

# Insight into Alchemy

by

**Titus Burckhardt**

Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 13, No. 3 & 4. (Summer-Autumn, 1979).

© World Wisdom, Inc.

[www.studiesincomparativereligion.com](http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com)

“To make of the body a spirit and of the spirit a body”: this adage sums up the whole of alchemy. Gold itself, which represents outwardly the fruit of the work, appears as an opaque body become luminous, or as a light become solid. Transposed into the human and spiritual order, gold is bodily consciousness transmuted into spirit, or spirit fixed in the body.

For the base metal, which represents the material ready to be worked, is none other than consciousness linked with the body and as if steeped in it. It is the “metallic body” from which must be extracted the “soul” and “spirit,” which are Mercury and Sulphur. If the body were not an inner reality it could not serve as material for the spiritual work.

With the average man, “to know” and “to be” are polarized, as it were, in thought and bodily consciousness; the first represents an intelligence separated from the being of its objects; whereas the second is a passive state of being and as if bereft of intelligence. This dichotomy is noticeable even in the dream state, where the psychic form of the body is more or less detached from its sensory form. The return to the centre, to the heart considered as “place” of the spirit, will comprise an integration and something like a reversal of the two poles: bodily consciousness will become in its way intelligent; it will transmute itself into a static state of knowledge, and at the same time thought—or the mentality—will crystallize out under the lightning action of the spirit.

This transmutation from spirit into body and from body into spirit can be found in a more or less direct and unmistakable manner in every method of spiritual realization; alchemy, however, has made it its principal theme, in conformity with the metallurgic symbolism founded on the possibility of changing the “state of aggregation” of a body.

At the beginning of the work, the bodily consciousness is chaotic and obscure. It is then compared to lead and the “order” which corresponds to this state of “matter” is attributed to Saturn. This planet represents the principle of condensation, and it is this which explains its seemingly contradictory assignment to the metal lead among things corporeal and to reason among the faculties of the soul; in relation to the existential dimension of the other faculties, reason is like a point without extension. The polarity of thought and bodily consciousness, the opposition “spirit”—“body”, is thus to be found in the nature of Saturn, and this corroborates the hostile character, impeding and even sinister, which this planet assumes in divinatory astrology.

On the plane of method, saturnine condensation becomes concentration; the intelligence withdraws from the exterior to the interior; having become a single point it submerges itself in the inner darkness of the body.

According to alchemical doctrine every metal is constituted by the more or less perfect union of two principles called Sulphur and Mercury; just as bodily consciousness, assimilated to metal as transformer, is woven from these two principles or subtle forces, at the same time opposite and complementary; Sulphur, which is male, and Mercury, which is female, are combined in the chaotic bodily consciousness—or in the base metal—in a manner in which they neutralize or shackle one another.

Basil Valentine<sup>1</sup> writes: “Where soul, spirit and metallic form are present, there, too, must be found quicksilver, sulphur and metallic salt....”<sup>2</sup> Therefore he likens Mercury to the soul and Sulphur to the spirit, and it is thus that the two principles should be understood, always bearing in mind the fact that alchemy considers these primarily as powers or forces co-operating on the same plane of “nature.” If it happens that the same author, or other alchemists, call Mercury “spirit,” it must be understood that its “volatile” nature is here opposed to that of inert or solid bodies; in this sense both Sulphur and Mercury are “spirits.” On the other hand, Mercury, as “substance” of the inner or psychic form of the body, corresponds to the vital principle, intermediary between soul and body.

According to Galen, the vital spirit is a very pure substance distributed in cosmic space, and which the heart assimilates by a process analogous to respiration, thus transforming it into animal life. It is easy to see that this corresponds to the role of *prana*, the “vital breath,” as conceived by the Hindus; its employment in *laya-yoga*, the “yoga of solution,” appears to be exactly analogous to the use to which the alchemists put their “universal solvent.”

Just as breathing rhythmically re-establishes the link between the physical organism and the cosmic environment (a tie which the progressive solidification of the body tends to break) so this parallel, but more intimate, assimilation of the vital breath maintains the continuity between the psychic form of the body and the cosmic substance. Brother Marcanton writes on this subject: “It is not that I do not know that your secret Mercury is none other than a living spirit, universal and innate, which ceaselessly descends from heaven to earth, in the form of an aerial vapor, to replenish its porous belly, and is then born amongst the impure Sulphurs, and in growing passes from a volatile to a fixed nature, giving to itself the “radical humid” form.”<sup>3</sup> The “porous belly” of the earth here corresponds to the human body; as for the “impure Sulphurs” they are nothing but the gross bodies confining, as it were, their Sulphur, which is their formal principle, In allying

---

<sup>1</sup> A German alchemist of the fifteenth century.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *De la Grande Pierre des Anciens Sages*, published by Les douze Clefs de la Philosophie. (Trans. Eugene Canseliet), Paris, 1956.

