

# SEARCHING FOR THE COSMIC QUINTESSENCE: HOW ALCHEMISTS MEDITATED IN THE MIDDLE AGES AND RENAISSANCE

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In the Hermetic view of the alchemists, the creation of the universe took place through meditation – the focusing of the light of the mind of the Divine. “All things have come from the One Thing,” says the Emerald Tablet, “through the meditation of One Mind.” The source of the One Mind was embedded in Nature itself, in all created things, including human beings.

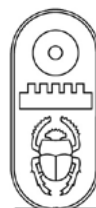
In their meditations, the alchemists were seeking to find the path of light and mind that unites the world of manifested forms with the divine ideals that are the source of everything. Alchemists believed they could connect with the divine mind through purification of their own consciousness and deeply focused meditation.



While they concealed their true methodology from medieval authorities, it was an open secret among alchemists of the time. Their ubiquitous motto *Ora et Labora* (“Pray and Work”) spelled out exactly how they intended to transform the metals, themselves, and eventually, the whole universe.

## **The Quintessence**

While the divine source of the One Mind is present in all material things, it exists beyond the Four Elements at the borderline between physical reality and the spiritual realm. “The Quintessence is a thing,” wrote Isaac Newton, “that is spiritual, penetrating, transformative, and incorruptible, which emerges anew from the Four Elements when they are balanced and bound together.”<sup>1</sup>





*Ora et Labora, by Katlyn Breene, 2007. The alchemist's ubiquitous motto referred to the method of using prayer and meditation to supplement practical or laboratory work.*

The alchemists saw this divine presence in all things as a Fifth Element and named it the Quintessence. The Quintessence of something carries its divine image or true identity and acts as a living force responsible for the emergence of its inner form.

The Cosmic Quintessence is the mind of the Divine active in the universe. It is the force behind the chaotic transformations and gradual evolution of the universe. In Hermetic philosophy, it is the logos or Word that gives form and identity to the universe. In simplest terms, it is the light of mind that directs the transformation of energy into matter.

The same principle of divine light manifesting the whole universe from the chaos of the First Matter works in each one of us. The idea that light is part of conscious creation is the source of the alchemists' fascination with what Paracelsus named the "True Imagination."

### **The True Imagination in Meditation**

The True Imagination of the alchemists should not be confused with daydreaming or fantasy. Carl Jung referred to it by the Latin word *Imaginatio* to differentiate it from the common concept of imagination. True imagination actually envisions the subtle processes of nature and connects with the divine archetypes.

"The concept of *Imaginatio*," said Jung, "is the most important key to understanding the alchemical Opus. We have to conceive of these imaginal processes not as the immaterial phantoms that we take fantasy to be, but as something corporeal, real – a subtle body."<sup>2</sup>

"Therefore should you also know," said Paracelsus, "that this perfect Imagination coming from the Astral, issues from the Soul" and "leads life thus deciphered back to its spiritual reality, and it then takes the name of meditation."<sup>3</sup>

What Paracelsus meant was that the True Imagination re-envisioned the divine

source of anything and accesses it in meditation. This hidden reality is always present, but the eyes of ordinary men do not see it. Only the mind's eye of the purified consciousness and the force of the True Imagination can perceive the divine vision of which the alchemists spoke.

Carl Jung explained the role of the True Imagination in alchemical meditation with incredible insight: "The act of imagining was a real, physical activity that could be fitted into the cycle of material changes that brought these about and was brought about by them in turn. The alchemist related himself not only to the unconscious but directly to the very substance that he hoped to transform through the power of imagination. The act of imagining is therefore a concentrated extract of life forces, a quintessential hybrid of the physical and psychic. There was no mind/matter split in the heyday of alchemy, but there existed an intermediate realm between mind and matter – a psychic realm of subtle bodies – whose characteristics are to manifest themselves in a mental as well as a material form."<sup>24</sup>

In summary, the True Imagination attempts to capture the essence of things "as the Divine dreams them." Therefore, when Hermetic writers speak of "seeing with the eyes of spirit," they are describing a process that penetrates into the mystery

of things beyond their outward appearance to the inner Quintessence or the "Thing Itself."

## Contemplative Prayer

For alchemists of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, contemplative prayer was what they practiced in the Inner Laboratory. This kind of meditation is depicted as the "first stage" of the Great Work in Figure 2. What many think of as meditation today is based primarily on Eastern methods that were not available to Europeans of that time.

The primary tool for work in the Inner Laboratory during the heyday of alchemy was not meditation but contemplative prayer.

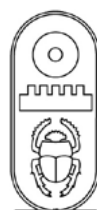
Albertus Magnus, Roger Bacon, George Ripley, Agrippa, Paracelsus, Raymond Lully, Nicholas Flamel, Isaac Newton, and most other European alchemists used contemplative prayer in their spiritual work.

From the very beginning, alchemical meditation was different from the

forms of meditation popular today. There was no special posture required. There was no mantra, magical word, or ritual practice that of itself established the desired state of consciousness. The work began immediately when the alchemist entered the Inner Laboratory by withdrawing from the world. There was no complicated preparation, because it was considered a completely natural thing to do.



*"The First Stage of the Great Work" by Hans Vredeman de Vries (1527–1604) shows alchemist Heinrich Khunrath at work in his laboratory. From Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae (1595).*



Once the attention was turned inward, it was up to the mental discipline of the alchemist to reach the higher states of mind. Most importantly, the initial stages of the alchemist's contemplation involved active inner work on the psychological and spiritual levels. A specific spiritual goal always existed in this kind of work, although it was usually personal union with the divine Mind.

