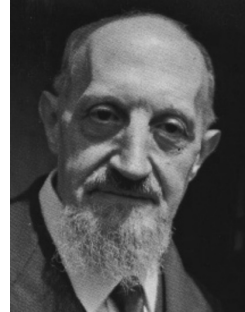


SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT AND NERVOUS DISEASES – Part I

(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



MAN'S SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT is a long and arduous adventure; a journey through strange lands full of surprises, difficulties and even dangers. In reality it is no less than the passing from the human to the spiritual kingdom.

It involves a drastic purification and complete transmutation of all the normal and purely "human" elements of the personality, the awakening of a series of faculties hitherto dormant; the raising of consciousness to an altogether new realm; the functioning along a new inner dimension.

Indeed, should we compare man as he was when he first started on his quest, and as he has become when he has reached the summit of spiritual perfection, we would find that practically nothing of the former personality has remained, that they are two entirely different beings.

We should not be surprised therefore that so complete a change, such a fundamental transformation, is marked by several critical stages which are not infrequently accompanied by various nervous, emotional and mental troubles.

These nervous disorders, while they may appear under the objective clinical observation of the physician to present the same symptoms as those due to other causes, have really quite another significance and value, and need very different treatment.

Nowadays disorders due to spiritual causes are rapidly becoming more frequent, as the

number of persons who are groping, consciously or unconsciously, towards a higher life, is much greater than before. Moreover owing to the greater development and complexity of the personality, and particularly to the more critical mind of modern man, spiritual development has become a more difficult and complex process. In many cases in the past, a moral conversion or a simple whole hearted devotion to a divine teacher or saviour, or a complete and loving surrender to God were sufficient to open the gates leading to consciousness and divine union.

On the other hand, the readjustment of modern man is more complete and well balanced, since it involves the regeneration of the whole personality, including a well developed and alert mind, thus escaping the one-sidedness of a purely devotional development.

For these reasons I have thought that it might be of some interest and serve a useful purpose to give a general outline of the nervous conditions appearing at the various stages of spiritual realisation, and some hints about their proper treatment.

We might, for the sake of clarity, tabulate five critical points along the inner path:

1. *Crises preceding the spiritual awakening.*
2. *Crises determined by the spiritual awakening.*
3. *Reactions to the spiritual awakening.*
4. *Phases of the process of transmutation.*
5. *The "Dark Night of the Soul".*

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Let us examine them briefly:

Crises Preceding the Spiritual Awakening

1. In order to understand thoroughly the strange experiences that usually precede the awakening of the soul, we must pass in review some of the psychological characteristics of the ordinary man.

One may say of this latter that he “*lets himself live*”, rather than that he lives. He takes life as it comes, and does not trouble himself with the problem of its meaning, its worth, or its object. If he belongs to the common, unevolved type, he devotes himself to the satisfaction of his personal desires; he seeks enjoyment of the senses, to become rich, and to satisfy his ambitions. If he is more developed, he subordinates his personal satisfaction to the fulfillment of the various family and social duties assigned to him, without troubling to understand on what bases those duties rest, or from what source they spring. He may also declare himself to be “religious,” and a believer in God, but his religion is merely outward and conventional, and when he has conformed to the injunctions of his church and shared in its rites, he feels that he has done all that is required of him. In short, he believes implicitly in the absolute reality of ordinary life, and is strongly attached to earthly goods, to which he attributes a positive value; thus he practically considers this life as *an end in itself*. Even if he believes in a future heaven, such belief is altogether theoretical and academic, as it is proved by the fact that he takes the greatest pains to defer the enjoyment of that wonderful heaven as long as possible!

But it may happen that this “ordinary man” is both surprised and disturbed by a sudden, or slow, change in his inner life.

This may take place after a series of disappointments; not infrequently after some emotional shock, such as the loss of a beloved relative, or of a very dear friend. But sometimes it occurs without any apparent cause, and in the full enjoyment of health and prosperity. The change begins often with a sense of

dissatisfaction, of lack, but not the lack of anything material and definite; it is something vague and elusive, that he is unable to describe.

