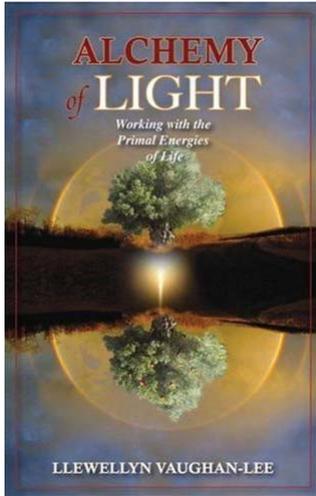


## BOOK REVIEW



Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee

*Alchemy of Light:  
Working with the Primal Energies of Life* ✦

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*Reviewed by U. Mohrhoff*

There is much truth in this slender volume. But are you ready for it? Test yourself:

Our Higher Self carries a light that belongs to God. When we are born, we carry a spark of this light into our human incarnation; it illuminates the experiences of our early childhood, showing us a world that is fully alive, full of magic and wonder. But slowly, as the adult world closes around us, the spark of our Higher Self gets covered over by the dust and debris of the world, of our conditioning, our desires, our concern with success and failure, our need to compete; it “fades into the common light of day.” It might reappear briefly, as the light of conscience that tries to point us in the right direction or the spark of intuition that comes unbidden into our consciousness. But mostly it is hidden, forgotten like the wonder of the world we saw as children. We no longer see the world by the bright light of what is real; we see “through a glass darkly,” through the shadowy, distorting light of the ego.

But the moment can come when, through the grace of God, the spark within us rekindles and we see again with its light. This is the most precious moment in the life of a soul, when we reconnect with our divine nature, when the journey Home begins.

Our reawakening to this light can take many forms: we might meet a teacher, be inspired by a spiritual text, or in a sudden unexplained moment of truth experience our eternal nature. Whatever the outer form, inwardly the moment is the same: the Higher Self gives us an energy that comes into our heart and the spark of light that is our gift from God begins to glow. The light of the Self awakens and brings its divine consciousness into our life. In this light we glimpse our true nature and the divine in life all around us. Usually the glimpse lasts just for a brief moment, and then the shadows of our ego, our mind, and the world close around us again. But it is enough to turn us away from life’s illusions, to draw us on the eternal search. . .

This is the light that guides us on our way, that shows us the path we need to follow. . . . When it becomes obscured through our ego or negative patterns, we stumble or lose our way; but then, through longing or despair, through the cries of our heart or the diligence of our practices, or simply through grace, we look to it again, and the light returns to guide us on, glowing brighter each time as our recognition of our need for it deepens.

. . . as our light grows, we attract a higher light, a light from the inner world of pure spirit. . . . The light within us and the light from above then work together, growing in strength and purity, helping us on our journey. In fact the journey is the light transforming us, revealing itself within and around us. What we think is our evolution is the evolution of the light of our true nature, expressing itself in our inner and outer life and expanding our consciousness.

The author, Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, is a Sufi teacher well versed in Jungian psychology. Your reviewer is a traveler on the Aurobindonian path, and he is impressed by the affinities between *Alchemy of Light* and some of the writings of Sri Aurobindo. For instance:

The lotus of the eternal knowledge and the eternal perfection is a bud closed and folded up within us. It opens swiftly or gradually, petal by petal, through successive realisations, once the mind of man begins to turn towards the Eternal, once his heart, no longer compressed and confined by attachment to finite appearances, becomes enamoured, in whatever degree, of the Infinite. All life, all thought, all energising of the faculties, all experiences passive or active, become thenceforward so many shocks which disintegrate the teguments of the soul and remove the obstacles to the inevitable efflorescence. He who chooses the Infinite has been chosen by the Infinite. He has received the divine touch without which there is no awakening, no opening of the spirit; but once it is received, attainment is sure, whether conquered swiftly in the course of one human life or pursued patiently through many stadia of the cycle of existence in the manifested universe.

