism or the Secular Left believes its kind of science has all the answers. The values and cultures that result from these two worldviews are totally at odds.

We Americans are the principle victims of the great philosophical divide created by Descartes in the 17th century. In this view matter, the province of science, and spirit, the province of religion, are totally separate. The Two Cultures have pursued their quest totally oblivious to each other ever since. No wonder we are so divided between two such primitive worldviews. Cut off from each other, religion and science have withered into dogmatic caricatures and fragments of their former selves. In this condition we remain alienated as individuals and as a nation. A greater view of life than what is provided us by the two dominant, warring and extremely-limited cultures is being created on the fringes of society. The revival of mystical vision, updated where necessary to better fit with our own reality and values today, is our eventual hope for renewal.

Neoplatonism is part of this revival, though it seldom takes this name today. But this forgotten philosophy is one of the keys to breaking the lock which our two limited dogmas have on us, so that we can become a more creative and enlightened people. Whenever such things as sacred geometry, an organic cosmos, the tree of life, holography, or the soul centers within our bodies are discussed, we are witnessing a revival of Neoplatonism. It is an umbrella term for a family of ideas that includes not only the mystical side of ancient Greek philosophers from Pythagoras and Plato to Plotinus, and their offspring, but also the Hermetic philosophies and their descendants, which include occult arts as well as the mystical traditions among all the Western religions, and they all nourished and fertilized each other, especially in Alexandria during late Hellenistic times. One of these arts even has for its central symbol the marriage of two warring forces in the soul and the cosmos, which would seem to be exactly what we need today. This is Alchemy, which I will focus on below. But first I will describe briefly the philosophy of Plotinus, the third century philosopher who gave Neo-platonism the form in which it came down to us through the ages.

According to Richard Tarnas in his book [The Passion of the Western Mind](#), "in Plotinus' thought the rationality of the world and of the philosopher's quest is but the prelude to a more transcendent existent beyond reason. The Neoplatonic cosmos is the result of a divine emanation from the supreme One, which is infinite in being and beyond all description or categories. The One, also called the Good, in an overflow of sheer perfection produces the "other" --the created cosmos in all its variety-- in a hierarchical series of gradations moving away from this ontological center to the extreme limits of the possible." (p.85) From the One comes the Divine Mind or Nous which pervades the universe and contains all the archetypal ideas, or Platonic Forms, which order and shape it. From the Divine Mind emanates the World Soul, the anima mundi, which gives the world its life and from which come the souls of all living beings. Finally comes the Material World, which reflects imperfectly the Divine. It is a magnificent organic whole despite the evil within it, which serves only to entice us to develop the inherent wisdom and discipline within us needed to break our bondage and ascend to the Divine. The gradations of Being are always present in all things, and the Ideas of the Spiritual World are reflected in the Material. The Unity within Diversity of the One outflows into the Many and returns to the One in a continuous process.

Alchemy focuses on this process by showing in a vivid and concrete way how the Divine World is reflected in the Material World through symbolic correspondences. According to Titus Burckhardt in [Alchemy](#), published in 1960, "the testimony of alchemists is unanimous" that the "real work" of alchemy "was the transmutation of the soul." The image of base metals being changed into noble ones, and their work of alloying,

purifying, dissolving, crystalizing and smelting various minerals, were merely supports and symbols for the process of changing our own base nature into a more noble one. Given the very term for the transforming agent, the "philosopher's stone," it is hard to believe that today's secularists can't see that the alchemical work was about philosophy!

The first principle of all Hermeticism, and thus of Alchemy, is "that which is in the world above is like that which is in the world below." Akin to this is the idea that what is outside reflects what is inside our minds, and vice-versa. These are important keys we need to break through the notion that the world of matter contains no soul. In our post-Cartesian universe we really believe that there is no one home out there, and we forget that everything we perceive is a content of our own consciousness. Even our own minds, many people say, can be explained as epiphenomena of so-called material processes. Therefore the scientists say that "the supernatural" is outside the domain of science, and this really means that so is our very self and consciousness. This also means that people within this cosmos who want spiritual guidance must seek it from a supernatural and authoritarian God whose moral laws and behavior bear no connection or relationship to the world our science describes, other than as its sole Creator. Neo-platonism and Alchemy break through this chasm. They claim that the processes within the world are the same ones as those within our own souls, that both Spirit and Matter are parts of this process and of God, and that the material is a key to the spiritual. The within is like the without, and the above is like the below-- as described in an eternal series of interacting gradations from the highest to the lowest.