To this is added, by degrees, a sense of the *unreality*, the *vanity* of ordinary life: all the personal affairs, which formerly absorbed so much of his attention and interest, seem to retreat into the background, to lose their importance and value. New problems arise; the individual begins to enquire into the origin and the *purpose of life*; to ask what is the reason of so many things that formerly he took as a matter of course; the meaning of his own sufferings, and of those of others; what justification there may be for so many inequalities in the destiny of men.

When this point is reached, misunderstandings and errors begin to appear. Many, who do not comprehend the significance of these new states of mind, look upon them as stupid abnormal fancies and mental vagaries. Fearing to become unbalanced, they strive to combat them in various ways. They make efforts to re-attach themselves to the reality of ordinary life that seems to be slipping from them. Often they throw themselves with increased ardour into a whirl of external activities, seeking ever new occupations, new stimuli and new sensations. By these and other means they may succeed for a time in allaying their disturbed condition, but they are unable to get rid of it altogether. It continues to ferment in the depths of their being, undermining the foundation of their ordinary existence, and easily breaks forth again, perhaps after a long time, with renewed intensity. The state of agitation becomes more and more painful and the sense of inward emptiness more intolerable. The individual feels himself annihilated; all that which constituted his life now seems to him a dream; it vanishes like a shadow, while the new light has not yet come. Indeed, he is as yet ignorant that such a light exists, or else he cannot believe that it may ever be possible for him to possess it.

It frequently happens that in this state of perturbation a more definite moral crisis supervenes; the conscience awakens and becomes more sensitive; a new sense of

responsibility appears and the individual is oppressed by a heavy sense of guilt, of remorse for evil done. He judges himself with severity and becomes a prey to profound discouragement. At this point it is not unusual for the mind to entertain ideas of suicide. To the man himself it seems as if physical annihilation were the only logical conclusion to this inner breakdown and disintegration.

The foregoing description constitutes merely a general outline of such experiences. In reality there are great and wide differences among individuals. There are many who do not reach the most acute stage, while others arrive at it almost at one bound. Some are more harassed by intellectual doubts and metaphysical problems; in others the emotional depression or the moral crises is the most pronounced feature.

These various manifestations of the spiritual crises bear a close resemblance to some of the symptoms which doctors consider to characterise the nervous diseases called neurasthenia and psychasthenia. Indeed one of the chief characteristics of the latter is what Professor Pierre Yanet aptly calls "la perte de la fonction du reel" (loss of the reality function) and another is called by him "depersonnalisation". The similarity is made still greater by the fact that the stress and strain of the spiritual crisis easily produces also physical symptoms such as nervous tension, insomnia, and various digestive, circulatory and other troubles.

Crises Determined by the Spiritual Awakening

2. The opening of the channel between the personality and the soul, the flood of light, joy and energy which accompanies it, often produce a wonderful release. The preceding conflicts and suffering vanish and the nervous and physical symptoms which they determined disappear, sometimes with amazing suddenness, thus confirming the fact that they were not due to any organic disease, but were the direct outcome of the inner strife. In such cases the spiritual awakening amounts to a real

cure. But in cases where the personality is more defective in certain respects, different incidents and even real diseases may ensue. This happens, for instance, when the mind is not quite balanced, or the emotions are uncontrolled when the psychic nature is over-developed or the nervous system too sensitive—in cases in which the onrush of spiritual energy is overwhelming in its suddenness and force.

When the mind is too weak to stand the illumination, or when there is a tendency to egotism and conceit, the experience is wrongly interpreted and there is, so to speak, a "confusion of planes". The distinction between absolute and relative truth, between soul and personality is blurred and the spiritual force might tend to feed and inflate the personal ego.

