

## **Evolution or revolution? The alchemy of consciousness**

All over the planet, people from all walks of life – sustainability practitioners, astrologers, economists, health care workers, politicians, and consciousness workers – are understanding that changes of a dimension that human beings have never witnessed is taking place. This is happening in our philosophical, spiritual, financial, social, environmental, health and psychological structures. On the one hand, chaos is reigning; on the other, there is a sense of underlying forces emerging, like slow moving volcanic lava, from the depths. It is a time of challenges and opportunities. Many people are resonating with the idea of an ‘evolution of consciousness’, as a way of both understanding and moving forwards.

What does this really mean – and if it is happening, how can we as individuals and collectives bring this into sharper and compassionate focus as the world struggles with some potentially destructive, but creative changes? I argue here that we need to look to the past, as much as to the future to find the gateways to a new consciousness.

### **The nature of consciousness**

It would help if we were first to define what we mean by consciousness. It surprises me how there is so much discussion about this, without a necessary exploration of what we understand by it. How can we discuss the evolution of something which we believe is critical to our progress as humans, if we have not ascertained its nature and qualities – or at least moved towards a shared consensus on what we are talking about? Surely, it is only through the discussion about what it means that we can come to understand what it may mean to evolve it!

This is a problem of our age, in that the scientific view has appropriated the right to determine how we actually perceive of ourselves as humans, so that our tools of perception, and the objects of our perception are taken for granted. We rarely ask direct questions of our experience. Rather, we make further abstract statements, leading us into a land of Alice in Wonderland. These are questions of philosophy and experience which have fallen away from our purview. None of these questions lie within the curricula of our traditional academic institutions, other than in abstruse philosophical departments who ponder on the nature of language – without reference to the way in which perceptions and language shape or condition our actual experience. All of this is exacerbated, and perhaps determined and conditioned by the proliferation of new technology, which means that much of our time is spent in the two-dimensional ‘reading’ of ideas on the internet, or on the body-less telephone. Our means of connection are changing, but without an embodied reflection as to what makes life rich and fruitful. Largely, what is good for us, is determined by corporate bodies forever seeking more growth in terms of profit.

This is all to say that we forget that our minds are conditioned not only by our parents and social world, but also by the nature of the technology which connects us. We take all this for granted, and assume this is the nature of reality. Thus our experience is limited, and our thinking too is limited to the superficial products of our mind and institutions. Easy to say, but not so easy to feel and expand into. So, to explore

‘evolution of consciousness’ means to question fundamentally the nature and perception of our experience, and breaking down the conditioned structures in our minds.

One way in which we could approach this, is to return to the insights and practices of earlier alchemists who were engaged in just this practice of transformation. In this article, I wish to explore in more depth what we understand by ‘consciousness’ from some different angles, and by so doing, see how the practices of alchemists can shed light on this. This may provide some more pointers, to those of us who are aware of this significant change, so that we can more consciously participate in, and articulate its particular dimensions, finding new ways forward that do not rely on outmoded forms of perception – and also bearing in mind that the mental faculty which I am using just now, is just one factor in the nature of consciousness.

### **The dualistic nature of consciousness and the predominance of mental faculty**

In the West our thinking and behaviour is conditioned by a linear Newtonian paradigm, which because it is conditioned goes unnoticed, so we talk glibly about consciousness as though it is some type of ‘thing’ that can grow or evolve, like a flower; or it is equated with the brain, if not the brain itself; or it is treated as a tool with which we learn to find our way in the universe. It is largely construed as some mental faculty that can be tracked or even measured by movements in the brain, or inferred from behaviour. This is an ever-reducing circle – a tautological movement that is only measured by a science that no longer questions its own assumptions.

Other aspects of our experience, such as the imagination, that part of us which is truly creative, is considered just that – something that we create within our minds that may then produce aesthetic ideas, or the fantasies of children – or of adults.

So let’s ask some questions of our experience. Let’s fantasise. Take a chair, a quiet spot and explore.

