

What Is Alchemy?

The origins of alchemy date back at least as far as ancient Egypt. Some say its origins go back even further to 10,000 BC, a time known in the ancient texts as *Zep Tepi*, when godlike beings roamed the earth and shared their knowledge with mankind. These universal principles were so powerful that they were kept secret from the common people and expressed only in secret writings or concealed in the architecture of sacred buildings for enlightened people to intuitively recognize. That tradition was carried on during the heyday of alchemy in the Middle Ages in secret ciphers, symbolic drawings, and in the sacred architecture of cathedrals.



The gold of alchemy, according to this deeper tradition, is simply hastened perfection, inner and outer – the divinization of matter and of human beings. The goal or Great Work of alchemy has always been to speed up the natural process of perfection and resurrect the spiritual essences that are trapped in matter. Every human being participates in alchemy, whether in a conscious manner (through the intentional transformation and manifesting of one's higher nature) or through the tumult and suffering of worldly experiences that finally lead to increased spiritual awareness. So alchemy is really a Science of Soul, a unique discipline that is not merely an intellectual but also an intuitive science.

That is not to say that alchemy does not deal with material things, for the alchemists saw spirit and matter as two opposite poles of the eternal One. Yet, it is a grave mistake to confuse alchemy with chemistry. Chemistry is an artificial science that deals only with the external forms in which the elements manifest. It never produces anything truly new to creation; it can only recombine atoms and molecules into different substances. Alchemy, on the other hand, causes that which already pre-exists in a latent state to become active and grow. Alchemy is perhaps more comparable to biology than to chemistry, for the growth of a plant, tree, animal, or the evolution of whole species are alchemical processes going on in the laboratory of nature.

The central tenet of alchemy is its chief paradox: the idea that all matter is alive. This concept cannot be fully grasped until it is experienced at a deeper level than the ego-centered everyday world. To some extent all craftsmen know that matter is alive. They know that their material has a life of its own – a history, a character, needs, and possibilities unlike any other – and they know that they must feel and understand this life so that a creative relationship exists between them. Modern quantum physicists are also familiar with this idea. It has been proven that the expectations of an observer can influence the outcome of experiments and that consciousness itself is a force in nature. In fact, anyone who has lived long enough to see how their attitude affects the reality around them knows this to be true.

So alchemy is also an art, and as every artist knows, true art can only be practiced by those who are in possession of the inspired presence and purified imagination necessary for creative transformation. While the manipulations required for some alchemical preparations may, like an ordinary chemical process, be taught to anybody capable of reasoning, the results that such a person could accomplish would be without life – an alchemical still-birth. For only the person in whom the true life has awakened can in turn awaken it from its slumber in matter and cause visible forms to grow and the metals of the human body and temperament to be transformed.