<sup>3</sup> *La Lumiere sortant par soi-meme des Tenebres*. Paris 1687.

itself with the psychic form of the body, Mercury is solidified, so to speak, while forming at the same time its “humid radical,” its *hyle*, or plastic substance.

With regard to ordinary mercury, it is noteworthy that, alone amongst metals known to antiquity and the Middle Ages, it occurs normally under the liquid aspect which evaporates under the action of the craftsman’s fire; it is thus, at one and the same time, both a “body” and a “spirit.” Through it gold and silver can be liquefied; it also extracts the noble metal from a mixture of impure and insoluble minerals; the amalgam being exposed to the fire expels the mercury and lays bare the gold.

Just as common mercury forms an amalgam with gold, so subtle Mercury contains the germ of spiritual gold; the vital breath, while being “humid” by nature, as with the feminine cosmic energy—the *Shakti* of Hindu doctrine—carries the igneous principle of life. Reduced to its universal prototype, Mercury corresponds to the primordial ocean of Hindu mythology, to *Prakriti*, which carries *Hiranyagarba*, the golden embryo of the world.

Conformably with this universal prototype, Mercury includes a maternal aspect; more precisely, it is itself the maternal aspect or power of the *materia* of the world of the soul. On this account alchemists sometimes give it the name—a little disconcertingly—of the “menstruum”; they mean by that the blood of the matrix which nourishes the embryo as long as it does not flow outwards to become corrupted; Mercury indeed nourishes the spiritual embryo enclosed in the hermetic vessel.

It is through bodily consciousness, apparently closed in on itself, and within its innermost enclosure that the alchemist recovers this cosmic substance, Mercury. In order to “win it over” he relies on a bodily function such as respiration, and this is significant for all spiritual arts related to alchemy; starting out from a physical modality, the consciousness, which is essentially intelligence, ascends through its own “sheaths” to arrive at the universal reality of which this modality is the reflection or echo. Such an integration cannot however be achieved without some kind of grace; moreover it presupposes a sacred framework as well as an attitude excluding every kind of promethian or egoistic adventure.

Mercury is thus, at the same time and according to the different planes of its manifestation, the subtle “breath” animating the body, the transient substance of the soul, lunar power, the *materia* of all the world of the soul, and finally the *materia prima*. Just as the universal energy which the Hindus call *Shakti* possesses not only a maternal but also a terrible and destructive aspect, so Mercury is at the same time the “water of life” and the “mortal poison”; that is to say its “humid” nature is generative or dissolvent, according to circumstances.

“Let us leave the compound” wrote Synesius,<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Greek alchemist. He is perhaps identical with Bishop Synesius of Cyrene (379-415), a disciple of Hypatia, a Platonist of Alexandria. Cf. *Bibliothèque des Philosophes Chimiques*, Paris 1742.

take its simple (*sic*) for it is its quintessence. Observe that we have two bodies of great perfection (gold and silver, or the heart and blood) filled with quick-silver. Thence draw your quicksilver and you will make of it the draught, which is called quintessence, having a permanent and ever victorious power. It is a living light which illuminates every soul that has once beheld it. It is the knot and bond of all the elements, which it contains in itself, just as it is the spirit which nourishes and vivifies all things, and by means of which nature acts in the universe. It is the force, the beginning, the middle and the end of the work. To tell you all in a few words, know, my son, that the quintessence and the occult thing of our stone is no other than our viscous soul, heavenly and glorious, which we hold by our mastery of the ore-bearing mine<sup>5</sup> which alone engenders it and that it is not in our power to make this water by any art, since nature alone can beget it. And this water is the sharp vinegar which makes a pure spirit from the body of gold. And I tell you, my son, take no account of any other things, for they are vain, but only of this water, which burns, whitens, dissolves and congeals. It is indeed that which decomposes, and that which makes to germinate....

Although Mercury, after the manner of universal substances, contains all natural qualities in potentiality—it is also often represented as androgynous—it is polarized in relation to Sulphur and manifests itself as cold and humid, while Sulphur manifests as warm and dry. It should be noted here that warmth and dryness, which are the two masculine qualities, correspond to expansion and solidification, and that the two feminine qualities of humidity and cold represent solution and contraction. To a certain extent Sulphur imitates, in a dynamic and indirect way, the action of the formal principle, of the essence, which “deploys” forms and “fixes” them in a certain plane of existence. Solution and contraction, on the other hand, which originate from Mercury, express the receptivity of the plastic or feminine principle, its faculty of embracing all forms without being held by them, as also its delimiting and separative action, which is an aspect of the *materia*. In the order of craftsmanship, the analogy of Sulphur with the formal principle is evinced in the coloring action of the former: thus the union of common sulphur and mercury produces cinnabar, in which the fluid mercury is at one and the same time fixed and colored by sulphur; now, in metallurgic symbolism color is analogous to quality, therefore to form, according to the traditional significance of the term. However, it should be stressed that cinnabar is only an imperfect product of the principles concerned, just as common sulphur and common mercury are not identical with the two alchemical principles they symbolize.

