

Mysticism and the Dark Night of the Soul
Considerations from the viewpoint of transpersonal psychotherapy
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“Lead me in the face of temptation”

Providing company on the journey through the dark night of the soul

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In which way is transpersonal psychotherapy different from other methods of psychotherapy? Does transpersonal psychotherapy support spiritual practice? Can transpersonal psychotherapy help to provide guidance on the journey through “the dark night of the soul?”

In this text I will not be dealing with the treatment of acute spiritual crises. For that please feel free to refer to my article on this specific topic “Spirituelle Krise – Was kann man tun“ (Spiritual Crises and how to deal with them) that was published in Phönix-magazine in 2004. This can also be found on my homepage: www.parasamvit.de

Today I shall focus on individuals who, either as a consequence of their meditation practice or as a totally unexpectedly event, experience the dissolution of their ego-structure and fearfully shy away from the sudden sense of boundless space, freedom, and lack of structure. In such situations any accompanying spiritual “mountain guide” needs to have deep trust in the path and in the result of the outcome from her own personal journey on the spiritual path in order to be able to stand by the affected person.

The person who is “growing into” this new freedom can only be effectively accompanied by the guide in a meaningful way if the individual is willing to face this existential experience. Doing so can then enable the integration of all aspects of the client’s personality, while at the same time releasing her. This process requires the accompaniment of an experienced guide who is herself free from anxiety.

John of the Cross (a Christian mystic), describes this purification process using the metaphor of a log of wood which is first dried by the fire, becomes dark and ugly but then, while it gets drier and drier, shines more and more brightly and spreads its warmth : “... The log of wood now carries the characteristics and the effects of the fire within itself: it is dry and it makes things dry, it is warm and it gives warmth, it is light and it casts light, and it is much lighter than before...” (from „Die Dunkle Nacht“ (The Dark Night), 1586).

We will now consider the usual psychosomatic or psychotherapeutic approach:

People start psychotherapy because they are suffering from physical or psychological problems that keep them from engaging in their daily routine and experiences without pain, without any obstacles or even with satisfaction and happiness.

So the aim of therapy is to provide healing for the client.

Now the question arises: Is it possible at all to provide healing, and if so, what does “healing” mean?

Also, what is the task of the therapist in that process?

Healing as I see it is the process of “becoming whole” again; meaning, I know myself and my abilities, and I am able to implement them effectively, I am aware of my thoughts and

feelings and I am authentic in my actions. Also my abilities and resources are available to me.

Where is this so called “Ego”?

Psychotherapy is basically dealing with getting to know the Ego of an individual, with understanding how that Ego developed and continues to develop, and finally stabilize. From an integral perspective (see Ken Wilber, a well known authority of transpersonal psychotherapy), human beings, from the moment of their birth, develop from a “Non-Ego” (also called pre-personal) to an Ego, (also called “personal” or “persona”), via a variety of conditioning influences over the course of their lives that they identify with more and more. The personal consciousness experiences itself as the central Ego-consciousness, which controls all emotions, reflexes, thoughts etc. by the help of reason, thus reflecting itself in the process. However if we ask ourselves where this Ego is actually located, we realize very quickly that we can neither see nor touch or fix it. The Ego is something which is constantly changing.

The Inner Observer

If we then ask ourselves who is actually asking that question about herself, about her own Ego, we realize that there is an Inner Entity which can observe herself from the inside while at the same time having the ability to notice all the events of life going on on the outside. We call this entity the “Inner Observer”. This is not merely an extension of the splitting of the Ego as known from depth psychology; it is more an externalisation versus the ego splitting.

If one looks at oneself and the world around her from this perspective of the Inner Observer, the angle of vision is much wider than the angle of the Ego without the functions and qualities of the Ego being lost. This angle of vision or perspective is transpersonal.

This, however, is not dissociation in the clinical sense. Nothing is being split off, but the relationship with oneself is always mindfully maintained. This must especially be taken into consideration when dealing with “meditation practitioners” with an unstable personality structure.

The changing nature of the Ego

Assuming this perspective or angle of vision, I realize the constantly changing nature of the Ego, how reason constantly searches for explanations for its state of being, and how it constantly judges and categorizes everything that is perceived.

Anything happening in life that does not fit these categories leads to anxiety.

