

ALCHEMY AND MODERNITY

Miscellaneous Thoughts

from a Modern Taoist Internal Alchemist

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INTRODUCTION

In the last few years I have seen and heard many things about “alchemy” that, in my humble opinion, do not seem to make sense and ruin the reputation of real alchemy. Some of the problems result from the fact that alchemy has not been regarded or been practiced seriously for a long time and that (in many instances because of this fact) it has been attracting not-so-serious people as its representatives or practitioners. Alchemy may also have lost the contact with reality or, at least, modernity. For Chinese alchemy, the last big (r)evolution or adaptation to modernity dates from the first half of the twentieth century, when famous scholar and alchemist Chen Yingning (1880 – 1969) organized an alchemical studies society in Shanghai. If alchemy is to survive this century and flourish again, alchemists need to put more effort in modernizing alchemy and making it attractive again. This, of course, does not mean that alchemy should be “popularized” or simplified, but quite the contrary: it should regain its former position of the science of sciences, but without losing its foothold in society. Alchemy has many advantages to offer, both to the scientific world and to the public, but it is up to the alchemists themselves to release this potential.

I would like to offer some ideas to the international alchemical community (if such a thing exists) about alchemy that are based on my experience during thirty years of practical and theoretical study of Chinese Taoist internal alchemy. They are nothing but a humble attempt at expressing my own views and can be taken seriously or neglected. However, rest assured, these honest words, strange or harsh as they may sound to some, were written by a passionate yet worried alchemist who only wishes to revive alchemy and not insult or look down upon others. Starting out from existing problems, I would like to propose solutions or suggestions to keep alchemy on the right track. Finally, I would like to explain why the study of alchemy is an interesting one.

WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

To make things clear from the start, allow me to express my personal view on what alchemy actually is. This will help in understanding my point of view concerning the problems and perspectives of alchemy.

Alchemy is rooted in ancient practices and beliefs coming from the Far and Middle East and the Ancient Western World. I hold the view that it does not come from one root or source. Many cultures developed something that provided material for what later on became known as alchemy.

From an historical point of view, the Hermetical Traditions (and probably even elements from Chinese Traditions) seem to be the main ingredients of Western alchemy as we have come to know it from the later Middle Ages onwards. Chinese alchemy came down from the so-called *xian* ("mountain-people" or "people-mountains"; usually interpreted as "immortals") who were practicing magic, medicine, meditation, and the cultivation of life in many ways from the early times of Chinese civilization onwards. It later picked up ideas and practices from other traditions (especially from Taoism) to include rituals, metallurgy (more specifically the *huangbaishu*: making gold and silver), cosmology, and so on.

Alchemy, in the West, the Middle East, China and the rest of the Far East follows two complimentary roads: the experimental (external) and the spiritual (internal). Both roads are inseparable, because they connect the "internal world" experience of the practitioner to the external (for some the "real") world. If one loses this connection, alchemy loses its vital potential. Different opinions on how to practice external and internal alchemy have always existed and have given rise to many traditions, some of which stress the importance of "official" transmission of knowledge (they keep track of their tradition members) and some prefer to remain anonymous. The experimental processes rely on the interaction with the outside world, whereas the internal processes use the (temporarily) shut-down of external influence to actually realize the union of the internal and the external.

To me, alchemy is the experimental science that, through transformation of the human body (influenced in certain ways from within and without), liberates man from the limitations of his human condition and re-establishes his cosmic root.

PROBLEMS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Some problems I would like to discuss are general ones, having to do with the perception of alchemy; others are specific to the Chinese forms of alchemy.

Let us start from a few general misconceptions.

One problematic idea is the modern "scientific" view that alchemy was a primitive form of chemical science, created for the purpose of making gold.

Another is quite the opposite idea; it is the claim that alchemy was actually only a spiritual way and has nothing to do with science.

Some pretend that spiritual alchemy is a sort of psychology.

Yet another view describes alchemy as a thing of the past, while others only discuss Western alchemy and completely neglect Far Eastern traditions.

For some, an alchemist is a recluse, living far away from the world or locked up in his/her laboratory.

All of these viewpoints are either far from the truth or half-truths at best.

To perceive experimental alchemy as an early attempt at practicing chemistry can only come from people without knowledge about alchemy. Just take a brief look at ancient books on alchemy and you will see that there is a lot more about it than the experiments. It is a view of the world that combines at least (ancient) philosophy, religion, practical

laboratory experiments, medicine, and the knowledge of life. Making real or "spiritual" gold is an important part of the labor an alchemist engages in, but it may also be just a metaphor and therefore the lack of finding gold does not imply the failure of the alchemical practice. Alchemy is not a goal; it is a process. Alchemy produces many types of "gold" or fruits of the transformations that one creates.

