

Alchemy and Transformation, East and West: A Cross-cultural Analysis of Jungian Psychology and Tibetan Tantra

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Abstract: During his many decades of research into the mystery and complexities of the human psyche, Carl Jung engaged in a concerted focus on comparative religion, ethnology, and esoteric contemplative traditions. His explorations of Eastern alchemical disciplines included a deep resonance with many of the primary tenets and experiential methodologies found in Taoism and Buddhism, and the tantric Buddhism of Tibet in particular would provide inspiration and confirmation for many of his psychological discoveries. This would lead him to a subsequent exploration of medieval European alchemy, which further supported and expanded upon many of his earlier postulations. In these complex systems he found a profusion of various *God-images* that included abstract forms such as the mandala as well as personified archetypal representations such as the Buddha and Christ, and in Tibetan Tantra, as in his own psychotherapeutic techniques, such mythic imagery and motifs would be employed in creative visualization as dynamic agents of healing and transformation. This study provides an overview of Jung's encounter with these traditions and presents a cross-cultural analysis of the alchemical practices found in both Jungian depth psychology and Tibetan Buddhist Tantra, which serves to further enunciate the vital contributions Jung made toward advancing the ever-evolving contemporary dialogue between the esoteric spiritual disciplines of East and West.

Keywords: Jungian depth psychology, Tibetan Buddhist Tantra, alchemy, archetypes, mandala God-image, transcendent function, spiritual transformation

Introduction

The process of spiritual transformation has manifested in innumerable articulations over the course of human history, and has produced an especially profound legacy of practices and principles through the ancient tradition of alchemy. In contemporary times, after a prolonged period of relative decline, this discipline attracted the attention of the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung (1944/1968), who discovered in both its Western and Eastern schools highly sophisticated hermetic systems linked to the spiritual evolution of humanity. In the Taoist and Tibetan tantric traditions, and later in the alchemy of his own European heritage, he encountered a rich plethora

of symbolic imagery accompanied by profound philosophical precepts and procedures. In the course of his intensive exploration of these esoteric disciplines, he would decipher many secrets to the inner-most regions of the psyche, a legacy that played a prominent role in establishing the dynamic and ever-evolving contemporary East-West dialogue that continues to this day.

In the pages that follow, Jung's journey of discovery will be enunciated alongside the mythic forms, tenets and transformative procedures that effected the most prominent influence on his seminal theories and postulations. This includes a comparative overview of the alchemical methods of spiritual transmutation found in Jungian psychotherapy and Tibetan Buddhism, which despite definitive differences in certain doctrinal precepts nonetheless share a number of striking similarities, especially in relation to the creative and contemplative use of mythic images and symbols as dynamic agents of healing and transformation.

A Brief History of Alchemy

The ancient tradition of alchemy has a long and varied history that has found expression in many of humanity's most compelling esoteric disciplines. In its various historical manifestations it has encompassed a broad range of doctrines and treatises, from the transmutation of chemical processes to procedures designed to elicit radical spiritual transformation (Principe, 2013). Although the exact origins of this mysterious system remain difficult to discern, it is thought to date back some 4000 years to the Indian subcontinent of the pre-Vedic period, and over the course of the ensuing centuries arose in diverse formulations in the ancient cultures of China, Mesopotamia, Greece, Hellenistic Egypt, Medieval Europe, and the Islamic world. In its many incarnations it has produced and applied a wide range of principles and practices that include metallurgy and chrysopoeia (i.e., the transmutation of base metals into gold), the creation of an elixir of immortality (as in Taoism), the manifestation of *gnosis* as enunciated in late classical Greek philosophical texts, the development of panaceas for the cure of physical ailments, certain branches of natural philosophy, and modern chemistry.

In the West, alchemy is thought to have arisen around the time of the birth of Christ, and after flourishing in Greece and in parts of the Roman Empire in the second and third centuries it began a gradual decline (von Franz, 1977). In the seventh and eighth centuries the Greek texts were translated into Arabic in regions of North Africa and the Middle East, from which it was then transported a century later to occupied parts of Europe and was reintroduced into Christian civilization through Arab and Jewish adepts residing in Spain and Sicily. This school of alchemy

integrated aspects of Greek rational philosophy and scholasticism, Mesopotamian astrology, and well-developed methods of chemical-magical processes derived from Egyptian influences.

After reaching a peak in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Western alchemy suffered a steady decline in its spiritual and cabalistic predilections in the midst of the industrial revolution and the rise of scientific materialism, at which time it became largely focused on the science of modern chemistry. Despite this development, this alchemical tradition would in time experience a number of historical revivals in its inner orientations, most notably through the work of C. G. Jung (1944/1968, 1963/1970), who found tremendous inspiration in the alchemical symbolism of medieval and early modern Europe. Jung's engagement with this tradition and with schools of Eastern alchemy would last for more than thirty years and provide a wealth of material for many of his most consequential theories.

Jung's Road to Alchemy

In the dreams and visionary experiences of his patients, and in the often dramatic expression of psychic imagery that arose within his own experience during the course of his lifetime, Jung (1963) discovered a wide range of recurring themes and mythic motifs. Such phenomena often revealed an unconscious collective process that well exceeded the personal background and cultural make-up of those involved, leading him to seek out cross-cultural historical affirmations for what would later become his theory of the archetypes of collective unconscious. His study of alchemy would prove decisive in this regard, and his penetration of this tradition's many cultural and historical inflections would consume much of his focus in the last three decades of his life.

From 1916 to 1926, Jung (1963) had engaged in an intensive study of the esoteric writings of the Gnostics because of their emphasis on the inner world of the psyche, but his researches remained inconclusive and he was unable to establish a living link to the present. In an effort to find broader historical and cultural associations with his emerging theories, his investigations led him to explore many of humanity's other prominent spiritual traditions, a process that would prove instrumental in the validation and development of many of his most notable theoretical precepts and psychotherapeutic practices.