The biggest fear of the Ego is the fear of its own dissolution which feels like dying. This is why reason tries everything it can to reassure the Ego of its illusory stability.

Thus, **transpersonal consciousness** is able to put the so-called stable Ego-structure into a wider context. It can see that all thoughts and emotions are of a temporary nature, that there is nothing one can take hold of or that remains the same.

The only thing that remains is the observation of everything that happens inside of me and around me. And this observation is free. It rather is a state of watching, of being aware, a state of observing how, in every moment, a new Ego is being created and fades away.

Classical psychotherapy supports the stabilization of the Ego by revealing inner ambivalences and thus helping the client to come to a new state of inner balance. Closeness and distance, opening up and defining boundaries, adaptation and autonomy must be perceived in a differentiated fashion and developed individually.

Whereas **transpersonal psychotherapy** goes beyond the Ego-consciousness, moving into the transpersonal sphere of consciousness. It thus opens up a dimension which can be seen as the canvas or screen for the individual biography. A screen on which the film of life can be watched. Healing or “becoming whole” includes this transpersonal dimension.

In that case, psychotherapy would not be something the psychotherapist does actively, but in order for healing to take place it needs a fundamental attitude of presence, a radical acceptance and acknowledgement of the other person, a space, where change can happen, and the willingness of the therapist to accompany and support this process of healing.

On the basis of this attitude the other person and his problems are not judged on the basis of moral or other standards as being healthy/ill or right/wrong. Rather, the success of the therapy is defined by the other person’s ability to spread his wings, develop, advance, and find more options for acting in his daily life.

So, **the aim of therapy for the client** is not primarily to overcome all problems, for example to get freedom from all problems, but to develop the ability to accept everything that is including the ability to change and integrate life situations into his own life or change them.

It is the therapist’s job then, to find the suitable way forward together with the client and to radically accept him in his individuality.

Transpersonal psychotherapy goes even a step further and accompanies the client to the place of the Inner Observer, which is also the place of inner freedom, so that he gains the ability to act freely in his daily life.

In doing so, **transpersonal psychotherapy** focuses on the resources and unique abilities of the client. At the same time, it introduces the perspective of the Supra-individual Being, so that after the identification with the Ego and its problems has been recognized it becomes possible to let this identification go.

In this process exercises in mindfulness and meditation are extremely helpful.

Thus, transpersonal psychotherapy is not a new form of therapy but rather the extension of conventional psychotherapy by the non-dualistic level of consciousness. Consequently, the therapist has to be familiar with that level of consciousness in order to be able to work from that inner space. The transpersonal space of consciousness cannot be created, rather it is always present and we develop or mature into it.

How does this process unfold?

From a psychotherapeutic perspective, the Ego is a collection of conditionings and attributions caused and made by others, that we accept and adopt during the course of our life. Parents, teachers, bosses, friends, partners – everybody gives us feedback on who we are, what our qualities and characteristics are, what we are able or not able to do, which talents we have and what we should or should not think or feel. Over and above

this, they judge us on how well or how badly we adopted these attributes.

In society we are classified as belonging to certain groups – professional groups, social groups, religious groups, etc., and these classifications keep changing all the time. They change just as much as our body, our emotions, and our thoughts constantly change. So, the Ego actually consists of an infinite number of different stories that one has lived through and identify with. Consequently, the Ego is not an independent being but a collection of learned behaviours and patterns. This Ego defines the centre and the direction of our perception in everyday life.

The shadows of one's personality

Apart from emotions and thoughts, this collection of personality traits also includes suppressed parts of our individual consciousness, such as fears, depression, doubts, mistrust, rage or hate - to put it in a nutshell: the shady side of our individual consciousness or personality. However, this part also wants to be seen, accepted, and, in the final analysis, integrated, because we cannot get rid of our shadows.

We are more than ready to see these shadows or demons, (from the Greek word "Daimon" = split off) in others, but we do not want to accept them as part of ourselves. This is why psychotherapy also has the task of helping to recognize this split-off part of ourselves which is needed to not be seen as negative, but to accept it and thus integrate it into ourselves. This process of externalization and subsequent internalization is necessary in order to develop a stable personality.

It is helpful in this context to look at everything that appears without judging it: "*Yes, that's the way it is*", or: "*Everything just as it is*", as Shunryu Suzuki says.

