

Chapter 6

The Fullness of the Void: Black Light in Lucid Surrender⁵⁹

*Oh happy gate of blackness,
which art the passage to this so glorious change!*⁶⁰

— Sir George Ripley (15th-century alchemist)

What is Black Light? Imagine taking part in a physics experiment in which you are asked to peer into a box full of natural light. What would you see? The light contained in the box would appear as black emptiness because, to human eyes, light is invisible. However, if a metal wand were inserted into one side of the box and spun around, flashes of metal would become visible, while the light, however, remains unseen.

We see only the objects light illuminates.⁶¹ This is why, once beyond the earth's atmosphere, the apparently empty reaches of outer space appear black. To be perceived visually, light wavelengths must inter-penetrate with matter. Physicists believe that matter, from the smallest grain of sand to the largest galaxy, forms only five percent of the universe, with

invisible dark matter and dark energy comprising the remaining ninety-five percent.⁶²

Prefiguring this discovery, the ancient alchemical precept 'As above, so below'⁶³ describes ordinary waking consciousness as representing only a minute fraction of an infinitely larger, 'spiritual' universe, from which material reality arises. In the words of the medieval alchemist Michael Sendivogius, we learn to see that 'this natural world is only an image and material copy of a heavenly and spiritual pattern; that the very existence of this world is based upon the reality of the celestial archetype; and that God had created it in imitation of the spiritual and invisible universe.'⁶⁴ The invisible realm is thus seen in 'Nature as reflected in a mirror'.⁶⁵

In the alchemical worldview, just as there is a physical sun, so there is a spiritual sun, illuminating the mind with understanding. Alchemists depicted this sun as the *sol niger*, the black sun, suggestive of inner mysteries, in contrast to the sun by day, associated with rational thought.⁶⁶

In the natural world, a full solar eclipse creates a seemingly 'black sun' that radiates a halo of light, a striking display of darkness and light, a juxtaposition of opposites. Alchemically speaking, the alignment of the earth, sun and moon mirrors a profound alignment of body, soul and spirit.

Before I knew about the alchemical teachings on the *sol niger*, I had the following Lucid Surrender dream, portraying an encounter with the black sun:

With lucidity, I bow my head and the dreamscape and my dream body give way to Black Light. Strong winds on the blackness

carry me as if I were lying on a flying carpet moving at the speed of light. Staying with this movement takes a good deal of energy. To help keep my focus I repeat a sacred song. Far in the distance, I am astounded to see what looks like a black sun. The sun becomes ever larger upon approach. Eventually, the movement slows, and I find myself set down before this immense, living sun.

The sun's wavy rays are outlined in a thin band of reddish-orange. As the rays break off, moving into the blackness in wavy lines, new ones appear. The beauty and power fills me with wonder. I perceive the sun's profound presence to be Divine and ask, 'Why a black sun? Why this way?' The answer: 'So you won't be annihilated.'

Without warning, a ray strikes me in my heart area, filling me with bliss. I cry out with joy, aware of this light's beauty and truth. The ray's power moves through me making me cry out with longing, 'Give me the ability to love and heal!' When I connect with this desire the sun dissolves into deep red, as I awaken.

In this dream, it felt as if my ego, along with all its drives and defences, had been eclipsed so that I could be opened to a greater reality, (although I yet desired a spiritual gift!).

Later, I learned that Sufi mystics describe a place called 'The Land of the Midnight Sun', where Black Light shines. Of such light, the narrator of the 14th-century Persian medieval poem, *The Rose Garden of Mystery*, movingly speaks:

Blackness, if you but knew, is the Light of Essence;
Within the essence flows the Water of Life ...

What can I say about this most subtle secret
of a luminous night within a dark day?⁶⁷

This light, perceived by the organ of inner sight, the heart,⁶⁸ heralds a revelation of the Divine or 'supra-consciousness'.⁶⁹

Black Light illuminates the teachings of many mystical traditions across the world. To understand its nature as revealed in lucidity, and the spiritual importance it holds for humanity today, I will draw on the concept of alchemy described by Carl Jung and on the teachings of the wisdom traditions.

The Alchemical Model in Psychotherapy

Jung drew parallels between the development of the human psyche, as it came to be understood in the early 20th century, and alchemy. He recognised that the alchemical pursuit to transform base matter into gold combined both physical and spiritual alchemy, the alchemists themselves undergoing psycho-spiritual transformation while conducting their experiments.