Seeing alchemy as a type of spirituality is also a proof of a limited vision. There is no alchemy without the internal (whether one calls this "spiritual" or not), but there must also be an external part to make something worthy of the name "alchemy". Because of practical and/or historical reasons, the "experimental" part may reveal itself in many shapes and forms. In China, for instance, experimental alchemy implies the use of metals, drugs, minerals and such to create potions, pills, and medicinal recipes. Because of the high cost of the ingredients and the scarcity of some herbs, this type of practice is hardly practiced nowadays. Some therefore say that only internal alchemy is still being practiced, whereas this is not true. The external alchemy has, in some instances, been transformed in ways of finding and creating funds and means to live the life of an alchemist.

"Psychology" or understanding of the human mind, consciousness, the subconscious, etc. is an important element of alchemical studies, yet, it is not alchemy itself, because it is too limited in scope. Alchemy includes the more material aspects of life, too.

To see alchemy as a Western and Middle Eastern phenomenon only is to be blind. In fact, it may well be that much of the Western alchemical knowledge came from Chinese sources. Both in the Western world and in the East, alchemy is still alive, but, evidently, it is not really flourishing. Much has been diluted by popularization or commercialization, by lack of transmission, knowledge, and knowledgeable people, and because not many people really care about it or find the time and zeal to engage in alchemical studies.

If alchemists were or are recluses, we would not know much about the alchemical traditions. It is because many are people who care about the world and interact with it, that alchemy is still alive and known.

Chinese alchemy, which is my field of expertise, has its own specific problems. The difficulty of organizing and realizing the right preparation is one of them.

Taoist alchemy practice requires several conditions and means. One type of means may be called "utensils" (vessels, a hearth or fire; these can be found in the outside world and/or in the human body). Another type is called "medicine" or *yao*: the ingredients to prepare the potions or elixirs. Then, one also needs the oral and written transmission (*jingdian* or *danjing* [classical Chinese texts on alchemy] and *koujue* [individual oral formulae and instructions]) and the guidance of an experienced and qualified predecessor or teacher (a *danshi* or Taoist alchemist). Furthermore, the correct and timely use of actions is necessary, meaning the teacher and the student must be aware of suitable and unsuitable times and spaces.

Many erroneous views and side doors (or deviating roads) exist and in common literature on so-called Taoist alchemy and Taoist healing, these are often cited as the real thing. In the past decades, many people from many countries have asked me questions that were inspired by what they had read or what had been taught by a "famous" alchemic teacher who had written many books.

One such question comes up regularly, because the practice that instigates it is particularly well spread. According to many teachers, a male Taoist alchemist should practice retention in order to recycle his semen through the back to the brain. Although this is typical practice in Chinese (and certainly Taoist) sexual training, it really has nothing to do with alchemy. In female alchemy, there is a preliminary practice called "taming the red dragon". Most interpret this as taking measures to stop menstruation. Both these practices can be very harmful to the human body and alchemy actually should not harm but cure the body. What does belong to Taoist alchemical practice is refraining from bearing or producing children. However, this is not done by retention or stopping menstruation. A well-informed alchemical master (that accepts you as a student) will tell you how this is done and (s)he will also tell you how to practice alchemy if you do have children.

Many teachers claim that they have ways of opening up the *bamai* or eight extraordinary vessels, and especially the so-called smaller heavenly circulation. In most cases, they are only able to create the illusion of circulation or an imaginary experience of such a thing. The problem is that without the proper preparation this "opening up" is impossible. As an authentic teacher one should make it very clear from the start that hard work is required and imagining things is to be avoided at all costs.

Secrecy is another big "roadblock". Many Chinese alchemists were/are afraid to discuss and transmit the essentials and the actual practice, because of possible abuse of the powerful effects of internal and experimental alchemy. Even though they tried to avoid transmission to the wrong people, they did not succeed. They may even have created more abuse by not divulging the contents. We should be very careful about what we teach, whom we instruct and how we teach things, but this should not keep us from transmitting this most wonderful practice. In my experience, the learning process of authentic alchemy itself will control the transmission, i.e. it takes very decided and well-motivated people to engage in a study that takes a lifetime and the wrong kind of person usually gives up soon after the first steps! Since many would-be alchemists got lost along the way, alchemy itself degraded into something that is not worthy of the name. Focusing on, for instance, the power (over people and processes) that some of the practices deliver blocks one's own progress. Not informing potential students about the dangers of some of the side effects of the internal practice (hallucinations, illusions) may lead to these same students searching for exactly that kind of experience and assuming that these are the real effects of the practice, because the experience can be very overwhelming and attractive (similar to the attraction of drugs abuse).

