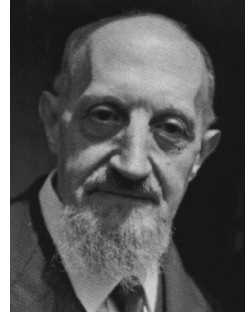


SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT AND NERVOUS DISEASES – Part II

The transcript of a lecture delivered by Dr. Assagioli at the Third Summer Session of the International Centre of Spiritual Research at Ascona, Switzerland, in August, 1932.

By Dr. Roberto Assagioli



“The Dark Night of The Soul”

5. When the process of transformation reaches its climax, its and decisive stage, it is marked by a period of intense suffering and obscurity, which has been called by the Christian Mystics, “the dark of the soul”. The mental anguish and the great depression accompanying it bear a close resemblance to the symptoms of the mental disease called by psychiatrists “depressive psychosis” or “melancholia”. These symptoms are chiefly: an emotional state of despair; an acute sense of unworthiness; a systematic self-deprecation and self-accusation; the impression of going through a hell which becomes so vivid as to produce the delusion that one is irretrievably damned; a keen and painful sense of intellectual impotence; a loss of will power and self-control and an inability and distaste for action.

Some of these symptoms may appear in a milder form in much earlier stages, but we must not mistake those for the true “dark night of the soul”. As Adela Curtiss has expressed it in her vivid style: “You feel as if you were nothing but a hole; a huge unfathomable ache of emptiness into which all creation might be poured and still it would be emptiness, aching for God. Of course, we all think we are in this state ages before we have come within sight of it. Any mood of dissatisfaction can be mistaken for it, as we all discover when we come to the real thing and look back at the many absurd imitations which deluded us into wonder as to what God

could be doing to neglect such a hunger and thirst as ours”.¹

This strange and terrible inner experience is not a mere pathological state; it has a specific spiritual cause and a great spiritual purpose.

The cause has been explained both by Plato and by St. John of the Cross with the same analogy.

Plato in his famous allegory of “the dark cave”, contained in the Seventh Book of his *Republic*, compares unenlightened men to prisoners in a dark cave or den and says:

At first, when any of them is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round and walk towards the light, he will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows.

St. John of the Cross uses words curiously similar.

The self is in the dark because it is blinded by a Light greater than it can bear. The more clear the light, the more does it blind the eyes of the owl, and the stronger the sun’s rays, the more it blinds the visual organs; overcoming them, by reason of their weakness, depriving them of the power of seeing. So the Divine Light of contemplation, when it beats on the soul not yet perfectly enlightened, causes spiritual darkness, not only because it surpasses its strength,

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but because it blinds it and deprives it of its natural perceptions...As eyes weakened and clouded by humours suffer pain when the clear light beats upon them, so the soul, by reason of its impurity suffers exceedingly when the Divine Light really shines upon it. And when the rays of this pure light shine upon the soul, in order to expel its impurities, the soul perceives itself to be so unclean and miserable that it seems as if God had set Himself against it, and itself were set against God...Wonderful and piteous sight! So great are the weakness and impurity of the soul that the hand of God, so soft and gentle, is felt to be so heavy and oppressive, though neither pressing nor resting on it, but merely touching it, and that, too, most mercifully; for He touches the soul, not to chastise it, but to load it with His graces.²

The purpose of the “dark night” is very clearly explained by Evelyn Underhill:

The function of this process upon the Mystic Way is to cure the soul of the innate tendency to seek and rest in spiritual joys; to confuse Reality with the joy given by the contemplation of Reality. It is the completion of that ordering of disordered loves, that trans-valuation of values, which the Way of Purgation began. The ascending self must leave these childish satisfactions; make its love absolutely disinterested, strong, and courageous, abolish all taint of spiritual gluttony. A total abandonment of the personal standard, of that trivial and egoistic quest of personal success which thwarts the great movement of the Flowing Light, is the supreme condition of man’s participation in Reality...

