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# The Alchemical Heart: A Jungian Approach to the Heart Center in the *Upaniṣads* and in Eastern Christian Prayer

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**Abstract:** The heart is a rich symbol in religious traditions both East and West. When interpreted through a Jungian alchemical lens, the heart emerges as a symbol of psychospiritual transformation, integration, and healing. This article re-visions the metaphor of the heart in the *Upaniṣads* and in Eastern Christian prayer through the use of Jung's lectures on the heart *cakra*, his transcendent function theory, and as Spirit Mercurius. Each facet of this lens offers a variegated approach through which to explore the heart as mediating center of psychic polarities, what Jung referred to as the *union of opposites*. When interpreted through an alchemical lens, the heart in both Eastern and Western traditions emerges as an alchemical womb of the philosopher's stone, and offers the possibility of profound healing through the tension of opposites when held in the heart.

**Keywords:** *Alchemy, heart, hesychasm, Upaniṣads, transcendent function, Spirit Mercurius, alchemical hermeneutics*

Jung's analytical psychology utilized the symbolism of Western alchemy in the interpretation of client dreams and fantasies. To Jung, the *opus alchemicum* served as a guiding metaphor, which could illuminate his clients' psychological conditions. Outside of the consulting room, Jung also applied his alchemical hermeneutic to the interpretation of religious texts. In demonstrating the psychological efficacy of a text, Jung (1968) used Western alchemy as a model to illustrate the individuation process at work in religious symbols, works of art, rituals, and rites of passage.

## Jung's Alchemical Psychology and the Interpretation of Religious Texts

Building upon Jung's alchemical method, this paper interprets the symbol of the heart in the *Upaniṣads* and in the Eastern Christian practice of *hesychasm* through a depth psychological lens. An alchemical hermeneutic illuminates both traditions to unveil the function of the heart as a unifying center of psychological and somatic wholeness and integrity. The heart, when interpreted through a Jungian lens, becomes the womb where psychic opposites are held in a pregnant tension which births an alchemical "third": the new unforeseen attitude or expansion of consciousness with the potential to integrate polarities such as above and below, matter

and spirit, and human and divine. The heart, when viewed through an alchemical lens, receives a depth psychological treatment that offers symbolic richness and a multi-dimensional approach to this symbol of integration, differentiated wholeness, and healing.

## Method

Jung's alchemical psychology postulated that the movements, moments, and vicissitudes of the psychological journey are mirrored and amplified by the stages of Western alchemy. Jung (1968) found in alchemy's strange symbolism a mirror for the process he termed *individuation*, the path of self-becoming. Jung's (1963/1970) "alchemical hermeneutic" (par. 366) offers a depth approach to textual analysis and interpretation that honors the symbolic and psychological elements of a text that might otherwise be neglected in more traditional interpretive methods (e.g., historical-critical). The use of an alchemical lens to interpret certain religious texts furthers Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutic theory, where the meeting of interpretative lens and text creates a "fusion of horizons" (1975/1989, p. 305) that offers an ever increasing "excess of meaning" (1976, p. 103).

A Jungian alchemical approach to religious studies thus provides significant contributions to the understanding of religious texts, as previously

unforeseen and novel symbolic interpretations arise from the “hermeneutical union” (Kripal, 2001, p. 5) between Jungian perspective and text. An alchemical hermeneutic offers a novel approach to the interpretation of religious texts that highlights and illuminates the text’s depth psychological possibilities. However, by offering a method that purports to mine the symbolic, and therefore in this context allegedly unconscious, potentialities within a text, the alchemical hermeneutic goes beyond traditional interpretations of religion, and thus demands a certain justification or validity of its method.

As outlined above, in building his psychological model upon the symbolism of Western alchemy, Jung constructed a method built upon the unconscious as *prima materia* with its presence in the text as targeted hermeneutic foci. In doing so, Jung offered a method that sought to understand and uncover the role of the psyche in a text or tradition. This concern for the “spirit of the depths” (Jung, 2009, p. 119) in the interpretation of religion places any Jungian or depth psychological hermeneutic well outside the confines of a traditional horizontal methodology that seeks to offer a critical inquiry through historical, linguistic, or cultural examination of a text.

A Jungian alchemical hermeneutic adds a vertical dimension to textual interpretation, offering a symbolic and depth-oriented approach (Coppin & Nelson, 2005) that allows for a certain *isogetical* (Tuck, 1990) and creative approach to hermeneutic inquiry (Eliade, 1969, p. 62). An alchemical approach to religious studies thus offers a necessary intuitive, creative, and symbolic balance to a field that has largely emphasized historicity, linguistics, and an empirically informed approach to the interpretation of texts (see Romanyshyn, 2007).