Despite what many Hermetic writers have told us, the Christian roots of Western alchemy cannot be denied. The kind of prayer practiced in the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Islam, and Christianity) became the spiritual practice of medieval alchemists. By the end of the thirteenth century, alchemy had already developed a structured set of fundamental principles. These included not only the theories of Hermes summarized in the Emerald Tablet, but also the Biblical idea that the human soul was divided after the fall of Adam.

Healing the soul was the shared goal of both alchemy and the religious tradition. There were certainly differences of opinion on how to accomplish it, but their philosophical roots were planted in the same soil. The supreme accomplishment in spiritual alchemy, the *Mysterium Coniunctionis* ("sacred marriage"), involved the re-uniting of the severed parts of the soul.

The sacred work of perfecting the soul is the Great Work of alchemy. The operations of alchemical transformation were considered universal principles, so if one could learn the secret of transmuting lead into gold, one could use the same basic techniques on the spiritual level.

Despite their conflicts, the medieval Church and the alchemists had the same

timeless goal—the redemption of the human soul.<sup>5</sup>

### The Quietist Movement

The Quietist Movement had its roots in the teachings of Christian mystic Meister Eckhart (1260- 1328).<sup>6</sup> He believed that by escaping the tyranny of the self through the purification of consciousness, one could attain union with the Divine. That seed of mysticism took root in the Church and eventually blossomed in Spain in the writings of a priest named Miguel de Molinos (1640- 1696).<sup>7</sup> His ideas rapidly spread to France and Italy and eventually became one of the most popular spiritual movements in Europe.

The Quietists taught a method of contemplative prayer designed to get beyond human self- centeredness to enter into union with the Divine. The Quietists believed it is possible to have an inner experience of the divine within the human soul, and that soul can achieve divine perfection while still on earth. But only the grace of the Divine can transform the soul, which can only occur once the soul has been purified and uplifted through deeply intuitive contemplation and purifying meditation.

One of the most popular leaders of the Quietist Movement was a Spanish nun named Teresa of Avila (1515-1582).<sup>8</sup> Teresa's basic message was that the ascent to heaven begins within us, and like most spiritual alchemists, she taught that the unrefined person must be transformed through hard inner work. "It is foolish to think we will enter heaven without entering into ourselves," she explained, but she also cautioned that the work required a preliminary purification of consciousness, "Untilled ground, however rich, will bring forth thistles and thorns; so also is the mind of a person."<sup>9</sup>

## Practicing Quietist Meditation

As an example of the kind of meditation practiced by Western alchemists in the Middle Ages, the following are four steps of the structured contemplative prayer used by Quietists.

### Step 1 – Quieting

Quieting is a simple method of focused relaxation and mental detachment that is common to many different traditions. But for practitioners of contemplative prayer in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, there was only one reason to practice it – preparing the soul for union with the Divine.

To begin the Quieting process, sit comfortably with your spine upright and close your eyes. Do not perform Quieting while lying down. The best time to practice is early morning, after a nap, on a day off, or other time of solitude without any interruptions.

This basic process of Quieting takes place on all levels of body, mind, and soul. Beginning on the level of your body, slowly withdraw your attention from physical sensations and sensory inputs. Start “softening” the body by relaxing the muscles and releasing tension.

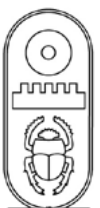
On the level of mind, Quieting requires stilling the constant chatter of thoughts and the swirling chaos of emotional energy. During this initial stage, the mental faculties are not yet completely purified, and one will tend to be distracted by lingering thoughts, emotions, memories, fantasies, planning, worrying, and other lingering impressions in the mind. Simply ignore it without deliberately trying to control it in any way. Try not to invest any energy pushing it away or attempting to bury it. Let it dissolve by not paying attention to it.

Other distractions that arise during this kind of activity are insights, breakthroughs, and self-reflected comments such as “Am I doing this right,” “I feel so peaceful,” etc. All these attachments – even the positive ones – will cause the mind to descend into worldly concerns.

The mind should be clear without any ideas or impressions. It may take some time to achieve this state, but it will manifest eventually if you maintain an attitude of dissolution and surrender and keep reducing everything to a state of simple awareness. When mental quieting has been attained, the attention should be rested on the warm light of mind behind the eyes in the forehead.

On the level of soul, the Quieting process is one of release from earthly concerns and desires. It is a way of soothing your inner being by letting go of nagging feelings of guilt, greed, pride, and intrusive desires of any kind. It is also necessary to overcome any feelings of deficiency, sinfulness, or inferiority and to realize the soul is infinite and not tied to this world or to the acts of any temporal ego that emerged from it. Successful quieting of the soul results in a feeling of loving innocence and transcendent peacefulness.

Once body, mind, and soul are quieted, the work of this first stage involves a mental Cultivation of Silence. The primary work here is on the individual will, which becomes lost or absorbed by the Divine presence in the sacred Stillness.





Remember, it is the Stillness itself that dissolves you. In spiritual chemistry, this etheric ingredient is known as the Alkahest or Universal Solvent.

Do not set a time limit or use an alarm to end the Prayer of Quiet. Do it as long as you can, and when you feel it is time, gently withdraw from the Inner Laboratory and end the session. Purity of intent is what makes this work. Once that is lost, it is time to stop.