In illumination, the soul, basking in the uncreated Light, identified the Divine Nature with the Divine Light and sweetness which it then enjoyed. Its consciousness of the transcendent has been felt chiefly as an increase of personal vision and personal joy. Thus, in that apparently selfless state, “the I, the Me, the Mine”, though spiritualized, still remain intact. The mortification of the senses was more than

repaid by the rich and happy life which this mortification conferred upon the soul. But before real and permanent union with the Absolute can take place; before the whole self can learn to live on these high levels where—its being utterly surrendered to the Infinite Will—it can be wholly transmuted in God, merged in the great life of the All; this separated life, this dependence on personal joys, must be done away...

The various torments and desolations of the Dark Night constitute this last and drastic purgation of the Spirit; the doing away of separateness, the annihilation of selfhood, even though all that self now claims for its own to be the Love of God”.³

The “dark night of the soul” in its highest and final stage corresponds to what has been called the “mystica crucifixion”; the death and resurrection which really marks the disintegration of the personality, the “old Adam”, and the triumph of the soul, the “new Christ”.

Many serious disturbances, which sometimes amount to diseases, are due to a special cause and have their origin outside the personality of the sufferer. This cause is the “mystical substitution”, by means of which an ardent, loving and generous soul may attract to itself the inner suffering and even the physical symptoms of another person. This may sound strange and almost unbelievable at first, but a closer investigation will show that it really is only an extreme instance of the taking on through sympathy of another person’s condition, which most of us have sometimes experienced. The important distinction is that in the case of “mystical substitution” it is not something which happens unconsciously and without volition; it is the consequence of an active and determined spiritual resolution. This “mystical substitution” can be accomplished both in a personal and in a general sense. Instances of the former are not rare in the lives of the Christian Mystics and the Saints.

The most familiar probably is the case of St. Teresa of Spain who states in her autobiography that she brought upon herself the intense temptations of a

priest, who was at once freed from them as soon as St. Teresa began to experience their torment.

The most extreme and dramatic case is perhaps that of St. Lydwine of Schiedham, who succeeded in attracting to herself a series of grave diseases. Her extraordinary story has been graphically portrayed by the French novelist, Huysmans.

The general “mystical substitution” consists in offering to offset by one’s own suffering, some of the sufferings and wrongs of humanity at large. The more austere and contemplative religious orders, such as the Trappists and the Carmelites, are doing this regularly.

An interesting experiment of this kind, made by a group of twelve laymen in cooperation with the Carmelites at San Remo, is related by Montague Summers in his article on *Mystical Substitution*. He describes the effects as follows:

The psychic experiences of the mystic were very remarkable. Amongst other things all suffered during the time of their oblation from intense mental lassitude and a spiritual aridity which are always accounted sure proof that the substitution has been accepted and prevails. It may further be noted that this psychological state began abruptly in each case immediately the oblation had been made, the interior disorders and pain increased almost hourly, and no relief nor waning was found until the dark cloud dispersed suddenly, in a moment, to be succeeded by the sunshine of an interior peace, and consolations which were all the sweeter from their contrast with the preceding desolation.⁴

In the East this spiritual activity is performed in a different way, but with a self abnegation no less unreserved and heroic. We find it expressed in the vow in which the Bodhisattva or future Buddha, pledges himself to renounce the bliss of Nirvana and surrender his all for the good of all.

From the merit of all my good works I aspire to soothe the pains of all creatures, to be the medicine, the doctor, the servant of all those who are ill while disease exists, to be myself during the famine, food and drink, to be an inexhaustible

treasure for the poor and a servant who furnishes them with all that they are lacking. I relinquish without regard for myself my life in all its re-births, all my belongings, all the merit acquired by me now and in the future in order to obtain the salvation of other creatures... I want to be a protector to those who have none, a guide for the travelers, for those who want to reach the other shore. I want to be a boat or a bridge, a lamp for those who are in darkness, a bed for those who want to rest, the shelf for those who need one... As all the elements: earth, water, fire and air are in every way at the service of all the innumerable creatures who people the immensity the vastness of the world so may I in every way, and over the whole world, contribute to the life of all that exists until all creatures are liberated.⁵

This is what is done by the Great Beings who in the East are called Mahatmas, who renounce bliss in order to relieve, by sharing them, the ills and the sufferings of humanity.

Alas! when once thou hast become like the pure snow in the mountain vales, cold and unfeeling to the touch, warm and protective to the seed that sleepeth deep beneath its bosom — ’tis now that snow which must receive the biting frost, the northern blasts, thus shielding from their sharp and cruel tooth the earth that holds the promised harvest, the harvest that will feed the hungry.