Jung de-codified many richly illustrated alchemical emblems to show not only how they portray the secrets of physical alchemy but also psychological stages of maturation, evident in waking consciousness *and* dreams. The alchemical process manifests on two levels, known as the Lesser and the Greater Wisdom. The first refers to knowledge of the earthly world, the second to knowledge of the spiritual. Jung brought

the two forms of knowing together in his alchemical studies on the psychological and spiritual development of Individuation, a process by means of which a person matures in body, psyche (or soul) and spirit. In formulating this concept, Jung drew on the alchemical stages outlined in Chapter Five: *Nigredo*, *Albedo*, *Citrinitas* and *Rubedo* (*the darkening, the whitening, the yellowing and the reddening*). In exploring Black Light, we will be focusing on the first of these: *Nigredo*.

In Jung's alchemical model, working through 'dark' or challenging times, when external forces beyond our control shatter our sense of who we are, compels us to acknowledge our self-limiting beliefs in order creatively to develop previously unrecognised qualities in ourselves. Jung likens this stage of the therapeutic process to the alchemy of *Nigredo* in which the alchemist breaks down the elements prior to their transformation, a vital step that precedes the generation of all new forms.

The Empty-Centre

Jung associated the darkness of *Nigredo* with the 'shadow side' of our unconscious, the negative traits we project onto others as well as our dreams. Rooted in our instinctual nature, this shadow side, when unacknowledged, can erupt from the unconscious with destructive force,⁷⁰ fixating in the form of a projection on anything perceived as a threat, whether an individual, a community, nation, or even darkness itself.

During a crisis, like the Covid-19 pandemic, we are especially vulnerable to shadow projections, either casting our 'shadow' on others, or carrying the shadow put on us by

others. Yet, when we recognise our own shadow as part of ourselves, admitting our fallibilities, fears and prejudices and taking responsibility for our actions instead of blaming others, we can withdraw our projections.

When we are clear about what is 'ours', it also becomes possible to disengage from the projections of others, calmly returning the problem to its 'owner'. This withdrawal of projections, both our own and from others, frees up the energies caught in the negative dynamic and opens the way to creative life changes.

Our collective human participation in the shadow is expressed in symbolic language that reaches beyond individual birth and death and constellates what Jung called an 'archetype'. As Jung explained, 'The archetype is, so to speak, an "eternal" presence and the only question is whether it is perceived by the conscious mind or not.'⁷¹ For example, the archetypal *sol niger* has a heavy darkness, associated with 'shadow' attributes: fearfulness, depression and death. An alchemical emblem from the 16th-century work *The Splendor Solis* (Figure 6), powerfully depicts the *sol niger* of *Nigredo*.⁷² Fittingly, Sufis call this oppressive darkness 'captive light', an apt description for how our shadow projections can entrap us, keeping us from seeing the light in the darkness.

Jung taught that by making the darkness in ourselves conscious, we become enlightened, being liberated from the ego's domination. This involves a confrontation with what Jung referred to in correspondence as the 'empty-centre' within each of us.⁷³ He writes: 'Emptiness in this sense doesn't mean "absence" or "vacancy," but something unknowable

which is endowed with highest intensity.' He further explains that the term 'centre' could be described more generally as 'God'



Figure 6. The *Sol Niger* of *Nigredo*

or, more specifically, as the 'God-image' or as the supreme archetype of the Self.⁷⁴ He notes that archetypes can only point

the way to the 'empty-centre' — they help us to name and conceptualise, yet the 'empty-centre' can never be fully known.⁷⁵ In Jung's view, the more we become conscious of our own shadow, the more whole we become, and the closer we move towards the centre.

The Jungian analyst Edward Edinger shares a dream of his own in which the empty-centre appeared.⁷⁶ He saw a one-celled organism, like an amoeba, that had, instead of a nucleus, a large empty hole through which the blue sky shone. Edinger described this hole as 'a window that looks out on another dimension of reality'.⁷⁷ As he explains, most of the time we rush to fill the 'emptiness' of the centre with a culture-bound God-image. Or we may project our shadow onto the centre, not only our existential fears, but also painful feelings like loneliness and despair.

That is why learning to 'sit with' difficult feelings in waking life, owning them and working through them therapeutically, helps prepare us for an encounter with the 'empty-centre' in both the visible world and dreams. (I recall an early lucid dream in which the entire dreamscape gave way to what felt like 'the empty-centre', a still and silent void, causing me to fear that I may have died.)

After many lucid dreams, I began to understand that when I withdrew my projections and thereby acceded to the Greater Wisdom of spiritual insight, I found myself 'pulled' into the Black Light that illuminates the 'empty-centre', learning over time to become peacefully at one with this infinite, radiant darkness.

