

BURMESE ALCHEMY BELIEFS *

BY

MAUNG HTIN AUNG

Before Anawrahta made Southern Buddhism the official religion of the Burmese people in 1066, there were already in existence two or three religious cults. One of them was the cult of the *Aris* monks. The *Aris* professed to be Buddhist monks, but at the same time, they had always been interested in magic and witchcraft. By about the 5th century A.D., they had become interested in Alchemy also. As the *Aris* were thus the patrons of both magic and alchemy, alchemy in Burma has close affiliations with magic and witchcraft.

Alchemy reached Europe in about the 4th century A.D., and it was known as the "Black Art", because it came from Egypt, "The Black Country". But alchemic practices did not start in Egypt, India seemed to have been the first centre of alchemic experiments, and from India, alchemy spread westwards to the Arabs, the Egyptians and the Greeks, and later to the Mediaeval Europeans, and eastwards to Burma and farther east to China. By the 5th century A.D., alchemy was being practised in China and in our own country. The great period of alchemy in the world as a whole was roughly from about the 5th century A.D. to the 16th century when its popularity waned with the dawn of Modern Science.

In Burma, the great period of alchemy was roughly from the 5th century A.D. to the 11th century, and it became almost a religious cult by itself. But in the 11th century its popularity waned with the introduction of Buddhism into the country, for Buddhism frowned upon alchemy. Thus, after the 11th century alchemy started to decay, and although the cult has never completely died out and although even at the present day some still indulge in alchemic experiments, it has long ago ceased to be in any way a rival to Buddhism. Alchemy in Burma is known as "Aggiya", meaning "the work with fire". "Work with fire" is indeed the essence of alchemy,

* A lecture given before the Annual Meeting of the Burma Science Association on 11th September 1953. Printed with the kind permission of the above Association.

and the alchemist endeavours to transmute metals by means of fire. This endeavour to transmute base metals into precious metals is not peculiar to the Burmese alchemist, and was the practice of the alchemists in Egypt, Mediaeval Europe India and China. But Burmese alchemy has as its background a deeper philosophy – a philosophy so deep and developed that it was almost a religion. The endeavour “to turn lead into silver and brass into gold” is, to the Burmese alchemist, merely a first step towards a greater goal, namely the discovery as the result of further experiments, of “the stone of live metal”, or “stone of live mercury”, which is the Burmese equivalent of the Philosopher’s stone of European alchemy. Again, “the stone of live metal” itself is not the final goal. The final goal is the attainment, after more experiments, of a superhuman body and an eternal youth.

After long endeavour, the first stage is reached by the Burmese alchemist, when he is able to transmute base metals into precious metals. Using the results of this first stage of his experiments he continues his experiments with metals and metal compounds until he has evolved the “Stone of Live Metal”. The possessor of this stone can fly in the air, or dive not only under water, but underground. He cannot be wounded as long as he has this stone on his body, that is, in his mouth, under his hair-knot, in his hands, or under his armpits. He will be free from fatigue and disease. However, the body of the possessor of the stone is still just a human body, and the superhuman powers described above in reality do not belong to him but only to the stone, which by its mere touch can turn “lead into silver and brass into gold”. It is not necessary that for these powers to accrue to him, the possessor of the stone should be the actual discoverer of the stone. For that reason, when an alchemist has discovered this stone of Live Metal, he exposes himself to the danger of being robbed of the stone by evil spirits or jealous magicians. Burmese folklore is full of stories about this stone of Live Metal and the Chronicles mention the case of an Indian Prince who came flying every day to the Kingdom of Pagan from his kingdom in Bengal to pay court to a Burmese princess; he was not an alchemist, but he had somehow obtained possession of a stone of Live Metal, and with this stone in his mouth, he was able to fly in the air.