### **Limitations**

There are complications and limitations when using one symbol set to interpret another. The lens of Western alchemy, Jung’s interpretation and assumptions regarding its place in his psychological theory, as well as the application of a Jungian-chemical lens to interpret two distinct and temporally removed religious traditions is a feat that goes beyond the boundaries defined by modern hermeneutic scholarship. What makes such an attempt possible is a tentative adoption, for the purposes of this inquiry, of Jung’s (1959/1969) theory of the archetype as an enduring pattern of psychic energy that although manifesting in specific historical and religious cultures, has an ever-present origin that Jung traced back

to the psyche, or in his words, the collective nature of the unconscious.

The reality and exact nature of Jung’s collective unconscious was a hotly debated topic in his time among theologians and historians of religion and remains so today (Lammers & Cunningham, 2007; Clarke, 1994). My intention here is not to solve or attempt to answer the challenges it raises to critical hermeneutic scholarship, but rather to honor the complexities involved while still moving forward, albeit cautiously, in exploring the potential the value of a Jungian hermeneutic which, building upon his archetype theory, posits that similar psychological patterning and functions exist in specific religious symbols across varying traditions—in this case, that of the heart.

The novel approach of a Jungian alchemical hermeneutic is that it highlights these similarities—without conflating differences—in order to show what it considers as the transformative dimensions of the psyche at work through diverse religious traditions. Mindful of the methodological limitations at hand—unresolved as they may be—the method is employed as an exploration in meaning making through a Jungian lens in order to determine what relevance and symbolic illumination such an interpretive lens might offer in the interpretation of the psychologically and spiritually rich symbol of the heart.

### **Alchemy and Individuation:**

#### **Jung’s Lectures on Kundalini Yoga**

Jung’s (1932/1996) lectures on kundalini yoga serve as the starting point for an alchemical interpretation of the symbolic function of the heart. He illustrated through his interpretation of the *Sat-cakra-nirūpana* (Description of the Six Centers), a 16th-century Tantric Bengali text, the psychological unfolding of individuation as it occurs in the heart. Although not central to his individuation theory, in these lectures, Jung (1932/1996) interpreted the seven energy centers (cakras) of the body as alchemically related to the individuation process itself. As consciousness grows in awareness from the base or dense energies of the body, gradually increasing to the more subtle or spiritual, conscious and unconscious elements unite in the heart, a process Jung (1932/1996) described as alchemical in itself.<sup>1</sup>

From this perspective, the heart cakra (anāhata, “unstruck”; see Eliade, 1958) can be understood as the central focus of the individuation process.<sup>2</sup> The heart is the fourth energy center in the body, located along

the spinal region closest to the physical heart. The heart center represents the air element—elements representing metaphors for particular qualities—and is located between manipūra in the solar plexus, representing fire, and viśuddha in the throat, representing space or ether. The location of the heart at this important crossroad or junction of the body is alchemically as well as psychologically significant. Jung (1932/1996) wrote:

at the diaphragm you cross the threshold from the visible tangible things to the almost invisible intangible things. And these invisible things in *anāhata* are the psychical things, for this is the region of what is called feeling and mind. The heart is characteristic of feeling, and air is characteristic of thought. (p. 44)

It is in the heart center that “entirely new things occur” (p. 44) and a “higher state of consciousness is reached” (p. 107): the birth of an impersonal or archetypal Self. As self-reflexivity emerges, consciousness increases as thought (air) is yoked to feeling in the heart. It is the “yoking” (yoga) of conscious and unconscious aspects that Jung (1932/1996, 1953/1966) defined as individuation.<sup>3</sup> Hence, it is in the heart that “individuation begins” (1932/1996, p. 39), which serves as the foundational concept for this Jungian alchemical hermeneutic of the heart.

### **The Transcendent Function of the Heart**

Jung’s lectures on *kundalini yoga* address the symbolic function of the heart as a center of consciousness and integration in the body, the meeting point of conscious and unconscious contents. His concept of the transcendent function (Jung, 1916/1957) further amplifies the symbolism of the heart from a perspective both analytical and alchemical. As Jung (1953/1966) wrote, “The secret of alchemy was in fact the transcendent function, the transformation of personality through the blending and fusion of the noble with the base components, of the differentiated with the inferior functions, of the conscious with the unconscious” (para. 360). The heart serves as the alchemical container that holds the conflicting currents of consciousness and unconscious in a creative tension. It is in holding each polarity, rather than attempting to solve or reduce one or the other, that the alchemy of individuation occurs, facilitating the birth of an entirely new, integrated attitude of awareness. Jung’s work on the transcendent function articulates this important alchemical function of the heart.

### **The Alchemical Heart**

As Jung (1916/1957) described, the transcendent function arises from the “union of conscious and unconscious contents” (para. 131) and “is called ‘transcendent’ because it makes the transition from one attitude to another organically possible, without loss of the unconscious” (para. 145). The transcendent function therefore has a “synthetic” quality to it (para. 145), and is marked by the birth of a “new attitude” (para. 146), often represented by the creation of a symbol or “product... which is influenced by both conscious and unconscious, embodying the striving of the unconscious for the light and the striving of the conscious for substance” (para. 168).