Jung's (1963) encounter with Richard Wilhelm's (1931/1962) publication of the Taoist alchemical text *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, which dates back to the eighth century Tang Dynasty and the esoteric religion of the Golden Elixir of Life, was a particularly significant event in his life. He found in this work confirmation for many of his psychological postulations, as it

provided him with “exactly those items I had long sought for in vain among the Gnostics” (quoted in Clarke, 1994, p. 83). His exposure to this enigmatic treatise had a profound effect on his emerging theories that was instrumental in creating a bridge between East and West and bringing further confirmation to his theory of the archetypes as universally identifiable structures in the human mind. What was especially significant for Jung was the fact that this Chinese alchemical text emphasizes the legitimacy of the imaginal and mythic elements of human existence, as well as providing cogent symbolic and conceptual representations of wholeness through its central notion of the *Tao*:

The *Golden Flower* offered a model of balanced psychic development in which the externalizing forces of *yang* are balanced by the rooted inwardness of *yin*. The concept of *Tao*, which is central to Chinese thinking and to this text in particular, signifies a union of opposites, 'a reunion with the unconscious laws of our being,' and hence represents an image of wholeness. The key to this psychic balance and wholeness lies in the release of the power of fantasy and imagination. (Clark, 1994, p. 84)

In Jung's (1963) own experience and that of his patients, he had already keenly observed a transformative dynamic in which ego consciousness is involved in a circumambulation of the psychic center, or *Self*, in the developmental process he termed *individuation*. In his encounter with this Taoist text, he was struck by the distinct similarity he encountered in the Chinese concept in which the golden flower, or *flower of light*, blossoms through the process known as the *circulation of the light* (Jung, 1931/1962). He also determined that the manifestation of the visionary golden flower represents a true mandala motif, which, in concert with both his therapeutic work and his comparative research, he came to understand as a profound symbolic representation of the Self. Jung was also able to draw a direct analogy to his concept of the anima and animus, the masculine and feminine aspects of the soul, for which the Taoist text presents equivalents in the form of the personified masculine *cloud demon* and the feminine *white ghost*. In addition, he viewed the text's production of the diamond body through creative meditation as representing a shifting of identity from the ego to the transpersonal center, a deeply transformative process that is also central to individuation and had been elicited by Jung (1963) through his psychotherapeutic practice of *active imagination* and other dynamic imaginal methodologies.

Jung (1963) also experienced great resonance with other Eastern alchemical traditions, especially the rich symbolic yogic disciplines of kundalini and tantra. His reading of J. G. Woodroffe's (1918/2003) *The Serpent Power* introduced him to the tantric chakra system with

its representations of the stages of psychic growth symbolized by the rising kundalini, or serpent power, and within this context he found particular inspiration in the tantric discipline of Tibetan Buddhism. In this esoteric tradition he discovered a holistic approach and an affinity with nature that resonated with him deeply. He was also fascinated by its highly articulated and complex symbolism, which provided further support for his emerging theories of the archetypes of the collective unconscious. And although he remained committed to his Christian heritage throughout his long life, he felt that the image of the Buddha constitutes a more complete and accessible representation of the unmitigated human being than that of Christ because it integrates both the light and dark aspects of human nature. Buddhism also emphasizes that enlightenment lies *within* each human being (and in all of creation) as one's true nature, as opposed to the separation of God and humanity, and of humanity and nature, as depicted in traditional Christian faith. In addition, the life and teachings of the great Eastern master were much more closely aligned with the introverted religious path that Jung deemed so essential to genuine spiritual development. Further, Tibetan Buddhism's emphasis on finding one's own way toward inner realization through direct creative and contemplative engagement with mythic imagery (as found in both Jungian psychotherapy and Tibetan Tantra) contrasts directly with the Christian view of an *external agent* of divine intervention. In these Eastern precepts he found many meaningful correlations to his own spiritual inclinations, and for him "Buddha became, as it were, the image of the development of the self" (p. 280), a representation he believed was directly reflective of the individuation process and its movement toward an ever-increasing integration with the Self.

Jung's Encounter with European Alchemy

Jung's experience with Eastern alchemy, and with Tibetan Tantra in particular, led him to seek out corresponding disciplines in his own cultural heritage, and he discovered that the radical psychic transformation sought by the practitioners of these ancient Eastern traditions found parallels in the pursuit by certain medieval Western adepts to produce the incorruptible stone, or *lapis philosophorum*. As with many of the most consequential occurrences in his life, the emergence of alchemy as a central component in his work was foreshadowed in a sequence of dreams that announced this crucial new period in his existence. In Jung's words:

Before I discovered Alchemy, I had a series of dreams which repeatedly dealt with the same theme. Beside my house stood another, that is to say, another wing or annex, which was strange to me. Each time I would wonder in my dream why I did not know this house, although it had apparently always been there. Finally came a dream in which I reached the

other wing. I discovered there a wonderful library, dating largely from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Large, fat folio volumes, bound in pig skin, stood along the walls. Among them were a number of books embellished with copper engravings of a strange character, and illustrations containing curious symbols such as I had never seen before. At the time I did not know to what they referred; only much later did I recognize them as alchemical symbols. In the dream I was conscious only of the fascination exerted by them and by the entire library. It was a collection of medieval incunabula and sixteenth-century printings. The unknown wing of the house . . . and especially the library, referred to alchemy, of which I was ignorant, but which I was soon to study. Some fifteen years later I had assembled a library very like the one in the dream. (1963, p. 202)

Jung acquired his first European alchemical text from a bookseller in Munich, which was composed of some thirty Latin treatises in two volumes attributed to *Artis Auriferae* and published in Basel in 1593 (Jaffe, 1989). His library would eventually contain more than two-hundred books and manuscripts of these rare works, and over time two 16th century alchemists in particular would effect the most profound influence over his developing theories. The first was the doctor and natural philosopher, Gerard Dorn, and the other was an esoteric practitioner by the name of Paracelsist. Jung was especially inspired by Dorn's powerful reflections on the spiritual underpinnings of the alchemical opus, the three stages of the *coniunctio* (transformation process), and the hypothesis of *unus mundus*, which, in its translation as "one unitary world", would become a cornerstone of Jungian theory in its emphasis on the interrelatedness and ultimate union of all phenomena, both physical and psychic. In the school founded by Paracelsist, matter was understood as an expression of God and thus existed in direct correlation with divine processes. These essential precepts held that the physical world was the vessel of a captive spirit, and it thus became the mission of the adepts to unlock and liberate the divine through their transformative practices.