### **Step 2 – Reversion**

The second step on the Quietist path is Reversion, in which the content of contemplation is focused on turning yourself completely over to the will of the One Mind of the universe and seeking Divine guidance to replace personal will. In religious terms, this is personal surrender to the Divine, which ironically occurs most easily when persons are at the end of their rope – frustrated and disappointed in their efforts to better themselves. It can happen to anyone trying to do something extraordinary with life and being thwarted by peer group, family, job, society, dogma, or other cultural restrictions.

To really understand Reversion, you have to understand the ways in which you have rejected the Divine in your life. Some people throw themselves into daily chores, busywork, obligations, and careers and never acknowledge the spiritual level of their lives. They do not believe in mystical experiences, or they think that accepting such ideas will somehow interfere with their practical strivings. Others are consumed by soul-robbing jobs that demand all their time and energy, and they do not have the luxury of experimenting with spirituality. Still others are hardened into a strictly materialistic approach to the world through greed, painful experiences, and rejection or lack of love.

The practice during this stage is to reflect on how one's failures to open up to divine energies and acknowledge the ways in which the soul has been damaged because of it.

### **Step 3 – Recollection**

The third step in Quietist contemplation is Recollection, which is a process of transcending duality and affirming the divine Source of all things. The work of Recollection begins with intense mental prayer in which one concentrates on the withdrawal of the soul from worldly temptations and enters devout contemplation on the power of spiritual passion. The two previous steps must be mastered before proceeding to the Recollection stage.

The primary tool of Recollection is deep contemplation, which must be practiced inside the heart and not intellectually. One then experiences a deep piety develop in one's heart that is beyond any that can be achieved through religious dogma or observances. This pureness in the heart becomes a private guide, and the soul is led by the divine Will only.

From the Hermetic viewpoint, this spirit is Thoth/Hermes, the inner guide that emerges from one's infinite soul and resides within the purified heart. In practice, one must agree to the necessity of divine assistance – something totally separate from

one's being—that will provide the confidence and deep faith to proceed to the final stage in this process, because one's everyday personality or ego does not want to go there.

It is very important at this stage to persevere in a state of deep contemplation and continue residing in the heart until your personal will dissolves. Suddenly, you feel “refreshed and renewed” by the unmistakable presence of Divine grace.

In terms of spiritual chemistry, the vessel of the soul must be hermetically sealed so nothing from the mundane world contaminates it. At that point, contemplation must cease immediately without discursive thinking of any kind, and the methods by which you achieved this state must be abandoned. Your soul must allow the divine to work within it and through it. It must open completely without hindrance and allow the influx of grace to continue as long as possible.

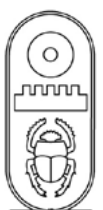
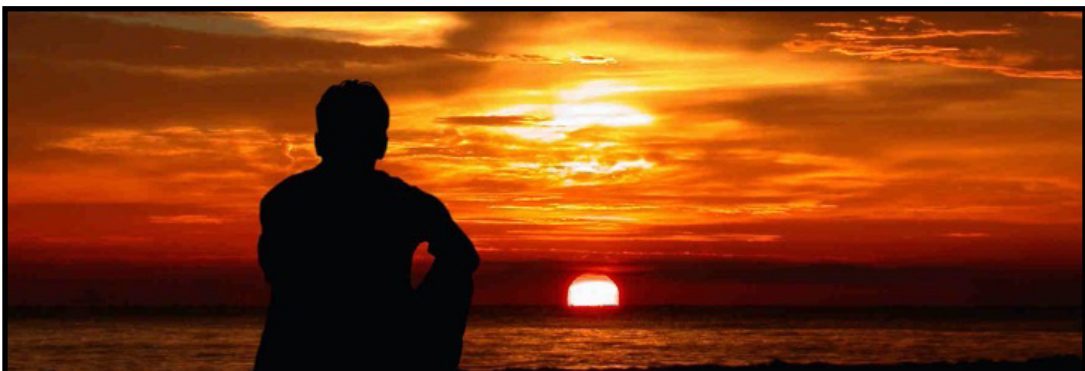
#### **Step 4 – Infused Contemplation**

The final step of the Quietist approach to meditation may take some time to achieve, but it is made possible through the gateway to divine grace opened in the previous step. One now enters a state of passive contemplation accompanied by infusion with divine energy. It is experienced as an infinite entertainment or fascination in the presence of the divine.

In other words, one feels completely fulfilled and alive, and require nothing more. The search for truth ends and one exists in a state of gnostic bliss. It is a rare and wonderful state that human beings can – and have – achieved.

Each individual soul is also part of the greater Soul of the universe. Therefore one's soul is also the center and kingdom of the Divine. Because of this, a person can become one with the divine Mind by cohabitating the same sacred space. To stay in this holy place, continuous self-denial and mortification are required. Pride and self-love on all levels must be banished, so that all that remains is the simple and pure desire to remain in the presence of the Divine, which is the soul's true home.

One's role during Infused Contemplation is to become the perfect vessel for divine energy. Thinking this or trying to visualize it is not enough. One must continue in this final phase in a wholly passive state in which sensations of being in the body disappear. Memory and imagination will now be absorbed in the divine, and a feeling of ecstasy and rapture will permeate one's being.





The Azoth of the Philosophers, *Basil Valentine*, (1659). This restored and colored version copyright 1999 by *Dennis William Hauck*.