The alchemical nature of the transcendent function is found in its relationship to and creation of a “third,” which is born from the union of spirit, representing consciousness, and matter, signifying the unconscious (Abraham, 1998; Jung, 1968). Jung (1916/1957) described the transcendent function as “the bringing together of opposites for the production of a third” (para. 181). It is through the “confrontation of [opposites that] generate[s]... a tension charged with energy and create[s]... a living, third thing... a living birth that leads to a new level of being” (para. 189). It is this new symbolic “level of being,” born from the “threshold” encounter of conscious and unconscious (para. 132) that marks the birth of the third: the creation of a new psychological attitude that contains yet transcends formerly unconscious material.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Spirit Mercurius and the Duplex Heart**

An analytic-alchemical foundation is being constructed in order to examine the heart as a transcendent yet integrative center in the body that alchemizes conscious and unconscious elements within the psyche and produces a “third,” or new attitude of awareness. The heart contains the polarities of conscious and unconscious attitudes that are necessary for a new awareness to be born. An additional and final perspective towards crafting an alchemical approach to heart lies in the exploration of the Mercurial nature of the heart and its role in the anatomy of the psyche.

The Greek inscription beginning Jung’s (1943/1948) essay on Mercurius describes the god as “dweller in the heart” (encardie; p. 192). It is in the heart, both in the heart of alchemy, as well as in the heart of Jung’s thought, that the ancient messenger god has primacy of place (Mather, 2014). Hermes-Mercurius, Greco-Roman trickster god and patron of the alchemical

arts, served as messenger throughout the pantheon and could therefore “participate in both light and dark worlds” as well as serve as “the perfect mediating bridge” between them (Abraham, 1998, p. 126).

Mercurius, by nature, is duplex consisting of polarities including light and dark, water and fire, and matter and spirit (Jung, 1943/1948; Abraham, 1998). As hermaphrodite, Mercurius appears as both sexes, and consists of “all conceivable opposites,” both “destructive and creative” (Abraham, 1998, p. 126). Jung (1943/1948) interpreted the “antinomian dual nature” (para. 266) of Mercurius as the “principium individuationis” (par. 243), the principle of individuation itself. Jung based this statement on Mercurius’ capability to “unite in itself... contrary qualities” (para. 266). Jung wrote, “The paradoxical nature of Mercurius reflects an important aspect of the self... namely, that it is essentially a *complexio oppositorum*, and indeed can be nothing else if it is to represent any kind of totality” (para. 289). In this sense, Mercurius serves as the psychic “glue” that holds psychic polarities together and unites body and spirit (para. 263).<sup>5</sup>

All things mercurial exist in pair and in paradox; from an alchemical perspective, the heart in the Upaniṣads and in Eastern Christian prayer is no different. As transcendent function, and as center of individuation, the heart serves as the vessel that creates the “uniting symbol” (Jung, 1921/1971, para. 331), which emerges from the conscious contact of above and below. In its Mercurial nature, the heart serves as the mediating link between human and divine, and as duplex has characteristics of both. Jung (1943/1948) affirmed such an alchemical interpretation of the heart in his description of Mercurius as “the process by which the lower and material is transformed into the higher and spiritual, and vice versa” (para. 284). In the heart center, above and below, consciousness and the unconscious are held in creative tension, giving birth to the philosopher’s stone, symbol of a more integrated transpersonal reality that Jung (1959/1968) termed the Self.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Summarizing the Alchemical Hermeneutic**

The article has thus far constructed a Jungian alchemical lens through which to interpret the symbol of the heart. It began with Jung’s (1932/1996) work on the heart cakra, demonstrating the vital relationship between the process of individuation and the symbolic heart. Jung’s (1916/1957) work on the transcendent function then showed the relationship of conscious

and unconscious contents and how the emergence of an alchemical third births a new attitude of integrated awareness, with the heart functioning as alchemical container and womb. Finally, Jung’s (1943/1948) writings on Mercurius formed a bridge between the transcendent function and the individuation process. Through Mercurius, an alchemical hermeneutic illuminates the duplex or binary nature of the heart, its dark and light aspects, as well as how in its Mercurial aspect the heart binds and “glues” together psychic opposites in order that a greater psychospiritual wholeness may emerge.

These three Jungian-alchemical threads shape the hermeneutic lens through which to interpret the heart in the Upaniṣads and in Eastern Christian prayer. Through an alchemical elucidation of the heart in both these traditions, the psychological efficacy of the heart is further amplified and made evident as an integral center of consciousness in the body where psychological elements both human and divine unite for the birth of an altogether new and living relationship: the possibility of union between matter and spirit, psyche and soma, spirit and flesh.

