

An Interview With Mark Stavish

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New Worlds: What would you say students of alchemy, Qabala, elemental witchcraft and herbalism will find within the pages of your new book, *The Path of Alchemy*?

Mark Stavish: Alchemy is called the “Royal Art” because it is the capstone of occult practices and philosophy. It ties together qabala, astrology, natural magic and the direct experiential gnosis of mysticism in a single practice. Readers will find time-tested methods of making tinctures with plants utilizing the natural planetary cycles of the day, month and year, thereby allowing them to recreate the processes of creation in their home laboratory or kitchen.

Alchemy offers an objective tool whereby to assess one’s personal growth. This is particularly important in modern occultism which has become imbalanced with its emphasis on psychology and subjective states of consciousness. Medieval and Renaissance occultism were very much concerned with objective results. With the renewed interest in alchemy and Nicholas Flamel as a result of Harry Potter, *The Path of Alchemy* also contains a lot of interesting material on the life and legend of Nicholas Flamel and his wife Pernella. It also discusses the method they used for confecting the Philosopher’s Stone.

NW: Many readers automatically think of stones, minerals and such when a discussion of alchemy arises, but a large part of your focus in this book is on plant and herbal alchemical techniques. What are some of its key points?

MS: Working with plants, or spagyrics, is typically the first area of practice in alchemy. Plant work is considerably safer than working with minerals, many of which are toxic or require high heat or acids. Plants can be used in one’s kitchen and cleaned up afterwards with about as much effort as preparing lunch or dinner. More importantly, the process of working with plants — identifying, extracting, purifying and recombining the Sulphur, Salt and Mercury of a plant — is essentially the same process as in working with minerals. The steps you learn in one domain you use in another. In addition, for the occultist who is really looking for a form of hyper-herbalism if you will, they will find it here. Many people spend the better part of their time working with plants, even exclusively.

NW: In the book you give a wonderful overview of the link between alchemy and homeopathy. Beyond the alchemy enthusiast and practitioner, who else do you think would benefit from the material in your book?

MS: Anyone interested in a practice that ties everything together. Too often we look at practices and have no means of linking them, giving them continuity and the resultant power to transform our lives. In many ways this is the blessing and the burden of our age: we are awash in information but have little wisdom. Alchemy states “Lege, lege, lege, ora et labora,” or, “Read, read, read, pray and work.”

In alchemy we read, read, read in order to imbibe ourselves with the information contained in the text — a text written symbolically. In doing so we develop an intimate and powerful relationship with the ideas and images; our subconscious is saturated with the symbols and ideas that allow us to experience the inner revelation needed to move forward on the Path. This is the same reason why magical rituals need to be written out by the person performing them — so they can be internalized. Today, instead of imbibing ourselves with one, two or three complimentary manuscripts, we read everything we can, fail to digest it, give ourselves psychic indigestion and get no results. Instead of changing our method, we continue to binge on the book of the week.

Lack of concentration and effort (prayer and work) makes our consciousness overweight, lazy and confused. The great irony is that concentration is how we increase our serotonin levels. Serotonin is secreted from the pineal gland and is most likely the key to what Colin Wilson called “Factor X.” Actions that degrade concentration, such as drug use or dissipation of our efforts, act against the process of evolution. At the risk of digressing, this is the secret of alchemy and magic. In alchemy we say Mars contains the “seeds of gold” used in making the Philosopher’s Stone. The symbol of Mars is the Pentagram — the symbol of man in the material world, of concentrated energy in action. When we concentrate, we bring our powers to bear; we invoke the power of the pentagram, whether we draw one in the air or not.

This is also directly connected to the great key of awakening — overcoming fear. Initiation is not safe, alchemy is not safe; anything that is safe cannot increase our concentration, and cannot thereby project us to a higher level of awakening. The desire to experience the inner worlds and the domain of the psyche where earth, heaven and hell meet — and for it to be safe — is either a joke or a lie. Alchemy forces us to pay attention, to be awake, to concentrate, to achieve breakthroughs in consciousness for these reasons.

NW: You’ve included several historical references in your text, from Egyptian mythology as it pertains to alchemy to observations on the origins of Tibetan Buddhism. Was there one particular historical work that perhaps influenced your writing *The Path of Alchemy*?

MS: Not really. There are a lot of good books on alchemical history as well as general esotericism. It is really

important that readers become students and think critically of both the information they are ingesting and its source. Two books everyone interested in alchemy should read are *The Lure and Romance of Alchemy* by C.J.S. Thompson and Cockren's *Alchemy Rediscovered and Restored*. They are written in a very friendly style. Students of Western esotericism, however, should consider *The Hermetic Tradition — Symbols and Teaching of the Royal Art* by Julius Evola and Antoine Faivre's *Access to Western Esotericism* as mandatory reading. Anything by Faivre should be read, as he is the father of modern academic studies in the field. Too few people know his name or are aware of his works. Evola is good, as he is a counter-weight to much of the attitudes we find in a lot of post-war works.

NW: If you would, please give us a few examples of how you incorporate natural magic into your own life. Have using these techniques become a part of your day-to-day life, or are they confined to the laboratory?

MS: Since we are talking about natural magic as an aspect of plant alchemy, it is important to point out that I use tinctures on a daily basis for both physical and psychic health. Regarding other areas, we need to recognize that natural magic is about going with the flow, so the easiest way is to take advantage of the planetary hours and the days they rule, as well as sub-parts of each day. In this manner the day itself becomes your talisman and you have little need for much else on a day-to-day basis. You literally imbibe, or tinct, your psychic body with the energy of the day and allow it to assist you. Lunar cycles, of course, are next as they are the strongest influence in our lives, along with solar cycles across the year. The benefit of a rigorous discipline using these cycles is that they become a conscious part of your subconscious. That is, you naturally begin to tune into them and benefit from them because you have made the effort and have told yourself they are important and beneficial. For example, if I want to learn something new I will make and use a tincture in harmony with the energies of Mercury (the planet of learning), use it on Wednesday (the day ruled by Mercury) and be sure to study or practice the new material on that day. If we confined these things simply to our lab or ritual period, then we would be working against the fundamental unity and harmony they can bring.

NW: You have a wife and family, Mark. Do they share the same interest in Western Esotericism as you?

MS: My wife holds a Ph.D. in Molecular and Cellular Biology, so her job is to make sure I don't blow anything up. My children are too young to express an interest in anything other than Harry Potter, so one could say they have an interest, they just don't know it yet.

NW: You've been very active over the years in your devotion to forwarding the path of Western esotericism, from founding what was to become the Institute for Hermetic Studies to creating a non-profit organization for that sole purpose. Beyond your writing, are there any special projects related to this that you are currently working on?

MS: Writing is currently consuming the better part of my time. Otherwise the soapbox I stand on is related to the direction contemporary esotericism is going, and with that magic, neo-paganism and Wicca as a whole. Movements need organization to survive and to create lasting and meaningful changes. Contemporary readers need to start acting like students and supporting the institutions that have helped them acquire the information, training and methods needed to advance on the Path. To this end the Louis Claude de St. Martin Fund, a tax-deductible fund, was established to give students a means of financially supporting academic research in esotericism, as well as to provide funding to registered non-profit entities promoting practical applications. A movement of self-taught, solo-practitioners is unsustainable. We have to move away from treating spirituality like a consumer product or some form of personal therapy and move it forward to an educational model — like it was in Classical civilizations and even to some degree during the Renaissance. We need students who can listen, learn and practice what they are being taught, and instructors who can demonstrate that they have internalized the ideas and processes to become living role models of what we are becoming. We need to build for the future, for our children and grandchildren.

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