Self-doomed to live through future Kalpas, unthanked and unperceived by men; wedged as a stone with countless other stones which form the Guardian Wall*, such is thy future if the seventh gate thou passest. Built by the hands of many Masters of Compassion, raised by their tortures, by their blood cemented, it shields mankind, since man is man, protecting it from further and far greater misery and sorrow.⁶

As the stern demands, the heroic self-sacrifices of “mystical substitution” and the suffering it involves may deter some aspirants. I wish to make it quite clear that “mystical substitution” is a *special*

vocation, a particular method of serving, to be used only by those who feel drawn to it and who feel that they have the necessary grit and stamina to stand its ordeals. Not all aspirants have to use that method. There are other ways of serving, less strenuous and exacting, which are just as useful and as much needed for the general upliftment of humanity. I would even advise those who feel the generous urge towards “mystical substitution” to proceed very carefully and gradually, and to test again and again their strength and power of resistance in order to stand the intense and almost unbearable reactions.

The same *Book of the Golden Precepts* which contains the sublime words just quoted, warns us very wisely:

If the sun thou canst not be, then be the humble planet. Aye, if thou art debarred from flaming like the noonday sun upon the snow-capped mount of purity eternal, then choose, O neophyte, a humbler course.

Point out the way—however dimly, and lost among the host—as does the evening star to those who tread their path in darkness... Give light and comfort to the toiling pilgrims, and seek out him who knows still less than thou; who in his wretched desolation sits starving for the bread which feeds the shadow, without a Teacher, hope or consolation, and let him hear the Law.⁷

The subject which I have chosen has obliged me to deal almost exclusively with the darker and more painful side of spiritual development, but I do not by any means desire to give undue emphasis to the pathological aspect of it, nor to give the impression that those who are on the path of spiritual realisation are more likely to be affected by nervous troubles than ordinary men and women.

I, therefore, wish to state very clearly the following points:

1. In many cases spiritual development is being accomplished in a much more gradual and harmonious way than that which has been de-

scribed so that the inner difficulties are overcome and the different stages passed through without causing severe physical reaction or producing definite symptoms.

2. The nervous and mental troubles of the average man and woman are often more serious and intense, more difficult for them to bear and for the doctors to cure than those of the aspirants. They are mostly due to violent conflicts between their lower passions, or between the subconscious impulses and the conscious personality; or to rebellion against conditions and people arising from their selfish desires.

We find that some of those correspond to Freud’s interpretation (which is by no means valid for all); others to Adler’s formula, etc. It is often difficult to cure them satisfactorily, because their higher side is not yet awakened and there is little to which one can appeal to induce them to make the necessary sacrifices or submit themselves to the necessary discipline in order to produce the needed adjustment.

3. The nervous and mental problems of the aspirant, however serious they may at first appear, are merely temporary reactions, by-products so to speak, of an organic process of inner growth and regeneration. Therefore they often disappear spontaneously when the crisis which had determined them is over, or they yield more easily to proper treatment.
4. The sufferings of the mystic, which are caused by the downward oscillations, by the ebbing of the spiritual tide, are well compensated, not only by the periods of inner elevation, but also by the remembrance of the great Purpose and Goal of the quest.

This vision of glory is a most powerful inspiration, an unflinching comfort and a constant source of strength and courage. We should, therefore, make a special point of recalling that vision as vividly and as frequently as possible, and one of the greatest services we can render to our fellow travelers on the path is to help them to do the same.

We can visualise the glory and the bliss of individual attainment and picture the splendour

of the spiritual man, the liberated soul, the conqueror of the three worlds of human endeavour, participating consciously in the knowledge, the power and the bliss of the one Life. We can contemplate it in a wider sense as the glory of the Kingdom of God fulfilled on earth; the vision of a redeemed humanity, of the whole of creation regenerated and rejoicing in fully manifesting God's perfections.

It is such visions as these which have enabled the great mystics and saints to endure smilingly their inner tortures, or external martyrdom, and which made St. Francis exclaim, "So great is the good which I am expecting, that each pain is a joy for me."

Considering now the question more strictly from the medical and psychological standpoint, we should realise that, while the troubles that accompany the various phases of spiritual development are in their outward appearance very similar and sometimes identical with those which affect ordinary patients, their causes and their significance are very different; in fact, in a sense quite opposite, and the treatment must be correspondingly different.