*Are the dreams within us more real than the daily reality we inhabit? What is it that let’s us know we are alive? Is it the day-to-day office work, or is it the visions we have when looking out of the window? How might we make these into a reality? What would that take? Do we ever go that far? Or do we become paralysed by fear? What connects my dream of last night with my cup of tea in the morning?*

*There’s another possibility too. Let’s feel that vision inside us – what might it feel like? Is it a vibration, a sensation, a colour? What does this now tell us? Which is more real, the felt sense inside, or the world we can see outside us? Who is experiencing it?*

*Do we need to make the vision happen, or is it enough just to experience this? If we wish to make it happen – then do some more dreaming. Imagine the steps needed towards this. It may not unfold in that way – but it puts you in a different direction.*

These are mental constructs, envisioning with the mind and body. The first set of questions was an invitation to visualise. The second, an invitation to resonate more deeply with the image we had constructed. The third invitation, was to make it

happen. To make these things happen, we have to take action. This may be difficult if we are paralysed by fear. To take action, we have to take some responsibility for our actions, and run the risk of failure. Taking action means activating a stronger sense of will that comes deeply from the unconscious.

### **The suffocation of the imagination**

The connecting thread with this exercise is the imagination. As human beings, we not only perceive the world, but we also respond to it. The way in which this interaction takes place can take place on many levels – only one of which is intellectual. We can also project our imagination out into the world, consciously, and then move towards our projections. As we move towards it, we begin to build foundations for the vision. These projections may change as they meet obstacles, or positive pointers from the outside world – our imagination is flexible enough for this. This faculty of imagination combined with perception is what connects us with the world, with ourselves and with one another. We've lost this – shut it down since it cannot be measured. It has become stifled by the crass superficialities of consumer capitalism which has to shape our visions in order to grow.

Our minds have become paralysed by the way in which consumerism has appropriated our desire, and fed it with fantasies which they are able to meet. This has rendered us passive, immobile, slaves to the expansion of large corporations. This is a global phenomenon. Throughout the globe, many people spend their lives working in the service of large corporations, whose only agenda is more and more growth in figures on a spreadsheet. Consumer capitalism cannot tolerate the imagination, since it is possible that it can create visions that go beyond the financial targets. Large corporations both create, and then feed off, a collectivised process of desire symbolised by a vast advertising and marketing structure that invades our lives from morning to night. Do we ever question the fact that, if we have the television on, marketers are selling us 'stuff' in our very living spaces? The only place that has not been colonised by this is our night time sleep. Fortunately, here our unconscious reality can begin to take root, can play into our daytime experience and become part of a deeper reality than that fed only by desire.

We think that imagination is the plaything of children. In fact, it is the servant of the force of life itself. It is what helps shape our world. It is what gives our lives meaning and shape. Without it, we stumble around in an alien universe, disconnected from ourselves and therefore from others.

Whilst we dismiss imagination as something that we picture in our minds, or something about which we fantasise, which does not bear any resemblance to the material reality in which we live, we are actually dismissing the possibilities for transformation, connection, creation, vitality – for a connection between the inner world and the outer world. We dismiss our potential for creation.

This imaginative process that I have been describing is a process that has fuelled the lifeforce of humans and the meaning we make of the world for millennia. Knowledge of, and curiosity about this is what gives us a real relationship with our souls, with one another, and with the material world we collectively inhabit. Before the colonisation of the imagination through modern science, however, great masters existed who understood and studied the relationships between the human being and

the cosmos. These were the masters/mistresses of consciousness. These were the alchemists. They existed in both East and West, and their knowledge is largely lost to modern civilisation, though arguably some of the teachings in Buddhism and Western esoteric schools, or poetry, literature and art, demonstrate this profound understanding of human nature and action. In order to explore further what an 'evolution of consciousness' may mean, then the knowledge and processes that they evolved in this grey area between the inner world and the outer world is a crucial building block. It is my purpose here just to explore the processes of the alchemists as we understand it today, as a pointer for more conscious collective evolution.