THE BIG WHY

Why should one practice alchemy? I cannot discuss the reasons or purposes of other people or other traditions, but I can tell you what Taoist internal alchemy of the Southern Tradition tries to achieve: longevity, good health, progressive independence, responsible freedom, a good and comfortable life, a rich internal world in harmonious cooperation with the rest of the cosmos, the ability to use all of the body's potential, and ultimately the annihilation of the self and (through this annihilation) increasing "control" over life, death, time and space and (not individualized) immortality.

THE BIG HOW

How does one practice alchemy? Again, I can only describe my own tradition's (and the Chinese Taoist) way. For Nanzong Jindan, the Taoist Southern Tradition, you foremost need to be accepted by a competent and experienced teacher showing and explaining to you the correct way of practicing this very tradition. (S)he will take care of providing all your alchemical needs. Then you need to find practicing time, and you require diligence and perseverance.

Nanzong Jindan is a so-called "*huoju*" (living in the fire) tradition, meaning that the alchemists of this tradition usually spend most of their days in society and not in separation (in a monastery or on a mountain). We take on active social roles and functions, preferably by teaching and/or engaging in the (Chinese) medical profession, and try to lead by example and not by converting. From the time of Zhuangzi (an early, very influential alchemist of the 4th century BCE) onwards, people like us stay away from politics and politicians. That way is definitely NOT our way. We try to govern the world not by worldly methods but by harmonizing our own world (our body).

One of the projects my wife and I have been working on for a very long time is our college, the [China Arts College](#), which offers long and short-term courses in Chinese internal alchemy and its cultural background, thereby fulfilling this social role required by our tradition. In that way, we try to make sure that this method is readily available to every suitable student and not only to some interested Chinese. It is my predecessors' wish that the great treasure that is stored in Taoist Internal Alchemy, should find its way to respectful people all over the world, on condition that it does not lose its Chinese Taoist cultural essence (without which it would lose its soul). The main problem for non-Chinese (and even many Chinese) candidates is the lack of direct contact with the practice and the practitioners because of the (Chinese and/or alchemical specialist) language barrier. Using my skills as a well-trained sinologist and anthropologist, I have always tried to bridge this gap by teaching internal alchemy and Chinese culture from the viewpoint of an insider and by using my direct and long-term access to the Chinese original sources.

Generally speaking, the practice requires the "restitution of authenticity", achieved by living according to *Dao* (the Way) and realized in *De* (the application of this Way). This comes down to individual practice of a harmonious, no-nonsense way of living that suits your personality and removes those aspects from your character and person that are unsuitable for this harmonious social life. Care for the world, Nature, society, people, plants and animals, and so on are all part of the *De* work. It is a continuous work, a *magnum opus*, as Western alchemists call it. By removing (acquired) burdens, you may refind your individual unified potential and authenticity and this, basically, serves the more general purpose of restoring the (your) universe to its original unified state. The actual study involves caring for your own and any life (e.g. by practicing health exercises, studying medicine, and limiting your negative impact on Nature), changing the way you use your body (including, especially, the mind), absorbing the "knowledge" of your predecessors of the Way, and practicing a life of creation (many Chinese internal alchemists were artists). A look at our study [program](#) will show you the necessary details of what we offer in this way.

FINAL WORDS

Look at the world we live in. The many negative aspects of our "human" (but in many cases not "humane") world come from not observing and not knowing natural principles, and from focusing mainly on worldly gain, fame, and power. If you feel this is your way of living, do not study alchemy. If, on the contrary, you feel this is not the right way, alchemy might be the solution for you. If looking around, you feel alone, realize that you are not. Many "loners" feel like you. We and several others are still around and waiting for you to join our cause, but it is you who should take the step. With your support, we can all become stronger and cause beneficial change without abusing power. We do need to speak out and be active and not flee from our responsibilities. Searching a purely spiritual life detached from the real/material world is an illusion, the founder of our tradition, Zhang Boduan (984 - 1082), taught. In return for this "sacrifice" of active engagement in the revival of whatever authentic tradition of alchemy, we can all obtain a richer, both social and individual, life and a more interesting and independent existence.

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