

Book Reviews

A Synthesis of Alchemy, by Dorje Jinpa, second edition, Ashland, OR: Pentarba Publications, 2016. Hardcover, 170 pages. List price US \$35. Available at: Amazon.com.

Few subjects have been as ill treated as alchemy. Thousands of medieval manuscripts purported to reveal alchemical secrets to the initiated, but most were impenetrable, and vital information was withheld or veiled in allegory. Worse, much of the content was copied from other manuscripts, leaving readers wondering which, if any, of the writers had personal knowledge of the art. Many would-be alchemists probably died from mercury poisoning, or from explosions in their labs. Fraud was not unknown, along with the greed of wealthy patrons. Yet alchemy maintained broad credibility for more than a millennium.

By the nineteenth century the scientific establishment had concluded that chemical elements were immutable. The present consensus is that elements cannot be transmuted by chemical means alone, though they can by nuclear fusion and fission and a few scientists concede that transmutation may take place in living organisms. But claims by twentieth-century individuals, like Jean Julien Fulcanelli and R. A. Schwaller de Lubicz, to have turned lead into gold are swept under the accommodating rug of “pseudoscience.” Meanwhile, Carl Jung—to the great relief of people troubled by the prospect that transmutation might actually be feasible—turned alchemy into a symbol of psychological integration and a set of archetypes populating the collective unconscious. New Agers use it as a metaphor for any kind of personal transformation. Serious esotericists suspect that there is something “out there,” but are unsure what it is, and fondly refer to any kind of esoteric activity as “the Great Work.”

Dorje Jinpa offers us new insights into alchemy, presenting, in little more than one hundred pages, a view of the subject that, even in

itself, is profoundly transformative. These 100-or-so pages make up Part One of *A Synthesis of Alchemy*; Part Two is an anthology of important writings, with interposed commentary. Jinpa gathers, interprets and integrates quotes from Buddhist, Taoists, Vedic Hindu, and other sources, as well as from the classical literature of the West, to present a synthesis of alchemical thought spanning two millennia and multiple levels of reality. Alchemy involves not just physical transmutation but, on higher levels, transformation and transfiguration (pp. 24-25).

Not surprisingly, much alchemical lore has been misunderstood. Jinpa compares Arabic alchemists, whom he judges were right in their methods, with Paracelsus whom he said erred. The author criticizes modern Tantra for its focus on physical sex, which was always renounced by the celibate adepts of the East (pp. 51-53, 63-54).

The alchemical literature is replete with symbols, in part to protect essential knowledge from potential abuse, but also because ordinary language is inadequate to express the underlying truths. For instance, Jinpa explains that “mercury” is a code word not only for the planet or the god Mercury, but also for Buddha. “Mercury, sulphur and salt” stand for life, consciousness and form; or spirit, soul and body. “The Mother Principle” relates to the etheric subplanes.

Physical transmutation involves extraction of the etheric essence—the “idea” of a substance—from dense matter, elevation of the essence’s vibration, and return of the vitalized essence into dense matter (pp. 23, 35-37). The process may occur naturally in a plant. More importantly, from our perspective, it can take place under the control of the Will within the alchemist’s own being; indeed the alchemist’s “crucible” is the etheric body (p. 57). But Will alone is not enough; it must be tempered by Love (pp. 48-49). The dual mechanism is expressed in the union of head and heart. When

the necessary creativity is added to the mix, we have the Ida, Pingala and Sushumna, or the three strands of the Antahkarana.

A major part of a high initiate's alchemical work is the condensation of psychic energy. The work may produce the Rod of Initiation wielded by the Christ or Sanat Kumara; the Philosopher's Stone, to be used in healing; Hermetic gold; the *bindu*, or "pearl" on an adept's brow; or even the "evolved, or *Bodhi-chitta* crystals" found in the cremains of saints (pp. 54-61). These last are said to be so powerful that they multiply after the saint's death and can be distributed to locations where his or her energy is needed. The author claims that one such crystal was carried to Oregon (p. 63). The multiplication and distribution of Bodhichitta crystals calls to mind the proliferation of relics in the Christian West, where, among much else, "splinters of the True Cross" are estimated to compare in their total mass with a battleship.

For the ordinary disciple, the all-important transmutation is of the human vehicles, from their initially coarse, dense form into the brilliant, light-filled, ethereal form of the high initiate. This transmutation runs parallel to the path of transformation of consciousness (p. 73-74). For much of the way the path is dark, recalling John of the Cross's "dark night of the soul": a period of "aridity" in which necessary cleansing takes place. But the seeker finds his or her way by the guiding light in the head. This light is portrayed variously as a brilliant light with a dark indigo center; a star in a blue circle, with a golden white halo; and the Rose Cross. It is nothing else than the light of the twelve-petalled Causal Body (p. 83).