In the first phase of the work, it is the solidifying and coagulating action of Sulphur which is opposed to the liberation of Mercury, even as the contracting action of the latter neutralizes

---

<sup>5</sup> According to Morienus, it is man who is (the mine of that with which the Grand-Mastery is accomplished). (*Dialogue du roi Khalid avec l'ermite Morenius*, Bibl. des Phil. Chim.)

Sulphur. The knot is loosened by the growth of Mercury: to the extent which this dissolves the imperfect coagulation which is the “base metal,” the expanding warmth of Sulphur comes into play in its turn. At the beginning Mercury works against the solidifying power of Sulphur; but after that, it awakens its generative force, which manifests the true form of gold. Here we have the analogy of the love contest between man and woman; it is the feminine fascination which dissolves the “solidification” of the virile nature and awakens its power. It is sufficient here to remark that it is this fascination, spiritually canalized, which plays a certain part in Tantric methods.

In *Les Noces Chimiques de Christian Rosencreutz*, Johann Valentin Andréae<sup>6</sup> narrates the following parable: “...a beautiful unicorn, white as snow, and wearing a gold collar inscribed with certain signs, advanced towards the fountain, and bending its front legs knelt as if to do obeisance to the lion who stood upright on the fountain. This lion, who because of his complete immobility seemed to be made of stone or brass, forthwith seized a naked sword which he held in his claws, and broke it in twain: I think the two halves fell in the fountain. Then the lion continued to roar until a white dove, carrying an olive branch in its beak, flew towards him as fast as it could; she gave the branch to the lion who swallowed it and became quiet once more. Then with joyous bounds the unicorn returned to her place.” The white unicorn, a lunar animal, is Mercury in its pure state. The lion is Sulphur, which being identified with the body of which it is the formal principle, appears at first immobile as a statue. By the homage of Mercury he wakes and begins to roar. His roaring is none other than his creative power: according to the *Physiologus*, the lion vivifies the still-born whelps by his voice. The lion breaks the sword of reason and the pieces fall in the fountain, where they will be dissolved. He does not stop roaring until the dove of the Holy Spirit gives him to eat the olive branch of knowledge. This seems to be the meaning of this parable of which Johann Valentin Andréae certainly was not the author.

In certain conditions, Sulphur, when fettered, is the reason and contains the gold of the spirit in a sterile state. This gold has first to be dissolved in the fountain of Mercury, in order to become the living “ferment” which will transform other metals into gold.

The first action of Mercury is to “whiten” the body. Artephius<sup>7</sup> wrote:

The whole secret...is that we should know how to extract from the body of the Magnesia the non-burning quicksilver, which is Antimony, and the Mercurial Sublimate; that is to say, it is necessary to extract an incombustible living water, then to congeal it with the perfect body of the Sun, which is dissolved in it in a white substance, coagulated like cream, until it all becomes white. However, first

---

<sup>6</sup> Johann Valentin Andréae (1586-1654). Cf. *Les Noces Chimiques de Christian Rosencreutz*. (Trans. Aurigen, Ed. Chacornac, Paris 1928).

<sup>7</sup> A mediaeval alchemist of whose life nothing is known. “Artephius” is probably a pseudonym. (Bibl. des Phil. Chim.)

the Sun, by the decomposition and solution it undergoes in this water, will lose its light, will be obscured and darkened; then it will rise on the water and, little by little, a white color and substance will float on the surface; it is this which is called whitening the red brass, its philosophical sublimation and reduction to its primary matter, that is to say, to incombustible white sulphur and fixed quicksilver. Thus, humid when limited, that is to say gold, our body, having undergone repeated liquefaction in our dissolvent water, will be converted and reduced to sulphur and fixed quicksilver; and in this way the perfect body of the sun will take life in this water and be vivified and inspired; it will wax and multiply in its own kind, as do all other things....

The sun referred to by Artephius, which dies and is dissolved in the mercurial water<sup>8</sup> before being reborn, is none other than the individual consciousness bound to the body, the bodily ego, as it were, which is only gold or sun in a latent condition. Alchemists often gave the name of “gold” or “sun” to that which is gold in a virtual sense.

The “whitening” of the “body” which follows the “blackening” is sometimes described as a dissolution of the body in the mercurial water and at other times as a separation of the soul from the body. This is because the reduction of bodily consciousness to its psychic substance causes the soul to withdraw from the sensory organs and go out, so to speak, into a “space” which is both inward and unlimited. “It mounts from Earth to Heaven—says the Emerald Tablet—and redescends from Heaven to Earth, thus receiving the power of both superior and inferior things.” In the same way, one speaks of a sublimation which has to be followed by a new coagulation.