### Azoth of the Philosophers Mandala

The “Azoth of the Philosophers” is a meditative emblem attributed to German alchemist Basil Valentine.<sup>10</sup> The original drawing dates from the early 1400s, but it was kept hidden from the eyes of the Church and shared only among alchemists for the next 200 years. It was not until 1659 – at the height of the Renaissance – that the Azoth emblem finally appeared in a book published in Paris called *L’Azoth des Philosophes* (*The Azoth of the Philosophers*). The text of that book was based on an earlier work published in 1626 without the drawing. Also attributed to Valentine, it was titled *Azoth, ou le Moyen de faire l’Or caché des Philosophes* (*Azoth, or the Way to the Hidden Gold of the Philosophers*).

It is not surprising the original Azoth drawing was kept secret. The emblem

is actually an alchemical mandala used to transform consciousness by working through the operations of alchemy. The goal was to achieve divine perfection and union with the Divine. Such spiritual practices were not allowed outside the Church, and several alchemists – most notably Giordano Bruno<sup>11</sup> – were burnt at the stake even for suggesting that people could experience the Divine through private prayer and meditation in their own chambers.

The word “Azoth” is an alchemical term first used in the ancient writings of Zosimos, Mary the Jewess, and Jābir ibn Hayyān (Geber).<sup>12</sup> It refers to the universal agent of transformation, which is capable of reducing anything to its primordial state and then perfecting it. The term is derived from the Arabic word for mercury (*al-zābūq*).



The first two letters in the word relate to the letters at the beginning and end of the three languages used by scholars of the time: Latin (A-Z), Greek (alpha-omega), and Hebrew (aleph- tau). The connotation is that the Azoth contains and controls both the beginning and end of the Great Work – not just the chaotic First Matter at the beginning of the Work but also its perfected essence (the Philosopher's Stone) at the end.

The circle at the center of the drawing contains the face of a bearded alchemist at the beginning of the Work (the alpha point). Like looking into a mirror, this is where the alchemist focuses attention to begin the meditation. From this self-reflective point, the alchemist begins the inner work and continues around the mandala through the spiritual operations depicted in the seven numbered circles. At the end of meditation (the omega point), the alchemist returns to the central circle, but this time focuses on the face contained within the downward pointing triangle.

The downward-pointing triangle superimposed over the face of the alchemist is the cipher for the Water element, which is used here as a symbol of divine grace pouring down from Above.

Within the boundary of the triangle one can see the face of the Divine, and the drawing clearly implies that the face of the Divine and the face of the alchemist become one at the end of the Work.

Unfortunately, ideas like that were considered blasphemy punishable by death in the Middle Ages. It was not until the late Renaissance, when the concept of the divine nature of humankind began to circulate openly, that the Azoth drawing could finally be published.

### **Symbols of the Azoth**

Working with the Azoth in meditation is very straightforward, but first one needs

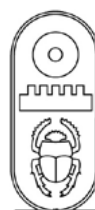
to understand the complicated layout and meaning of the symbols used. In the image on the previous page, the mandala shows the schematized body of the alchemist shown in perfect balance the Four Elements, as depicted by his outstretched arms and legs. His feet protrude from behind the central emblem, one foot on Earth and the other in Water. In his right hand is a torch of Fire and in his left hand a feather symbolizing Air.

The alchemist also stands balanced between the masculine and feminine powers in the background. He is the offspring of the sacred marriage between Sol, the archetypal Sun King seated on a lion on a hill to his right, and Luna, the archetypal Moon Queen seated on a great fish to his left. "Its father is the Sun," says the Emerald Tablet, "its mother the Moon."<sup>13</sup>

The jovial, extroverted Sun King holds a scepter and a shield indicating his authority and strength over the rational, visible world, but the fiery dragon of the rejected contents of his unconscious waits in a cave beneath him ready to attack should he grow too arrogant.

The melancholy, introverted Moon Queen holds the reins to a great fish, symbolizing her acceptance and connection to those same unconscious forces that threaten the King. Behind her is a chaff of wheat, which stands for her relationship to fertility and growth. The bow and arrow she cradles in her left arm symbolize the wounds of the heart and body she accepts as part of her existence, for feminine consciousness accepts the world as it is, with all its pain and suffering.

In simplest terms, the King and Queen represent the raw materials of our experience – thoughts and feelings – with which the alchemist works. The King symbolizes the power of thought and willpower, which are characteristics of



spirit. The Queen stands for the influence of feelings and emotions, which make up the chaotic energy of the soul. Their marriage produces a new intuitive state of consciousness that Egyptian alchemists referred to as “Intelligence of the Heart.”

Between the legs of the alchemist at the level of the root chakra is the Cubic Stone, which is labeled *Corpus* (meaning “body”). The five stars surrounding it indicate that the physical body has a hidden Fifth Element or Quintessence whose “inherent strength is perfected if it is turned into Earth” according to the Emerald Tablet. Where the head of the alchemist should be, there is a depiction of the winged solar disk, which symbolizes the ascended essence or personal Quintessence manifested through the operations of spiritual alchemy.

Touching the wings of the Quintessence are a salamander engulfed in flames on the left side of the drawing and a standing bird on the right. Below the salamander is the inscription *Anima* (Soul); below the bird is the inscription *Spiritus* (Spirit). The salamander, a symbol of soul, is attracted to the blazing heat of the Sun, while the white bird, a symbol of spirit, is attracted to the coolness of the Moon. This is a visualization of the fundamental duality of energies that drive the universe. It is similar in meaning to the Tai Chi symbol, which represents the interplay

of the feminine yin and masculine yang energies

Spiritus, Anima, and Corpus (Spirit, Soul, and Body) form a large inverted triangle that stands behind the central emblem of the alchemist. Together they symbolize the Three Essentials, the triad of hidden forces within any created thing – the celestial archetypes that the alchemists called Sulfur, Mercury, and Salt.