As the light grows more brilliant it illuminates the whole etheric body. At the third initiation, the entrance to the Greater Mysteries, the etheric body takes on a silver, violet iridescence, earning the descriptor "Rainbow Body" (pp. 99-102). The etheric body becomes the "Body of Light," to which the Golden Fleece of classical mythology hinted. But it is not just wrapped around the dense physical body; it begins to supplant the dense physical form as the vehicle for the indwelling

life. Thus the Body of Light becomes the *augoeides* of Neoplatonist philosophy, or the *mayavirupa*, which adepts can materialize at will. The Body of Light is created by the descent of Spirit from above; "all" the disciple needs to do is remove the obstacles in the etheric, sentient and mental bodies (p. 85).

The descent of Spirit is itself an initiation. Scriptural precedents were Christ's baptism in the Jordan and the descent of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost. In Hermetic symbolism, the White Crowned King descends from his throne to marry the Red Daughter (the kundalini) in the Chemical Wedding (p. 91). The offspring of their union is the Child of the Sun (the Christ?). In an interesting aside, Jinpa interprets the Return of the Goddess as a prophecy of the Externalization of the Hierarchy (pp. 94-95). If this suggests that the Planetary Hierarchy has a feminine quality, he also suggests that the women's movement was divinely inspired (p. 106).

The Great Work is purposely and simultaneously the transmutation/evolution of material substance, consciousness and spirit. Its hallmarks are Oneness, Beauty, Energy, and Group Consciousness (p. 106). The Work is advancing rapidly—for example, Oneness is already expressed in physics, religion, and gender inclusiveness—but much destruction of outworn forms is necessary, and therein lie the woes the world is currently experiencing. (p. 107).

A Synthesis of Alchemy is a remarkable book, a must-read for all serious esoteric students. It is too dense to be skimmed. But from a careful reading one comes away, if not with working knowledge of the alchemical process, at least with an appreciation that alchemy is a serious subject, a sense that certain individuals have penetrated its secrets, and a realization that the secrets will eventually be revealed to us as we move forward on the path of discipleship and initiation. While the author makes no claims and betrays no ego, there is little doubt that Dorje Jinpa himself is privy to many of those secrets.

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Mandala In The Heavens: How the Greek star myths tell the story of the Path of Initiation, by Paul LaFerla, The Wisdom Bookshelf, Paperback, 245 pages, Publishers Price US\$22.95.

In the course of his studies, Paul LaFerla discovered that the circle of the classical constellations in the heavens is a mandala of enormous size. The mythological lore corresponding to the constellations, as he later came to see, yielded 12 groups of three constellations having certain similarities, such as three fish, three women, three heroes and three objects, etc. In addition, LaFerla realized that these 12 constellations could be paired with the 12 constellations of the Zodiac. Overtime, he found “that all 12 groups of three constellations could be paired with the 12 constellations and signs of the Zodiac according to a ‘likeness’ of some kind.”

Inspired further by the comments of the 9th century Arab astronomer-astrologer, Abu Masher, who called the decanate constellations “faces” and the constellation of the zodiac “bodies,” LaFerla came to understand that the three decanates or “three masks” depicted three different phases of energy. Using this key and Abu Masher’s “Sky Clock,” along with Greek constellational legends and the Ageless Wisdom teachings on Initiation and Esoteric Astrology, he recognized that there is an intelligent design in the sky which veils universal truths concerning the “timeless process of spiritual growth and development.”

After providing this background on his research methods, the author sets out to familiarize the reader, particularly those who are new to these ideas, with some of the fundamentals concerning the Astrology of the Soul and other relevant concepts from esoteric philosophy. The three chapters that follow explore the Three Crosses of esoteric astrology, which indicate the three basic stages or phases of human development. An explanation of the esoteric significances of the Cardinal, Fixed and Mutable Crosses and their relationship to the growth of consciousness is provided. An outline of the three-decanate constellations pertaining to each sign in the cross, based on a “likeness” of some kind is also included. In

discussing the Cardinal Cross, for example, the three birds, the Raven, the Eagle and the Swan are paired with Aries; the River, the Band, and the Arrow are paired with Cancer; the Cup, the Lyre and the Altar with Flame are paired with Libra, while the Ship, the Serpent Fighter and the Centaur are paired with Capricorn. Also included is a brief description of what each image depicts. For instance, the three-decanate constellations for Libra are said to symbolize the Heart, the Throat and the Brow/Head centers, respectively. These chapters and all the subsequent chapters contain full color illustrations of the twelve signs of the Zodiac as well as the constellation decanates as they were described in Greek mythology.