This approach to textual interpretation has proceeded cautiously, mindful of its benefits, as well as limitations. With both in mind, I now apply the alchemical hermeneutic to the symbol of the heart in the Upaniṣads and in Eastern Christian prayer.

#### **The Alchemy of the Heart in the Upaniṣads**

The heart is a central concept in the spiritual anthropology of the Upaniṣads. Hauer (in Jung, 1932/1996) remarked, “the great intuitions [in India] did not come through thinking, it is said thousands of times in the Upanishads [sic]. They felt that the deepest intuition—which...stands for the creative power... was from the heart” (p. 110). Heart (Sanskrit, *hṛdayam*) translates as, “this is in the heart” (Olivelle, 2006, p. 54). The “this” in the equation is the *ātman*, the individual self, or soul. Throughout the Upaniṣads, there is a declarative resonance: *tat tvam asi*, “That thou art... . Thou art the seat of Brahman” (Radhakrishnan, 1953, p. 915), which describes the fundamental equation of spiritual attainment: If the divine dwells in the heart, and one desires to know the divine, then one must enter the heart.

The heart, as the location or residence of divinity, serves as a “metaphor for consciousness” (Muller-Ortega, 1989, p. 64) that connects the heart center in the

Upaniṣads to the Jungian alchemical hermeneutic. The heart is “not only... the abode of the ātmān, but also... the instrument by which the ātmān comes to be known” (Muller-Ortega, 1989, p. 70). To know the heart is to be transformed by what one discovers in the heart. This section focuses first on the nature of the heart as an alchemical and integrating center of the cosmos; it then interprets the curious but important “person” who dwells in the heart through a Jungian-alchemical lens.

*Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (B.U.), an early Upaniṣad (5th century BCE), offers an account of the heart that locates it within the very center of consciousness itself.<sup>7</sup> B.U. describes the heart as supporting the five directions in space and their deities. This heart-centered inquiry unfolds as a dialogue between Śākalya and the sage Yājñavalkya regarding “the quarters [of the universe] and their supports” (B.U. III.9.19-20). Upon each quarter Śākalya asks “What deity have you in this... quarter?” followed by “... on what is it supported?” (III.9.20). Faith, sacrifice, water, semen, initiation, truth, fire, and speech, Yājñavalkya tells the listener, are all revealed to be resting upon the heart (III.9.20-24). The heart, understood as Brahma himself (*hṛdayaṃ vai brahmeti*, IV.I.7), is defined as “the abode of all things and... the support of all beings... The heart... is the Supreme Brahma [paramam brahma]. The heart never deserts him who knowing thus, worships it as such” (IV.I.7).

In the spiritual vision of the Upaniṣads all elements of life must be held by the heart center; otherwise they remain un-integrated and isolated from personal meaning and cosmic intention. Similar to the function of Mercurius in his role as psychic “glue” which holds together the opposites (Jung, 1943/1948, para. 263), the heart functions as integrating principle uniting the outer and inner worlds of cosmos and psyche. The heart alchemizes these worlds, as all ritual, sacrifice, and even the fluids of the body rest and find their support within its center.

It is not only the material and the spiritual realms that are joined in the heart, however. An interesting passage in B.U. further develops the anatomy of the heart through its detailed description of the meeting of the male deity Indra and his female counterpart Virāj in the heart center:

Their place of union is the space within the heart.  
Their food is the red lump in the heart. Their

covering is the net-like structure of the heart. Their path for moving is that channel which goes upward from the heart; like a hair divided a thousand fold, so are the channels called *hitā* which are established within the heart. (B.U. IV.2.3)

The symbol of the heart functions not only a central locus for integrating the world elements and varieties of bodily and spiritual experience, but also the residence and union of the masculine and feminine dimensions of the self, a theme developed at length by Jung (1959/1968) in his *anima/us* concept and seen in the more Mercurial, “ambisexual,” and integrative aspects (Jung, 1943/1948, para. 268) of the heart.<sup>8</sup>

From an alchemical-Jungian perspective, the heart serves as archetypal bridge and alchemical mediator between worlds as it provides symbolic and ritual meaning through uniting the elements, religious practices, the body and its functions, as well as masculine and feminine aspects of the deities, binding them together in the heart and forging a transcendent psychospiritual reality greater than its divergent parts. As B.U. offers, “As the ocean is the one goal (uniting place) of all waters, as the skin is the one goal of all kinds of touch, as the nostrils are the one goal of all smells... the heart is the one goal of all forms of knowledge [*vidyānām hṛdayaṃ*]” (II.IV.11).<sup>9</sup> In B.U. and throughout the Upaniṣads, the heart serves as alchemical vessel and womb, where meaning and consciousness (*vidyā*) are born from the uniting of spirit and matter, masculine and feminine, the elements, bodily fluids, and the divinity itself.