I can only mention here a few of the many, and sometimes inverted or paradoxical, correspondences put forward by alchemy. Perhaps the most famous is that between gold and the Sun, and silver and the Moon. It is fascinating to behold the relationship between the two greatest bodies we see and the two most shiny and precious metals we see. Despite the claims that such a correspondence is merely coincidence or subjective fancy, our songs proclaim it, showing it still has some power for us. We sing "by the light of the silvery Moon," and in Tony Bennett's "I Left My Heart in San Francisco," he knows that when he returns there its "golden Sun will shine for me." In traditional times the correlation was so obvious, that the value of each metal was determined by the relationship between the apparent movements of the two celestial bodies. For alchemy, the Sun is the paragon of planetary bodies, gold is the most perfect form of metals, and both represent the potential to perfect the gold within our own souls. The obvious astronomical facts astound us. No other planet in the solar system, and perhaps even in the universe, has a Moon which when viewed from the Earth is the same size as the Sun. Perhaps other planets have such a relationship between their Sun and Moon and the precious metals, which are the same everywhere; we don't know. At least it indicates that as far as we know the Earth occupies a special place in the cosmos, and that its creatures are a unique expression of that cosmos. Our own science, which has for its purpose the manipulation of Nature through technology, teaches us to ignore this uniqueness, and the methods and products of this science may soon result in our planet's destruction if it doesn't embrace a wider view of its own purposes. Modern science may be in the process of doing this, but it won't succeed until it can find a way to integrate our souls back into its worldview, which is what it most resists doing.

Alchemy goes on to show correspondences between the other five visible planets and the principle metals used by craftsmen. All 7 planets are like colored and luminous balls in the sky that resemble the color, shine and tincture of the metals. And remember that in times past the sky seemed as close and brilliant to us as it still does when viewed beyond the lights and pollution of today's cities. From gold and silver, and from the Sun and Moon, stretch a Neoplatonic ladder of seven planets and seven metals through which by contemplation we may ascend to perfection, or descend to the expression of the Divine within the world. Thanks to Alchemy, these seven metals and planets each still have the same symbols or glyphs. Below silver on the ladder is Mercury or Quicksilver, which is the primary agent of the alchemist's work of dissolving and purifying metals, especially gold, as well as the symbol for purifying the soul. Corresponding to this is the planet Mercury, the next-slowest planet out from the Moon, and closest to the Sun. Next is copper, corresponding to Venus. The color of both resembles gold, but in an unpurified state. Further out, beyond the Earth's orbit, is Mars, corresponding to iron. And indeed when it rusts, iron exhibits the same red color that Mars exhibits, which we now know from astronomy is caused by the abundant presence of iron there. At this level, the Spirit is congealing into the corporeal. The strength of iron represents the soul at the level of Mars as it courageously moves out into darker spaces. The next lowest level further outward on the ladder of planets is Jupiter, corresponding to tin. This metal is very useful for creating alloys such as bronze, but it bears little color in itself. Still, like the expansive Jupiter, tin represents a loosening and expansion of the soul from bondage to the lowest level of consciousness, represented by lead, which exhibits metal in its most chaotic state, and by Saturn, the slowest-moving planet furthest out from the warmth and life of the Sun. At this level we are immersed in material and bodily consciousness, from which we may rise again into the light.

A contemplative alchemy corresponding to today's astronomy, physics and chemistry waits to be developed.

The next planet further out from Saturn is Uranus. The metal named for it, Uranium, we know is unstable and decays into lead. In chemistry the very name "periodic table" is a clue to the interesting fact that all the elements are arranged on an ever-widening series of seven levels, and that the elements on each level are arranged from positive to negative valence.

Alchemists and other Neoplatonists go on to compare the ladder of planets and metals to the cycle of the year. Here it is observed that from Winter to Summer, the Sun pursues an ever-widening circle as it moves further north, and an ever-narrowing one as it moves south. This is represented by the double-spiral symbol which is seen in all cultures worldwide, most notably in the Chinese yin-yang symbol. The cold and darkness of the Winter Solstice is like that of Saturn, in which the soul is imprisoned on the planetary ladder. The warmth and light of the Sun and Moon, are like the Summer solstice. Thus at Wintertime in the Northern hemisphere (where all alchemists live), the Sun is in the signs of the zodiac represented by Saturn, Capricorn and Aquarius, over what we call the Tropic of Capricorn, while at Summertime the Sun is in the signs ruled by the Moon and the Sun, Cancer and Leo respectively, over what we call the Tropic of Cancer. Between them stretch the other signs of the zodiac, which represent the same "journey" of the soul up and down the same ladder of planets and metals. The period between each New Moon is almost the same as the Sun's movement through one sign. The Sun ascends and descends through the ladder of signs and planets, and so we are renewed each year. So too the soul, in order to transform itself, must descend into chaos in order to be reborn. In Alchemy this is called "the great work."