For more than thirty years and up until his death in 1961, Jung (1944/1968, 1963/1970) engaged in an intensive study of the often mysterious symbols and obscure treatises of European alchemy in an effort to unravel the many riddles he encountered in its labyrinth of cryptic images, thought and procedures. Although many such texts were devoted to the transmutation of base metals into gold, many others concurrently described dream-like, visionary elements of a distinctly psychic nature that could be directly linked to heightened spiritual processes and states of consciousness. One such work, a ninth century text known as *The Book of Krates*, even presents the entire alchemical axiom in the form of a dream. Jung encountered in many of these texts a rich profusion of mythic imagery of a decidedly psychic and spiritual nature that

presented allusions to numinous mysteries hidden within matter, which he felt conferred upon alchemy the quality of a religious movement.

During the course of a prolonged investigation of this often obscure and beguiling discipline, Jung (1944/1968) came to the conclusion that alchemy was “ceaselessly engaged in preserving a bridge to nature, i.e., the unconscious psyche” (p. 34), which resulted from Christianity’s emphasis on the rational, masculine orientation of the historical figure of Christ and its insistence on unquestioned faith rather than the inward integration of the transformational psychic processes symbolized by his God-image. He described this crucial predicament as follows:

The demand made by the *imitatio Christi*—that we should follow the ideal and seek to become like it—ought logically to have the result of developing and exalting the inner man. In actual fact, the ideal has been turned by superficial and formalistically minded believers into an external object of worship, and it is precisely this veneration for the object that prevents it from reaching down into the depths of the psyche and giving the latter a wholeness in keeping with the ideal. Accordingly the divine mediator stands outside as an image, while man remains fragmentary and untouched in the deepest part of him. (p. 7)

Further, the Church’s separation of spirit and nature and the attendant subjugation of the sacred feminine evades the crucial task of the union of opposites. Accordingly, the central theme of European alchemy’s inner orientation was that of redressing Christian orthodoxy’s separation of spirit and nature, and the masculine and feminine, and its practices were thus “pre-eminently concerned with the seed of unity” (p. 25) in which,

the higher, the spiritual, the masculine inclines to the lower, the earthly, the feminine; and accordingly, the mother, who was anterior the world of the father, accommodates herself to the masculine principle and, with the aid of the human spirit (alchemy or “the philosophy”) produces a son—not the antithesis of Christ but rather his chthonic counterpart, not a divine man but a fabulous being conforming to the nature of the primordial mother. . . . This, in brief, is the drama that was played out in the obscurities of alchemy. (p. 24)

Within this framework, it was the redemption of the split between psyche and matter and the attendant realization and redemption of the divine within the feminine principle in both its earthly and psychic aspects that guided alchemical precepts and processes in their spiritual orientations. According to Jung (1944/1968), this development arose from within the collective unconscious in the historical drama of alchemy in compensation for Christianity’s one-sided emphasis on ego-consciousness (i.e., the rational, masculine aspect of the psyche) and the male God-image (i.e., Christ) at the expense and degradation of the sacred feminine. Thus, this activation of transformative alchemical and archetypal transmutations—with its origin in the neglected and forgotten regions of the human unconscious—represented a necessary renewal

stage in the all-important dialogical exchange between these two fundamental aspects of the psyche. This is imperative in the evolving collective individuation process of the species “because the unconscious holds the seed of the unity of both” whereas, in contrast, “the essence of the conscious mind is discrimination” (Jung 1944/1968, p. 25). In short, in order for human consciousness to evolve toward its higher potential, it must establish and sustain an enduring link to the numinous workings of the unconscious, which include the integration of the sacred feminine in both its psychic and earthly orientations. In time, Jung would come to understand alchemy as the connecting link between Gnosticism and the modern psychology of the unconscious, a historical current that for much of the last two-thousand years has run silently beneath the surface of Western cultural and religious consciousness and had been kept alive in the Middle Ages and Renaissance through the hermetic practices of the alchemical tradition.

Symbols of Transformation in European Alchemy

The vast array of symbolism found in the world’s various alchemical traditions defy any simple or straightforward classification, although there are certainly reoccurring themes that are accompanied by archetypal patterns and images (Jung 1944/1968). As with other traditions, European alchemy portrays a preponderance of forms, which variously include the following: personifications, such as religious and historical figures, hermetic practitioners, androgynous beings, and therianthropes (i.e., human-animal hybrids); archetypal representations of the natural world, such as the divine flower, tree of life, world mountain, and sacred stone; mythic entities representing unified pairs of opposites, such Rex and Regina (King and Queen), Sol and Luna (Sun and Moon), and Adam and Eve; material forms that incorporate highly symbolic objects such as vessels of transformation, stairways to higher or lower dimensions, and chemical substances that transubstantiate into gold; and sophisticated geometric designs, including numerous variations of mandala forms. These manifold images and motifs were very often combined in a complex synthesis of overlapping meanings that added to their aura of perplexity and mystery.