### **Climbing the Ladder of the Planets**

One continues the preparatory work with the Azoth mandala by moving through each of the alchemical operations depicted. The star-shaped pattern that makes up the body of the alchemist represents the Quintessence within – what Paracelsus called the “star in man” – the secret alchemical process going on in all souls. It is the same process behind the evolution of the Anima Mundi or soul of the universe.

#### Saturn

The first ray in this inner star is the black ray labeled number one and pointing to the Corpus Stone. It represents the beginning of the Ladder of the Planets and is marked by the cipher that stands for both the metal lead and the planet Saturn. This is the archetypal situation at the beginning of the Great Work. The square symbol for Salt is also shown in the first ray, which indicates the Work begins in the unredeemed matter of an



imperfect incarnation. It could represent any substance that needs to be perfected.

Movement through the Azoth is clockwise, and between each step on this Planetary Ladder is a series of circles that show how to proceed to the next step or transform the current situation.

These are the operations of alchemy.

The first circle shows a black crow perching on top of a skull. Next to the first circle (between the first and second rays) is the Latin word *Visita*, which means to visit or start a journey. Black crows are symbols of the initial Black Phase (the *Nigredo*) of alchemy, during which the subject of transformation is purified by breaking it down into its essential ingredients.

The scene in the circle represents the first operation of Calcination, which works with the element Fire to burn away dross and reveal hidden essences. The word “Calcination,” and such related words as “calcify” and “calcium,” are from the Latin root *calx*, which means limestone or bone. To calcine something is to burn it until it turns chalky white, reduce it to ashes, or cremate it. The skull in the first circle is the classic symbol of Calcination.

This first operation involves the destruction of ego and our attachments to material possessions. It is usually a natural humbling process as one grows older. But for the spiritual alchemist, this is an immediate and deliberate surrender of one’s inherent hubris that proceeds by igniting the fire of intense introspection and self-evaluation and eliminating all that is false.

### Jupiter

The second ray in the star of the Azoth points toward the King, and the operation here is directed toward masculine consciousness. This is the second rung on the Ladder of the Planets and is marked

with the symbol that stands for both the metal tin and the planet Jupiter.

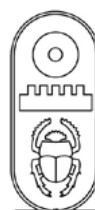
The second circle depicts the operation of Dissolution and shows the black crow watching itself dissolve before its own eyes to reveal its white or purer part. Reflecting back from the pool of Dissolution is the white image of the Soul Bird, which is exposed during this operation. This is still the Black Phase of alchemy, as the process of purification continues. In the outer ring next to the circle of Dissolution is the word *Interiora*, meaning the operation takes place in the innermost parts.

Dissolution represents a breaking down of the artificial structures of the psyche by total immersion in the unconscious, the rejected part of consciousness. Within the alchemist, the dissolving emotional energy known as the “Waters of Dissolution” can take the form of dreams, voices, visions, and strange feelings which reveal a less ordered and irrational world existing simultaneously with everyday life. During Dissolution, the conscious mind lets go of control to allow the surfacing of buried material and bound-up energy.

### Mars

The third ray of the Azoth points toward the torch of Fire and is marked with the cipher signifying both the metal iron and the planet Mars. This ray is also marked with a smaller symbol denoting Sulfur. Iron and sulfur come together chemically in Vitriol or sulfuric acid, the aggressive and biting liquid fire of the alchemists.

The third circle shows the operation of Separation in which the black, earthbound Soul Bird splits into two white birds that retrieve the saved remains of the first two operations. This is the first coming together of soul and spirit, and the newly acquired elevation of consciousness allows discernment of what is worthy of being



saved. Above this circle is written *Terrae*, which means “of the earth” and refers to the spiritual essences being separated out from the polluted dregs of one’s everyday personality.

### The Sun

The fourth ray of the Azoth points to the area at the top of the drawing where the right wing of the Quintessence touches the salamander wallowing in flames. The ray is marked with the single symbol for both gold and the Sun.

The fourth circle depicts the twin birds of soul and spirit leaving the earth together, lifting a five- spiked crown (the Fifth Element or Quintessence recovered from the preceding operations). At this point in the Work, only the purest and most genuine parts of the substance to be transformed remain in the vessel. The goal of the Conjunction is to recombine these saved elements into a whole new physical incarnation. “Its nurse is the Earth” is what the Emerald Tablet says of this stage.<sup>14</sup> Above this circle is inscribed the word *Rectificando*, meaning “by rectification” or setting things right, and the wings of the Quintessence spread over this operation as if to bless it.

The alchemists often referred to the Conjunction as the “Marriage of the Sun and Moon,” which symbolized the two opposing ways of knowing or experiencing the world. After this Marriage in the Mind, the initiate experiences the birth of intuitive insight, which produces a sense of reality superior to either thought or feeling alone. As can be seen in the Azoth drawing, Conjunction is really a turning point from working with the first three operations Below (in matter) and working with the last three operations Above (in spirit).

### Venus

The fifth ray of the Azoth points to the area where the left wing of the

Quintessence touches the standing bird of Spirit. The ray is marked with the single symbol for both copper and Venus.

The fifth circle is under the inscription *Invenies*, which means “you will discover.” This is the operation of Fermentation in which the unexpected mystic substance forms, the ambrosia of the gods, which represents the first lasting solidification of the conjoining of soul and spirit. The circle shows the Soul and Spirit birds nesting in a tree, brooding over their Egg, waiting for the mystical birth to occur.