The correspondences don't stop there, but descend into our own bodies. In Neoplatonic philosophy, the world axis along which the Sun ascends and descends each year, represents the immutable Divine essence of the world. This axial mundi corresponds to our backbones, the stabilizing spiritual axis within our own bodies. Leonardo da Vinci's famous drawing illustrates the point that our bodies are a circle with an up and down axis, and so is the world. Furthermore, there are seven "soul centers" or "chakras" along this axis that correspond to the seven planets and metals. Author Robert M. Place reports that this idea was not merely imported from India, but that "there is evidence that the seven soul centers were known to the ancient Pythagoreans and they have been part of Western culture for centuries. In the ancient world, the seven soul centers were related to the Neoplatonic ladder of the planets.... The soul centers or chakras are thought of as seven energy centers located in ascending order from the base of the spine to the top of the cranium." (The Tarot, p.289)

What is most significant about these soul centers is that we can experience them ourselves, so they are not just interesting symbols of the cosmos. They are the points at which our own psychic energies are most clearly focused and can be tapped. Several of these centers are so familiar to us that many people recognize them and use them in various ways to stimulate and release their personal powers. For example, students of martial arts concentrate on the 3rd or "power" chakra at the navel as the gravitational center of the body, in order to release their energy and courage. Most of us know too that the heart is not just a pumping organ, but the center that unites our whole spiritual and physical being, and the place we must consult if we are to be true to our honestly-felt "heart's desires." And "the 3rd eye" is known as the place where our mental energies can be focused, synchronized and unified in order to gain greater insight and intuition. As Eastern yogis and Western hermeticists focus on these soul centers, they can release their spiritual energy.

This energy flows up and down our backbones, which corresponds to the two ascending and descending movements of the Sun along the world axis. In yoga this double spiral is described as two power streams, Ida and Pingala, which wind themselves around the axis of the backbone. This same image appears in Western culture as the Staff of Hermes or caduceus, in which two snakes wind themselves around a staff through five levels up to a winged figure and a crown. It is ironic indeed that the Staff of Hermes has become the symbol of Western Medicine, which denies the existence of the soul centers and instead relies on merely physical methods of healing. But thanks to this connection between the Caduceus and Medicine, it is a symbol we can see every day, and it is the central symbol I believe of the new vision of ourselves as integral parts of the cosmos, a vision which, the symbol suggests, is the real source of the healing we need today, both for ourselves and for our nation.

This brings me to discuss the central symbol of Alchemy I mentioned earlier, "the alchemical marriage." The two snakes of the caduceus, representing the two opposing forces of our nature, join together at the head chakras, which correspond to the Moon and the Sun. We could also compare this to the joining forces of the right and left brain, which happens at the third eye. The two halves of our brain have come to represent the two sides of our nature, active and passive, male and female. The left (or solar, conscious mind) focuses on active analytical and sequential thought, while the right (the lunar, more subconscious mind) specializes in receptive modes like art, subtle feelings of intuition and bodily awareness. Alchemy refers to these two aspects as the coagulating power of sulphur and the dissolving power of quicksilver. To some extent the Moon, which passively reflects the Sun's light, can be compared to the ancient idea of Matter, which received

the "forms" imprinted on it by the Divine Mind, represented by the Sun. Eclipses represent their marriage. In this way, we can look upon the alchemical marriage as a symbol of how the two warring cultures of science and religion can be transformed and reunited.

**Here is a chart showing how the signs of the zodiac correspond to (and even generate) the two energy current channels Ida and Pingala (or the two caduceus snakes), by alternating polarity between yang and yin (or positive and negative) through the yearly zodiac cycle.**

This cycle is shown starting with the southern Winter signs (Capricorn, Aquarius) at the base chakra, moving up through the Spring signs, to the northern Summer signs (Cancer, Leo) at the crown chakra, and returning through the Autumn signs to the base.