. . . all perfection of which the outer man is capable, is only a realising of the eternal perfection of the Spirit within him. . . . All teaching is a revealing, all becoming is an unfolding. . . . The usual agency of this revealing is the Word, the thing heard (*śruta*). The Word may come to us from within; it may come to us from without. But in either case, it is only an agency for setting the hidden knowledge to work.

. . . the inner Guide, the World-Teacher, *jagad-guru*, secret within us. . . . destroys our darkness by the resplendent light of his knowledge; that light becomes within us the increasing glory of his own self-revelation. He discloses progressively in us his own nature of freedom, bliss, love, power, immortal being. . . . What is his method and his system? He has no method and every method. His system is a natural organisation of the highest processes and movements of which the nature is capable. Applying themselves even to the pettiest details and to the actions the most insignificant in their appearance with as much care and thoroughness as to the greatest, they in the end lift all into the Light and transform all.

(Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, 1999, pp 53–61)

Vaughan-Lee comes to us with a message: “a new light is awakening at the heart of the world, at the core of creation, which contains the potential for a whole new revelation of the divine and a new way of living in relation to the whole of life.” We need this light more than ever, and this light needs us. But we can truly benefit from it, and truly be of help, only if we “realize that it is not ‘our light’ and that it does not belong to us. It is

the light of the divine within us and belongs to the whole of life.” Life is being reborn, and we can “help in the wonder of recreation.”

How? First, we must have the faith that this is indeed possible. Next, we must embrace this possibility whole-heartedly and single-mindedly. This consent then

opens the door to an understanding of how to be in service. . . we just need to be prepared to be fully alive and awake to the need of the moment — not to be caught in our expectations or images of spiritual service. Because each individual’s light is unique, the way it can participate will also be unique. Life will speak to us in our own way, guiding us to the work that needs to be done. . . In all areas of this work, life will draw our attention to where it is needed. . . Each of us will find the unique way that our light can be used.

Vaughan-Lee reminds us that

[L]ife is not a battle to be fought or a struggle to survive; it may contain battles and struggles, but in essence it is the divine coming into being, expressing itself in a myriad of ways, each of which honors and celebrates the Creator. . . The divine is *alive*. It is not a concept, not a fixed idea or an icon, but a dynamic, living presence that permeates everything that exists.

I would add: because it *is* everything that exists!

If we will embrace our responsibility for our part in the world’s recreation, we can be awake at the dawn, at the moment when the world shifts on its axis and a breath from the beyond blows away the debris of the last era. We can be the future welcoming God back into His world.

YES!

[W]e will find a power within life that is stronger than any pattern of resistance, an energy whose suppleness will overcome what is rigid and fixed. Our work is to remain with this primal energy of life, to align our consciousness with its flow.

Indeed. But, again, how? How to remain with this primal energy of life, how to align our consciousness with its flow? I am reminded of the first time I read Sri Aurobindo’s *Synthesis of Yoga*. There was this unbelievable potential, for each of us, to be transformed and thereby transform the world. But how do I actualize it? What do *I* have to do? He doesn’t say. Soon enough I realized the egocentric fallacy of this kind of questioning. We cannot really know, in this domain, and nobody can tell us, how to do something we have never done — until we have done it! It is the depth of our longing for the divine — this alone — that ultimately makes things happen. One of the things that tend to happen is a “shift from a world seen by just the light of the ego to a world seen by the light of the Self.”

For each of us this moment in which the light of the Self comes into our world is unique, but it is an awakening to our real nature and the real nature of life. The world revealed by this light is the world we have always known, and yet it is completely new. . . And just as there is a moment of grace in our individual life when the light of the Self awakens in us, there also comes a moment in cosmic time when the light of the world awakens. On our individual journey, this awakening often happens at a time of despair: our soul, desolate in a world without meaning, calls out, and our divine light responds, revealing to us our divine nature which we had forgotten, and bringing meaning, color, and life back

to our world. So also does the light within the world awaken, in response to humanity's cry of despair.

There are a few points the author doesn't get quite right, as when he says that if "certain aspects of the inner work have not been done thoroughly, the individual can become inflated, or psychologically or psychically unbalanced, by the influx of divine energy." It is not the influx of divine energy that causes the damage. The divine force proceeds with extraordinary delicacy. It is only when the individual tries to seize the divine energy for egoistic purposes that things can go wrong.