What is to be transformed?

Beyond that, it can become a transforming process, a process that leads to the identification and recognition of the transpersonal space of consciousness if it becomes clear through the position of the Inner Observer that thoughts and emotions are constantly changing, and that our Ego is constantly offering identification with these emotions. At the same time we realize that nothing remains constant and that we cannot hold on to anything.

We realize how much we are being controlled by thoughts and feelings instead of controlling them. We also realize, though, that this inner Entity of Observation remains unaffected by these thoughts and feelings, that there is an inner core that has never been touched, the quality of which cannot be affected. If and when we connect with that inner perspective – which is experienced in meditation – then we can observe these emotions or emerging thoughts without them completely flooding and overwhelming us thus clouding our consciousness; we gain an inner distance from them. Thus, they cease to be the demons we felt helplessly exposed to.

Spiritual challenges

Sometimes this process does not happen without struggle or crisis. Crises or spiritual challenges are a part of human life; they help us to mature.

A crisis is often defined as a situation in life in which the usual coping mechanisms are no longer sufficient in order to anchor oneself in daily life and adequately master it. Such situations may be experienced as life-threatening or even as a process of going crazy.

That one fears that he has lost the ability to function “normally”.

A spiritual crisis is a situation in life, in which every-day consciousness is suddenly confronted with internal and/or external experiences that it does not know or that differ from the known perception. For example: moments in which something breaks into our life which reason cannot explain, such as energetic phenomena, broadened perception, borderline experiences, mystical moments, a loss of the Ego structure, pure consciousness enters, and the feeling of being split-off ends, or a feeling of boundlessness can occur.

In moments like these, transpersonal psychotherapy can help to understand the experience and integrate it into the individual's personality structure. Thus, the personality can mature into a stable state which is able to contain the intensity of pure consciousness.

The tricky part of transformation

The manifestation and extent of such a spiritual challenge differs from person to person. For people with unstable personalities, the transformation can lead to severe depression or even suicidal thoughts. Others can become temporarily psychotic or show a multitude of psychosomatic symptoms. Also it can easily happen that the anxiety triggered by the spiritual experience gets mixed up with neurotic traits and defence patterns.

It depends on the individual's personality how the sudden dissolution of the Ego structure is experienced – as a sort of spiritual awakening as an enlightening experience or as a crisis. It also makes a major difference whether someone is totally unprepared for that experience or already meditates, has devoted some time to studying the spiritual knowledge of the sages, and has at least theoretically heard about de-identification or experienced brief moments of physical dissolution during meditation.

What is needed in such a situation?

First of all one needs someone at their side who knows about such unusual states: a guide who can tell and show them that it is possible to come through such a situation. Anxiety is often the worst part of the awakening.

In acute situations, the client requires the company of a guide, and for stabilization he needs specific physical exercises, conversations, breathing exercises, and possibly medication.

After the mind, the nervous system, and the body have finally calmed down, this is when the actual inner work starts, namely, to mentally understand, process, and, in the final analysis, to integrate what one experienced in the moment of losing the Ego-structure.

All of a sudden, one sees oneself, the world around him, and reality in a completely different light. They wonder if they will be able to really adopt this new way of seeing things and integrate it into their daily life? Something immeasurable has happened to them. People often experience that the sense of the body structure is gone. They may feel this world to be not stable and consistent. Even when bodily sensations and the sensation of Ego disappear, they may wonder: There is still the consciousness of being? They may wonder, is this me? Will it stay like this? Can I cope with this in this world of relativity or have I become crazy?

And what about the anxiety that always tries to pull me back into known structures and habits?

Mature, integrated personalities can also experience a crisis.

John of the Cross, (a Christian mystic), calls this phase “The dark night of the senses, the soul, and the mind”.

Often it has all the symptoms of a classical depression. It is characterized by anxiety, an anxiety which is not directed at anything but is pure anxiety born out of itself. Additionally, there is often a feeling of pointlessness and hopelessness.

What happens to the Ego?

In this state it becomes radically clear that the Ego, my will power and my former experiences are not really helpful. It seems as if all security has disappeared from my life. All of them can still be there, but the place of identifying myself has changed. Everything can continue as before, but I now know everything is temporary and changing, and as such I identify as my unchanging Self. The Ego cannot answer my questions about the meaning of life, the true reality or about life and death and what comes after it. So the Ego is in fear of dying, while I am the unchanging immortal Self, the Inner Watcher, the one who knows and watches everything without being or becoming anything.