In lucidity, as we regain the capacity for self-reflection, we

also retain our connections to the deep feelings aroused in the dreaming state. In this way, lucid dreaming has the potential to bring focused thinking and emotional intelligence together. Whereas Jung applied the alchemical model to understanding psycho-spiritual growth expressed through dream imagery, I have found that similar stages can also be *consciously* initiated in a lucid dream to powerful therapeutic effect. For example, in the following dream, as I am able to withdraw my projections, my personal psychology is transcended, opening the door to the Greater Wisdom:

I am in the home of a man with whom I had an affair during a lonely time in my first marriage. He wants to take me in his arms. A part of my mind resists, for we have ended our relationship, but then, bowing my head, I give in to an overwhelming desire. In that moment, I remember bowing my head in the Sufi meditation on the word 'Mabud', Arabic for 'lover', and recall that the word refers to the Beloved aspect of the Divine. With this memory, I realise I am dreaming and that my real longing is for the Divine.

Dramatically, the entire dreamscape gives way to Black Light, filled with an ethereal and exquisitely beautiful music. I have no thoughts as I take in the quality of the Black Light. After some time, although without a visible dream body, I feel that my subtle hands are illuminated with energy of the Spirit. I awake, feeling the soft and holy darkness around me.

Subsequently, I was to discover that Black Light, when freed of all projections, pulses with an all-encompassing,

soulful intelligence, from which living light forms arise, alive with the beauty, intelligence and dynamism of Spirit. The forms that this light takes may depend on the individual soul-longing of the dreamer.

In my experience, revelatory light forms have imparted qualities of mind, soul and spirit, fulfilling my soul's desire to be known, to be loved and to love. At the same time, I am aware of the desire of Spirit for the same. I will be discussing these living light forms further in the following two chapters, but before doing so, I would like to share with you two more encounters with Black Light in Lucid Surrender.

The Alchemy of Lucid Surrender

Let us look more closely at what may follow the cessation of more familiar dream imagery when Lucid Surrender takes place.

We might begin by asking ourselves what we habitually project onto the colour black in waking life, as, for example, when we are alone in the dark. If you had to walk down an unfamiliar city street at night, how would you feel? Safe or under threat? If the latter, what perceived threats might you fear the darkness hides? How does this fear change your experience? If you met a stranger in the darkness, especially if that person was of a different gender, culture or ethnicity to you, how would you feel then?

Similarly, when in a lucid dream, projecting our shadow into the darkness of the Black Light can bring overpowering fear, confusion, disappointment, emptiness, loneliness, despair, shame, guilt or anger. Worse still, the disappearance of

the dream narrative, along with our dream body, can feel like a terrifying annihilation.

The Hindu goddess Kali, the black goddess called 'the Destroyer', symbolically represents this aspect of darkness. Yet, she is also known as 'the Transformer' because in liberating her followers from the constraints of the ego, she returns all to its primordial unity. In the *Mahanirvana Tantra*, it is written:

Just as all colours disappear in black,
So all names and forms disappear in her.⁷⁸

In lucidity, I find that when I project my fears into the darkness, the Black Light assumes strong 'Kali' attributes. At such moments, I fear the unknown. However, if I am able to calm my fears by drawing on divine grace through breath, prayer and song, then the way opens to Lucid Surrender, as the following dream excerpt shows:

I walk in a field as a strong wind comes up and pulls at me. I resist the wind even as it blows the very dreamscape away. I have difficulty becoming fully lucid as the Black Light and winds carry me down into a darkness that I perceive as evil. Ghostly beings of ashen white appear, wailing and gnashing their teeth like in the biblical descriptions of hell. My heart goes out to them. I fear I am being taken to the very bowels of hell. So I begin to pray. At this moment, I recognise the wind as Spirit and wonder if the ghost-like beings are from the hell my own mind has made. I continue to pray as I yield to the Black Light.

In this dream, I am eventually able to see the hellish shadow for what it is: a projection of my own mind. My prayerful attitude helps me to draw on the grace needed to move beyond these mental constructs.