In the European tradition, the essential figure who exemplifies the inscrutability and numinous quality of alchemy is Mercurius, a chthonic spirit who, in contrast to the masculine Trinity, contains the feminine principle and symbolizes the presence of divinity in material form (Jung 1944/1968). This and the profusion of other themes and images fascinated Jung, but what was especially impressive to him were the ubiquitous representations and variations of the

mandala motif, which in their specifically Christian orientation often contain the figure of Jesus in the center. This blending of personified forms with sacred geometrical designs brings together two primary symbols that represent expressions of the totality, or wholeness, of the psyche. In this respect, the category of mandala symbolism belongs not to the array of representations that are associated with the various stages of alchemical transformation, but rather they ‘refer directly and exclusively to the new center as it comes into consciousness’ (p. 41). In reference to this transpersonal center, Jung also emphasized that “in its scientific usage the term *Self* refers neither to Christ or the Buddha but to the totality of the figures that are its equivalent, and each of these figures is a symbol of the self” (p. 18). Further, the correlation and integration of such figures within the context of the mandala—as a *squared circle*—is essential in that “with the distinct leaning of alchemy (and of the unconscious) towards quaternity, there is always a vacillation between three and four. . . . Four signifies the feminine, motherly, physical; three the masculine, fatherly, spiritual” (p. 26). Thus, the mandala represents the union of masculine and feminine aspects (and all opposites) and exists as a supreme symbolic manifestation of psychic totality.

In *Psychology and Alchemy*, Jung (1944/1968) explored the dream sequence of a modern individual involving numerous representations of the mandala motif and demonstrated direct parallels to both alchemical themes and the individuation process. This procedure afforded him the crucial insight that in many instances alchemists were projecting unconscious archetypal images and principles upon their work, and in effect the chemical transmutations that were depicted represented processes of psychological transformation that revealed an inner movement toward the transpersonal center. Jung was fascinated to discover, for example, the manifestation of a sacred flower (as a representation of the mandala motif) in his patient’s dream, which also finds expression in both European and Chinese alchemy (among others) as the *golden flower*. This prominent archetype represents transformation and the emergence of the divine, and gold, in its purest and most noble form, expresses a direct correlated to the sun, which represents, “in psychological terms, the archetype of the God-image” (p. 11). Jung also discovered in this dream sequence a transformational process involving seven stages, which is also to be found in European and Chinese alchemy and in the chakra system of various Eastern religious traditions.

In Jung’s (1963/1970) final major work *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, he continues his in-depth study of Western alchemy and expands upon a number of primary themes as well as elaborating upon the correlations between his process of active imagination and the transformative processes

and stages found in alchemy. The alchemical adepts focused on generating a direct experience of the numinous unitary state of *unus mundus*, and many sought to manifest this union through the *imaginatio*, a dynamic process of fantasy activity involving mythic representations (as outlined above) that was inseparably linked to the opus. This unitary state was conceived as a quasi-corporeal state, a kind of *subtle body* that contained the highest psychic and spiritual characteristics. This led to Jung's hypothesis of a *psychoïd* archetype that is not purely psychic but possesses organic physical characteristics as well, a transcendental unity that lies behind the perceived separation of psyche and matter. This postulation would also inspire Jung's (1960/1973) investigations into synchronicity and his collaborations with the physicist Wolfgang Pauli. These primary themes and transformative processes resonated deeply with Jung, and as outlined previously, it was through his investigations of both Eastern and Western alchemical practices and the sometimes striking similarities he discovered therein that he was able to solidify essential aspects of both his theoretical cannon and his psychotherapeutic procedures.

Alchemical Transformation, East and West

Although there are clear distinctions between the fundamental tenets of Jungian depth psychology and Tibetan Buddhist Tantra, there also exist a number of compelling similarities, especially as they relate to the union of opposites and the manner in which mythic imagery is employed in both disciplines as a powerful agent of healing and transformation (Davis, 2015). As outlined previously, Jung (1963, 1992) found great resonance in the highly articulated and complex symbolism of Tibetan Tantra, and his reading of W. Y. Evans-Wentz's (1927/2000) publication of an English-language translation of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead, or Bardo Thodal*, was especially influential and subsequently "led Jung to boldly affirm the existence of archetypes for the first time in his writings" (Coward, 1992, p. 268).

A number of other key areas of overlapping focus made Jung's investigations into Tibetan Buddhism especially compelling and warrant further elaboration in line with the process of alchemical transformation. For example, each of these traditions—one revealing the wisdom of an ancient Eastern spiritual discipline and the other bringing forth insights through a modern Western psychological framework—emphasizes the mind, or psyche, as the foundational basis of existence and the primary means through which liberation (in the tantric tradition) and psychic wholeness (as in Jungian psychology) are pursued (Davis, 2015). And although the proficient guidance of an adept (i.e., lama or analyst) is considered essential in the formative stages of

spiritual development, each system also stresses that ultimately “the psyche or mind of the individual—the only instrument through which one experiences reality—is the sole authority” (Moacanin, 2003, pp. 102-03). Each engages the realm of dreams (e.g., dream analysis in depth psychology and dream yoga in Tibetan Tantra), meditative visualizations (such as the focus on wisdom figures and mythic imagery in both disciplines), and a varied assortment of other practices that at their very essence are designed to effect a reconciliation of opposites and the attendant union of masculine and feminine principles, which constitutes an essential feature in both systems in the facilitation of spiritual development:

The union of masculine and feminine is central to much of life, both inwardly and outwardly. The conjunctio, as Jung called this union, is equally important to the completion stage of tantra, where male and female aspects of the meditator are brought into union on an inner level. (Preece, 2006, p. 215)

This emphasis on the union of opposites also applies directly to the light and dark aspects of human nature, and in Tibetan Tantra, as in certain primary practices in depth psychotherapy, visualization plays a primary role in this process:

In Jungian analysis one must deal with one’s shadow, the dark rejected part of the psyche; one must detect projections and egocentric aims. . . . For that reason the total psyche must be approached, its dark as well as its light aspects, personified in tantra by peaceful and wrathful deities repeatedly constructed and dissolved in one’s visualization. One is continually facing the conflict of opposites in an effort to transcend them. This is the purpose of the *sadhanas* (meditation exercises), which are based on a profound understanding of what Jung would call depth psychology. (Moacanin, 2003, pp. 88-89)