### **The science of alchemy**

The work of the alchemists has been largely dismissed and indeed repressed by modern scientists, who, from Newton onwards, have privileged the role of reason as the only arbiter and perceiver of an objective reality. Indeed, alchemy has been scorned for its metaphor-based approach, or dismissed as magic. Paradoxically, the last of the great alchemists was the first of the modern scientists: Sir Isaac Newton. Whilst modern science has done its best to remove the scientist from the object of its inquiry, alchemists merged their inner reality, with the external reality of the matter with which they worked. By spending long periods of time working with different matter, by gazing at these processes, alchemists projected their own reality and fused with the matter in which they lived. From this merging, they believed, the 'philosopher's stone' would emerge. This would entail a change in the quality of the matter they were examining. What the philosopher's stone is, or was, remains still a mystery, but more importantly is its symbolic representation as an individual quest for meaning. From this process, however, we can see that was quite possible for alchemists to accept the possibility that changes in the personality of the artisan somehow effects changes in the matter in which he or she are working.

It was possible for alchemists to engage in this process since in their times, human beings did not have such a sense of being individual, and could be said to partake of a collective consciousness, where roles and actions were determined by history and birth, not by individual will. The human emerged from a felt relationship to the landscape and to the God or gods. The ego, differentiating itself through linear reason, had not yet emerged as the central ordering principle as it is today, where rather than being a part of a collective reality, we have become a collection of fragmented individuals, pursuing individual goals through the creation and leverage of money.

So could we change mind into matter? To the modern mind this would seem impossible. However, this is only so if we think that there is a qualitative difference between mind and matter, which is, of course, the defining feature of modern science. In Newtonian science, the objective human being can both measure, observe and control the world in which he or she operates. The ultimate expression of this is perhaps the mind-boggling tunnel round Geneva that has been created by physicists, chasing the elusive dark matter. Yet of course, Einstein had already shown that our world is made of multiple realities, beyond time and space. However, these are worldviews that are yet to shape our collective existence, which is one of the reasons why the world is in a state of confusion and chaos as these emergent realities challenge the older view.

We are in a great state of transition, as the older scientific view struggles to emerge with the emergent views of the world as quantum, and the human race looks aghast at the crumbling structures of consumer capitalism. In this process, the relationship between mind and matter is of critical importance and is a major part of the transition.

How did we lose the wisdom of the alchemists? As rationality and industrialisation took over, the imaginative faculty became the stuff of the romantics, a sideshow as the great edifice of industrial structures began to dominate our landscape.

So, along with the demise of alchemy came a demise of a relationship and respect between the inner world and the outer world. The inner world became a matter for each individual and her God, whilst the outer world carried on regardless. No wonder then that alchemy with its emphasis on mutual transformation, was regarded as a dangerous and heretic science, and was consequently derided, only to fall into oblivion. It could not co-exist alongside the growth of the modern ego with its emphasis on the self. No wonder, also, that the world is in its current crisis and each individual is out of relationship with the world in which they are embedded, and therefore with one another.

### **The shadow of modern civilisation**

The modern self has become etiolated; incarcerated in a folly of its own heroic making. The powerful discourse of managerial ideology has created a working world of 'enterprising individuals' ( Du Gay, Salaman and Rees, 1997) who are encouraged selfishly to pursue their own ends. The world of the daimons, of those powerful transformational energies that are the stuff of life, of the imagination, of creativity, have been imprisoned in a language of self-development and empowerment, that keeps us locked to a one-dimensional computer screen. It is a smouldering furnace that is ready to explode.

In our modern discourse, these energies can be said to have become locked in the 'shadow'. Jung used the term 'shadow' to signify what each person fears and despises in herself. When a child is brought into the world, it is important that they fit into the environment, and learn how to get their needs met. The child attempts a series of behaviours and actions ( such as crying or lying passive) in order to get fed and nurtured. Those behaviours that are not acceptable in a particular environment are punished, and so the child learns to suppress them. The personal shadow contains a mixture of negative and positive attributes of the self which were disowned and cast away in childhood because they were condemned by the collective in which the person has grown up. It is these processes that have forged the 'rational man' and the 'man of the market' and which get passed down from generation to generation. The personal shadow that each individual carries will be determined by the immediate environment (familial conditioning) and the larger environment ( societal conditioning). The personal shadow is a depository of all the stuff that the child's ego is unable to deal with or take responsibility for without feelings of ambivalence or conflict. The 'split-off' parts that are unacceptable are banished to the shadow, to the netherlands, only to emerge in unintegrated and destructive ways. Thus, what was appropriate and 'safe' behaviour for my mother, is then passed down through the way in which we related as infants and into adulthood. The shadow is also expressed for mankind as a whole, or for a particular culture at a particular time.