The alchemist, however, does not rest on his laurels after obtaining the Stone. He continues his experiments using the Stone. The aim of these experiments is to discover certain metal compounds, which will make his body a superhuman body. The third stage is reached when the required metal compounds are evolved. But he cannot just swallow these metal compounds as one swallows medicine, to make his body superhuman. They must be absorbed in his body. To do this, he must first swallow the compounds when his body will become as if dead, and then he must remain buried in the earth for full seven days. This temporary death of his body will become permanent if he is exposed to the air during the seven-day period. Moreover, during this period he will be entirely helpless and at the mercy of his enemies, evil spirits and magicians. Evil spirits will be on the look-out for him out of sheer jealousy and malice, but the magicians wish to eat his body, not only because it is very tasty and smells like the choicest perfumes, but also because by eating it, they will come to possess superhuman strength. The Chronicles mention two heroes of the Kingdom of Thaton, which was conquered and destroyed by Anawrahta, who had prodigious strength as they ate up the body of an alchemist, which they were cooking for their master a monk-magician, and he had dug it up as the alchemist lay helpless during the seven-day period. Therefore, when the alchemist has discovered the right metal compounds, the first task before him is to search for a faithful pupil who will bury him in the forest away from human beings, who will recite magical formulas to scare away evil spirits and magicians, and who will watch over the spot in which the alchemist lies buried. When the faithful pupil has been found, the alchemist makes him dig a hole, entering which he will swallow the metal compounds. Then the hole is filled up, and seven days later the alchemist of his own accord and in great joy jumps out of the hole for he has become a "Zawgyi", a "fully-developed alchemist". All the qualities the stone of Live Metal possesses are now his, and as he no longer needs it, he gives it to his pupil as a reward for services rendered and as a farewell gift. He will then enter the forest, and will come back to the abode of human beings very seldom, if at all. As his body has become superhuman, he can wander at will flying in the air or travelling underground; physical fatigue is no longer known to him,

and his body needs no further nourishment. His body will remain youthful until he dies, and death will come to him only after thousands of years. In fact before Buddhism with its doctrine of impermanence of all compounded things influenced the Burmese mind, it was believed that the "fully-developed alchemist" would live forever with his eternally youthful body. But even though Buddhism has influenced Burmese alchemic beliefs and the followers of the alchemic cult admit that death will come to all, including the "successful" alchemist, they still maintain that when death comes to him, it will come to him without decay and disease of his body.

The above is a summary of the Burmese beliefs connected with alchemy. But what is the basic philosophy behind all these beliefs, which perhaps seem so amusing to the scientist of the present day? Burmese alchemy tries to solve the tragic problem of human life, why youth has to pass, and man has to die. All men feel at one time or another the dark mood of despair when they say with Omar Khayan,

"Alas, that Spring should vanish with the Rose,
That Youth's sweet-scented Manuscript should close!"

Burmese Alchemy aims at achieving an eternally youthful, body, and thus to create a beauty that never fades, and a youth that never dies.

But is the "successful" alchemist happy after achieving his heart's desire? On the whole he is happy, but he also has his own troubles. His is an intensely lonely life. He does not have to eat, but occasionally he eats fruit, but he cannot eat meat because of its smell. Therefore, it follows that he cannot stay with human beings for more than a few minutes, as they are eaters of meat and smell terrible. However, he is not a hermit nor an ascetic, and in his youthful strength and vigour, he does not have to mortify his flesh. Instead he gives full play to his senses. He has endeavoured to obtain an eternally youthful body, so as to enjoy forever the pleasures of the flesh. He wants love, but as a human woman, being a meat-eater, smells so terrible, he cannot approach her, and he has to console himself with substitutes. On the slopes of the Himalayas, there are trees, whose fruit have exactly the size and shape of the average human maiden, and by his alchemic power, the alchemist puts some sort of "life" into them, so that the fruit