The presence of archetypal God-images is also prominent in both disciplines, and Lama Yeshe (1987/2001), in referring to the process of tantric meditation, expressed an adjoining perspective when he stated that,

the deity we choose to identify with represents the essential qualities of the fully awakened experience latent within us. To use the language of psychology, such a deity is an archetype of our own deepest nature, our most profound level of consciousness. In tantra we focus our attention upon such an archetypal image and identify with it in order to arouse the deepest, most profound aspects of our being and bring them into our present reality. (p. 30)

In *The Psychology of Eastern Meditation*, Jung (1936/1958) again emphasized this shared principle when he expressed the following:

In the meditation it is realized that the Buddha is really nothing other than the activating psyche of the yogi—the meditator himself. It is not only that the image of the Buddha is produced out of ‘one’s own mind and thought,’ but that the psyche which produces these thought-forms is the Buddha himself. (p. 567)

The various images and sanctified forms that are employed in the Jungian tradition typically derive from the dreams and fantasies of those involved in the therapeutic process. These images can vary dramatically from person to person and are thought to portray distinctive meaning that has a specific application to each individual, although the appearance of universal motifs (e.g., the sacred stone, the anima, and mandala forms) remains ubiquitous (Jung, 1963). The Tibetan discipline, on the other hand, adheres to a well-established and extensive group of traditional deities (e.g., Avalokiteshvara, Tara, and Amitabha Buddha) and mythic forms (e.g., mandalas), although the principle figures of creative visualization and contemplative meditation may vary to some extent depending on the given sect. (Tucci, 1970/1980).

This emphasis on and identification with various sacred symbols and God-images is part of a broader metamorphosis that stresses a radical shift away from the ego as the center of one's identity toward the realization of an inseparable interrelationship with a boundless and all-encompassing psychic reality (Davis, 2016; Moacanin, 1983). In both disciplines, this crucial shift is accompanied by a greatly enhanced sense of interrelationship with the whole of life, which cultivates a deep sense of compassion for one's fellow human beings and the other life forms with which we share our planetary existence. Ultimately then, each discipline's focus on wholeness and psychic totality extends well beyond the individual and any entrenched sense of separateness. This includes a transcending of limiting perceptions and afflictive emotions and a greatly heightened awareness of one's psycho-somatic processes in line with an expanded understanding of the nature and workings of the human psyche. This also involves a concerted emphasis in both traditions on the reduction of suffering and the cultivation of an increased sense of inner liberation in one's fellow humans, as with the analyst's unyielding commitment to the well-being of his clients and the Bodhisattva's vow to seek enlightenment for the sake of, and in service of, all sentient beings. And finally, within the context of liberation it warrants mention that in the Tibetan tradition the achievement of enlightenment (as the nondual union of emptiness and bliss) is accompanied by an end to suffering, whereas for Jung the process of individuation, with its ongoing dyadic interplay between the ego and the Self, involves an endless course of psycho-spiritual evolution for which suffering remains an unceasing—and even necessary—developmental component. Despite this notable distinction, in both disciplines the process of spiritual development and its guiding principles are intimately tied to the deeply transformative practices found in each tradition, a topic to which I now turn.

Alchemical Practices in Jungian Psychotherapy

A detailed account of this complex and mystifying process of inner transformation is beyond the scope of this brief study, but a basic overview of this intricate and often arduous process, which includes the attendant color associations and symbolic representations traditionally used to identify each alchemical phase in European alchemy, is presented below within a Jungian psychotherapeutic context (Jung 1963/1970).

Historically speaking, the process of transforming the *prima materia* into the philosopher's stone involved seven stages of which four were considered primary phases (reflecting a tradition that dates back to at least the first century CE), and this system varied to some extent depending on the practitioner, the period in which he performed his work, and whether his activities were focused on the transmutation of material substances or the human psyche (Jung 1963/1970). After the fifteenth century, many practitioners combined the third and fourth phases into one, which is the system Jung often referred to, especially in its psycho-spiritual orientation.

Accordingly, the three phases of the contemporary alchemical process of spiritual transformation include the following: phase one, which is known as *nigredo*, the blackening. This typically involves an initial, intimate exposure to the principles of inner transformation in order to bring about a level of familiarity with and inspire a pronounced introspection of human nature on the part of the initiate (von Franz, 1977). The focus is on turning inward and fostering humility and truthfulness in relation to oneself, which includes the ability to acknowledge one's ego consciousness as merely a social face (i.e., *persona*) that is shown to the outer world and is not to be confused with one's deepest and most authentic inner being. Facing one's shadow (concurrent with the blackening) in all of its complexity is crucial in this context, and plays a central role in the burning away (fire being the key symbolic element here) of the old identity in order that an analogous act of rebirth may ultimately occur. In a psychological sense, the *prima materia* is associated with the undifferentiated and often chaotic contents of the unconscious and represents the various opposing constituents that must be unified as part of achieving the goal of the opus. The *separatio* (separation) of these inner oppositions is necessary in order to assist in the differentiation of the ego from interior aspects of the personality, such as the shadow, the anima and animus, and the Self. Concurrent with the theme of blackening, this separation and differentiation process may be accompanied by episodes of the *dark night of the soul*, but this is to be understood as part of a deconstruction and loss of the old identity