At a more collective level, the process of ‘scapegoating’ describes how the ‘split-off’ process works in groups. In Jungian terms, scapegoating is a form of denying the shadow of both man and God. What is seen as unfit to conform with the ego ideal, or with the perfect goodness of God, is repressed and denied, or split-off and made unconscious. In the past, there would have been perhaps ritual sacrifice or confession to acknowledge the existence of these disowned parts of ourselves. We would have asked forgiveness for the blackness that we carried. The scapegoat ritual functioned to bring the transpersonal dimension to aid and renew the community. But the notion of original sin followed by science too, has banished ritual to a field of nonsense and primitive magic. We do not even see that they ( the scapegoated elements) are still part of our psychological make-up. But we are acutely aware of them belonging to others, the scapegoats. We see the shadow clearly in projection. We see this by the way in which we blame others for behaviour that we cannot tolerate, since we sense it in ourselves. Thus, we may condemn a nation for their lack of human rights, whilst ignoring what is happening in our own. Such mechanisms are reinforced in collective structures and social institutions as an effective means of controlling a group. ... a group can split off its unwanted parts instead of processing them.

### **Transforming the shadow**

In the stage of transition in which we find ourselves, however, these shadow elements are pushing for attention. The energetic processes that are contained in the shadow are so powerful that they are beginning to emerge everywhere. In the environment, in the growing political violence, in the financial and economic sectors, in our lack of care for ourselves, in problems of mental health. The pressure for transformation is undeniable.

However, as human beings, transformation is just what we avoid. This is because transformation demands an engagement with the exterior world that threatens existence itself. The ego is build in childhood, where survival is dependent on others. Whatever defences the child has erected for its existence, need to fall if real transformation is to take place. Further, not only are the personal ego defences challenged, so are those of the collective. The individual is conditioned by the social, and so meets forces that also pervade and organise perceptions of the entire culture. If he or she is consciously to evolve, then they will need to commit to meeting just such forces, and submit to the non-knowing of what will may emerge.

For real and long-lasting transformation to take place, an irreversible change has to take place, a change from one state to another. The only changes of this magnitude take place in nature, and in chemistry, as energy may change from solid to gas when applying heat. This means, the death of one state, and the birth in another. This is why alchemists use initiation as the central part of their work.

### **The importance of initiation**

Initiation traditionally took place in earlier cultures to mark the transition from one stage of humanhood to another such as the rites of adolescence. Some of these still exist in our global world, such as marriage and funerals. These honoured a new and different way of being in the world – which also meant that the initiate’s way of perceiving the world changed. There was no going back. The emotional and perceptive structures were so changed, that they learned to serve new ideals. They were not the person they used to be. The conforming regulations of globalisation, and

their tentacled reach within individuals' lives throughout the globe cannot tolerate change, since these would imply transformation. These processes themselves can be traced back to the great mystery cults. Mysteries were initiation rituals of a voluntary, personal and secret character that aimed at a change of mind, body and soul through the experience of the sacred.

However, in going through this process, initiates need to meet the darker aspects of themselves, that which was previously in the shadow. So the process includes experiences of terror, dread, rage, and deep anxieties. In the terms of the alchemists, substances are 'tortured' and have to 'putrefy'. Putrefaction, and the blackness of the psyche were the secret of their art. In this process, they projected their own inner world on the matter with which they worked, and so experienced themselves as changed from a leaden state, to one of illumination, so that they would have an inner self that is stable amidst the impact of life's events, and the emotional and instinctual turbulence of the inner world.