### **The person in the heart**

A further development of the heart’s alchemical metaphysic is the emergence of the image of the person in the heart. *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* describes this person as “the size of a thumb” (II.I.12) and also refers to it as “the dwarf [*vāmanam*] who is seated in the middle [whom] all the gods adore” (II.2.5). Who is this mysterious person within the heart? *Praśna Upaniṣad* tells the listener that, “in the heart is this self” (*hṛdy hy eṣa ātmā*) (III.6), a statement also mirrored in B.U.: “In the space within the heart lies the controller of all, the lord of all, the ruler of all” (IV.4.22). This seems as if it is the ātmān, or personal spirit, who resides within the heart is this tiny person. An ambiguous metaphorical relationship begins to emerge in the Upaniṣads, between the heart as Brahma, the heart as the self (ātmān), and the heart as residence of both.<sup>10</sup>

Jung (1932/1996) commented extensively on this mysterious person residing within the heart. Following his remarks on the heart cakras as the locus of individuation, Jung described in detail the psychological importance of the puruṣa, the person the size of a thumb dwelling within the heart. According to Jung:

In anāhata you behold the puruṣa [person], a small figure that is the divine self, namely, that which is not identical with...[the] mere release of energy that runs down blindly with no purpose. [Rather than losing one's self in their emotions] there is a possibility that one detaches... the possibility of lifting [oneself] above the emotional happenings and beholding them. [One] discovers the puruṣa in [one's] heart... In the center of anāhata there is again Śiva in the form of the liṅga, and the small flame means the first germlike appearance of the self. (p. 39)

There is a certain alchemical separation that occurs in the heart for the individuation process to emerge. The dis-identification with one's emotional self must first occur in order for a more objective or impersonal reality to emerge. It is this awareness that Jung (1932/1996) identified as forming the core of individuation, which he located in the heart (p. 39, and above). Jung equated the impersonal self with the puruṣa of the Upaniṣads and the appearance of Śiva's liṅga in anāhata (heart) cakras.<sup>11</sup>

Psychologically, Jung likened the impersonal awareness that arises in the heart with the conscious formation of the Self. It is the puruṣa, which first emerges in anāhata, "That is the first inkling of a being within your psychological or psychical existence that is not yourself—a being in which you are contained, which is greater and more important than you but which has an entirely psychical existence" (Jung, 1932/1996, pp. 45-46). Hence, it is "In the recognition of feelings and of ideas [that] one sees the puruṣa" (p. 45). In other words, it is in raising awareness of one's feeling states and examining one's ideas, rather than thinking and acting unconsciously, that the impersonal self arises. It is here that the puruṣa, "the conscious human being," lives, and from there that "one sees the ātmān, and the yogi now knows, 'I am it.' In anāhata the prospective spirit is born; it starts becoming conscious" (p. 77).<sup>12</sup>

Alchemically, puruṣa serves as the "third," the new attitude that is born from the union of conscious and

unconscious contents. Puruṣa arises when consciousness (the air element "above") is brought to unconsciousness (matter, the denser elements "below") and held in the heart center. Jung described this process as the hallmark of individuation, with the result—the transpersonal Self—emerging as the "person in the heart." In other words, with the heart serving as Mercurial mediator between conscious and unconsciousness, the impersonal self emerges as the puruṣa, the alchemical third forged in the heart.

The heart in the Upaniṣads, when interpreted through a Jungian-alchemical lens reveals itself as alchemical "glue" integrating the physical body and cosmic reality, the personal with the transpersonal, matter and spirit, human and divine. Through the Mercurial mediating function of the heart, the birth of the transpersonal Self, the ātmān, emerges as "third," a new attitude born of spirit and flesh, conscious and unconscious (Jung, 1943/1948). The following section interprets the Eastern Christian hesychast prayer of the heart in order to demonstrate that its function, similar to the heart center in the Upaniṣads is to integrate and maintain the integrity of the psyche in order that a new level of consciousness may be born.

#### **The Alchemy of the Heart in Eastern Christian Prayer**

To encounter the heart in Eastern Christian spirituality is to enter an entirely different cultural and philosophical milieu than found in the Upaniṣads. The practice of entering the heart in the Eastern Christian tradition is known as hesychasm, from the Greek, hēsuchia, which translates as "silence," "quiet," or "rest" (Ware, 1986b). Practitioners of this method are known as hesychasts. The origins of this prayer-practice are humble, beginning in the deserts of Egypt in the third-fourth centuries CE. The art of silence and internal repetition of the Jesus Prayer ("Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner") that came to mark the hesychast method flourished in Greek Byzantium up to the 15th century and subsequent Muslim conquest. Hesychasm experienced a revival in the 18th and 19th centuries on the Greek island of Mt. Athos and especially in Russia, until the suppression of religion under communist regime.<sup>13</sup>

#### **Heart in the Christian East**

As the spiritual practices of hesychasm developed in the Eastern Christian traditions, the focus of the practice became centrally located in the heart. The heart (cardia, Greek) came to represent the central or core

focus of human and divine interaction and integration. Ware (1986b) wrote, “the heart signific[d] not merely the physical organ in the chest, and not merely the emotions and affections, but the deep centre of the human person as a whole. . . . ‘Prayer of the heart,’ therefore, mean[t] not just ‘affective prayer’ but prayer of the entire person” (p. 246). The heart was understood as that which “sustains the energy of all the forces of the soul and body” (Spidlik, 1986, p. 105). From this perspective, the heart in the Christian East serves a similar alchemical function to the heart center in the Upaniṣads.