The nervous symptoms of the ordinary patient have generally a *regressive character*. The individuals have not been able to accomplish some of the necessary inner and outer adjustments which constitute the normal development of the personality. It may be that they succeeded in freeing themselves from the emotional attachment to parents which persists into later life as a childish dependence on them or on other individuals who have become their substitutes.

Sometimes it is the unwillingness to meet the requirements of ordinary family and social life or the inability to cope with its difficulties which makes them unconsciously seek refuge in a nervous illness and invalidism.

In other cases it is an emotional shock of some kind; a disillusionment or a bereavement which they cannot or will not accept, and to which they react with a breakdown or with nervous and mental symptoms. In all these cases we find as a common characteristic a conflict between the conscious personality and certain

parts of its lower and subconscious elements, with the partial victory of the latter.

The difficulties produced by the stress and strife of spiritual development have, on the contrary, a specific *progressive* character. The description we have given of them clearly indicates that they are the outcome of conflicts and temporary maladjustments between the personality and the higher spiritual energies flowing from the soul. It is obvious then that the proper treatment for the two categories should be quite different.

In the first category the therapeutic problem is to help the patient to reach the normal state of the average man and woman; eliminating the repressions and inhibitions, the fears and attachments; helping them to pass from the egotistic self-centredness, from the hazy state of half dreaming and emotionally distorted outlook and valuations, to an objective, sane, and rational consideration of normal life; to a recognition of its duties and obligations and a right appreciation of other individuals. The contrasting, partly undeveloped, uncoordinated conscious and subconscious elements have to be harmonised and integrated in a *personal psychosynthesis*.

The therapeutic task in the second category, instead, is that of arriving at an harmonious adjustment, through the proper assimilation and integration of the inflowing higher energies with the pre-existing normal elements; that is, of accomplishing an alignment between the soul and the personality, a *spiritual psychosynthesis* around a higher centre.

From this it is apparent that the treatment suitable for the first group proves not only unsatisfactory, but often definitely harmful for the patient of the second group. His lot is doubly hard if he falls into the hands of a doctor who does not understand and appreciate the spiritual nature of man, who ignores or denies the possibility of spiritual development. (This may apply not only to the ordinary materialistic medical man, but also to the followers of some modern and widespread schools of psychotherapy, such as that of Freud.) The physician will either ridicule the patient's uncertain spiritual aspirations

as being mere fancies, or he may interpret them in a lower and gross manner. Thus the patient may be persuaded that he is doing the right thing in trying to harden the shell of his personality, closing it against the insistent knocking of the soul. This, of course, can only aggravate the condition, intensify the struggle and retard the right solution.

On the other hand a doctor who is himself on the spiritual path, or has at least a clear understanding and sympathetic attitude towards spiritual achievements and realities, can be of great help to the sufferer. If, as is very often the case, the latter is still at the stage of dissatisfaction, restlessness and unconscious groping; if he has lost interest in life; if everyday existence has no attraction for him and he has not yet had a glimpse of the higher reality, if he is looking for relief in the wrong directions, wandering up and down blind alleys, then the revelation of the true cause of his trouble and the indication of the beautiful un hoped for solution can do wonders in bringing about the inner awakening which in itself constitutes the cure. This is one of the most gratifying and happy results both for the doctor and the patient.

When the aspirant is at the second stage, that of contented basking in the light of the spirit and of joyous flights into the higher levels of consciousness, great assistance can be rendered by explaining to him the true nature and function of his state and in gently forewarning him that it is of necessity a temporary stage; outlining to him the vicissitudes of the quest. Thus he is prepared when the reaction sets in and can avoid much of the suffering due to the suddenness of the fall and the subsequent doubts and discouragements.

When such forewarning has not been given and the patient is being treated during the reaction, its temporary nature can be explained to him and much relief and encouragement afforded him by pointing out actual examples of those who were in a similar plight and have come out of it.

In the fourth stage of the "incidents of ascent", which is the longest and most complicated, the work of the helper is correspondingly more complex.