The characteristic process takes place in a crucible, which holds the fire of destruction and creation. The material worked upon is the *prima materia* that is never fully defined. The intent of this is the dissolving of old states and evolving of new ones, in a turbulence of emotions. This turbulence needs to be integrated in order that the numinous qualities of the process can be experienced. This change was said to take place in a space that they called the 'subtle body', a mediating area, which was neither material nor spiritual. This is the mysterious space that exists between the inner and outer world of the individual. The understanding here was that the essence of an individual is not separate from others and neither is the personality stable and unchanging. It may be clear that such a process is outside any light of human reason, which by its nature, blocks the unknown or the chaotic.

Vital to this process is the alchemist intertwining himself with the matter in which he is working. In fusing with the object, there is an understanding that the individual is an inseparable part of a greater unity. The alchemical process leads to the creation of a higher spiritual state that is capable of meeting the darkness of the *nigredo*, and shame of putrefaction. This is almost impossible for us to consider with our conditioned Western minds, which has separated the ego so clearly from the unconscious where it arose. The notion of 'enlightenment' in itself implies a moving away from the dark, rather than a true meeting with the dark forces which are equally part of our individual and collective psyche.

As Lindsay notes: ' This identification of the scientist-artisan with the processes he is producing is perhaps the hardest aspect of alchemy for anyone nowadays to understand or enter into. To men in whom the alienation of the intellect from the world of nature have been carried very much further than among classical Greek thinkers, the whole thing seems fantastic and overstressed, unreal. But in fact it was passionately real, and in my opinion it held an element of truth which we must strive to grasp and recapture if our science is to measure up to the full demands of reality (Lindsay, p.27 quoted in Swartz-Salant 1998).

### **Evolution of consciousness; evolution of relationship**

Given this, then, consciousness may be understood rather differently. It cannot be measured or seen, yet its effects are apparent to both observer and observed. We can infer its existence both personally and collectively. It contains faculties such as the imagination. The work of the alchemists pointed to a different consensus reality, shaped both by the inner world and the outer world. They may not have understood the relationship between their own projections on matter, and its alchemical results, but they did understand that in engaging with this process, something transformed. This reality has been lost to us. We either have an inner world which is separate from our daily existence, or we eschew an inner world altogether, and consider the world outside as some objective construct that needs to be controlled in order to feed our desires.

Perhaps the obsession that has developed in the West around the notion of the 'romantic relationship' is the one place where our true soul desires still exist. However the understanding of this promulgated and appropriated by marketing does not embrace the darker, more powerful aspects of the magnetic attraction between humans, which is at one level, purely primal, without any reason. It is through 'falling in love' that we can see both our lighter and shadow sides, and this may be said to contain some of the same principles of 'projection' developed by the alchemists. We project out those parts of ourselves that we cannot see, since they have been enshadowed in our early conditioning, and it is only through merging with the other that we can find them again. However, when the merging is unconscious, then inevitably the darker sides will also merge, leading to co-dependent relationships, lacking in honesty, and therefore characterised by confusion and often physical or psychological violence. So this is why the forging of conscious relationship is the way in which the human species can move forward, not only with one another, but also in sustainable relationship with the planet.

In our rational society, what we understand as 'consciousness' is often merely equated with language, with a symbolic, mental representation of reality. The unconscious aspects of our psyche are meeting at different levels and different planes. As these unconscious elements push forward to be seen, they are experienced as emotions, drives, which can feel overwhelming or confusing, as they may not resonate with what is being spoken. Because they can be experienced like this, we tend to avoid situations where they might arise, or we may push them ever deeper into the unconscious –especially in situations of intimacy. When, however, we can face these fears squarely, then we move into conscious relationship, and then a transformation takes place. This is a ground of creativity. It is the ground of conscious relationship.

