

Origins of the Mappa Mundi

Misha Norland

The origins of physical chemistry, so I was taught at my Hampstead primary school, lay in the murky antiquity of Alchemy. I was given my first insight into the manner of mediaeval thought by my school teacher, who simultaneously ridiculed it. She taught that alchemists tried to turn lead into gold, and wasn't this a silly idea? For me, it was an imaginal star-burst—"they tried to turn lead into gold!" My teacher also spoke about the *Four Elements* and the *Element of Ether* which, she explained, inter-permeates all matter, and which the mediaevals actually thought of as a mediating spiritual flux. That theory was also ridiculed.

It was many years later that I came across the writings of Paracelsus and Hahnemann and met my initiator into the practice of homeopathy, John Damonte. John Damonte expounded a four element "map" for the purposes of diagnosis. Although his map differs from the one given here, was a "first take" for me—one which began to integrate homeopathy, the medical arts, and Jungian psychology with the teachings of the Greek philosophers, Astrology and Alchemy. I offer it to you in the hope that it likewise will open doors into symbolic and imaginal, as well as practical, realms.

Mappa Mundi (the map of the world) is a system for understanding processes in terms of elemental energies—Earth, Water, Fire and Air—and the associated temperaments—Melancholic, Phlegmatic, Choleric and Sanguine. For example the Melancholic temperament is traditionally associated with elemental Earth, although in this map it is co-associated with elemental Air. These are the raw materials out of which an understanding of both psychic and bodily states and imbalances within these systems, may be appreciated. Mappa Mundi is a method of analyzing the totality by subdivision, where by we come to perceive a state of dynamic balance in terms of action and reaction. Many of us will be slightly familiar with the topography of the four temperaments from our reading of 19th and early 20th century homeopathic literature, Anthroposophical works, Chaucer and the metaphysical poets and playwrights.

Historical Roots

In the West, the earliest surviving written records of a four-fold division of bodily and spiritual processes are found in ancient Egypt. During the embalming process, the internal organs of the body were placed in four canopic jars dedicated to the four sons of the falcon-headed sun god, Horus, each corresponding to the four directions and the four elements. Eventually the mystery teachings of ancient Egypt were taken via Alexandria to Greece and from there to Europe.

Empedocles, the Sicilian philosopher of the 5th century BC, stated that change is of the essence in the Universe. According to his philosophy there are four roots—the elemental essences of Fire, Water, Air and Earth—and from them all other things are derived by the operation of the two fundamental contrary forces, attraction and repulsion, or love and strife. What appears to us as generation and destruction are in fact compounding and dissolution. These ideas are universally rooted in the ancient world view.

The Hindu *Bhagavad Gita* (written in the oldest known language, Sanskrit) refers to similar concepts, as explained by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi:

When life evolves from one state to another, the first state is dissolved and the second brought into existence. In other words, the process of evolution is carried out under the influence of two opposing forces—one to destroy the first state and the other to give rise to a second state. These creative and destructive forces working in harmony with each other maintain life and spin the wheel of evolution.

The astronomy of Empedocles held that day and night were produced by the separation of Fire and Air from which came the two hemispheres of light and dark. Their movement around the Earth is explained by the loss of equilibrium caused by the pull of the opposing forces; the presence of the stars by the fact that the dark hemisphere of night still contains a little Fire.

Hippocrates, who died in the following century, associated the four elements with the cardinal fluids in the body—gall, black bile, phlegm, and blood. Gall associates with Earth Black bile with Air; Phlegm with Water; Blood with Fire. Aristotle attributed the four qualities of dryness, coldness, wetness, heat, to the Humours. Dryness is a quality of Earth; Coldness of Air;

Wetness of Water; Heat of Fire. Physical and mental health was said to depend upon the eucrasis (right mixture), symmetry (right measure), and isonomy (right action) of these four vital fluxes.

The Mappa Mundi was synthesised from traditional sources by the homeopath Joseph Reves of Israel and is referred to by him as "The Circle."

As Above, So Below

The four elements have an evolutionary relationship to one another.

1. Fire, essentially heat, is an energy and without substance.
2. Air, being a vapour, is almost immaterial.
3. Water is fluid, not yet as formed and solid, as Earth.
4. Earth is dense and represents the ultimate stage in the process of solidification.