In Lucid Surrender the dreamer must not only learn to withdraw their projections but also to restrain the ego's desire for control, for the aim is to accede one's personal will to the 'Highest Will'⁷⁹ — to yield to the Greater Wisdom⁸⁰ — a yielding known in the Taoist tradition as 'practising eternity'.⁸¹

We see this process in the following lucid dream when I acquiesce to the revelation of the Black Light:

I walk on a city street past a parking lot full of rubble, and I think, 'That's like my mind, and that's not how I want my mind to be.' Instantly, I become lucid and the dreamscape falls away into blackness. I am lifted up by surging winds at a tremendous speed into the powerful spaciousness of the Black Light. To maintain my focus, I sing a sacred song that arises spontaneously. After some while, my soul is suspended in an endless black space through which a delicate, yet forceful wind blows. The wind invigorates and fills me with a refined desire. I wait trustingly. Then I have the feeling that this vastness in which I rest is making love to me, as though my consciousness has become the strings of the Aeolian harp that send vibrations into my very being. Gently, this leads to a 'cosmic' ecstasy much finer and more ethereal than an ordinary orgasm. I wonder at how these vibrations move all of Creation and how Creation springs from a great love and joy and a desire for being.

I continue to rest in the Black Light until my being is

whisked onto the winds as if I am being carried on a powerful current. For once I don't feel at all afraid, just curious and not worried about 'getting back'.

This dream, ending as I awaken with these words ringing in my ear, 'The universe can make love to you!', has continued thereafter to enliven me, body and soul.

Life After Death

The 'death' brought about by the withdrawal of projections in Lucid Surrender brings to mind an alchemical emblem in J. D. Mylius's *Philosophia Reformata* (1622), featuring a skeleton standing on a flaming black sphere (Figure 7).⁸² At first glance, the emblem looks rather frightening. It is, nonetheless, a pictorial drawing of inner transformation that applies both to Jung's alchemical model and to the alchemy of Lucid Surrender.



Figure 7. The *Nigredo* Standing on the *Rotundum*

Jung refers to this emblem as 'The *nigredo* standing on the *rotundum*', a spherical form of gold.⁸³ Drawing on my own learning, I would suggest that the 'rotundum' depicts an eclipsed or black sun, signifying that the energies of the shadow have become available for positive change through the withdrawal of projections. The resulting sense of inner alignment with the soul's nature is symbolised here by the two angelic presences.

To return to the dream of hellish projection I reported earlier:

Once I realise that the hell before me is a creation of my own mind, the winds on the Black Light carry me to a still place, where interlaced cubes of blue light radiate to infinity in a double-helix spiral. As I stand contemplating the light form, I feel that each cube constitutes a very basic building block of life, as well as representing every individual human life — all intertwined.

I know myself to be part of this chain of life. In that moment, I perceive the expansiveness of my vision and exhaustion of my actual earthly body. It seems strange to me that both are true and that this beautiful light form should require my limited, exhausted self in order to be known. It feels wondrous and very humbling, as well as inspiring and encouraging. After some time in this state, I awaken.

The practice of Lucid Surrender requires that we enter the Black Light with trust. There, we find unbounded Beingness, known over millennia to mystics and sages. It is the spacious

and sentient 'naked awareness' revealed to Tibetan Buddhists,⁸⁴ the bliss referred to as *Sat Chit Ananda* in the Vedas, and in Taoism, the 'Limitless Infinite' that gives birth to 'the ten thousand things'.⁸⁵

Importantly, Christian mysticism distinguishes between the darkness that is associated with the 'fallen' state of matter, the Lesser Wisdom, and the darkness that reveals the Greater Wisdom. The early Christian mystic Dionysius the Areopagite tells us: 'For by the resistless and absolute ecstasy in all purity, from thyself and all, thou wilt be carried on high, to the super-essential ray of the Divine darkness, when thou hast cast all away and is free from all.'⁸⁶ Elsewhere, in his poem 'Dark Night', St John of the Cross writes:

Oh Night, my guide!
Oh Night, more loving than dawn!
Oh Night you join
Beloved to Beloved,
Oneness transformed!⁸⁷

Over time, I have learned to trust the luminous darkness as the spaciousness where Spirit abides and to approach it with a humble mind and heart. I have learned to wait patiently as sacred living lights appear, illumined intelligences of goodness, beauty and truth, divine emanations of that 'infinite sphere, the centre of which is everywhere and the circumference nowhere.'⁸⁸

NOTES:

59. First published in the International Association for the Studies of Dreams, *DreamTime Magazine* (March 2012), as 'The Alchemy and Archetype of Black Light in Lucid Surrender', this revised chapter reflects the learning gained subsequently from hundreds of lucid dreams.
60. Originally from Sir George Ripley's *Compound of Alchymie in Ripley Reviv'd*, Eirenaeus Philalethes (William Cooper) 1668-1688, 357. Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership, 2011, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A61326.0001.001/1:13.5?rgn=div2;view=fulltext>
61. Based on the physics experiment entitled 'Project Eureka' as described by Arthur Zajonc in his *Catching the Light: The Entwined History of Light and Mind* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 1-2.
62. See the NASA article 'Dark Energy, Dark Matter,' accessed 10 July 2020, <https://science.nasa.gov/astrophysics/focus-areas/what-is-dark-energy>
63. The full verse from the 'Emerald Tablet' is translated by Robert Steele and Dorothea Waley Singer in 'The Emerald Table' as 'True it is, without falsehood most certain and true. That which is above is like to that which is below, and that which is below is like to that which is above, to accomplish the miracle of the one thing.' See Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine, 21, No. 3 (January 1928): 485-501, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2101974/?page=1>
64. Michael Sendivogius, *The New Chemical Light. Second part. Concerning Sulphur*, ed. Jean Pierre Donabin (originally published by J. Elliot and Co., London, 1893), 138, <http://www.livres-d-hermes.com/PDF/NEWCH101.PDF>
65. Ibid.
66. For a groundbreaking study of the psycho-spiritual understanding of darkness, see Stanton Marlan's *The Black Sun: The Alchemy and Art of Darkness* (Texas: A & M University Press, 2005).
67. Mahmud Shabistari, *The Garden of Mystery*, trans. Robert Abdul Hayy Darr (Cambridge: Cherwynd House, 2007), 46, verses 123 and 128.
68. See Henry Corbin's *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism* in which he presents Sufi teachings on the mystical encounter with luminous darkness and coloured lights. (Omega Publications: New Lebanon, New York, 1994), 100.
69. Ibid., 116.
70. Carl Gustav Jung, 'The Shadow', in *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung: Psychology and Alchemy*, Vol. 9ii, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, eds. Gerhard Adler and William McGuire (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953, 1974), paras. 13-19.
71. Jung, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 12, 'The Symbolism of the Mandala', para. 329.

72. This depiction comes from Salomon Tismosin's 'Splendor Solis'. <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/xrvf3w96?wellcomeImagesUrl=/index-plus/image/V0025641.html>, Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0). To learn more about this emblem, see Joseph L. Henderson and Dyane N. Sherwood, *Transformation of the Psyche: The Symbolic Alchemy of the Splendor Solis* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2005).
73. 'Letter to Pastor Bernett', 13 June 1955, in C. G. Jung's *Letters: Volume 2, 1951–1961*, ed. Gerhard Adler in collaboration with Aniela Jaffé, trans. R. F. C Hull (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), 257–264.
74. Ibid.
75. Ibid.
76. Cited in Edward F. Edinger's *The New God Image: A Study of Jung's Key Letters Concerning the Evolution of the Western God-Image*, eds. D. D. Cordic and C. Yates, (Wilmette, IL: Chiron Publications, 1996), 22.
77. Ibid., 22.
78. From Chapter 13, 'Installation of the Devata', verse 5, in the *Mahanirvana Upanishad (Tantra of the Great Liberation)*, as translated by Ajit Mookerjee in her *Kali: The Feminine Force* (London: Thames & Hudson, Ltd., 1988), 62. See also Arthur Avalon's and John George Woodruffe's translation: 'As white, yellow, and other colours all disappear in black, in the same way, O Shailaja! all beings enter Kali', 157, <http://public-library.uk/ebooks/59/94.pdf>
79. Assagioli, *The Act of Will*, 106–122.
80. See Chapter Nine on nightmares and Chapter Ten on lucid dreaming in my *The Hidden Lives of Dreams* (London: Bonnier Books UK, 2020).
81. Mitchell, *Tao Te Ching*, No. 52.
82. Engraving by Balthazar Schwan, 1622
83. Jung, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 12, 88. Illustration No. 34, 'The Nigredo Standing on the Rotundum'.
84. See Tenzin Rinpoche Wangyal, *Awakening the Luminous Mind: Tibetan Meditation for Inner Peace and Joy*, ed. Marcy Vaughn (London: Hay House, Inc., 2012).
85. Referred to as *Wuji*.
86. See *The Collected Works of Dionysius the Aeropagite*, ed. Anthony Uyl, trans. Rev. John Parker (Ontario, Canada: Solace Games, 2015), 52.
87. From the poem 'Dark Night' by St John of the Cross, written in 1578. This is my own translation from the Spanish.
88. This idea appears in a medieval teaching, most likely from Rabbinical sources, that describes 'God' as a being whose centre is everywhere and circumference nowhere.