Fermentation is the introduction of new life into the Child of Conjunction to completely change its characteristics, to completely raise it to a whole new level of being. The Emerald Tablet tells us to leave the earthly realm by the fire of imagination, “gently and with great Ingenuity,” into a state that sets one’s soul afire with higher passion.<sup>15</sup>

Like natural fermentation, spiritual Fermentation is a two-stepped process that begins with Putrefaction, which in which the matter is allowed first to rot and decompose and then to ferment or come alive again in spirit. In his *Chemisches Lustgaertlein* (1625), alchemist Daniel Stolcius describes the importance of this uncomfortable phase: “Destruction brings about the Death of the material. But the spirit renews, like before, the Life. Provided that the seed is putrefied in the right soil – otherwise all labor, work, and art will be in vain.”

This process appears most clearly in the making of wine. First, the grapes are “sacrificed” or crushed to release their essences in the juice. Then, Putrefaction begins as the juice is allowed to decompose and rot. Next, a white layer of digesting bacteria arises that begins the process of Fermentation. This phase is also sometimes marked by a waxy substance the alchemists called the Ferment and an oily film known



as the Peacock's Tail. Finally, the new life force "conquers" the original identity of the grape juice and supplants it with a new and higher presence or life.

This higher presence releases during the next operation (Distillation), which produces the true Spirit of Wine (its alcohol), which contains the purified essence of grapes.

This process is the death of the Child of Conjunction that will eventually result in its resurrection to a new level of being. Out of the blackness of the alchemist's despair (Putrefaction) comes a brilliant display of colors and meaningful visions (the Peacock's Tail.) Fermentation can be achieved through various activities that include intense prayer, desire for mystical union, breakdown of the personality, transpersonal therapy, psychedelic drugs, and deep meditation. Personal Fermentation is living inspiration from something totally beyond oneself.

### Mercury

The Azoth's sixth ray points to the feather, symbol of Air and indicating the process of spiritualization. This ray is usually colored indigo, although it is shown as white or light gray. The ray is marked with the cipher for the metal Mercury (Quicksilver) and the planet Mercury, as well as an identical smaller symbol indicating the heavenly principle of Mercury.

Distillation is the sixth of the major operations in alchemy, and it is represented in the sixth circle by a unicorn lying on the ground in front of a rose bush. According to legend, the unicorn runs tirelessly from pursuers but lies meekly on the ground when approached by a virgin. The virgin is the purified matter at hand, which has returned to a state of innocence and potential. Above the circle is the word *Occultum*, meaning secret or hidden, since

the essences at the beginning of this stage are invisible.

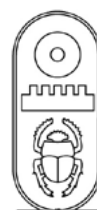
Distillation is a key process on all levels of alchemy. It involves releasing volatile essences from their prison in matter and condensing them in a purified form. Repeated Distillation produces an extremely concentrated solution the alchemists called the "Mother of the Stone." In a kind of Distillation known as sublimation, the vapors condense directly into solid powder at the top of the distilling apparatus and remain "fixed" there. The Emerald Tablet describes distillation as: "It rises from Earth to Heaven and descends again to Earth."<sup>16</sup>

On the personal level, distillation is the agitation and sublimation of psychic forces necessary to ensure that no impurities from the inflated ego or deeply submerged id are incorporated into the next and final stage. Personal Distillation consists of a variety of introspective techniques that raise the content of the psyche to the highest level possible, free from sentimentality and emotions, cut off even from one's personal identity. Distillation is the purification of the unborn Self – all that one truly is and can be. In society, the Distillation experience is expressed as science and objective experimentation.

### The Moon

The seventh ray of the Azoth points to the realm of the Queen and contains the symbol that stands for both the metal silver and the Moon. It is at the feminine level of soul where masculine consciousness is transformed.

The seventh circle shows an androgynous youth emerging from an open grave, with the Latin word *Lapidem*, meaning "the Stone," on the outer ring next to it. This is the operation of Coagulation, in which the fermented Child of Conjunction fuses with the sublimated



spiritual presence released during Distillation. The resurrection of the soul is accomplished by bringing together only the purest essences of one's body and soul into the light of meditation. In other words, Coagulation incarnates and releases the *Ultima Materia* of the soul that the Emerald Tablet described as the "Glory of the Whole Universe." At this stage, the alchemists felt they were working with the "new" or resurrected Salt.

On the spiritual level, Coagulation is first sensed as a new confidence that is beyond all things, though some people experience it as a Second Body of golden coalesced light, a permanent vehicle of consciousness that embodies the highest aspirations and evolution of mind.

Coagulation incarnates and releases the *Ultima Materia* of the soul – what Paracelsus named the "Astral Body" – which the alchemists also referred to as

Philosopher's Stone. Using this magical Stone, the alchemists believed they could exist on all levels of reality.

There are deeper secrets contained in the Azoth drawing that are only revealed through deeper contemplation of the image. Although it shows only seven operations, there is another eighth step concealed in the mandala. This secret is suggested by the fact that while there are eight circles depicting corresponding operations, only seven rays are labeled.

There is also a problem with the order of the planets from the Ladder of Planets. The positions for Venus and the Sun have been switched around, and that has thrown off the correct order of planets on the alchemist's left side, thereby losing the logical pattern of the preceding steps. This is examined more closely in the following meditation.