that is often necessary in order that rebirth may occur and reveal one's self as the immensely expanded and unified transpersonal center; phase two, known as *albedo*, the whitening, involves the emergence of a new dawn that results from the cleansing (*ablutio*) and purifying of shadow aspects, a process in which the soul, having experienced a dissolution in the initial phase, reemerges and is reunited with the revitalized *prima materia*, resulting in the manifestation of a brilliant multi-colored display known as the *peacock's tail*. This phenomena, as an expression of the harmoniously integrated aspects of the psyche, then transforms into the *white light of the albedo*, which Jung compared to the period of dawn that prefigures the rising sun (as the final stage of transformation); and phase three, which is referred to as the *rubedo*, the reddening. In order for the *opus* to become fully manifest in an embodied mode of existence, it must be mixed with the *blood of life*. This latter phase is exemplified by the reconciling and attendant merging of the powerful archetypal opposites of the anima and the animus, which constitutes a crucial step in Jung's process of individuation. In this metamorphosis, the archetypal Queen (represented by the color white and signifying the anima) and the archetypal King (signified by the color red and representative of the animus) rise out of the mercurial depths of the unconscious to enact the *coniunctio oppositorum*, or *chymical marriage*, the assimilation of the archetypal masculine and feminine that symbolizes the union of all opposites. This glorious climax marks the unfettered realization of the *magnum opus* (the great work) and the consummation of the *mysterium coniunctionis* (mystical conjunction), and results in the bringing forth of a *third aspect*, a divine birth that facilitates the unification of love and soul in an awakening of supra-consciousness. Jung (1944/1968) observed that Dorn referred to the production of this union in the third phase as the *caelum*, which represented,

a symbolic rite performed in the laboratory. Its purpose was to create, in the form of a substance, a "truth," the celestial balsam or life principle, which is identical with the God-image. Psychologically, it was a representation of the individuation process by means of chemical substances and procedures, or what we today call active imagination. (p. 494)

In line with these experiences, Jung (1963) developed the practice of active imagination and the attendant process of *amplification*, which represents a method by which the deeper meaning of archetypal images, symbols, and dream-figures are expanded through their association with mythological, cultural, and religious motifs and metaphors—a process that possesses significant application within a psychotherapeutic and developmental context. Such a procedure occurs in the therapeutic process in line with the emergence of archetypal material, and Jung (1977) also

stressed that these psychologically potent mythic forms are not creations of the conscious ego, but rather arise from the depths of the unconscious. For this reason, the phenomena of dreams is of primary importance in depth psychology “because dreams are the most common and most normal expression of the unconscious psyche. . . . They provide the bulk of the material for its investigation” (p. 73). He further suggested that the purpose of such dreams is “to effect a reversal of the relationship between ego-consciousness and the unconscious, and to represent the unconscious as the generator of the empirical personality” (Jung, 1963, p. 324).

In *The Transcendent Function*, Jung (1960) outlined the various precepts and techniques he developed to help manifest the interplay between consciousness and the unconscious, and he viewed creative expression in particular as one of the primary means of facilitating this process. He discovered, for example, that drawing, sand play, and other imaginal exercises involving archetypal imagery could be very effective in bringing clarity to vague feelings, images, and other manifestations of inner content. This proves especially useful in that “the whole procedure is a kind of clarification of the affect, whereby the affect and its contents are brought nearer to consciousness, becoming at the same time more impressive and more understandable” (p. 82). The ego’s direct engagement with mythic imagery thus represents one of the most essential features of this alchemical healing process, as it signals “a movement out of the suspension between opposites, a living birth that leads to a new level of being, a new situation . . . a quality of conjoined opposites” (p. 90). This intriguing phenomenon is well represented through the following dream (one of author’s own) and the practices of active imagination and amplification that were used to bring forth its deeper meaning:

I am standing in a room and am engaged in a conversation that reveals with great certainty that at a later date I will be involved in the dissemination of Jung’s theories to a wider audience. This realization is accompanied by a strong sense of personal pride at the prospect of professional accomplishment and recognition in the outer world. Then I suddenly pass through a curtain and find myself on a football field preparing to kick a field goal that will signify my success in this endeavor; but when I kick the ball, it hits the base of the goal post, and falls short. Then I wake up. (Davis, 2015, p. 38-39)

Having been left with the undeniable sense that this dream had special significance, and having been confused by the seemingly contradictory messages it provided, I was intent upon discovering its deeper implications. To accomplish this decisive task, I engaged in the practice of active imagination, which was created by Jung (1960) as an imaginal exercise in which one

reenters the dream in a conscious state by focusing intensely upon a primary image and then allowing the ensuing *inner drama* to unfold of its own accord and toward its own completion. In this case, the goal post was clearly the most prominent symbol in the dream, and so, with this image firmly in mind, I proceeded to close his eyes, concentrate my focus, and then experienced the following:

In a short time I found myself again on the football field, this time playing quarterback. Each time I tried to pass the ball, I was quickly tackled. Finally, I decided to keep the ball and attempt to cross the goal line by my own volition, and was then able to maneuver my way through the defense, ultimately being brought down as I successfully crossed the goal line. As the football I was carrying touched the ground, it suddenly turned into an enlarged, glowing blue diamond, and this was accompanied by a wordless telepathic communication that can only be described as a sacred revelation, one that arose from a deeper part of myself that I rarely have direct access to, and yet somehow instinctively know to be my *true self*. And what this communication revealed to me was that the *goal* in life is not about achieving success or status in the outer world, but rather, the true meaning of this life is to reconnect, to return *home*, to the very source of one's being. (Davis, 2015, p. 39)

This profound and utterly illuminating experience could not have been anticipated nor constructed by one's conscious ego, as it had unfolded from an unfathomable place within that transcends the waking self. Further, its strikingly numinous character serves to confirm Jung's (1964) theory of universal archetypes, as the diamond exists as one of the primary symbols of the Self and has manifested as a sacred representation of spiritual radiance, purity, and indestructibility in an array of diverse traditions, including the lapis of European alchemy and Tibetan Buddhist Tantra, or *Vajrayana*—the Diamond Vehicle. It also constitutes a compelling testament to how the unconscious acts in a regulatory capacity (Jung 1960), compensating for the misguided direction of the ego through the spontaneous manifestation of mythic symbols, a process that combines aspects of one's contemporary personal existence (i.e., the goal post) with archetypal imagery from the collective unconscious (i.e., the blue diamond), resulting in a sense of deep personal meaning and psychic wholeness (Davis, 2015, 2019). Contact with this deeper sphere of being is facilitated through the psychic engagement and assimilation of key symbols and archetypal forms that arise from the depths of the unconscious, and it is through such creative methods as active imagination that the individuation process can be brought to its most preeminent and revelatory potential.