Each chakra is ruled by a planet, which in turn rules (is linked to) two signs each, one yin and one yang; except the Sun (yang) and Moon (yin) which rule one sign each. Yang signs are in bold, yin signs are in *italics*. The ascending, liberating yin current or "snake" flows through the yin signs, and the descending, manifesting current flows through the yang signs. This scheme is a combination of the chart from Anodea Judith, *Wheels of Life* (1989, Llewellyn), page 123, and Titus Burckhardt, *Alchemy* (1960, Penguin), page 88.

chakra	Autumn signs	Planets	Spring signs	chakra
7-crown	<b>Leo</b>	Sun/Moon	<i>Cancer</i>	6-third eye
5-throat	<i>Virgo</i>	Mercury	<b>Gemini</b>	5-throat
4-heart	<b>Libra</b>	Venus	<i>Taurus</i>	4-heart
3-solar plexus	<i>Scorpio</i>	Mars	<b>Aries</b>	3-solar plexus
2-genitals	<b>Sagittarius</b>	Jupiter	<i>Pisces</i>	2-genitals
1-base	<i>Capricorn</i>	Saturn	<b>Aquarius</b>	1-base

**Here is a table of the 7 levels and 3 parts of the soul, listed from the highest:**

3 parts of soul: Plato	Kabalah	Hindu gunas	Freud's psychology	metaphysics	chakra	<a href="#">Toccata in F section</a>	tone	color	metal	planet	Tree of Life
reason/wisdom	Neshemah	sattvas	super-ego	super-conscious	7=crown	synthesis: crown theme	B	violet/purple	gold	The Sun	Kether (crown)
reason/wisdom	Neshemah	sattvas	super-ego	super-conscious	6=3rd eye	synthesis: breakthrough	A	indigo	silver	The Moon	Hokmah (wisdom) & Binah (understanding)
passion/will	Ruah	rajas	ego	conscious	5=throat	chord columns, urgent and clear	G	blue	mercury	Mercury	Hesod (mercy) & Gevurah (severity)

passion/ will	Ruah	rajas/ sattvas	ego	conscious	4=heart	chord columns, calm and centered	F	green	copper	Venus	Tiphereth (beauty)
passion/ will	Ruah	rajas	ego	conscious	3=navel	chord columns, strong and fiery	E	yellow	iron	Mars	Netzah (victory) & Hod (glory)
appetite/ worldly	Nefesh	tamas	id	sub-conscious	2=genitals	joyous canon, left hand leads	D	orange	tin	Jupiter	Yesod (foundation)
appetite/ worldly	Nefesh	tamas	id	sub-conscious	1=base	joyous canon, right hand leads	C	red	Lead	Saturn	Malkuth (kingdom)

*Here is the longer  
and earlier version of  
my paper:*

Currently we live in a nation polarized between two extreme ways of looking at the world. These two fundamentalist ideologies are not the only ones that are confounding and confusing Americans today, but they are the principle ones that divide us into the warring camps of the Culture Wars. The first, fundamentalist Christianity or the Religious Right, believes that its religion has all the answers; the second, scientism and materialism or the Secular Left, believes its kind of science has all the answers. One side believes God created all creatures as they are today some thousands of years ago, while the other believes they all evolved through a mindless mechanical process. The values and cultures that result from these two worldviews are totally at odds. This conflict is found nowhere else in such intensity, and it has divided us politically between two increasingly-hostile groups of religious-conservative "red states" and secular-liberal "blue states." (Note that I don't claim to be a moderate; I'm a liberal who prefers the "blue" over the "red," but actually am a member of the *Green Party*)

We Americans are the principle victims of the great philosophical divide created by Descartes in the 17th century. In this view matter, the province of science, and spirit, the province of religion, are totally separate. The Two Cultures have pursued their quest totally oblivious to each other ever since. No wonder we are so divided between two such primitive worldviews. Cut off from each other, religion and science have withered into dogmatic caricatures and fragments of their former selves. In this condition we remain alienated as individuals and as a nation. Nor does a mere compromise of the two views, such as claiming that "God is revealed through the magnificent process of evolution," do anything but allow us to shrink from the real conflict that exists between them. We need a new vision of the whole cosmos and ourselves, and this is more than a tepid compromise between two inadequate views.

Fortunately there are alternatives. In the modern world they have appeared ever since Romanticism, as a cross current to the tightening grip of the two divorced extremes. Existentialism, Depth Psychology and related views have sought a comprehensive picture of humanity through exploring our inner experience. And most importantly of all, awakenings have occurred about a hundred years ago, and again since the late 1960s, in which mystical and esoteric practices were revived and human potential explored. A greater view of life than what is provided us by the two dominant, warring and extremely-limited cultures, is thus being created on the fringes of society, and it is our eventual hope for renewal. Naturally, the two extreme cultures which fragment our society today seek to ridicule and destroy this alternative. It is up to us not to react to their mis-informed condemnations, but to embrace this revival of mystical vision, and to update it where necessary to better fit with our own reality and values today.