Alluding to elemental Fire in the mystical traditions, Darby Costello has this to say in her book *Water and Fire* published by CPA:

In esoteric religions, that is, in early Islamic mysticism and early Christian mysticism and in Neoplatonism, fire is the realm which is first manifest, out of the unmanifested, undifferentiated realm of being. This Fire realm is Plato's realm of Ideas... The world of Ideas was the first perceptible world-form but not yet form. All worlds descended from it. Each created thing has a spark at the centre of itself, that is of (elemental) Fire.

This Paragraph as a Footnote

There are other interpretations however, as explained by a student of Hindu philosophy:

This order of things is where I have a problem. Bhagavad Gita and other Vedic stuff are consistently clear that the progression goes Air, Fire, Water and Earth. Fire has always been at the transition point between the grosser elements and the finer elements, and Fire has been the transformer of one to the other. This happens in creation, where fire takes solid things and makes them into finer particles which go into the air. In the human body also, Ayurveda sees Fire (pitta dosha) located in the stomach, midway between the seat of kapha (Water-Earth) in the throat and lungs and vata (Air) in the colon. Pitta's job is to transform the grosser inputs of food, etc that go down the gullet, into the subtle element of vata. It is funny how it all happens upside down, with the grosser elements having their seat higher up and the subtler element having its seat lower down, but it seems to be significant that the human body reverses the arrangement of elements in the macrocosm.

I am quoting this objection here because there may be others. For example, astrological and alchemical traditions

arrange the pairs of elemental opposites in variance with this map. I would therefore like to take this opportunity to remind us all that "the map is not the territory" and that there will be different maps of the same territory. Therefore, should you find yourself having a hiccup with this arrangement, then try to suspend your disbelief for as long as it takes to put this map to the test for the purposes of a synthesis of information. For instance, once you have assimilated enough to be getting on with, have a go at putting a remedy "on the map." Try *Ammonium carbonicum* or *Bryonia*, or *Lachesis*, or *Natrum muriaticum*.

At any Buddhist Stupa or large shrine, prayer wheels are turning, today as well over two thousand years ago, spinning the mantra, "OM MANI PADME HUM." This translates as, "Om, the jewel in the heart of the lotus, Hum." It is probably the most invoked mantra. About it volumes have been written, yet it would not be out of place to attempt to write a few sentences of interpretation. "Om" represents the creative sound of existence; it is the roar of eternity and the hum of the "motor" of the universe. The sounding of "Om" invokes the "All" that pre-exists and contains the world (corresponding to the stage before Plato's world of Ideas) and is therefore inexpressible.

The "jewel" is symbolic of the indestructible and pure essence which is at the heart (primal Fire) of manifestation and which is beyond the polarization into opposites—the Yin/Yang aspects of the created universe. As a symbol of pure essence the jewel is also the state before becoming and the creative center of all existence.

The "lotus" represents the world of phenomena and the events of earthly life. The lotus has its roots firmly set within the earth and mud of the pond, its leaves upon the surface of the water, and its flower raised above the pond's surface, aspiring, as it were, to reach the spiritual light. In other words, it has roots in the earth, stem in the water, flower in the air, reaching towards the sun (Fire). The petals of the lotus are also symbolic of Fire, so the symbol of the lotus unifies all the elements. Thus the jewel of spiritual awareness is set within the form of the daily round of life.

Some attest that "Hum" has no particular meaning beyond that of a coda: it seems to say "It is it!" In some traditions "Hum" or "Hung" as the Tibetans say it, represents all five elements (the fifth to be described later). As each element represents a densification, or materialization of energy, the descending series is about the journey from spirit to matter. This idea is given form in the architecture of the Stupa, where the flag and descending structure enlarging in steps, domes or stages represents elemental energies merging with the earth.

The ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus has written: "Each of the four elements lives by the death of the others. Water lives by the death of Air; Air lives by the death of Fire" and so on. In other words, the essence of the "superior" elemental

force must die into the matrix of the "inferior" below it in order that it may imbue it with vitality and indeed existence.