In addressing this profound phenomenon, Jung (1953/1972) emphasized the attendant need in the individuation process to identify with and integrate what he referred to as the *mana-personality*, which presents itself inwardly as the “God within us” (p. 238) and constitutes the realization of a new and immensely expanded center of the psyche that’s shifts one’s identification from the conscious ego to the Self. He elaborated upon this theme as follows:

Thus the dissolution of the mana-personality through conscious assimilation of its contents leads us, by a natural route, back to ourselves as an actual, living something, poised between two world-pictures and their darkly discerned potencies. This “something” is strange to us and yet so near, wholly ourselves and yet unknowable, a virtual center of so mysterious a constitution that it can claim anything—kinship with beasts and gods, with crystals and with stars. . . . This “something” claims all that and more, and having nothing in our hands that could fairly be opposed to these claims, it is surely wiser to listen to this voice. I have called this centre the self. Intellectually the self is no more than a psychological concept, a construct that serves to express an unknowable essence which we cannot grasp as such since by definition it transcends our powers of comprehension. It might equally be called the “God within us.” The beginnings of our whole psychic life seem to be inextricable rooted in striving towards it. This paradox is unavoidable, as always, when we try to define something that lies beyond the bourn of our understanding. (pp. 237-238)

It is this unfathomable mystery, this deep inner voice from within, that draws the waking self ever closer to the transpersonal center of one’s being through the psychic dialogue of the ego-Self dyad, which lies at the very heart of the individuation process and serves as the basis of Jung’s methods of imaginal and archetypal psychotherapy and their emphasis on sacramental alchemical transformation.

Alchemical Practices in Tibetan Tantra

The distinctive form of psycho-spiritual practice that arose and flourished in Tibet seeks to address the causes of human suffering through a fundamental understanding of the nature of mind (Tucci 1970/1980). This understanding proposes that emptiness, or *sunyata*, is the mind’s essential nature, and it is toward the realization of this nondual state of ultimate liberation that all aspects of spiritual practice are directed. Creative meditation and visualization play a preeminent role in this alchemical process, which, concurrent with its Western counterpart, is focused on the reconciliation of opposites and the union of masculine and feminine principles through creative meditation on abstract mythic forms such as the mandala, as well as on a variety of archetypal God-images.

Although there are in fact numerous forms of tantric practice, and a variety of deities to which different sects are aligned, basic structures of divinity worship were established that have

a broad application to such procedures (Tucci 1970/1980). Within this context, Lama Yeshe's crucial insight warrants repeating, namely that "the deity we choose to identify with represents the essential qualities of the fully awakened experience latent within us. . . . Such a deity is an archetype of our own deepest nature, our most profound level of consciousness" (1987/2001, p. 30). To facilitate this deep awakening, "Tantra worked out a system of meditation on deities which is marked by a sequence of four steps" (Conze 1951/1959, p. 185), as outlined below:

First of all, there is the understanding of emptiness and the sinking of one's separate individuality into that emptiness; *Secondly*, one must repeat and symbolize *germ-syllables*; *Thirdly*, one forms a conception of the external representation of a deity, as shown in statues, paintings, etc.; *Fourthly*, through identification, one becomes the deity. (p. 185)

A complete and unwavering commitment to this method, combined with a genuine belief in the heightened reality of the deity that manifests, are deemed absolutely essential to the efficacy of this process, as described in the following passage:

It would be useless to invoke any form of divinity, higher or lower, without believing in such a being. The high point of any such rite is the descent of the actual divinity (known as the 'wisdom-being' or *jnanasattva*) into the symbol of the divinity (the sacramental-being or *samayasattva*), which has been prepared for this mystical (or magical) conjunction. The practitioner is certainly taught that the divine forms are also emanations of his own mind, but they are not arbitrary imaginings and they are far more real than his own transitory personality, which is a mere flow . . . of consubstantial elements. In learning to produce mentally such higher forms of emanation and eventually identifying himself with them, the practitioner gradually transforms his evanescent personality into that higher state of being. Thus belief in them is essential; otherwise the means by which one would progress dissolve before the desired 'success' (*siddhi*) is achieved. (Snellgrove, 1987/2002, p. 131)

This process of consecrated alchemical assimilation involves a merging of experiential planes, and in addressing this theme Tucci (1970/1980) stated that "the meditation processes . . . evoke the divine being and draw him down on to the human plane . . . and at the same time they raise the human being to a plane beyond human existence" (p. 98). This mysterious and discerning metamorphosis can be understood as follows:

The mystic himself becomes able to transform himself temporarily into a god (*lhar bskyed*), a process familiar with Indian liturgy: *na adevo devam arcayet*, 'he who does not change himself into a god cannot worship a god'. This principle has developed in an altogether extraordinary manner in the Vajrayana and within Lamaism. Beginning with the meditational formulae which describe the aspect and symbols of particular gods, the meditator concentrates on an individual form chosen by him; he transforms within his mind the place where he is into a paradise until this actually appears before his sight. (pp. 94-95)

In pursuit of this state of unitary oneness, the deity thus acts as a kind of psychic bridge to the threshold of one's supreme nature. This threshold can be seen as the boundary between temporal, dualistic, manifest existence and the eternal, nondual, formless nature of dharmakaya, and it is the various practices of tantric meditation, or *mahamudra*, that foster the heightened condition of emptiness with appearance. In the words of Preece (2006):

Even though the notion of no-Self (Skt. *anatma*) is a central tenet of Buddhism, the Buddhist tantric path conceives that our potential for wholeness is personified in the symbolic form of a deity. . . . The deity in tantra is understood as a gateway or bridge between two aspects of reality. . . . In Buddhism we speak of 'relative truth,' the world of appearances and forms, and 'ultimate truth,' the empty, spacious, non-dual nature of reality. . . . The deity stands on the threshold as an expression of the potential for creative manifestation. (pp. 38-39)