When the author writes that the "forces of denial are all around us, in the corporations and hierarchies of power that appear to dominate and determine our collective life [full stop]," he creates the impression that those corporations and hierarchies are the main or only forces of denial. They are merely the most obvious ones. Vaughan-Lee rightly warns us against fighting them either inwardly or outwardly. The correct approach is to concentrate on the light that is being born. This is not to say that we cannot be led by the light to engage in a good fight! But we must not fool ourselves; we first must learn to distinguish the false lights from the true.

It is true, and of crucial importance, that the "real evolution is the evolution of consciousness." The author goes on to say that

the next step in planetary evolution requires that we wake up to the central role that consciousness plays in it, and that we recognize our consciousness as a part of the consciousness of the whole and step into the awareness and responsibility that brings.

Of course, "recognizing" here cannot mean simply "accepting the idea." What is required is that we come to experience our numerical identity with the Self of all selves. By the same token, even though "the responsibility that brings" will at first be the make-belief responsibility of the ego-centered self, which has its importance and can be instrumental in putting us on the right track, what is required is a true responsibility. "Real self-empowerment," Vaughan-Lee writes, "means accepting responsibility for this work that needs to be done." But real self-empowerment is the empowerment of the real Self, and this does not have to *accept* responsibility — it alone always was and always will be responsible. The only way for the individual self to accept responsibility is to lose itself in the real Self and, in so doing, grow one with it. Something like this inner alchemy may be Vaughan-Lee's intended meaning, but without sufficient emphasis on the losing part it is unlikely to come through.

As these examples indicate, the closer we come to the truth in speech or writing, the greater is the danger of distorting it by overemphasizing one of its many facets at the expense of another. In this domain no single statement is simply right or wrong. The truth of a statement depends on its implications, and these depend on the context. The meaning of a statement depends on other statements, whose meanings depend on yet other statements. And since the meanings we attach to words and sentences are shaped by our personal experiences, they also vary from person to person. Finally, what the right thing to say is depends on the time, the circumstances, and the person or audience that is being addressed. And some things are better left unsaid.

To give an example, we are told that to a consciousness that knows only form, the emptiness “behind the veils of this world”

can at first be frightening, its silence overwhelming. But gradually, as we become familiar with this undefined world, we awaken to a very different quality of life, a world of pure being and pure consciousness. We discover that in this dimension we exist free of any conditioning and as our real Self. . . we see how through form the one light of pure being becomes scattered into colors to reflect back the light in a myriad of ways. We see the wonder and terror of creation, not as its victim or prisoner, but as a free human being who knows its transient, ever-changing nature. And with this freedom we are able to participate in life as it really is. Because life is. . . the manifestation of a light that has a divine purpose.

There is no doubt in my mind that this is true. But when Vaughan-Lee writes that a “network of light has already been formed in the inner worlds, created by the masters of love and their disciples in order to help humanity emerge into the next era,” I have to take his word for it. And when I read that this “inner network is now being connected to a network of individuals and spiritual groups, sustaining them from within, giving them access to energy that would otherwise be veiled from them,” I feel that something is not quite right. As regards those individuals and spiritual groups who belong, or fancy themselves to belong, to this inner network, the likely effect of this statement is to unnecessarily foster self-importance. In others it may cause a desire to belong to this network and to profit from the energy that would otherwise be inaccessible to them, rather than a desire to belong and be of service to the light that is being born. Yet others may simply be repelled by an implied or perceived elitism.

Vaughan-Lee writes that “we have to learn how to work with the divine.” *With* the divine? As with a tool or instrument? As with an assistant or colleague? No, we can only work *for* the divine. It begins with an attitude of consecration, doing whatever we are doing as an offering to the divine. We then pass through a stage in which we become conscious instruments or tools of the divine. And finally, through the inner alchemy the author mentions in the same paragraph, we become one with the divine.