become animated. He makes love to them with enthusiasm and with zest, but unfortunately, as they are but fruit, they get crushed in no time and become of no use to him. Moreover, this kind of fruit tree is not very common even on the slopes of the Himalayas. So the alchemists are often fighting and quarrelling with each other as there is not enough fruit-maidens to go round. But perhaps this belief regarding the fruit-maidens originated in anti-alchemist propaganda which prevailed after the coming of Buddhism. The majority of the Burmese, after they have become Buddhists, frown upon alchemic experiments as a wanton waste of time, and look upon the alchemist as a seeker after gold and after sensual pleasures. In reply, those who still believe in alchemy will maintain that the alchemist wants to live for thousands of years, not because he wants the pleasures of youth, but because he wants to be alive when the next Buddha appears on this earth, so that he may worship him and attain the eternal bliss of Neikban. To meet this defence, anti-alchemists will say that when the next Buddha appears after so many thousands of years, the alchemist will have lost all sense of time and will be so busy quarreling over his fruit-maidens, that he will not remember to go and worship the Buddha. But all these arguments and counter-arguments seem to be after-thoughts, and the solitary but tranquil life a "Zawgyi" must have appealed to many an ascetic and many a scholar. Thus, we find the great great Burmese Dramatist, U Kyin U* describing with sympathy and understanding this ideal of a "Zawgyi" :-

"Zawgyee": 'At last I have achieved what I desired. I have obtained the 'stone of live metal', and I have also become a 'Zawgyee'. My stone can turn lead into silver, brass into gold. I have eaten that compound of alchemy, which makes me above nature, above this earthliness. I cannot be hit by bullets and bombs, and swords and spears wound me not at all...I can be king. But what care I for worldly power? Make way, make way, I wish to leave the abode of human beings and retire to the forest.

'I have reached a lovely part of the forest. Look at the flower-stems, look at the water-fall. Here is a streamlet, there is a little pond. Here pebbles, and silvery sand. Green moss covers that rock, green water flows silently down that stone. The heat of the noon-day sun

* His literary career lasted from about 1819 to about 1850.

has no effect on the peaceful place. Short trees and tall trees, big trees and small trees, they stand side by side. This tree clings to its lover, that tree is defiant. This bush looks inviting, this bamboo looks charming. That place under that tree is smooth-lawned. Did some fairy play there before I came and disturbed and frightened it away? What a peaceful place! A poet can live here forever writing verses on this beauty!"

I shall now endeavour to explain to you the theory behind Burmese alchemic experiments. The whole universe is made up of four basic elements, earth, fire, water and air. Therefore, all things on this earth, whether organic or mineral also have these four elements. The human body is also made up of these four elements. But behind these four elements, there is an essential matter, which is not subjected to decay or change. Things decay only because of the four elements, and if the essential matter can be purified of the four elements, it will be preserved from change and decay. The aim of alchemic experiments is to obtain that essence which is in all metals, and then introduce that essence into the human body, which thus will become free from the four elements and will become an immortal and an eternally youthful body.

The Burmese alchemist knows nine metals and twelve metal compounds. The nine metals are classified as "females" and the twelve metal compounds are classified as "males". Just as in the universe, perfection can be obtained only through the union of female and male, so the essential matter in all metals can be obtained only through the union of female metals with male metal compounds. The following is the list of the metals :

Metals - Females

1. Lead
2. Tin
3. Antimony
4. Zinc
5. Copper
6. Silver
7. Gold
8. Iron
9. Mercury

The metals 1 to 5 are considered to be base metals, and the metals 6 and 7 silver and gold are noble metals. The base metals can be transmuted into silver and gold. Metals 8 and 9, iron and mercury, are considered to be neither base nor noble. Therefore, either iron or mercury must be the *basic* metal on which experiments with other metals will be made, and either in iron or in mercury, the Stone of Live Metal will be obtained. Therefore, alchemists have been classified into two categories, "those who work on iron", and "those who work on mercury". In the alchemy of all other countries, mercury alone is considered to be the most important metal, but the Burmese consider iron to be of equal importance with mercury in their alchemic experiments. The Burmese alchemists consider that there are 167 varieties of iron, and they are familiar with steel.