In the most developed aspects of the hesychast tradition, the heart operates as a locus of integrative functioning or unitive knowing. The heart “knows” from a holistic, comprehensive center of body-mind unity. Ware (1986a) described the prayer of the heart as “a means of ‘gathering together’ the fragmented self” (p. 183), serving a Mercurial function that binds the dis-jointed self. As with the *hṛdayaṁ* of the Upaniṣads, and the heart *cakra* in kundalini yoga, the heart in the Christian East also serves as integrating center in the person as well as point of contact between humanity and divinity (Spidlik, 1986).

The anonymous 4th century writer, Pseudo-Macarius (1992), offered a striking representation of the varieties of divine and human experience held in the heart:

the heart itself is but a small vessel, yet there also are dragons and there are lions; there are poisonous beasts and all the treasures of evil. And there are rough and uneven roads; there are precipices. But there is also God, also the angels, the life and the kingdom, the light and the Apostles, the treasures of grace—there are all these things. (p. 222)

In the Christian East the heart stands as a battleground for an internal spiritual warfare between aspects of light and darkness. The heart is understood as the “point of meeting” (Ware, 1992, p. xvi) between these two forces, and acts as container to hold the heat of hesychast spiritual practices.<sup>14</sup> From a Jungian alchemical perspective, the heart serves as alchemical cauldron that holds the *prima materia*, the chaos of the undifferentiated unconscious, from which, through psychospiritual practice and the raising of consciousness, the more differentiated archetype of the Self may emerge.

**The practice of the heart.** From the perspective of Jung’s transcendent function and its Mercurial nature,

the heart can be interpreted as a locus of individuation through the bridging and uniting of conscious and unconscious forces. This process is alchemical in nature, as divergent elements are consciously held together in the heart. As has been shown, the heart in this aspect has a central focus in the Upaniṣads, and can be additionally amplified through the hesychast tradition. The foremost imperative in hesychast teaching is on “drawing down the attention of the mind into the heart” (Chariton, 1966, p. 61). The teaching is always to bring the mind and heart together in prayer, which is described as a form of “enlightenment” (p. 74), homecoming, and “re-integration” (p. 128). The hesychast is instructed to “gather yourself together in the heart” (p. 77), for “when attention descends into the heart, it attracts the powers of the soul and body into one point there” (p. 94). In other words, the practitioner’s “entire being. . . mind, heart, and body [is] united, composing a single and unified whole” (p. 148). An inner “reintegration of [one’s] spiritual organism” occurs (p. 157), comprising of a “transfiguration or spiritualization of body and soul” (theosis), which occurs when “consciousness is gathered into the heart and stands before the face of the Lord” (p. 155).<sup>15</sup>

The implications of the alchemical and psychological transformations that occur in the hesychast practice are profound. As with the yoga of the Upaniṣads, the hesychast prayer of the heart unites consciousness with the unconscious in the heart. As the mind is drawn down and held in the heart center, the elemental forces of “above” and “below,” spirit and flesh, psyche and soma are unified, re-integrated, and made whole. As Jung’s (1932/1996) lectures on kundalini yoga proposed, the heart stands as center of the individuation process through the bridging of consciousness and unconscious forces. A similar alchemy occurs in the hesychast tradition where the heart serves as the center of unification of the entire person: body, mind, spirit, and soul (Spidlik, 1986; Ware, 1992).

Due to the profound importance of the heart in the Eastern Christian tradition, emphasis is placed on ascetic practices that involve watching (*nepsis*), guarding (*phulaki*), and attending (*prosochi*) to the heart (Kadloubovsky & Palmer, 1951). These practices involve a descent of the mind into the heart through a physical technique incorporating bodily postures, breathing exercises, and internal awareness (Ware, 1986b). From this perspective, hesychasm has been referred to as

a type of “Christian yoga” (Déchanet, 1964). In the hesychast practice the monk physically demonstrates the conjoining of above and below by bringing the head to the heart. In a seated posture, with the upper body bent over the knees, the hesychast bows the head and fixes the eyes on the heart center while repeating the silent invocation, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me” (see Eliade, 1958). The practice offers a physical enaction of the internal alchemical intention.<sup>16</sup>

**The heart as inner kingdom.** It is in the fertile soil of the heart that the cultivation of a personal awareness of the transpersonal Self occurs. In the Christian East, this manifests as a continual psychological and somatic mindfulness of the presence of Christ in the heart. By centering the mind in the heart, consciousness is brought to latent archetypal affect, activating the individuation process. It is here that the impersonal or archetypal Self is born as third, initiating a conscious relationship between the ego and the Self through the heart. Christ as “inner” person is “hidden” in the heart (Chariton, 1966, p. 191; see 1 Peter 3:4) and enthroned in a “treasure-house”—both synonyms for the Kingdom of Heaven—“for the two are the same, and there is but one single entry to them both” (Chariton, 1966, p. 164). This entry way is through the heart.

