

Knighthood of Purity and the Alchemical Process

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The Alchemical process was introduced in The Inayati Order by Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan from his study of Jung's analysis of historical alchemical sources. Pir Vilayat adopted the process of alchemy as a method of transformation structured into a silent retreat in 6 stages.

The retreat begins with a purification practice traditionally called muhasaba, translated by Pir Vilayat as examination of conscience. In the silence of a retreat, when everyday distractions are put aside, unresolved issues tend to rise to the surface. If they can be previewed before the retreat and brought to the surface and one can resolve to address them after the retreat, then one can free one's conscience for exploration of the inner life. Particularly addressed is whether there is a need to be forgiven, a need to forgive, and a need to address a grudge against life or God. One would like to clear the slate by making a commitment to address any wrongs and to make amends and by receiving forgiveness from the source of unconditional love. This prepares the way for a return to innocence.

Examination of conscience allows one to turn one's attention outward contributing to the work of the first alchemical stage which involves expansion of one's outlook from the narrowness of self-preoccupation. Concern for the welfare of others is central to the attitude of chivalry. It is found in the fifth of the Ten Sufi Thoughts: There is One Law, the law of reciprocity which can be observed by a selfless conscience together with a sense of awakened justice. The law of reciprocity is a correction to the habit of defending and justifying our limited self. To balance that tendency we also take the point of view of the other and do for others what we naturally do for ourselves, that is, consider the interest of others as much as we consider our own self-interest. Awakened justice comes when we see the interest of others equally with our own and treat all with fairness.

In the second stage one reconnects with one's feeling of sacredness and awe. One becomes aware of one's ideal and through admiration and aspiration one is lifted up toward the ideal. One focuses one's attention on the ideal instead of on oneself and feels inspired.

The first two stages of the alchemical retreat have much to do with the work of the Knighthood but in the outer world. Through the practice of the Herald one works on one's personality by developing habits more in line with one's values and ideal. One develops consideration for the other and practices adab or respect toward the other.

One withdraws from one's involvement in the world in the third stage of the retreat, seeking the source of one's ideal within. One leaves behind one's personal identification. It is a dying before death. One strips away what is transient and what is incidental and is left with the essence of one's true self. When all is stripped away, what remains is the bare sense of "I" and one associates with it what can be sensed as pure intelligence. This can lead into an empty state of absolute oneness. This condition of oneness is the gold hidden in the ore.

In the path of chivalry, one might begin by thinking that one has to lift oneself up by one's bootstraps. It appears initially that one has to master oneself or take oneself in hand to change one's habits. This can be a great burden and lead to discouragement if one assumes that the task is all up to the limited self. It is the gold within on which we can depend. To realize it we need to relinquish that everyday identity which we either devalue or justify and to make our ideal a reality by holding its vision before us and reminding ourselves that it is only covered over by clinging to our little self. When our heart opens to another, our true self is awakened and living up to our ideal gives us pleasure. Remembering the gold of essence at the core of our being helps us to feel the meaning of one of the Silver Rules: My conscientious self, meet your shortcomings with the sword of self-respect.

The fourth stage of the retreat begins the return journey back into everyday life. There is a recognition of the mutual relationship between heaven and earth. Heaven or the all pervading spirit expresses itself through earth and earth derives its sustenance from its source in heaven. Embodiment has a purpose in the fulfillment of the endless creative potential of the source. One is drawn back from the depth of the retreat into life in the world for a greater purpose, to unfold what has been invested in one's true self.

The gold is still soft and malleable in the fifth stage and needs the process of annealing or hardening to be able to withstand the stresses it will encounter when it returns to life in the world. In this stage comes the pledge of the knight to serve his or her highest ideal and to nurture and protect others. Now one adopts determination and mastery to overcome whatever holds one back, basing that strength on a realization of the essence within. Knowing that there is a greater purpose behind one's personal purpose and a greater desire working behind one's own desire, one takes courage in meeting any challenge. The exploits of Hazrat Ali demonstrate the extent to which this strength can arise from an immovable faith. When the fledgling Muslim community was being attacked by an army of those

who opposed the Prophet, it was customary for each side to put forward a champion warrior for hand to hand combat. Hazrat Ali was always the champion for the Muslims and he defeated every powerful warrior the other side could muster. He did so in a noble manner that won the admiration of his enemies.

The sixth stage is a completion of the process, acknowledging a mutuality between spirit and matter. It is a give and take, the spiritualization of matter and the materialization of spirit. One reenters the world taking up one's part in it but not being of it, belonging to a higher world. One is dedicated to one's ideal and one's ideal is alive and working through one. One becomes an instrument for a higher cause.

Behind this scheme of alchemy are some assumptions of Sufi metaphysics. The ideal human is an awakened soul. The soul is a ray of the divine sun. The source of all is absolute Oneness and is also the source of Love, Harmony, and Beauty. The ordinary life of separation hides the truth of underlying oneness and yet the One desires separation. There is a reason for it. The One is a Hidden Treasure longing to be known and its way of knowing itself is through the expression of its myriad qualities or Sifat. Every apparently separate object is an expression of qualities. In order to be separate, we must function with an ego or nafs. But the nafs becomes a veil over the the qualities inherent in the soul. Awakening happens as the soul discovers its nature by contemplating its ideal. The work of the Knight is the outer work to discover and live according to that ideal which is inherent in one's soul. Working with the Rules is a process by which we come to know our own unique ideal and bring it to life.