I met a striking instance of such a disastrous effect several years ago at the Psychiatric Hospital at Ancona. One of the inmates, a plain little man, formerly a photographer, quietly and persistently declared that he was "God". Around this central idea he constructed a series of the most fantastic delusions about heavenly hosts at his command and so on. Apart from this, he was the most peaceful, kindly and obliging fellow one could imagine, always ready to render a service to the doctors and the patients. He was so reliable and accurate in his actions that he had been appointed assistant to the pharmacist and had been entrusted with the preparation of medicines and the keys of the pharmacy. The only lapse in his perfect behaviour was that he sometimes took away sugar in order to give pleasure to some of the inmates of the asylum.

The materialistic doctor would probably consider this as an ordinary case of delusion, but I think that there is a truer and deeper interpretation of the man's insanity. From a purely *metaphysical standpoint* his central affirmation was quite correct; in the light of the Vedanta philosophy there is no other reality than the "Absolute"—Brahman—and each pupil of Vedantic teachers is enjoined to identify himself with the Absolute and to boldly

affirm *Aham evam param Brahman* (I am verily the supreme Brahman).

The man's fatal mistake was that he attributed to his unregenerated personal self God's attributes and that he drew fantastic and childish consequences from this fact. Philosophically speaking, his error can be described as a confusion between Absolute and relative truth, between the metaphysical and the personal standpoint.

This is an extreme case, but more or less pronounced instances of such confusion are not uncommon among people who are dazzled by the contact with a spiritual truth which is too great for their mental powers to grasp and to assimilate in the right way. We probably all know of such cases which are to be found in every cult and spiritual movement.

This "confusion of planes" might often be avoided, I believe, if the metaphysical doctrines were presented with more qualifications and wise warnings. When the mistake has crept in, it is useless to try to convince the individual that he is entirely wrong and to ridicule his delusion: this only arouses his opposition and resentment. The better way is to sympathize with him, admitting the ultimate truth of his belief, but then to point out where the mistake lies and to train his mind to make the necessary distinctions.

In other cases the sudden flash of illumination produces rather an emotional upheaval which expresses itself in intense and disordered reactions—shouting and crying, singing and all sorts of hysterical outbursts.

Those who belong to the active, aggressive type are often impelled by the excitement of the awakening to play the role of the prophet or saviour, to found a new sect characterised usually by fanaticism and proselytism.

In some unbalanced and neurotic types there is an awakening of psychism. They have visions, generally of exalted beings; or they may hear voices, or begin to write automatically, taking the messages at their face value and obeying them unreservedly. The quality of such messages is very diverse: sometimes

they contain very beautiful teachings, but they should always be examined with much discrimination and judgment, without regard to their abnormal origin or to any claim of their alleged transmitter. Diffidence should be exercised especially towards messages containing definite orders and commanding blind obedience or tending to exalt the personality of the receiver. True spiritual teachers never use such methods.

Apart from the authenticity and the value of the messages, there is danger for the health, and for the emotional and mental control, in allowing such psychic activities. There are other and higher kinds of powers which are

the result of a full spiritual development and realisation and which are consciously used and fully controlled by the soul.

Diffidence should be exercised especially towards messages containing definite orders and commanding blind obedience or tending to exalt the personality of the receiver.

Reactions To The Spiritual Awakening

3. The reactions which we shall deal with in this section unfold and generally occur a certain time after the awakening.

As I have said, an harmonious spiritual awakening is characterised by a sense of joy and mental illumination which brings with it an insight into the meaning and purpose of life; it dispels many doubts, offers the solution to many problems and gives us a sense of inner security. At the same time one realizes that Life is One and a great outpouring of spiritual love flows through the awakened individual towards his fellow beings and the whole of creation. Indeed, nothing is more refreshing and

delightful than the sight of a neophyte reveling in such a “state of grace”. The former personality, with its sharp angles and disagreeable traits, seems to have vanished, and a new loving and lovable individual smiles at us and at the whole world, full of eagerness to please and to Serve, and to share his newly acquired spiritual riches, the abundance of which seems almost too much for him to contain.

Such a blessed state lasts for varying periods, but it is bound to cease. The lower self was only temporarily overpowered and stunned, but not killed or transformed. The inflow of spiritual light and love is rhythmical, as is everything in the manifested universe; after a while it diminishes or ceases—the out-flow is followed by the ebb.