**Neoplatonism** is part of this revival, though it seldom takes this name today. But this forgotten philosophy is one of the keys to breaking the lock which our two limited dogmas have on us, so that we can become a more creative and enlightened people. Whenever such things as sacred geometry, an organic cosmos, the tree of life, or the soul centers within our bodies are discussed, we are witnessing a revival of Neoplatonism. It is an umbrella term for a family of ideas that includes not only the mystical side of ancient Greek philosophers from Pythagoras and Plato to Plotinus, and their offspring, but also the Hermetic philosophies and their descendants. Hermeticism is in turn another umbrella term for occult arts such as astrology, as well as



the mystical traditions among all the Western religions, and they all nourished and fertilized each other, especially in Alexandria during late Hellenistic times.

According to legend, the Hermetic arts were given to us in Egypt over 4000 years ago by Hermes Trismegistos, the thrice-great Hermes, who is identified with the Egyptian God Thoth, the giver of human arts and sciences, and who became identified with the Greco-Roman God Hermes or Mercury. One of these arts even has for its central symbol the marriage of two warring forces in the soul and the cosmos, which would seem to be exactly what we need today. This is **Alchemy**, which I will focus on below. But first I will describe briefly the philosophy of Plotinus, the third century philosopher who gave Neo-platonism the form in which it came down to us through the ages, and which has flourished most powerfully during the times of greatest cultural creativity and balance such as the Renaissance.

According to Richard Tarnas in his book *The Passion of the Western Mind*, "in Plotinus' thought the rationality of the world and of the philosopher's quest is but the prelude to a more transcendent existent beyond reason. The Neoplatonic cosmos is the result of a divine emanation from the supreme One, which is infinite in being and beyond all description or categories. The One, also called the Good, in an overflow of sheer perfection produces the "other" --the created cosmos in all its variety-- in a hierarchical series of gradations moving away from this ontological center to the extreme limits of the possible." (p.85) From the One comes the Divine Mind or *Nous* which pervades the universe and contains all the archetypal ideas, or Platonic Forms, which order and shape it. From the Divine Mind emanates the World Soul, the *anima mundi*, which gives the world its life and from which come the souls of all living beings. Finally comes the Material World, which reflects imperfectly the Divine. It is a magnificent organic whole despite the evil within it, which serves only to entice us to develop the inherent wisdom and discipline within us needed to break our bondage and ascend to the Divine. The gradations of Being are always present in all things, and the Ideas of the Spiritual World are reflected in the Material. The Unity within Diversity of the One outflows into the Many and returns to the One in a continuous process.

Alchemy focuses on this process by showing in a vivid and concrete way how the Divine World is reflected in the Material World through symbolic correspondences. Today's extreme and limited scientific culture would have us believe that alchemists were primitive chemists who tried to turn lead into gold through quest for the "philosopher's stone" or elixir, which could also heal all disease and confer immortality. But according to Titus Burckhardt in *Alchemy*, published in 1960, "the testimony of alchemists is unanimous" that the "real work" of alchemy "was the transmutation of the soul." According to Burckhardt, alchemy is the "royal art" whose aim was not only its visible creations but "the ripening, transmutation, or rebirth of the soul of the artist himself." (p.23). The image of base metals being changed into noble ones, and their work of alloying, purifying, dissolving, crystalizing and smelting various minerals, were merely supports and symbols for the process of changing our own base nature into a more noble one. Given the very term "philosopher's stone," it is hard to believe that today's secularists can't see that the alchemical work was about philosophy. But it is true that many people early in the post-Cartesian age really believed that by studying secret alchemical doctrines they could make themselves rich, and so gave alchemy the bad name it has today.

The first principle of all Hermeticism, and thus of Alchemy, is "that which is in the world above is like that which is in the world below." Akin to this is the idea that what is outside reflects what is inside our minds, and vice-versa. These are important keys we need to break through the notion that the world of matter contains no soul. In our post-Cartesian universe we really believe that there is no one home out there, and we forget that everything we perceive is a content of our own consciousness. Even our own minds, many people say, can be explained as epiphenomena of so-called material processes. Therefore the scientists say that "the supernatural" is outside the domain of science, and this really means that so is our very self and consciousness. This also means that people within this cosmos who want spiritual guidance must seek it from a supernatural and authoritarian God whose moral laws and behavior bear no connection or relationship to the world our science describes, other than as its sole Creator. Neo-platonism and Alchemy break through this chasm. They claim that the processes within the world are the same ones as those within our own souls, that both Spirit and Matter are parts of this process and of God, and that the material is a key to the spiritual. The within is like the without, and the above is like the below-- as described in an eternal series of interacting gradations from the highest to the lowest.