In tantric practice the body plays an essential role in this process, one that reflects a holistic coalescence between mind and matter, and in this respect "the union of entity and environment and of observer and observed . . . lies at the very heart of Tibetan tantric practice" (Davis, 2016, p. 245). Preece (2006) further enunciated this theme in the following passage:

Tantra cultivates a return to the world where psyche and soma, consciousness and matter, are in an intimate inter-relationship. The understanding of subtle energy, both within the body and in the natural environment, makes this profound reconnection possible, principally through the body. (p. 245)

The body thus acts as a kind of alchemical vessel of transformation and does so in direct relationship to the yogic activation of the chakras. These seven bodily centers serve as the channels through which the vital feminine energy rises from the lowest to the highest center to be united with the masculine principle, ultimately resulting in a union of emptiness and supreme bliss. In the words of the Gyatso Tenzin, The 14th Dalai Lama (1995):

Such feats are accomplished on the basis of sophisticated yogic practices that principally involve mentally penetrating the essential points within the body where the *cakras*, or energy centers, are located. By means of this subtle and refined coordination of mind and body, the practitioner is able to accelerate the process of getting at the root of ignorance and completely overcoming its effects and imprints, a process that culminates, finally, in the realization of full enlightenment. (p. 11)

Creative meditation consequently assimilates physiological and psychological aspects to create a highly effective means through which spiritual transformation can be induced. Deity worship plays an essential role in this process, and involves the fusion of gross and subtle levels of energy that merge in blissful accord to reveal heightened states of spiritual unity. The fundamental teachings of Tibetan Buddhism assert that not only are the upper levels of

the chakras attainable, but so too is the level of the seventh chakra, which exists as the very essence of the clear light of dharmakaya and reveals one's true nature as all-encompassing, undifferentiated, nondual awareness. This is the unrivaled, incomparable vision from the summit of the highest peak, the ultimate horizon from which all is one and where the "I" vanishes into the eternal light of supreme spiritual realization.

The creative and meditative practices of Tibetan Buddhism are designed to induce psychic development toward this indomitable state, and the mythic image itself stands "at the threshold of passage from time to eternity, which is in fact the plane of reference of the metaphors of myth" (Campbell 1986/2002, p. 40). Ultimately such contemplative practices reveal a dynamic process of alchemical transformation, one that serves to "make a crystal of our minds, so that there is no separation between inner and outer" (Tarthang, 1978/1990, p. 30). Liberation is thus achieved through the dissolution of a separate ego and the luminous union of observer and observed, which in Highest Yoga Tantra (as the final stage of practice) reveals itself as follows:

The meditator experiences the first taste of dharmakaya as clear light awareness dissolves into nonduality like a clear sky, or a drop of water dissolving into the ocean. Once this experience arises, buddhahood, it is said, is possible within this lifetime, and practitioners with this quality of awareness can, within their present bodies, complete the final stages of unification. (Preece, 2006, p. 230)

Conclusion

The ancient tradition of alchemy has arisen in a wide array of historical periods and cultural inflections, and in its precepts and procedures it has variously emphasized the transmutation of base metals into gold and the radical transformation of the human psyche. In the modern era, alchemy received the concerted attention of Carl Jung, who discovered in both its Eastern and Western orientations a wealth of highly symbolic material that would exercise tremendous influence on his most prominent theories and therapeutic practices.

Through his contact with Eastern esoteric traditions such as Tibetan Tantra and Taoism, he encountered a rich and fascinating array of mythic images and motifs that would play a decisive role in the development of his theories of the archetypes of the collective unconscious and the process of individuation. These highly enriching encounters eventually led to an exploration of European alchemy in which he discovered direct correlations to the dream symbolism (including mandalas) of his patients, which served to further confirm and expand the development of his most consequential postulations and psychotherapeutic procedures. He would also arrive at the

crucial understanding that the alchemical tradition of his own cultural heritage had emerged in human history as a manifestation of the collective unconscious that was intended to redress the critical imbalance depicted in the God-image of Christ (in his purely masculine orientation and as an outward object of faith). Conversely, he viewed the archetypal figure of the Buddha as a more complete representation of the actualized, unmitigated human being due to Buddhism's merging of the light and dark aspects of human nature and its emphasis on an introverted, inwardly directed process of spiritual awakening. He also found great inspiration in Tibetan Tantra's practice of deity worship and its creative use of mythic imagery as powerful agents of inner transformation. Other Buddhist tenets resonated with him deeply, including the tradition's emphasis on the psyche as the primary constituent of being, the shifting of one's identity from ego-consciousness to the transpersonal center, and the merging of opposites and concurrent union of masculine and feminine principles.

Although Jung's experiential and theoretical horizons did not allow for the conception of an ultimate nondual state of being as ascribed in Buddhist doctrine, his investigations into the alchemical traditions of the East, especially Tibetan Tantra and Taoism, were instrumental in creating a bridge between the esoteric traditions of Asia and Europe. In light of his discoveries and related articulations, Jung's contribution to the East-West dialogue, and to the study of human spiritual transformation in particular, cannot be underestimated, and the themes he explored and the phenomena he examined hold considerable promise for further expansion and integration in the contemporary world. In the words of Clarke (1994):

He learned from and stood on the shoulders of many giants, who, from the Age of Enlightenment onwards, sought to place European thought within a wider, global horizon, and thereby to subject it to penetrating criticism. His own special achievement lay, first, in his attempt to illuminate contemporary psychological questions by means of a detailed comparison with religious and philosophical ideas from China and India, and, secondly, in his attempt to confront what he saw as the crisis of Western culture by engaging in a dialogue between the cultures of East and West. (p. 179)

The illumination of these essential themes remains a central task in the world today, and in deeply considering the process of inner transformation that is so central to the disciplines of Tibetan Buddhist Tantra and Jungian depth psychology, one is reminded of the judicious counsel of Lama Anagarika Govinda, who emphasized that "such penetration and transformation are only possible through the compelling power of inner vision, whose primordial images or 'archetypes' are the formative principles of our mind" (1969, p. 91).

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