This is a most painful experience for the neophyte and it is apt, in some cases, to produce strong reactions and cause serious troubles. The lower self reawakens and asserts itself with renewed force. All the rocks and rubbish which had been covered and concealed by the high tide emerge again.

The man whose moral conscience has become more refined and exacting, whose thirst for perfection has become more intense, judges with greater severity and condemns with a new vehemence his personality and he is apt to nurture the false belief of having fallen lower than before. It sometimes happens that some lower propensities and impulses which had been lying dormant in the subconscious are vitalised by the inrush of higher energy, or stirred into a fury of opposition by the spiritual consecration of the awakened soul, which is a challenge and a menace to them. (This corresponds in some respects to what H. P. Blavatsky describes in *The Secret Doctrine* as the “pledge fever”, by which many serious aspirants are affected.)

At times the reaction goes so far that the individual even denies the value and the reality of his recent spiritual experience. Doubts and criticisms enter his mind and he is tempted to consider the whole thing as an illusion, a fantasy or a sentimental inebriation. He becomes

bitter and sarcastic, ridicules himself and others, and even turns his back on his spiritual ideals and aspirations. Yet, however hard he may try, he cannot return to his old state; he *has seen the vision*, and its beauty and attractiveness remain with him, in spite of his efforts to suppress it. He cannot accept everyday life as before, or be satisfied with it. A divine homesickness haunts him and leaves him no peace.

Sometimes the reaction is of a more pathological character; fits of depression, of despair and temptation to suicide may constitute a real problem.

The proper treatment in such a crisis consists in imparting a clear understanding of its nature and in explaining the only true way to overcome it. We should make clear to the “patient” that the state of grace he has experienced could not last forever and that the reaction was inevitable. It was as though he had made a superb flight to the sunlit mountain tops and thus realised their glory and the vastness and the beauty of the panorama spread below; but after the flight one is brought back to the starting point, and one has to climb step by step, the steep path which leads to the heights.

The realisation that this descent or “fall” is a natural happening affords a great relief to the mind and heartens the pilgrim to undertake the arduous task which confronts him on the path towards Reality.

Phases of the Process of Transmutation

4. We have now to deal with the stage in which the aspirant has recognised that the necessary conditions to be fulfilled and the price to be paid for the high achievement of union with Divine Reality are the complete transmutation and regeneration of the personality.

It is a long and many-sided process, which includes phases of active purification in order to remove the obstacles to the inflow and operation of spiritual forces; phases of developing and building up of faculties which lie dormant or undeveloped; and phases in which the personal self has to

remain still and let the spirit work, enduring the pressure and the inevitable pain of the process.

It is a most eventful period, full of changes, of alternations between light and darkness, between joy and suffering.

The energies and the attention of the aspirant are often so engrossed in his task that his power of coping with the problems and activities of normal life may be impaired. Observed from the outside and gauged in terms of ordinary efficiency he seems to have deteriorated and to be less capable than before. Superficial and unjust judgments on the of well meaning but unenlightened friends or physicians are not spared him, and often he is the butt of pungent and sarcastic remarks about the “fine” results of spiritual ideals and aspirations which make him weak and ineffective in practical life. Such comments are sometimes very painful to the sensitive aspirant. At times he may be influenced by them and became a prey to doubts and discouragement.

This trial constitutes one of the tests on the Path and a lesson in overcoming personal sensitiveness, in steadfastness, independence of judgment and in detachment. Aspirants should accept it cheerfully and use it as an opportunity for acquiring strength. If, on the other hand, the people who surround the aspirant are enlightened and understand, they can be of great help and protect him from unnecessary friction and suffering.

In reality it is a period of transition; a passing out from the old state, without having reached the new; an intermediate stage in which, as it has been aptly said by a teacher,—one is “seeing double.” This condition is similar to that of the caterpillar undergoing the process of transformation into the winged butterfly; the insect has to pass through the stage of the chrysalis which is a condition of disintegration and helplessness. But the aspirant generally has not the privilege of the protecting cocoon in which to undergo in seclusion and peace the process of transformation. He must, particularly now-a-days, remain where he is in life and continue to per-

form his family, professional and social duties as well as possible, as though nothing were happening.