I can only mention here a few of the many, and sometimes inverted or paradoxical, correspondences put forward by alchemy. Perhaps the most famous is that between gold and the Sun, and silver and the Moon. It is fascinating to behold the relationship between the two greatest bodies we see and the two most shiny and precious metals we see. Despite the claims that such a correspondence is merely coincidence or subjective fancy, our songs proclaim it, showing it still has some power for us. We sing "by the light of the

silvery Moon," and in Tony Bennett's "I Left My Heart in San Francisco," he knows that when he returns there its "golden Sun will shine for me." In traditional times the correlation was so obvious, that the value of each metal was determined by the relationship between the apparent movements of the two celestial bodies. For alchemy, the Sun is the paragon of planetary bodies, gold is the most perfect form of metals, and both represent the potential to perfect the gold within our own souls. The obvious astronomical facts astound us. No other planet in the solar system, and perhaps even in the universe, has a Moon which when viewed from the Earth is the same size as the Sun. Perhaps other planets have such a relationship between their Sun and Moon and the precious metals, which are the same everywhere; we don't know. At least it indicates that as far as we know the Earth occupies a special place in the cosmos, and that its creatures are a unique expression of that cosmos. Our own science, which has for its purpose the manipulation of Nature through technology, teaches us to ignore this uniqueness, and the methods and products of this science may result in our planet's destruction if it doesn't embrace a wider view of its own purposes. Modern science may be in the process of doing this, but it won't succeed until it can find a way to integrate our souls back into its worldview, which is what it most resists doing.

Alchemy goes on to show correspondences between the other five visible planets and the principle metals used by craftsmen. All the planets are like colored and luminous balls in the sky that resemble the color, shine and tincture of the metals. And remember that in times past the sky seemed as close and brilliant to us as it still does when viewed beyond the lights and pollution of today's cities. From gold and silver, and from the Sun and Moon, stretch a Neoplatonic ladder of seven planets and seven metals through which by contemplation we may ascend to perfection, or descend either towards chaos, or to the fruitful expression of the Divine within the world. Thanks to Alchemy, these seven metals and planets each still have the same symbols or glyphs. Below silver on the ladder is Mercury or Quicksilver, which is the primary agent of the alchemist's work of dissolving and purifying metals, especially gold, as well as the symbol for purifying the soul. Corresponding to this is the planet Mercury, the next-slowest planet out from the Moon, and closest to the Sun. Next is copper, corresponding to Venus. The color of both resembles gold, but in an unpurified state. Further out, beyond the Earth's orbit, and beyond what appeared to most ancient astronomers as the Sun's yearly orbit around the Earth, is Mars, corresponding to iron. And indeed when it rusts, iron exhibits the same red color that Mars exhibits, which we now know from astronomy is caused by the abundant presence of iron there. At this level, the Spirit is congealing into the corporeal. The strength of iron represents the soul at the level of Mars as it courageously moves out into darker spaces. The next lowest level further outward on the ladder of planets is Jupiter, corresponding to tin. This metal is very useful for creating alloys such as bronze, but it bears little color in itself. Still, like the expansive Jupiter, tin represents a loosening and expansion of the soul from bondage to the lowest level of consciousness, represented by lead, which exhibits metal in its most chaotic state, and by Saturn, the slowest-moving planet furthest out from the warmth and life of the Sun. At this level we are immersed in material and bodily consciousness, from which we may rise again into the light.

A contemplative alchemy corresponding to today's astronomy, physics and chemistry waits to be developed. The next planet further out from Saturn is Uranus, discovered at the dawn of the revolution of human freedom and industrial technology. The metal named for it, Uranium, we know is unstable and decays into lead. The periodic table also affords some correspondences, imperfect though they may be. We observe for example that the precious metals gold, silver and copper are aligned in descending order in the same row on the table. So are lead and tin. The very name "periodic table" is a clue to the interesting fact that all the elements are arranged on an ever-widening series of seven levels.

