



Lecture 01 - What is required to get started

Delivered to learn_alchemy yahoo group 2004-05
Unedited version 1.0-200805
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Ok, so we have a place to work, we have the basic equipment to carry out the work, and we have a supply of the simple chemicals we require for the prima. So now we can look at the first stage in the herbal work (prima).

First some background. Alchemy is a universal process. It is a mechanism inherent in nature and this mechanism can be found operating in every department of nature. An analogy which might help to understand the relationship between alchemy (as a universal mechanism) and the departments of nature it resides in is to consider that (generally speaking) all organic life forms have a digestion system ... digestion is a mechanism which performs a function necessary to organic life, yes? The alchemical process, or mechanism, has a similar place in life ... it resides in all things, systems, conditions and processes. No thing can exist, from thought, to subatomic particles, through molecules to blue whales or planets without the alchemic mechanism regulating their birth, maintenance of life, their death and rebirth. Because of this fact it would be easy to imagine that we could find examples of the alchemic mechanism working in the three primary kingdoms - animal, vegetable and mineral.

If we dissect any entity from either of the three kingdoms we will find their the various pieces of the machinery of the alchemic mechanism, just as if we were dismantling a clock in order to obtain its cogs, wheels and springs, etc.

While it is true that examples of such dissections (in and of the three kingdoms) exist in many classic alchemic texts, it probably was Frater Albertus who first openly and clearly defined the proper progress for teaching a novice in the art of alchemy was to begin with the vegetable (herbal) work, continue to the animal work and finish with the mineral work. The idea here is that the herbal work is the easiest to learn, to understand and to carry out. The other two works are increasingly more difficult to practice and to understand.

Frater Albertus also defined (again, probably for the first time publicly) what constituted a beginning to each of these works and a completion or mastery of them. In the herbal work he suggested that we should start with experiments with the herbal 'simple' (a basic spagyric herbal tincture) and mastery of the herbal kingdom could be claimed when we had successfully completed a herbal 'stone' ... the highest vibratory species (expression) of the herbal kingdom.

Work in each of the three kingdoms always, philosophically (i.e. ideally) begins with "putrefaction".

There is a saying ... "Our great work begins in darkness and death and ends in the light." If you are partial to reading alchemical literature you will see variations of this statement repeated many times. What it means is that in experimental alchemy we start by effecting a deliberate "philosophic" death of the subject we are working on. This idea needs some explaining because it is often overlooked, and its understanding holds an important key to knowledge of the later work.

A "common" death of any living thing is death by natural causes ... accident, disease, etc, etc, where the subject is left exposed to natural conditions to decompose naturally. It is important to understand that death is not only that part of the process where consciousness evacuates the subject, it also includes the important process of decay (decomposition or putrefaction.) A philosophic death (as opposed to one which happens under natural conditions) is a death which is deliberately carried out under controlled conditions. In the case of natural death the three philosophic principals (mercury-spirit, sulphur-soul and salt-body) separate under the force of putrefaction - both physically and on a non-physical level. Once they separate through decomposition their composite parts retire to their own level of nature and are not able to be reconstituted (preserved as their original whole.) In the case of a philosophic death the decomposition of the 'principals' is controlled in such a way that the spirit, soul and body of the subject are not allowed to be lost (irreparably dis-integrated.)

If we consider that the physical manifestation of the principals (which tradition has referred to as mercury, sulphur and salt) "always" serve as vehicles for their non-physical counterparts (spirit, soul and the forces which integrate the physical body/matrix - body) then a serious contemplation of the information in the previous paragraph will reveal some very curious knowledge.

In the plant kingdom we start the herbal alchemical process by choosing a herb we would like to work with and by collecting about 1 pound (roughly 2 kilos), minimum, of that plant 'fresh'. (Note: dried herb can be used in order to learn the manual technique, but there is good reason to believe that a fresh herb is required in order to obtain truly spagyric results.)

The first method I will explain, of how to carry out the first stage of the herbal work, is the correct, accurate, traditional one. It is more complex and more difficult than the more often used 'short path', which I will explain second.

When the herb is collected, fresh, it should immediately be transferred into water in the container it will be fermented in, and sealed air-tight. The quicker this is done the more successful the process will be - alchemically speaking. This is because a minimum amount of the life-components will be lost from the process if the herb is transferred to its fermentation bucket, into water, fast.

Technically, this means that as soon as the herb is picked volatile spirits and oils start to dissociate themselves from the plant matrix (evaporate) and they will not, of course, be replaced. These volatile components carry away with them the higher consciousness of the plant, which uses these volatile components as their physical vehicle.

Again, technically, in order to assist in the capture of these volatile components the alchemist should take the freshly picked herb, in the water it will be fermented in, and boil it in a distillation train (or a special essential oil collector) in order to collect these volatiles separately. This complicates what is necessarily a relatively simple process under usual circumstances. But when making a herbal stone it can be essential to catch these volatiles separately. But for the common 'simple' process of making a herbal spagyric tincture the separate capture of these volatiles is not necessary. (I will talk more about this when I get onto the subject of herbal stones.)

The next step is to ferment the plant matter in the same way you would ferment fruit in order to make wine. I will not go into depth here about how fermentation is carried out because there are ample very good books out there (or websites online) that explain every detail of how this is done. What I will restrict myself to here is an explanation of the peculiarities of trying to ferment herbs over the more common method of using fruit in wine making.

Fermentation is a process of using yeast to convert carbohydrates (sugars) into CO₂ (carbon dioxide) and alcohol (primarily ethanol). Fruit (generally) is high in natural sugars (fructose, glucose, and sucrose) therefore it is very easy to ferment by either simply adding cultured yeast or by relying on the existence of natural wild yeasts that are everywhere in our environment. Where herbs are concerned, though, they rarely have enough carb's (sugars) to make fermentation reliable, even when there are abundant wild or cultured yeasts present. So what we will have to do in order to kick-off a herbal ferment is to add cultured yeast (brewers yeast) and manufactured sugars - the preference is fructose over sucrose (the sugar you put in your coffee). Fructose is the type of sugar found naturally in the plant kingdom and can often be found most easily in brewers supply stores.

So we have our plant matter, in a large bucket of water, we have added fructose, brewers yeast and preferably some yeast nutrient (obtainable from brewers supply.) The whole mixture is sealed in the bucket with an air trap and left to ferment at approx' 28*c. (known as the first degree of heat in alchemy - roughly body temp.)

There is one important factor to consider about this type of fermentation (one where the sugar is added to the 'must' (plant/water mix), that the alcohol that is produced from the ferment is alcohol which is 'largely', but not completely, unrelated to the specific herb itself.) This type of fermentation is in fact a controlled and alchemically synthetic exercise in the natural death of a plant. It is a mimic of the natural herbal-death process, on a larger scale with some aspects of the process exaggerated for practical (alch-lab) purposes. Of equal or more importance is the fact that by controlling

the conditions in which the plant-death takes place, we can ensure that the mercury, sulphur and salt do not decompose under rough natural conditions and spread to the four winds. They are contained, separate but together, and ... most importantly, the plant spirit, soul and matrix forces that are attached to (or contained in) the physical principals are also retained ... the constituents of plant-life and consciousness.

I will end this post with a question, because I am curious to know if anyone here knows, or can guess, the answer:

What, alchemically speaking, do we have in the fermentation bucket once the fermentation of our plant is complete?

~rubaphilos