And who am I?

It such a moment, the Ego realizes its own ineffectiveness. It thus feels meaninglessness, and as a reaction to that immediately produces further feelings of anxiety, depression and emptiness and sometimes physical symptoms as well. It realizes that the Ego is nothing stable or independent. Every bit of certainty about oneself and the world around me is lost. Now, who am I then? The entire personality is calling itself into question, the seemingly stable structure of everyday life is turned upside down and the person is deeply shaken. This is also called the “dying of the Ego”, because this is how it feels.

The Ego-level is no longer able to provide support, while at the same time, spiritual consciousness is also not sufficiently stable yet. Where it provided security before, meditation now creates even more anxiety. One might even conclude that it was meditation that got oneself into this crisis. And this can add a feeling of guilt. The person falls into a state of absolute panic. Often the daily routine cannot be continued or resumed again which creates even more anxiety, such that the Ego desperately tries to get out of this state.

One also realizes that the Ego is hardly able to control emotions. The client realises that he is not in the driver’s seat. And the Ego is overwhelmed.

What can the therapist do?

Only a therapist who has experienced such a state herself can recognize that this is not a classical depression, but a transformation process, a purification, and dissolution of the Ego.

For the person concerned it initially comes as a major provocation to hear this from her therapist, because that person is suffering enormously. Only a therapist that has experienced these depths herself can credibly explain that this is a spiritual process and help the client to actually accept this state. When I say “accept” or “acceptance”, I mean the state of deep humility that makes you recognize that I or my Ego cannot “bring about” this state and that, consequently, I or my Ego cannot bring this state to an end. The only thing I can do, is to entrust myself and my suffering to the transpersonal. Transformation has it’s own rhythm, and I deeply bow to the immensity of what is happening.

What is helpful in this situation?

First it needs regular dialogue which enables the client to express his inner experiences without being judged. The therapist needs to have sufficient inner openness in order to freely accept everything that is being said.

It is also important to explain repeatedly to the client, that he is not suffering from a classical depression, rather he is undergoing a process of purification. This process takes courage, because there is no way back. The only thing one can do is to carry on with patience, trust, and respect for own efforts. The Ego cannot do anything himself but hand over the entire process to the "Healing Space".

It is no classical depression

This is why the client should not give in to depression, but should distance himself from it again and again, knowing that he has a body, and he is not defined by the body, that he has thoughts and emotions but he is not defined by these emotions.

Again, the Ego is strongly tempted to identify with that state. Now, "not giving in" does not mean to suppress or split-off these emotions, but to assign a place to them.

"What does the sky care, if clouds pass it by?"

A mirror is sometimes used in a metaphorical way. It is said: be a mirror that reflects the thoughts and ideas but stay untouched by them. Thus, remain a pure mirror that does not judge what is happening and that realizes that whatever is happening is happening without your being able to influence it. It is an emotional or psychological event, but it is not your actual Being. Your actual Being is the Self.

Stay focused in this moment

In that process it is helpful to stay focused on the "Now" as Eckhart Tolle says: Now I breathe, now I walk, now I do a certain activity.

Activities in nature, or different activities such as gardening, sports, music, or painting often enable a person to express her feelings. Often, it is not so important what I do. What is important, is the inner stance of what Buddhist call the mindfulness and slowness in what I do. In being aware to the moment, in being present one can often recognize that there is no Ego suffering. However, as soon as one loses the focus of mindfulness, thinking starts again, the fear and anxiety may come back in association with the intellect.

It is also important not to look for answers or explanations in that state, but rather to dwell in this empty space of the inexplicable for a while and meditate.

Meditation

Meditation is helpful in that process, and it is preferable to mediate together with others than alone. If meditating alone triggers too much anxiety or if the client has not been meditating so far, joint moments of silence are a softer option, especially if there has been talk before.

During meditation we close our eyes and practice looking into the space behind the eyes and to observe what happens. In doing so we realize, often for the first time in our life, how little we can control what we feel and think: we are just thinking along, feeling something. We realize how we believe that we are these feelings and thoughts and how difficult it is not to identify with them. It takes patient practice until inner calmness and quiet unfolds.