Alchemists and other Neoplatonists go on to compare the ladder of planets and metals to the cycle of the year. Here it is observed that from Winter to Summer, the Sun pursues an ever-widening circle as it moves further north, and an ever-narrowing one as it moves south. This is represented by the double-spiral symbol which is seen in all cultures worldwide, most notably in the Chinese yin-yang symbol. The cold and darkness of the Winter Solstice is like that of Saturn, in which the soul is imprisoned on the planetary ladder. The warmth and light of the Sun and Moon, are like the Summer solstice. Thus at Wintertime in the Northern hemisphere (where all alchemists live), the Sun is in the signs of the zodiac represented by Saturn, Capricorn and Aquarius, over what we call the Tropic of Capricorn, while at Summertime the Sun is in the signs ruled by the Moon and the Sun, Cancer and Leo respectively, over what we call the Tropic of Cancer. Between them stretch the other signs of the zodiac, which represent the same "journey" of the soul up and down the ladder of planets and metals. Beneath Cancer and Leo on either side of the Solstice are Gemini and Virgo, the signs of Mercury, one having a negative or feminine, yin polarity (Virgo), and the other a positive, masculine, yang polarity (Gemini). So follow in order the signs of Venus, Libra (yang) and Taurus (yin); the signs of Mars, Scorpio (yin) and Aries (yang); and the signs of Jupiter, Sagittarius (yang) and Pisces (yin). The name for one rotation of the Earth is *day*, which is related to the word for God, Dios; representing the apparent movement of the Sun, the Lord and paragon among the planets. The name for the rotation of the Moon around the earth is *month*, which comes from the word moon; and the period between

each New Moon is (within half a day) the same as the Sun's movement through one sign of the zodiac. The Sun ascends and descends through the ladder of signs and planets, and so we are renewed each year. So too the soul, in order to transform itself, must descend into chaos in order to be reborn. In Alchemy this process of transformation is called "the great work."

The correspondences don't stop there, but descend into our own bodies. According to Burckhardt, the body affords us stability among the flow of sensations and psychic impressions, as well as connecting us to the cosmos. (Alchemy, p.147-48) In Neoplatonic philosophy, the world axis along which the Sun ascends and descends each year, represents the immutable Divine essence of the world. This *axial mundi* corresponds to our backbones, the stabilizing spiritual axis within our own bodies. Furthermore, there are seven "soul centers" or "chakras" along this axis that correspond to the seven planets and metals. Author Robert M. Place reports that this idea was not merely imported from India, but that "there is evidence that the seven soul centers were known to the ancient Pythagoreans and they have been part of Western culture for centuries. In the ancient world, the seven soul centers were related to the Neoplatonic ladder of the planets.... The soul centers or chakras are thought of as seven energy centers located in ascending order from the base of the spine to the top of the cranium." (The Tarot, p.289) Each center, as well as each planet, was related to one of the seven notes in the diatonic musical scale, and since each planet was believed to sound its note as it moved in its course, so was described "the music of the spheres."

What is most significant about these soul centers is that we can experience them ourselves, so they are not just interesting symbols of the cosmos. They are the points at which our own psychic energies are most clearly focused and can be tapped. Several of these centers are so familiar to us that many people recognize them and use them in various ways to stimulate and release their personal powers. For example, students of martial arts concentrate on the third or "power" chakra (usually linked to Mars and iron, and also called the solar plexus and represented by the Sun) as the gravitational center of the body, in order to release their energy and courage. Most of us know too that the heart is not just a pumping organ, but the center that unites our whole spiritual and physical being, and the place we must consult if we are to be true to our honestly-felt "heart's desires." And "the third eye," or 6th chakra of the Moon and silver, is known as the place where our mental energies can be focused and unified in order to gain greater insight and intuition.

Today intuitive observers of these soul centers report that they are also each related to one of the seven colors of the rainbow described by Newton. The first chakra at the base of the spine gives off a red color and is concerned with physical survival. Thus it is also related to lead, Saturn and Winter, when we are immersed in the chaos of the body and its needs and cut off from the light of the spirit. As Eastern yogis and Western hermeticists focus on these soul centers, they can release the spiritual energy trapped in the lower centers so it can rise through the spectrum and ladder of the chakras, thus liberating us from narrow consciousness and reuniting us with the spiritual world at the crown chakra at the top of the head, usually linked to the colors purple and gold and to the Sun. At the same time, we can also learn to bring divine cosmic energy from the crown down to the base, and so ground our spiritual wanderings into creative and practical activities in the world. These two movements up and down our backbones correspond to the two ascending and descending movements of the Sun along the world axis.