The following is the list of the Metal Compounds:—

Metal Compounds - Males.

1. Sulphur
2. Alum
3. Salt
4. Nitrate
5. Borax
6. Sal Ammoniac
7. Camphor
8. Lime
9. Soda Ash
10. Arsenic
11. Arsenic Sulphide
12. Mercuric Sulphide.

Sulphur is neither a metal nor a compound according to modern scientific terminology, and some of the above compounds are not metals at all. But the Burmese word "Dat" is rather a comprehensive term, and although the nearest English equivalent will be "metal" it covers chemicals also.

The two lists given above do not contain any vegetable products, but the *Ari* monks as practising magicians used herbs and roots of trees, and as a result, Burmese Alchemy also uses herbs and roots in the experiments with metals.

But I have not been able to make a list of the herbs and roots so used

The Burmese physician and the Burmese craftsman are often accused of being very selfish persons who consider their knowledge and their experience to be "trade secrets" and who therefore will not communicate their discoveries to others. The Burmese alchemist is also accused of the same fault. But the accusation is unfair. As in the case of the Mediaeval European Trade Guilds, the Burmese physician, the Burmese alchemist and the Burmese craftsman will keep their "art" secret from outsiders, but they will freely circulate their "secrets" within their own professions. With regard to the Burmese alchemist, there is a considerable body of literature on the subject of alchemy, but all Burmese alchemic writings are in code. Alchemists were never persecuted as were the *Ari* monks, but the practice of alchemy was frowned upon by the new Buddhism of Anawrahta and the alchemist became a social outcast. Therefore, after the 11th century, the Burmese alchemists conducted their experiments in secret, but they communicated with each other regarding their experiments and discoveries. Many secret formulae were passed from hand to hand. Unfortunately, the alchemists could not organize themselves into a nation-wide group, and instead grouped themselves into different schools. Each school wrote down its discoveries in its own code. The code was a simple one, and the metals and metal compounds were given nicknames or secret names such as "the lion", "the tiger", "the wife with many children", "the wife with no children", "the wife with many husbands", "the mouse", "the white cat". The nicknames were used by all school but applied to different metals. Thus whereas one school would refer to gold as "the big eagle". Therefore, by the 15th or 16th century, much of the energy of the Burmese alchemist was wasted in attempting to decipher the secret alchemic formulae.

One reason why alchemy flourished so much in Burma in the early centuries was the richness of the country in minerals, and all the "metals" and the "metal compounds" were easily procurable in the country. All the same, alchemy has always been an expensive pursuit. Before

Anawrahta, the kings themselves were patrons of alchemy, and Burmese folktales tell of instances when the royal treasury became empty through the king's financing of alchemic experiments made by a monk. Therefore, another reason for the decay of alchemy after the 11th century was withdrawal of this royal patronage. Before the 11th century, the practising alchemists were mostly *Ari* monks, but after the 11th century the practising alchemists were usually astrologers, physicians, gold and silver smiths, and scholars. These professional men were not very rich, and they endeavoured to make alchemy pay by helping them in their professional work. Astrologers and physicians sold lumps of metal from their alchemic laboratories as charms and amulets, or positive cures for certain diseases. Scholars wrote plays, poems, and treatise on alchemy. Gold and silver smiths directly benefited from their knowledge of metals. Some members of your Association have regretted that whereas in Europe alchemy developed into modern Chemistry, in Burma, alchemy has always been a superstitious practice. That is not quite true. Burmese alchemy did result in some important chemical discoveries, but Burmese chemistry was completely overwhelmed when Western chemistry came suddenly into the country after the British conquest. Some members of your Association may also consider the Burmese alchemist to be a charlatan and an imposter. But I will plead with you to spare him a sigh. Of all the religious cults that existed in Burma before the advent of Buddhism, alchemy was the noblest. Like modern science, Burmese alchemy aimed at a conquest of nature, and to discover for suffering humanity a way to preserve the human body in its vigour and beauty.

Maung Htin Aung