## The Azoth Meditation

Begin your meditation by entering a relaxed and open state of consciousness while staring directly at the face in the center of the mandala. Many alchemists have actually replaced the central image with a small round mirror to facilitate this introspective process. While staring at the center of the mandala, try to incorporate into your peripheral view all the alchemical images of King and Queen, Spirit and Soul that are present. Go slowly and intuitively and try to feel a sense of increased meaning and inspiration, as you begin your journey through the operations.

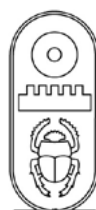
First look at each ray in order, beginning with the black ray of Calcination. Observe the symbols on the ray and its position on the “Star in Man.” Then move your attention clockwise to the circle explaining the operation to be performed here. Look at the scene depicted and try to get a feeling of actually being in the scene and witnessing what it depicts. Continue this way all around the mandala until you reach the final operation of Coagulation that shows the androgynous youth emerging from the grave. This is a clue for you to do the same in your meditation with the mandala.

Sit back now and stare at the whole drawing and try to break free of the salted person you have become. In other words, free yourself from the dead grave of the flat, square picture in which you have buried your consciousness in this meditation. Let your attention be free and see where it lands. In almost every case, you will be drawn to the black ray at position one, which points to the Cubic Stone. This is the Salt or unpurified matter at the beginning of the Work, as well as the new Salt or Stone at the end of the Work.

Further meditation on the meaning of this “eighth” ray leads you directly above this ray to the crowning sphere of Conjunction. This is the operation that works with Earth to manifest the new Salt in material reality. It is also the turning point between the Below and the Above. In other words, the operation associated with the hidden eighth step is Conjunction. It is the beginning and end of the Work. Some alchemists felt so strongly about this that they actually changed the entire process to show the final step of transformation depicted by gold and the Sun in ray number four instead of ray number seven. In any drawings based on Basil Valentine’s version that appeared in his *Azoth des Philosophes* (1659), the Sun and its metal are shown in this Ray of Conjunction instead of in the final Ray of Coagulation.

This is an overwhelming confirmation of the importance of the ancient alchemical principle known as the Law of the Octaves. Just as the seven first notes in the musical scale lead to an eighth note that is a repetition of the first at a higher level of vibration, so do the seven operations of alchemy lead to a return to the realm of matter at a higher frequency of consciousness.

Stated differently, the goal of alchemy is not to remain in the realm of spirit, as it is in all the Abrahamic religions. Like Buddhist and Taoist doctrine, the goal is to become purified in the realm of spirit and then return to the earth as seeds of spirit. The Great Work of alchemy is nothing less than the “consecration of the Whole Universe” as the Emerald Tablet states. It is the coagulation of spirit in matter, the full awakening of the Cosmic Quintessence – the hidden spark of light and consciousness that carries humankind’s true identity but is trapped in matter. That can only be accomplished by a second Conjunction, a Sacred Marriage between Soul and Spirit that takes place on the cross of matter in the real world.



In most alchemical meditations – including both of the meditative techniques we have examined in this paper – the first step is the sacrifice of the substance at hand, which is the former self or ego of the meditator. This work is accomplished by working with everyday thoughts and base emotions in what alchemists called the operations of Calcination and Dissolution, which are applications of the Fire and Water elements respectively.

The second step proceeds with diminished sensory input and withdrawal from worldly preoccupations until the meditator achieves a basic awareness of the androgynous Self beyond duality. This is accomplished by working with higher intellect and refined emotions (love and compassion) in the operations of Separation and Conjunction. These two operations apply the Air and Earth elements respectively in a horizontal union of the opposites within. This marriage, which completes the Lesser Work, unites the alchemist's personal soul and spirit to give birth to higher state of consciousness known as the Child of the Philosophers or the personal Quintessence.

The third step is the Greater Work, which takes place in the rarefied realm of purified consciousness and seeks a vertical union between Above and Below. The work involves subtle energetic transmutations performed by the unified consciousness of the alchemist. As noted previously, the entire process is most aptly described by the Emerald Tablet:

Separate the Earth from Fire,  
gently and with great ingenuity. It rises  
from Earth to Heaven and descends  
again to Earth, thereby combining  
within itself the powers of both  
the Above and the Below. Thus you  
will obtain the Glory of the Whole  
Universe. All Obscurity will be clear  
to you. This is the greatest force of

all powers because it overcomes every  
Subtle thing and penetrates every Solid  
thing.<sup>17</sup>

At this level of the work, we are beyond the elements and working with the primordial powers of creation – the *Tria Prima* of philosophic Mercury, Sulfur, and Salt. The work here projects the purified light of mind (the 'True Imagination') and the highest Objective Consciousness during the operations of Fermentation and Distillation, which are applications of Mercury and Sulfur respectively.

The final Coagulation is a union of personal Quintessence with Cosmic Quintessence and only takes place by the grace of the Divine. The new Salt, if it coagulates, is seen as a second body at a higher frequency or octave, a golden incarnation at the center of our Rosy Cross, where horizontal and vertical reality merge and all is One.

*Ora et Labora* was not just another saying of the alchemists. It was their secret formula for uniting the inner and outer worlds to open a new dimension of reality that remains hidden from our modern culture and science. For the alchemists, this was not just a spiritual dimension but a unique marriage of mind and matter that that was the source of physical as well as spiritual transformations.