When the inner consciousness is thus reduced to its primary matter, similar to the moon and silver, Sulphur reveals itself in its true nature, which is a power emanating from the mysterious centre of the being, from its divine essence; it is the roaring of the solar lion, which is like a sonorous light, or a luminous sound. Sulphur “fixes” the fluid and ungraspable substance of Mercury by giving it a new form which is at the same time both body and spirit.

Artephius wrote:

...natures change from one to the other, since the body incorporates the spirit, and the spirit changes the body into spirit both colored and white...boil it in our white water, that is in Mercury, until it is melted into blackness; then, through a continuous decoction, the blackness will disappear, and in the end the body thus dissolved will mount up with the white soul (bodily consciousness reabsorbed into the soul), and the one shall blend with the other, and they shall embrace in such a way that they can nevermore be separated; it is thus that spirit and body are

---

<sup>8</sup> Or in Antinomy, which is equally a dissolvent and which, in spiritual alchemy, is a synonym for Mercury.

united (by a process inverse to the first) with true harmony, and they become one permanence (the body “fixing” the spirit and the spirit restoring the bodily consciousness to the pure spiritual state) and this is the solution of the body and the coagulation of the spirit, which are one and the same operation.

Most alchemists only speak of Sulphur and Mercury as natures constitutive of gold; others, such as Basil Valentine, add Salt. In the order of craftsmanship, Sulphur is the cause of combustion and Mercury of evaporation, whereas Salt is represented by ashes. If Sulphur and Mercury are “spirits”, Salt is the body, or more accurately the principle of corporeality. In a certain sense Sulphur, Mercury and Salt correspond respectively to the spirit (that is to say to the spiritual essence), the soul, and the body of man, or again, to the immortal soul, the vital breath, and the body.

If the distinctions between these three natures do not always seem clear in descriptions of the alchemical work, this results from their not being considered in themselves, but only through their action on the cosmic plane, or, more exactly, on the subtle or *animic* plane, where their forces blend in countless ways. On account of the complexity of this realm, the most “archaic” descriptions of the work are the most accurate because they include everything in their symbolism; which brings to mind the words of the Emerald Tablet: Sulphur, solar power, Mercury, lunar power, are the “father and mother” of the alchemical embryo; the “wind”, which is no other than the vital breath, second nature of Mercury, has “carried it in its womb”; the earth, that is to say, the body, is its “nurse”....

When the body, or more exactly the bodily consciousness, is purified of all passional “humidity”—and in this connection it corresponds to “ashes”—it helps to retain the “fugitive” spirit; in other words, it becomes the “fixative” of spiritual states which the mind could not by itself sustain. This is so because the body is the “inferior” which corresponds to the “superior,” according to the formula of the Emerald Tablet.

The spiritual state which “leans” on the body has, however, no common measure with the latter; it is like a reversed pyramid of unlimited extension, having its point resting on the earth; it goes without saying that this picture, which suggests a state of instability, is only valid in relation to space.

In the realm of sacred art, the human likeness which most directly expresses the “spiritualization of the body and the embodying of the spirit” is that of the Buddha: the analogy with alchemical symbolism is all the more striking since this figure comprises solar attributes—halo and rays—and is often gilded. We have in mind more particularly the statues of Mahāyana Buddhism, which at their best, perfectly express, in the plastic quality of their outward appearance, that plenitude which is both immutable and intense and which the body contains but cannot enclose.

Basil Valentine compares the result of the union of spirit and body to the “glorious body” of the resurrected.<sup>9</sup>

Morienu<sup>10</sup> says: “...Whosoever shall have truly known how to cleanse and whiten the soul and make it ascend on high; and shall have guarded his body well and removed from it all obscurity and darkness together with any bad odor; it (the soul) shall then be able to be restored to its body, and at the time of their reconnection great wonders will appear....”

And Rhases<sup>11</sup> writes: “...Thus each soul reunites with its first body; and in no case can it unite with any other; from thenceforth they will never again be separated; for the body will be glorified and brought to incorruption and to an unutterable subtlety and luster, so that it will be able to penetrate all things however solid, since its nature will then be the same as that of a spirit....”

---

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit. This bears on the role which the immortality of the body plays in Chinese alchemy.

<sup>10</sup> *Le Dialogue du roi Chalid avec l'ermite Morenius* is perhaps the first text translated from Arabic into Latin.

<sup>11</sup> Rhases is undoubtedly the Greco-Latin form of the Arabic “Razi”, the full name being Abu Bekr ar-Razi (826-925). (Bibl. des Phil. Chim.)