In another passage we read that we “are still focused on the old paradigm of treating problems in isolation. . . But the problem is the isolation we have imposed on ourselves and our world.” How did we manage to impose isolation, however illusory, on ourselves? It was the Light, the Source, God, the Divine — call it whatever you like — that managed, first, to multiply itself — by entering into relations with itself, by presenting itself to itself under a myriad of aspects — and then apparently or effectively to isolate itself from itself. It’s a bit of an irony that *Alchemy*, as far as my sensibilities are concerned, makes rather too frequent reference to *us*, to *our* part in the divine play, to *our* responsibility, to what *we* have to do. This unduly overemphasizes God’s aspect of *multiplicity*. The authors does so unwittingly, to be sure, for the right emphases are also present, as in the following passage, though I would have wished them to be somewhat more prominent.

We all carry the light of divine consciousness, and we need to give this light back to the world. . . We just know that there is a deep need for us to participate, to give ourselves, and to accept that life possesses wisdom and knowledge far beyond our present consciousness. We are each being given the opportunity to be present at this moment in

time, this catalytic moment of creation. Life is calling to us and it is for each of us to hear and respond to this call in our own way. And this is all part of the most strange and wonderful love affair of life, our life and the life of the world.

To give ourselves. This is what matters.

According to Vaughan-Lee, “[t]his world will always contain suffering; it is part of the nature of physical life.” Sri Aurobindo holds out a greater promise:

The fully evolved soul will be one with all beings in the status and dynamic effects of experience of a bliss-consciousness intense and illimitable. And since love is the effective power and soul-symbol of bliss-oneness he will approach and enter into this oneness by the gate of universal love, a sublimation of human love at first, a divine love afterwards, at its summits a thing of beauty, sweetness and splendour now to us inconceivable. He will be one in bliss-consciousness with all the world-play and its powers and happenings and there will be banished for ever the sorrow and fear, the hunger and pain of our poor and darkened mental and vital and physical existence. He will get that power of the bliss-freedom in which all the conflicting principles of our being shall be unified in their absolute values. All evil shall perforce change itself into good; the universal beauty of the All-beautiful will take possession of its fallen kingdoms; every darkness will be converted into a pregnant glory of light and the discords which the mind creates between Truth and Good and Beauty, Power and Love and Knowledge will disappear on the eternal summit, in the infinite extensions where they are always one.

(Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, 1999, p 509–510)

Finally, what about the Internet? The author believes that it is “a powerful, living image of life’s oneness.” But “life’s oneness” can be realized at many levels, and while oneness at a spiritual level is most desirable, premature oneness at a lower level is not. As Sri Aurobindo explains,

oneness with others is not enough by itself, if it is a oneness with their ignorance; for then the law of ignorance will work and error of action and wrong action will survive even if diminished in degree and mellowed in incidence and character. Our oneness with others must be fundamental, not a oneness with their minds, hearts, vital selves, egos,— even though these come to be included in our universalised consciousness,— but a oneness in the soul and spirit, and that can only come by our liberation into soul-awareness and self-knowledge. To be ourselves liberated from ego and realise our true selves is the first necessity; all else can be achieved as a luminous result, a necessary consequence. That is one reason why a spiritual call must be accepted as imperative and take precedence over all other claims, intellectual, ethical, social, that belong to the domain of the Ignorance. For the mental law of good abides in that domain and can only modify and palliate; nothing can be a sufficient substitute for the spiritual change that can realise the true and integral good because through the spirit we come to the root of action and existence.

(Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 2005, p 653)

For the moment, the Internet is rather a powerful manifestation of oneness at the wrong level. Besides, can the deep, meaningful communication that is possible with a physically present person take place over the Internet? I think not. Of course, “the Internet will reveal the secret of its real potential only if we approach it with the right attitude and acknowledge its sacred dimension.” Sure enough, but this is true of everything, not just the Internet.

All in all, *Alchemy of Light* is a wonderful introduction to what is happening behind the scenes, where a new light has been born with the power to transform. You are invited to participate in a new and unique adventure. Don't miss your chance.