Similar to the ātmān-Brahman relationship in the Upaniṣads, the heart is not only the dwelling place of God but also the throne of Christ. The 4th century ascetic, Ephraim of Syria, wrote, “The kingdom of heaven is within you. In so far as the Son of God [Christ] dwells in you, the kingdom of heaven lies within you also” (in Chariton, 1966, p. 181). Similar to the ātmān that resides in the heart (hṛdayam), in the Christian East, Christ is found in the heart as symbol of the archetypal Self that emerges from the union of consciousness and unconscious. From a Jungian alchemical perspective, it is in the heart that is born the philosopher’s stone—goal of the opus alchemicum and symbol of transcendent unity and wholeness.

### **Summary**

In traditions East and West the heart center emerges as a locus of psycho-spiritual integration, interior unification, and gateway to an incarnational somatic wholeness. A spirituality of the heart, found in traditions as divergent as the early Upaniṣads, Eastern Christianity, Islamic Sufism, and Western mystical Christianity, all recognize despite their cultural differences that there exists in the human body a fully

immanent yet transcendent integrating point of human consciousness that resides in the place called heart. This center operates as an alchemical vessel that forges the link between the material and the spiritual, and incorporates body, mind, spirit, and soul in the birth of a unified transpersonal awareness. The yoga of the Upaniṣads and the hesychast tradition of Eastern Christianity in particular amplify this archetypal function, where the heart serves as symbolic entryway to an integrated consciousness within.

### **Conclusion: The Birth of the Third in the Womb of the Heart**

This work has outlined an avenue of approach to the interpretation of religious texts founded upon Jung’s psychology of alchemy. Due to the controversial and unconventional nature of Jung’s psychological approach to religion, this interpretive inquiry has required some justification and naming of the potential limitations of a Jungian alchemical hermeneutic. These limitations have included a tendency to disregard historicity, thus conflating religious traditions through an ahistorical or uncritical psychological interpretation. This study has proceeded cautiously by building upon Jung’s postulation of the archetype theory while holding methodological tensions critically, in order to move forward with articulating a hermeneutically sound depth psychological approach to the texts and traditions in question.

In doing so, this article shows that the yoga of the Upaniṣads and the hesychast tradition of the Christian East—while emerging from differing cultural and philosophical milieus—share enough points of resonance to allow for a hermeneutically fruitful dialogue to emerge. This conversation has been framed through a Jungian and alchemical approach to the heart, which when viewed through this lens, emerges as the rich psychospiritual landscape for the union of psychic opposites within its center. When these oppositional forces are held in creative tension the seeds for the birth of a new, integrated attitude that includes and unites both matter and spirit are planted—an approach that Jung anticipated in his theory of the transcendent function and refined through his concept of individuation.

At the conclusion of the kundalini yoga seminar, Hauer and Jung remarked: “[Hauer:]... if we work together from different sides, the yogin coming from above... [Jung:] And I from below! [Hauer:] Then the great event may happen... . When the two things come

together, the child will be born” ( Jung, 1932/1996, p. 110). This child, seen as the sought after philosopher’s stone, has been interpreted in this article as the puruṣa in the Upaniṣads, and the Christ in the Christian tradition. Each of these archetypal god-images can be understood as the emergent “third”—the integrating symbol and transcendent function born from the union of matter and spirit that unites the opposites in the heart.

In order that this child, or “third,” may be born in the womb of the heart, the prima materia held within the heart must be carefully worked over and undergo intense transformation within the heat of each tradition’s somatic and spiritual disciplines. When these tensions are held in the crucible of the heart, as has been shown in the yoga of the Upaniṣads and in the hesychast practices of Eastern Christianity, an integrated transpersonal awareness is born. These practices, when interpreted through an alchemical lens, offer a theological and religious counterpart and companion to Jung’s individuation theory at its most developed spiritual possibility—that human and divine unite within, and yearn to wed in the chamber of the heart.