Furthermore, they are both represented by the same symbol of the double spiral. In Oriental kundalini yoga, which aims to transmute the sexual energies of the lower centers into spiritual energies at the higher ones, this double spiral up and down the backbone is described as two power streams, Ida and Pingala, which wind themselves around the axis of the backbone. This same image appears in Western culture as the Staff of Hermes or caduceus, in which two snakes wind themselves around a staff through five levels. Just as in the kundalini symbol, at the sixth level they join together, and on the Staff of Hermes they grow wings there which correspond to our two eyes at the level of the third eye or 6th chakra. The staff itself is crowned at the top. The two spiraling snakes also represent the Sun's yearly course up and down the world axis through the signs of the zodiac. It is ironic indeed that the Staff of Hermes, named after the very founder (at least in legend) of Hermeticism, Astrology and Alchemy, has become the symbol of Western Medicine, which denies the existence of the soul centers and channels and their correspondences, and instead relies on merely physical methods of healing based on the biomedical model of the body as a dead machine whose parts need repair. But thanks to this connection between the Caduceus and Medicine, it is a symbol we can see every day, and it is the central symbol I believe of the new vision of ourselves as integral parts of the cosmos, a vision which, the symbol suggests, is the real source of the healing we need today, both for ourselves and for our nation.

This brings me to discuss the central symbol of Alchemy I mentioned earlier. "The marriage of Sulphur and Quicksilver, Sun and Moon, King and Queen, is the central symbol of alchemy." (Burckhardt, Alchemy,



p.149) The two snakes of the caduceus, representing the two opposing forces of our nature, join together at the head in the 6th chakra or third eye, and in the 7th crown chakra, which correspond to the Moon and the Sun respectively. We could also compare this to the joining forces of the right and left brain, which happens at the third eye. The two halves of our brain have come to represent the two sides of our nature. The left (or solar, conscious mind) focuses on active analytical and sequential thought, while the right (the lunar, more subconscious mind) specializes in receptive modes like art, subtle feelings of intuition and bodily awareness.

These two brightest and largest celestial bodies that we see, represent our own visionary capabilities through their association with the 6th and 7th chakras in our heads. They also stand for the masculine or active, and the feminine or passive, sides of our being. The "alchemical marriage" represents the reunion of these opposing forces, and this could be represented by the solar eclipse. According to Burckhardt, "the two forces represented as serpents or dragons are Sulphur and Quicksilver. Their macrocosmic prototype is the two phases -- increasing and decreasing-- of the sun's annual course, separated from one another by the winter and summer solstices. The connection between the tantric and alchemical symbolisms is obvious: of the two forces Pingala and Ida, which wind themselves round the *Merudanda* (central axis of the body), the first is described as being hot and dry, characterized by the color red, and, like alchemical Sulphur, compared with the Sun. The second force, Ida, is regarded as being cold and humid, and in its silvery pallor is associated with the Moon." (p.133) Sulphur is a liquid fire that fixes and coagulates, while quicksilver is a dissolving force that animates. The basic alchemical slogan solve et coagula represents the two great forces in our souls of active and passive, yang and yin, male and female, intellect and passions, classic and romantic, essential and existential. Alan Watts called it the the conflict in philosophy between prickles and goo. But even some Platonists maintain that they are incompatible! My favorite teacher, Plato scholar Marie Fox, was an advisor for my Masters Paper in which I contrasted existentialism with Platonism. She said they were "incompatible," even though alchemists, who are Neo-Platonists, hold their reunion as their central symbol!

Burckhardt goes on to mention that in the myth of the Staff of Hermes, each snake that wound itself around his magic wand conferred on him the opposite powers of "binding" and "loosing," which transmute chaos into cosmos and conflict into order. (p.135) Here I notice another correspondence with a famous symbol often recognized today, but this one is found in the very heart of conservative religion. Even today the primary symbol of the Pope's office are two "keys to the kingdom," which according to the gospel of Matthew were given by Jesus to St. Peter and his other disciples. After saying "thou art petra, the rock, and on this rock I will build my church," Jesus says "And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Matthew 16-19) Ironic indeed again, that in the very highest seat of power of a religion whose most fanatic followers now denounce all the Hermetic and mystical arts as works of Satan, rests the very symbol of all those arts-- the same Staff of Hermes, here represented as the "keys to the kingdom."

I further notice that as the Sun makes its movement up and down the world axis, it moves through signs of the zodiac that alternate between masculine and feminine polarity. This could be the very source of the alternating "snake" currents that move up and down the human spine, which switch polarity from yang to yin and back as it moves through each soul center. Though I tend to think of this polarity as different from the one that contrasts the spiritual and the material, they are often confused. And to some extent the Moon, which passively reflects the Sun's light, can be compared to the ancient idea of Matter, which received the "forms" imprinted on it by the Divine Mind, represented by the Sun. In this way, we can look upon the alchemical marriage as the symbol of how the two warring cultures of religion and science can be transformed and reunited.

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