Some of the most important points of this work are:

1. To enlighten the sufferer as to what is really going on in him and to show him the right attitude towards it.
2. To teach him how to control, without repressing them, the lower tendencies emerging from the subconscious.
3. To initiate him into the technique of the transmutation of the psychological energies.
4. To help him towards the proper use of the spiritual energies inflowing from the soul.
5. To guide him and cooperate with him in the general work of the reconstruction of his personality, of spiritual psychosynthesis.

In the fifth stage, "the dark night of the soul", it is most difficult to give any assistance because the very nature of the condition wraps the individual in a shroud of darkness and pain and shuts him out from all effective help. In dealing with such cases the only way to give relief is the untiring assurance that the state is transitory and not in any sense permanent or hopeless, as the sufferer is too apt to believe. To assure him, with strong conviction, of the great and special value of the crisis which makes it worth while, however terrible it is; to induce him to bear it and inwardly accept it with calm resignation and patience. This help can be made more effective by giving in detail the examples and descriptions of others who have passed through such an experience, such as St. Teresa, Suso, and the profound analysis of it which has been made by St. John of the Cross.⁸

In all this work the psychological and spiritual treatment does not exclude the proper physical treatment which should be supplementary but I cannot enter now on that part of the subject except to indicate that it should consist chiefly in prescribing the proper diet, the right amount and kind of rest; of relaxation and contact with nature and such medical means which will alleviate the pains and enhance the nervous resistance.

In some cases the treatment is complicated by the fact that there is a mixture of regressive and progressive symptoms. These are cases of irregular inner evolution. Such people may reach a spiritual

level with one part of their personality and yet be handicapped on the other hand by certain infantile fixations or be under the spell of a subconscious complex. One might even say that a very close analysis shows that most of those who are treading the spiritual path may be found to have some remnants of this kind. This does not contradict our previous statement that in the great majority of cases a distinct prevalence is found of either regressive or progressive causes determining the condition. However, the possibility of a certain mixture of the two tendencies should be kept in mind and a very careful examination and interpretation of each symptom should be made in order to ascertain its true cause and consequently the right treatment.

From all that has been said, it is apparent that in order to be able to treat satisfactorily the nervous and mental troubles accompanying spiritual development a twofold training and competence are necessary, namely that of the nerve specialist and psychologist, and that of the serious student, or still better, the experienced traveler on the spiritual path. This double training is at present rarely found combined; and yet, considering the growing number of individuals who require such treatment, it is becoming increasingly urgent that many of those who wish to serve humanity by administering to its greatest needs, should be induced to qualify for the task.

The work would be facilitated if there could be formed also a body of trained nurses and assistants who could intelligently cooperate with these helpers in the details of the treatment.

It would be of considerable benefit also if the intelligent section of the public were better informed of the general facts concerning this subject, so as to make easier the task both of the patient and the doctor, instead of interfering with it and rendering it more complicated through ignorance, prejudice and even active opposition, which is generally the case up to now. This refers particularly to the family and relatives of the patient.

When this triple work of enlightenment will have been accomplished among doctors, nurses and the public, a great amount of unnecessary suffering and delay will be avoided, and many an earnest pilgrim will more easily and speedily attain the high goal of his endeavour—union with Divine Reality. ▲

(Concluded)

ENDNOTES

- 1 *Creative Silence*, p.153.
- 2 *Noche Oscura del Alma, L. II, cap. V.*
- 3 Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*, pp. 472-74
- 4 *The Occult Review*, October, 1918.
- 5 *Introduction to the Career of Future Buddhas* by Shantideva
- 6 *The Voice of the Silence, III: The Seven Portals*
- 7 *The Voice of the Silence: II: The Two Paths*
- 8 Much valuable material on this subject can be found in Chapter IX of Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism*.

* The Guardian Wall, or the wall of protection. It is taught that the accumulated efforts of long generations of Yogis, saints, adepts, especially of the nirmanakayas, have created, so to say, a wall of protection around mankind, which wall shields mankind from evils still worse.

The human being, —simply because he is himself fragmentary and incomplete—has always this urge within himself to seek other and greater than himself. It is this that drives him back to the centre of his being, and it is this that forces him to take the path of return to the All-Self. Ever, throughout the aeons, does the Prodigal Son arise and go to his Father, and always latent within him is the memory of the Father's home and the glory there to be found.

Letters on Occult Meditation, p. 257