For something to become 'conscious', it has to meet another 'object'. When this is another 'consciousness' then there is a meeting, and something additional comes into being – a thought, idea, vibration, and a third is constellated. We are not just a 'skin' which meets another, and makes connections through language. There is a vast well of different currents which may or may not come into direct contact, but where one meeting may ripple through the entire well. So relationship with one another could be a real way forward in the 'evolution of consciousness' that so many people are talking about. In core process which is a Buddhist-based psychotherapy taught at the Karuna institute in Devon, UK, the place of inquiry is the co-arising field between therapist and client. Just as alchemists were experimenting with that rich area that constellates when two beings truly open to deepening into the chaos that lies beneath the



structures created by reason, core process work focuses on the 'relational field' that arises between client and therapist, and attempts to bring into consciousness the multi-levelled phenomenon that may be found here. Rather than working exclusively with the notion of projection and transference, there is an understanding of a joint practice into what arises, with a focus on the client's material. Thus, in the therapy room, or in group process, a modern 'crucible' is formed to contain and work with the archetypal energies that can arise when brought into full consciousness. Only by acknowledging the 'what is' of what is present, which may feel devastating, can a healing take place. When this is acknowledged, then archetypal energies may begin to constellate, then something will transform and new phenomena arise. A transformation and healing has taken place, but what that would look like is completely unknown to both therapist and client. This process can also work in groups, and has been tried in different contexts ( Rees, 2011).

Thus, when we are talking about the evolution of consciousness, then we can say that one aspect of this is an evolution of the way we do relationships. The way in which we come into contact with one another, with nature, with our work, shapes, and is shaped by, the context in which we live. To evolve as a species would mean that we need to understand the nature of conscious relationship to deepen into our awareness of consciousness – or those subtle processes of meeting and transformation which are normally invisible to our eyes; hidden since we are so preoccupied with meeting our individual desires, with the abstractions of language, or fending off unknown terrors. This tendency has become so embedded in our society that it is systemic, and can be said to manifest as collective pathology. This pathology lies in the shutting down of connection at these different levels, so that they become pushed into the shadow, remaining hidden, but still exerting their effect in dangerous ways.

Thus the great development of the ego , which is the pride of reason, has brought with it a shadow side and the creation of defenses that allow too much separation of the ego from the unconscious and from the emotions of the body. Evolution of consciousness is not then, a mere matter of walking into the light. It means bringing and integrating these elements onto a different and harmonious level.

### **Collective transformation**

If we take this back to the notion of the 'evolution of consciousness' then, we can perhaps better speak of a 'transformation'. Evolution is a Western term, born in Darwinian times, and came from an assumption that Man was at the pinnacle of an evolutionary hierarchy, with the expansion of greater and greater reason. However, we have seen elsewhere, that this has ultimately created a fragmented post-modern psyche, with no sense of meaning or connection with the world that has become objectified. Transformation is a word that suggests a movement in cycles, and this is in keeping with the ever-unfolding processes of the planets, and of our psyches.

It has been up to Mother nature, in her wisdom, who is demanding more connection, to begin to show that this state of affairs cannot continue, and it is only when there is an acknowledgement of the isolated place in the universe to which the notion of evolution and progress has taken our psyches, and the damage this has done to the universe which supports us, that a possible transformation can take place. And we cannot even imagine what this may look like. We can project our psyches into the

cosmos, with humility, but in so doing this will require a willingness to face up to the unknown, to the terrors of birth, death, humiliation, alienation, pain. Each of us as individuals will need to go through this process, alone. And we do not know what is on the other side.

If we take a holographic view of the universe, which is, perhaps, one towards which we are collectively headed, then an evolution of consciousness, means an ever-increasing understanding of the different orders – the implicate and the explicate – as explored by the physicist Bohm. In the depths of the implicate exist all that there ever was, and all that there ever is to be. From the implicate unfolds the explicate. The explicate unfolds back into the implicate, just like the ocean waves on the sea. These unfoldings take place in our entire body, in our hearts and minds, in the felt sense, in the meetings we have with others. Evolution here means an ever-deeper listening to our souls and hearts, and a seeing of the infinite play in the universe. It requires, above all, the willingness to surrender to the movements of the universe, to its karmic requirements, to a deep acceptance of who and what we really are, so that our being is able to flow with the rivers of time, and not fragment into isolated pieces of matter, disconnected, meaningless and without feeling.

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