LaFerla next turns his attention to the star myths for the 36-decanate constellations, which unfold a narrative of the entire Path of Initiation as it is written in the heavenly mandala. In pairing each constellation with the apposite Greek star myth, and by providing a perceptive interpretation of its symbolism as well as a commentary on its relationship to the Wisdom teachings, LaFerla brings the mandala to life.

The journey through the celestial mandala begins on the Mutable Cross and in the constellation of Virgo, since it contains the active germ of spiritual life whose goal it is to shield, nature and reveal the hidden spiritual reality. LaFerla chooses the myth for Cassiopeia to represent the first decanate phase, which depicts the tests and trials that the integrated personality must undergo in its journey toward Soul consciousness. Queen Cassiopeia is shown sitting upon her throne. As LaFerla explains, this image represents the idea of the “self” “enthroned or seated in the mind. Such a reading is bolstered by the fact that Cassiopeia holds a palm frond, a symbol of victory or the attainment of personality integration and self-consciousness. Cassiopeia thinks of herself as “more beautiful than the Nereids,” the mermaids who lived in the sea. This means that she has a real measure of control over the waters of emotion and recognizes her “self” as being distinct from others, taking pride in it. However, LaFerla reminds us that

the brightest star in this constellation lies at the queen's heart, indicating that she is drawn to a higher reality and to spiritual things. Thus, this first decanate constellation marks the initial phase of personality integration and the incentive toward the life of discipleship.

The star myth that follows is the Sea Monster (Cetus). In this myth the arrogant Cassiopeia is punished by Poseidon who sends a sea monster to ravage the coast of her country. She fends off the attack by sacrificing her daughter, Andromeda, to the monster. Poseidon is said to represent the forces of desire, which creates the sea monster or dominant personality. Hence the myth can be understood to symbolize the phase of inner conflict between the self-centered personality (Cassiopeia) and the newly sensed, higher, spiritual reality or consciousness (Andromeda).

In the next myth Orion is promised the hand of a maiden in return for ridding the King's land of wild animals. After the King reneged on his promise, Orion takes the maiden by force (representing the fulfillment of personal desires). As a punishment Orion is blinded and banished to Lemnos where Hephaestus takes pity upon him and offers one of his assistants to serve as Orion's eyes. Orion heads eastward where the dawning light restores his vision. LaFerla sees this third phase of the journey as a struggle with the remnants of desire, and as a crisis of disillusionment where the personality-centered life loses its appeal and the man or woman gropes blindly in search for greater meaning. Greater meaning comes from Hephaestus, who symbolizes the Soul as the shaper of the personality, and whose young apprentice, sitting atop Orion's shoulders, implies the first attempts at meditation.

From here, LaFerla leads the reader through the star myths for each of the decanate constellations leading up to and including the First Initiation. The chapters that follow guide the reader through the decanate constellations

associated with the Second, Third and Fourth Initiations, until having come full circle, the sea monster is slain, and Andromeda (consciousness) is freed by the initiate Perseus who then marries her and returns her to her spiritual source at the Fifth Initiation.

The book includes two Appendices. Appendix A includes a "Sky Clock," (Table 1) used by the ancients to tell the time at night. Also included is a "Likeness Key" (Table 2), and a table (Table 3), that numbers the constellations according to their place on the Sky Clock. These are combined to arrive at the "Sequence Key" (Table 4), which tells the unfolding story of the Path of Initiation. Appendix A is somewhat complicated and may be difficult for the novice or non-astrologer to follow. Given the importance of these Tables, the author might have included them in the first chapter to give the reader a better understanding of how he arrived at the Sequence Key. Appendix B contains information on the various myths that were used by the author as well as a Pronunciation Guide.

Mandala in the Heavens provides insightful interpretations of the symbolism contained in each of the 36 star myths. It weaves key elements of esoteric philosophy into the text, in such a way as to provide an accessible introduction to the Ageless Wisdom teachings and the Path of Initiation. It should be noted here that this book, which breaks new ground on a fascinating but somewhat complex theme, deserves to be reviewed by an astrologer with a solid understanding of the decanate constellations and the ordered relationship between them.

That said, this book makes a valuable contribution to the subject. The author's effort to introduce the reader to the rich symbolism of the star myths, and unlock the meaning of the *Mandala in the Heavens* represents an inspired and welcome achievement.

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