His problem is similar to that which confronted the engineering experts whose task it was to reconstruct and enlarge a certain busy London station without interrupting traffic even for one hour.

It is not surprising, then, that such a difficult and complicated work may produce certain nervous and mental troubles in the form of nervous exhaustion, insomnia, emotional depression, aridity, mental agitation and restlessness. These in turn, owing to the great influence of the mind on the body, can easily produce the most varied physical symptoms and disorders.

In treating such cases, the true cause must be recognised and dealt with, because all external and merely physical remedies might help in alleviating the symptoms, counteracting the worst results, but they obviously cannot radically cure the condition.

Sometimes the trouble is caused or aggravated by an exaggerated *personal* effort to force the higher development, resulting in the repression instead of the transformation of the lower elements, with an undue intensification of the struggle and of the consequent nervous and mental strain.

The aspirant must realise that the fundamental work is always done by the soul and its energies, and that his chief task is to attract these energies by his aspiration, his meditation and his right attitude, and then allow them to perform the work of purification and adjustment within him. He needs to grasp the profound meaning of the wise injunction contained in *Light on the Path*, Part Two:

1. “Stand aside in the coming battle, and though thou fightest be not thou the warrior.
2. Look for the Warrior, and let him fight in thee.
3. Take his orders for battle, and obey them.
4. Obey him, not as though he were a general, but as though he were thyself and his spoken words were the utterance of thy secret

desires; for *he is thyself, yet infinitely wiser and stronger than thyself*. Look for him, else in the fever and hurry of the fight thou mayest pass him; and *he will not know thee unless thou knowest him*. If thy cry meet his listening ear, then will he fight in thee, and fill the dull void within. And if this is so, then *canst thou go through and fight cool and unwearied, standing aside and letting him battle for thee*. Then it will be impossible for thee to strike one blow amiss. But if thou look not for him; if thou pass him by, then there is no safeguard for thee. Thy brain will reel, thy heart grow uncertain, and in the dust of the battlefield thy sight and senses will fail and thou wilt not know thy friends from thy enemies. He is thyself. Yet thou art but finite and liable to error; he is eternal and is sure. He is eternal truth. When once he has entered thee and become thy Warrior, he will never utterly desert thee; and at the day of the great peace he will become one with thee.”

A different, and in a sense opposite difficulty confronts the aspirant during the periods in which

the flow of spiritual force from the soul is easy and abundant. If not wisely controlled, it may be scattered in feverish excitement and activity. Or, on the contrary, it may be kept too much in abeyance and unexpressed, so that it accumulates and through its strong pressure and high voltage may injure the subtle and physical bodies, just as an electric current of too great strength may produce a short circuit, burning out the fuses and melting the wires.

The true solution is to use constructively and harmoniously the spiritual energies in the work of inner regeneration, in creative expression and in fruitful service, according to the individual's condition and the opportunities of the individual.

Other difficulties may arise from the different *qualities* of the forces brought into play.

The quality of the soul's energy, (which is technically called the Ray of the Ego, may be different from that predominant in the personality). This frequently produces a period of conflict between the two which may cause various nervous diseases until an adjustment is effected.

To be concluded

The effort to produce soul contact or to hinder it is working out in the form of nervous diseases and pathological conditions and this is affecting potently the group activity of man. The effort by the dark forces to stimulate the lower psychic powers seems able to reach no deeper into matter and form than the etheric vehicles and from there to condition the physical body physiologically in the form of diseases, lesions, nervous troubles and brain afflictions and the many other ways in which the human being is rendered helpless and unfitted to cope with daily living and modern world conditions. But the mind nature has reached a stage of protective usefulness and some of the great guarding barriers which are flung up around humanity at this time are the spirit of scepticism, and the refusal to recognise the existence or the usefulness of the psychic powers. This is a point to be remembered.

Esoteric Psychology, Vol. II, p. 579