

Alchemy and Psychology: Ancient Roots of the Modern Mind

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June 16, 2026

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2026). *Alchemy and Psychology: Ancient Roots of the Modern Mind*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=37983>

The earliest recorded practices of alchemy come from Ancient China. These specifically take the form of Taoist writings that detail alchemical practices. The goal of this Chinese alchemy was to purify the Mind, Body, and Soul through medicine and knowledge of the body. Much like Western alchemy the goal of Chinese alchemy was to gain immortality through the consumption of particular elixirs. These practices would eventually evolve into a system of energy practices where the goal was to open the body up to Qi and balance the five elements (Chinese philosophy) within the body. The view that a person's well-being was based on having their inner elements balanced would later be adopted by Hippocrates who would greatly influence the philosophy of Galen which would dominate Western psychological thought for centuries.

The history of Western Alchemy allegedly begins in Egypt with the teachings of Hermes Trismegistus. Occult history states that Hermes was the greatest teacher of all-time and that he is the one that brought the gift of writing to Man. He is also believed to have ascended to godhood in the form of Thoth and would go on to be the Greek god Hermes. At the core of Hermes' teachings was that the entire Universe was created by the Mind. This theory would eventually emerge in the philosophy of Plato. Two other teachings credited to Hermes appear even earlier in the philosophy of Heraclitus. Both of these thinkers proposed that the world is in constant motion and that opposites are not separate entities, but the same thing in different degrees. Hermes took these ideas further and applied them to the Mind. He claimed that a person's Mind was constantly changing between different degrees, but by exerting willpower one could stop this motion and eventually master it.

In Western history the most important of Hermes' teachings were those regarding alchemy. It is claimed that Hermes not only gave writing to the Earth, but also the art of alchemy. The most basic teachings of which are said to have been given in the form of the Emerald Tablet. In the Western school of thought, alchemy was often portrayed with having the ultimate goal of creating the Philosopher's Stone. A substance that allegedly able to turn any mineral into gold as well as create an elixir that granted immortality. After the fall of the Roman Empire these claims would be investigated by the likes of Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas. While Aquinas was not exactly an alchemist, it is through his study of alchemy that would allow him to lay down the groundwork for the scientific method.

After Magnus and Aquinas the first true alchemist of the Middle Ages was Roger Bacon. Bacon, a Franciscan believed that knowledge could come from authority, reasoning, and experience. It was his firm belief however that knowledge was only effective if it came through experience. It is also believed that Bacon is one of the main perpetrators of the Philosopher's Stone story.

At this point alchemy was widely accepted by the Church as a way to learn more about theology. It was believed that if a process could turn minerals into gold, then a similar process could be applied to Man to purify its mind, body, and soul. After the writings of William of Ockham alchemy began to

fall into disfavor with the Church and the clergy was banned from studying it. This led to a long period where most of the philosophy of alchemy was neglected and instead it became more occult in nature.

Alchemy remained in this state until the Renaissance with the work of Paracelsus. Paracelsus believed that through observation and experimentation there was much to be learned about the human body. While accepting most of the neo-Platonic, Pythagorean, and Hermetical philosophies, Paracelsus rejected most of the magical writings that had been incorporated into alchemy. Through his research Paracelsus would go on to become the first major proponent for medicine. He believed that the human body grew sick because of an imbalance in chemicals and that balance was restored through various tinctures and elixirs.

Following Paracelsus' work alchemy quickly faded away in favor of modern scientific practices. While alchemy had helped create many of the principles science would follow it was discarded as an esoteric pseudoscience. Beginning in the 19th century and continuing throughout the 20th century alchemical writings would lose much of the jargon and esoterica that had shrouded them for centuries. The writings now reflected a more personal form of alchemy. The goal of alchemy was no longer to create the Philosopher's Stone, but to transform one's self into a perfect being. The belief was that one could change their Mind and by extension their Body and Soul through meditation and willpower.

Carl Jung would pick up on this belief and apply it to psychology in 1944 with the release of his book *Psychology and Alchemy*. Jung argued that the symbols used by the alchemists of the Renaissance and Medieval Europe were not merely esoterica, but were in fact manifestations of the psyche. Jung would then go on to show how the Great Work of the alchemists was a symbol for the reintegration of the psyche in a person. This would lead Jung to conclude that spirituality was key in a person's mental well being.

Following Jung's research into alchemy it started gaining followers once more. One of the most important Hermeticists of the 20th century was Franz Bardon. Bardon wrote three books on his view of the Universe and how one could learn to actualize their true potential as well as contact with beings from different planes of existence. Of these books the foundation of his entire metaphysics is *Initiation Into Hermetics*. In this book Bardon takes the concept originally proposed by the Chinese and Hippocrates that the body is composed of elements and that these elements must be in harmony. More so than alchemists before him, Bardon placed a great emphasis on a person's Will. He claimed that not only could one learn to control the flow of their thoughts through willpower, but they could eventually change their personality and the world around them using willpower alone.

Currently alchemy relies heavily on the writings that Jung laid down, while there are still a few that follow the older traditions. Within the field of psychology there are findings that have begun to

mirror those claims of the alchemists of the early 20th century, including Bardon. Throughout most of the 20th century it was believed that physical objects could not be changed through willpower. This belief is changing with research done by Jeffrey M. Schwartz. In the late 80s and 90s Schwartz ran studies on patients suffering from OCD and found that by employing meditation and using great amounts of willpower these patients were able to change the way their brains were organized.

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