### Notes

1. Jung (1932/1996) remarked that, “the idea of the transformation of the elements shows the analogy of tantric yoga with our medieval alchemistic philosophy. There one finds exactly the same ideas, the transformation of the gross matter into the subtle matter of the mind – the sublimation of [the person], as it was then understood” (p. 43). See Eliade’s (1958) and White’s (1996) studies of the relationship between Hindu tantra and Indian practices of alchemy. Jung’s source for the *Ṣaṭ-cakra-nirūpaṇa* is Avalon (1919/1974).
2. The symbol for the heart *cakra* – two interpenetrating triangles, one facing above and the other below – forms an Indian equivalent to the Hebrew *māḡēn Dāwīd*, or “Star of David.” Alchemically, this points to the *Golden Tractate* of Hermes Trismegitus (in Holmyard, 1957/1990), and the fundamental alchemical dictum that the “above” become as the “below” and vice versa. In Hindu tantra the triangles represents the upward-facing masculine consciousness of Śiva, and the downward pointing feminine awareness of Śakti, respectively (Eliade, 1958).
3. Jung (1932/1996) defined individuation here as “becoming that thing which is not the ego” discovered through “the withdrawal from the emotions; you are no longer identical with them...if you succeed in making a difference between yourself and that outburst of passion [i.e., in *maṇipūra*], then you discover the self (p. 39). For a more thorough treatment of the individuation concept, see Jung (1953/1966).
4. Jung’s (1916/1957) description of the transcendent function appears quite similar to the nature and dynamics of the archetypal Self as a *complexio oppositorum*, or container of the opposites (Jung, 1963/1970). Miller (2004) explored this correlation, as well as distinctions, between the two, as well as connections between the transcendent function and individuation.
5. Miller (2004) describes the Mercurial nature of the transcendent function due to Mercurius’ capacity to “simultaneously visiting two disparate places” (p. 107) as the “ability to simultaneously hold multiple levels of consciousness” (p. 108).
6. On the correlation between the archetypal Self and the philosopher’s stone, see Edinger (1972/1992).
7. All citations from the *Upaniṣads* are from Radakrishnan (2010).
8. *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* also mentions the heart as residence of *Aditi*, the Vedic mother of the gods (“the soul of the gods,” II.I.9), additionally affirming the place of the feminine in the heart.
9. See *Yoga Sūtras* III.34, “[By performing *saṃyama*] on the heart, knowledge of the mind [*citta*] ensues” (Bryant, 2009, p. 363). *Samyama* is the intense focus or concentration that arises when *dhāraṇā*, *dhyāna*, and *samādhi* are practiced together (see *YS* III.4; Bryant, 2009, p. 310), an alchemical art in itself (see Odorisio, *forthcoming*).
10. The concept of the self in the *Upaniṣads* served as valuable inspiration for Jung’s (1921/1971) own psychological concept of the Self as a “uniting symbol” (par. 331). His theory has not been without criticism from Jungian and Vedantic (Whitfield, 1992) as well as historical-critical (Clarke, 1994) perspectives.
11. It is important to clarify the nature of the terms “personal” and “impersonal.” These terms present semantic as well as phenomenological challenges when taken out of the functional and psychological

context that Jung intends. To Jung, the personal aspect of the psyche can be seen as interchangeable with the ego, whereas the impersonal aspect represents the archetypal or “objective” nature of the psyche (Jung, 1938) as opposed to the subjective personality. Christ, for example, would represent to Jung an impersonal, objective archetypal reality, even though a Christian may experience Christ “personally.” The *ātman*, similarly, can be experienced as a “personal,” or individual self, while remaining a “transpersonal” or archetypal/objective reality. My intention in this study is not to conflate or confuse the two, but rather to respectfully explore their intersection, and ultimately integration, through the heart center in each tradition.

12. Jung’s reference to “I am it” is to the *tat tvam asi* of the *Upaniṣads*. See Radhakrishnan (2010, p. 915), and above.
13. On the history and development of *hesychasm*, see Hackel (1986), Sherrard (1996), and Ware (1986a, 1986b, 1986c), as well as the classic *hesychast* anthology, *The Philokalia* (Palmer, Sherrard & Ware, 1979, 1981, 1984, 1995; Kadloubovsky & Palmer, 1951).
14. Compare to *tapas* or heat-inducing purification practices of the *Yoga Sūtras* (II.1, .32, .43; see Bryant, 2009).
15. On the doctrine of *theosis* in the Christian East, see Ware (1986d) and Meyendorff (1996). There are interesting implications between *theosis*, or the process of divinization, and Jung’s (1952) theory of individuation as continuing the incarnation of the god-image (see also Edinger, 1996).
16. This summary of the physical posture is based on the writings of Nicephorus the Solitary and a text attributed to Simeon the New Theologian (in Kadloubovsky & Palmer, 1951). The physical *hesychast* practice as outlined by Nicephorus is nearly identical to the early yogic posture practice outlined in *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* (II.8-9, 14). On the alchemical nature of yoga practice as described in the *Yoga Sūtras*, see Odorisio (*forthcoming*).

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