The chemical elements of the Universe were formed in a progression of increasing atomic weight from the original outpouring of Spirit. The Big Bang theory of cosmology explains that the lightest elements, hydrogen and helium, were created first. The rest were created in ever increasing density, to the heaviest radioactive metals, being cooked in stars and supernovae in a developmental sequence from Fire, to Air, to Water, to Earth. The periodic table describes this descent into materiality in terms of increasingly heavy atomic nuclei. The periodicity of the table arises from the patterns of electrons spinning around the nuclei. These patterns are repeated as heavier elements take up more electrons so that, for example, calcium has the same outer configuration of electrons as magnesium directly above it. Elements in the same period have similar chemical properties despite their increasing density because their chemical reactivity depends on the outer-most pattern of electrons.

Bhagavad Gita teaches that there is a fifth element, *Akasha*, translated as space or *Ether*—also referred to by the alchemists as *Phlogiston*. Ether is the mediating element between spirit and matter, the arena in which the four other elements play out into the material world. In terms of the makeup of the individual human being, Ether stands between the four elements of the material world and the three subtle elements of ego, intellect, and mind (in descending order, with ego or I-ness being the most subtle). Since Ether does not have an individual or specific nature, it does not appear on this Map. Ether may be conceived as being related to primal substance or essence, and in this sense is the original, undifferentiated quality of life itself as well as the vital quality of matter. It mediates between primal essence and the myriad forms of matter.

We can describe people in relation to these elemental archetypes, by saying that one is "ethereal," another is "fiery, eruptive like a volcano," or that another is "watery, wishy-washy," or "drowning in their feelings," another is "up in the air, having their heads in the clouds," and yet others we may describe as being "down to earth."

Temperaments and Humours

During the Middle Ages, the doctrine of humours propounded by Hippocrates (which associated the four elements with the cardinal fluids in the body—gall, black bile, phlegm, and blood) was expanded to include colors, tastes, seasons, foods, planets, and organs. For example, black bile is associated with the autumn and the Melancholic temperament; its quality is cold and dry. It is also related to old age and to such conditions as arthritis and degenerative conditions of the skeleton; its planet is Saturn. Blood is associated with the Sanguine temperament and the season of spring. Its quality is hot and wet; it is related to youth and vigor and such pathology as hemorrhage; its ruling planet is Venus.

The essential philosophy is of balance of the four elements and humours in health, and imbalance in disease. We still speak of the Melancholic, Sanguine, Choleric and Phlegmatic temperaments. We talk of being "out of humor," of being "all at sea," of feeling "cut off" (from the breath of life), of being "consumed" by passion (Fire), of being "bitter" about what has happened (Earth). Even much of (allopathic) medicine until the mid-nineteenth century depended on the doctrine of the humours. Physiognomy, constitution, temperament, endocrinology, psychology, all had their origins in it.

The Mappa Mundi, which organizes elements and temperaments into an eight-fold division, is a system for recognizing and analyzing the dynamic that is operating within any situation. Health (a dynamic balance of elemental forces) can be envisaged as freedom of movement centered at the locus of the circle, while increasing disease (and hence decreasing freedom), can be envisaged as limitation of movement within a narrow plane (one axis on Mappa Mundi) and hence increasing imbalance of elemental forces.

All manner of disease can be explained by Mappa Mundi. Let us look at some simple examples. A patient suffering from fever has an excess of Fire; with edema, an excess of Water; with obesity, an excess of Earth; with bloatedness an excess of Air. We can be quick tempered, forceful and excitable (Choleric); suspicious, brooding and pessimistic (Melancholic); optimistic, lively, impulsive and hopeful (Sanguine); sluggish, slow and yielding (Phlegmatic).

The four psychological functions described by C. G. Jung, namely intuition, thinking, sensation and feeling, correspond to Fire, Air, Earth and Water. Jung described how these functions operate in the human psyche as follows:

There are four aspects of psychological orientation, beyond which nothing fundamental remains to be said. In order to orient ourselves we must have a function which ascertains that something is there (Sensation); a second function which states whether it suits us or not, whether we wish to accept it or not (Feeling); a third function which establishes what it is (Thinking); and a fourth function which indicates where it came from and where it is going (Intuition)... This is so because the fourfold aspect is the minimum required for a complete judgment. The idea of completeness is the circle or sphere, but its natural minimum division is a quaternity.

Our bodies process elemental energies. The heart and nervous system process elemental Fire; the digestive system, Earth; the kidneys and bladder, Water; the respiratory system, Air. The four seasons correspond to pairs of the elements. The four ages of man correspond to the progression of the seasons—winter to gestation and infancy, spring to youth, summer to adulthood, and autumn to old age.