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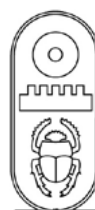
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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Philip Ashley Fanning, *Isaac Newton and the Transmutation of Alchemy: An Alternate View of the Scientific Revolution* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2009), 160.
- <sup>2</sup> Nathan Schwartz-Salant and Murray Stein, *The Body in Analysis* (Asheville: Chiron Publications, 1986), 32
- <sup>3</sup> Paracelsus (Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim), *Liber de Imaginibus*. (Bonn, 1531), Cap. XII.
- <sup>4</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy, Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 12*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), para. 394-395
- <sup>5</sup> The history of mysticism in the Catholic Church can be traced to the monotheism of the Neoplatonists and Gnostics around 100 C.E. Inspired by Plato's idealist metaphysics, members of these groups sought direct union of the soul with the Divine. Early Church leaders such as Saint Augustine supported the mystical path, but the official dogma would eventually proclaim that spiritual perfection was not possible in this life and that meditations seeking union with the Divine outside the Church were blasphemy.
- <sup>6</sup> Meister Eckhart believed that by escaping the tyranny of the self through the purification of consciousness, one could attain union with the Divine. But his idea of the Divine was closer to the Neoplatonic concept of the One Mind than to the anthropomorphic deity of the Church, and in 1329, Pope John XXII issued a bull in which Eckhart was declared a heretic.
- <sup>7</sup> Miguel de Molinos (1628–1697) is considered the founder of the Quietist Movement. In 1675, he published a book called *The Spiritual Guide* in which he advocated meditation as a tool of spiritual perfection. The book touched a chord among people searching for practical methods of enlightenment, and in the first six years after publication, the book went through twenty editions. Throughout Europe, societies were formed to practice the book's teachings. Even the Church endorsed Molinos' little spiritual handbook. It took the Church fathers several years to realize that what he was saying in his popular book was against Catholic doctrine. Molinos crossed the line when he asserted that persons could practice meditation in the privacy of their own homes "in the presence of the Divine." The Inquisition put him on trial for heresy in 1687. The Church wanted to make a public spectacle of his trial and offered an indulgence of fifteen years off punishment in hell for all those who attended. Molinos was sentenced to life in prison, where he died nine years later. After the trial, a papal bull was issued condemning and banning his *Spiritual Guide* and all of his other writings, whether published or unpublished.
- <sup>8</sup> Teresa Sánchez de Cepeda Ahumada was born in Avila, Spain, in 1515, but became known simply as "Teresa of Avila." At the age of twenty, she became a nun and entered the Carmelite order.



Teresa was a witty, intelligent, and beautiful woman. Her spiritual practice focused on the Prayer of Quiet, a level of contemplation in which the soul experiences extraordinary peace and rest. Continued practice of the Prayer of Quiet was said to result in an intimate awareness of the Divine's presence. Two years after arriving at the convent, Teresa contracted consumption, a devastating condition in which the infected person seemed to waste away, slowly being "consumed" by the illness. Now known as disseminated tuberculosis, the virulent disease left her near death for the next three years. She used the time to practice contemplative prayer and study books on the Quietist Movement. She explained that, during her illness, she rose from the lowest recesses of the soul to achieve union with the divine presence of the Divine, and His healing grace conquered the disease. Teresa went on to become one of the Quietist Movement's most influential leaders.

<sup>9</sup> Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle, or the Mansions* (London: Forgotten Books, 2007), 25,26.

<sup>10</sup> Many now believe that the author of these texts and drawings was not someone named Basil Valentine. The real author lived in the early 1400s and probably kept his work anonymous to avoid persecution by the Church.

According to historian John Maxson Stillman, no instance of the name "Basil Valentine" can be found in public or Church records before 1600, and even alleged portraits of Valentine have been dated to the seventeenth century.

Research by scholars in the eighteenth century suggests that a German alchemist named Johann Thölde (1565-1624) had discovered five anonymous manuscripts hidden in an old salt mine and published them under the pseudonym "Basil Valentine." After that, other authors began attributing their own work to the legendary Valentine.

<sup>11</sup> Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake on February 17, 1600. Born in Italy in 1548, he became a respected scholar who wrote many influential books on philosophy, mathematics, and natural science. He practiced alchemy and embraced the Hermetic teachings as the one

true philosophy of the world. "Those wise men knew the Divine to be in all things," he said of the Hermetic philosophers, "and divinity to be latent in Nature, working and bestowing light differently in different subjects and succeeding through diverse physical forms in making them participants in the divine life and mind." Bruno gave public lectures throughout Europe on Hermeticism and the principles of the Emerald Tablet. He believed the infinite One Mind was the source of everything and was thus present in everything. Therefore—and this is what frightened the Church more than any other of his heresies—he believed the Mind of the Divine and the human mind could become one in private prayer and meditation outside the authority of the Church.

Bruno became a fierce advocate of freedom of thought and had no patience for those who would control the minds of others. "The fools of the world," he exclaimed, "have been those who established religions, ceremonies, laws, faith, and artificial rules of life. The greatest asses of the world are those who, lacking all understanding, rot in perpetual pedantry."

<sup>12</sup> Theodor Abt-Baechi, *Corpus Alchemicum Arabicum II.2 The Book of Pictures-Mushaf as-sunwar by Zosimos of Panopolis* (Berlin: Daimon Verlag, 2012); Raphael Patai, *The Jewish Alchemists: A History and Source Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Syed Normanul Haq, *Names, Natures and Things: The Alchemists Jabir ibn Hayyan and his Kitab al-Ahjar* (Dordrecht, Germany: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> Dennis William Hauck, *The Emerald Tablet: Alchemy for Personal Transformation* (New York: Penguin Arcana, 1999), 45.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.