Step by step we realize that our permanent thinking and feeling deludes us into believing in continuity; the Ego is just an illusion.

We are that, which never changes

When we start to get more and more connected with that inner space that we look into, we realize that this space is always there, that it never disappears, and that it remains unaffected by anything that happens in the outside world. It seems to open ever more widely and deeply, boundless, empty and at the same time tightly packed. This space is what remains when the personal Ego disappears. This space is our actual Being.

Through the process of realization of that, which is our actual Being, it reveals itself: We are this space. That can trigger the same anxiety in persons who are experienced practitioners of meditation as it can trigger persons who unexpectedly lose their Ego-structure, as described above. Because all of a sudden there is this feeling of “no-body” and “no-time”, the limited experience of space confined to the body is lost, there is a suspension of thinking and feeling and the clients perception of inner space becomes boundless and infinitely vast.

Breathing exercise

In order to overcome the anxiety a helpful technique is to be anchored in the breath and regulate as follows: inhale - pause – exhale – pause – observe – carry on –.

Observing one’s breath in meditation can also be used as a micro-strategy in one’s daily routine.

I am the space

This state is similar to the pre-personal state of consciousness where there is no separation. However, in contrast to the pre-personal state, consciousness and the ability to distinguish are maintained. An alertness realizes the Being as an infinite quietness and vastness. This is the moment when many practitioners of meditation may be frightened, because they no longer experience a feeling of well being: there is only vastness and endless space.

Anyone who experiences this moment needs the guidance of one, who is already travelling this path. This allows one to relax into the space, and the space into which you relax is you.

Many people shy away from this and look for anchoring in the Ego. Perhaps they had imagined the transpersonal space to be connected to bliss or the feeling of calm and peace, but all of a sudden there is nothing. Simply nothing. Emptiness.

In order not to succumb to the temptation of falling back to the known, the company of the one on the path and his guidance is required: “And lead me in the face of temptation”. In these moments it is very tempting to fall back to old patterns of behaviour in the neurotic sense or to seek diversion and compensation through work, entertainment, alcohol, or similar things.

The state of awareness as such

When one identifies as space, the separation between the observer, subject, object, and

the process of observing dissolves. At that time there is only space, Oneness. It is the state of observation as such. It does not move; it is totally quiet. It brings things to an end, it causes things to stop and there are no new complications. At this stage one realises without fear that one is this infinite space, with no end and no beginning, and without a centre. It is boundless, timeless and eternal. The awareness of one's immeasurability can only be grasped by one who is a prepared receptacle with a stable personality. Through this whole process one's perception is refined and it becomes more subtle.

This state of consciousness cannot be brought about; it materializes as an act of grace. Meditation prepares one for this subtle state. If this state materializes on a regular basis, the body system gets stronger and stronger and becomes accustomed to it, and the state of awareness evolves.

The state of awareness in all day life

Through this deepening the state of awareness remains more and more present in the waking state. First it is an echo and then it is experienced more and more consciously. At the same time one maintains the ability to act affectively in the relative world. All the possibilities of engaging in the world remain acceptable, but there is no longer any attachment to them. The daily tasks that have to be done are done. The everyday activities can be performed in the light of non-doership. There is no continuity any longer. Feelings appear, are expressed and disappear. They no longer have their former intensity. The past may appear as a mental memory, yet there need not be any emotional reaction to it. The echo and thus the after-effects of the past are over.

The flow of thoughts is not problematic, as it may have been at one time. One's perception is now fine-tuned, and a person grasps a situation fully. Perception is now both, broad, and focused. As one now perceives oneself as pure consciousness, so one perceives any so called others as that same pure consciousness. Ego is in Me, I am not in or contained by ego.

This state goes hand in hand with a freedom from anxiety, something that is immediately felt by any one in there contact. This creates trust in the other person to also entrust himself to this state of infinite space and quiet.

If this state is experienced as something pleasant in any way, this is still an identification of the Ego and it must also be let go. Then the state of pure consciousness, which is not a state - but our true Being - can materialize. As anything that has a beginning has an end – birth and death, time and space – so is that, which is unborn and deathless, our true being. Only then is it possible to see the constant flow of everything and the inherent quietness in everyone and everything.

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