We can go on and see that some symptoms or conditions can be a combination of elements—thus thrombosis can be seen as

Earth in Fire/Water, cystitis as Fire in Water. Some symptoms can be best placed with regard to the humours, e.g., swollen glands are associated with the Phlegmatic humour, paralysis with the Melancholic. We find that all the symptoms a patient has, the language they use, the way in which they approach life, can all be fit into a synthetic whole, and a picture will be revealed showing the principal imbalance of the patient—that is, which direction he or she is moving in towards death and away from health.

Through the employment of Mappa Mundi we gradually gain a deepening sense of fundamental processes underpinning life and we cease to see symptoms as isolated phenomena, rather learning to view them as interrelated symbols of a unity in distress (as is appropriate to homeopathic practice).

Symbolism

The signs and symptoms of disease are all that we can perceive of the reaction of the vital force against the morbid influence in its process of reestablishing the former healthy state of the organism. (Hahnemann. *Organon*. Paragraph 19)

Once the healer has come to understanding these visible manifestations, then they begin to merge into a synergic totality which forms the image or symbol of the disease. Furthermore, each symptom and sign is symbolic of the whole dynamic and bears a relation to all other symptoms. Should this interrelationship and symbolism be understood, then a deeper appreciation of the patient is attained. Indeed the medicines in the materia medica may also be understood in this manner for they are living symbols of marvellous complexity.

A word or an image is symbolic when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning... As the mind explores the symbol it is led to ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason... By way of an example, take the case of the tribesman who, after a visit to England, told his friends at home that the English worship animals, because he had found images of eagles, lions and oxen in old churches. He was not aware, nor are many Christians, that these animals are symbols of the evangelists and are derived from the vision of Ezekiel, and that this, in turn, has an analogy to the Egyptian sun god Horus and his four sons. (C. G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols*)

Because there are innumerable things beyond the range of human understanding, we constantly use symbolic terms to represent concepts that we cannot define or fully comprehend... There are symbolic thoughts and feelings, symbolic acts and situations. It often seems that even inanimate objects cooperate with the unconscious in the arrangement of symbolic patterns. There are numerous well authenticated stories of clocks stopping at the moment of their owner's death... Other common examples are those of the mirror that breaks, or a picture that falls, when a death occurs; or minor

but unexplained breakages in a house where someone is passing through an emotional crisis. (C. G. Jung. *Man and His Symbols*)

A contemplation of symbols in relation to disease leads us to ask: What are these particular symptoms representing in this patient? What are they saying about the patient and his/her place in the world? How are the symptoms serving the patient and what further descent into disease are they preventing? Why has each patient's disease chosen to express itself in the way it has? To attempt to answer these questions is to do much more than find a remedy, it is to take the search for the simillimum to its innermost place. By so doing, it should lead the prescriber to find that one, central remedy which will act curatively, taking into account the widest possible "outer" totality of effects. The most elaborate symbol of the psyche is the totality of the individual and the individual's life story—encompassing all levels of the individual, from the spiritual through the mental, emotional and physical.

Physical actions are reactions to inner impulses; the body stance that we take is also a psychological stance. No deep experience in life is complete except that the body gets involved in it. Any breakthrough in consciousness, any enlightenment, is not complete unless the body is involved because the body is the carrier of that experience; it is the grounding, the outer world actor for the internal self. Another and more medical way of looking at it, is to note that physical and psychological functions run in parallel, thus to explore one is to be taken to the other. Thus we should learn to listen to what these symbols of the psyche are saying and develop the art of understanding, while bearing in mind the adage, "to never know first and to never know better." (Barbara Somers, 1981 lecture at The London Centre for Transpersonal Psychology)

Jung concurs with Barbara Somers that prejudging the case, rather than noticing innocently what is placed before you, is as likely to lead to false conclusions as the tribesmen believing that Englishmen worshipped animals:

When we attempt to understand symbols, we are not only confronted with the symbol itself but we are brought up against the wholeness of the symbol producing individual. This includes the study of his cultural background, and in the process one fills in many gaps in one's own education. I have made it a rule myself to consider every case as an entirely new proposition about which I do not even know the ABC. Routine responses may be practical and useful while one is dealing with the surface but as soon as one gets in touch with the vital problems, life itself takes over and even the most brilliant theoretical premises become ineffectual words. (C. G. Jung. *Man and His Symbols*)