

# Mystical Stages and Personality Development.

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In what follows I want to illustrate the similarities in patterns of development found in the personal documents of mystics and the growth of personality described by the clinical psychologist, Kazimierz Dąbrowski. Dąbrowski has also discussed the functions of various mystical practices, such as asceticism and meditation, and of mystical experiences, in the development of personality and I will provide some concrete examples of these.

## **Dąbrowski's concept of multilevel disintegration**

Dąbrowski (Dąbrowski & Piechowski, 1977) has articulated a five-stage model of personality development. In the first stage persons are integrated around their physiological needs; in the fifth and final stage persons are integrated around an ultimate and transcendent ideal. The three intermediate stages are three levels of personality disintegration. The first of these (level II) is called unilevel disintegration, a stage characterized by ambivalence and susceptibility to pressure from others. Unilevel disintegration is followed by a process of multilevel disintegration.

The shift from unilevel to spontaneous multilevel disintegration (i.e., from level II to level III) is indicated by the presence of an intrinsic hierarchy of values. Conflict takes place between satisfying biological drives and pressure from others on the one hand, and altruistic and transcendental concerns on the other. Failure to live in a manner consistent with the hierarchy of values results in self-criticism. The values hierarchy also provides a means of critically evaluating, and resisting, the expectations of others.

Level IV is called organized multilevel disintegration because individuals are able to plan and take control of their own development. Autonomy, from biological drives and social pressures, is much stronger, as is the intrinsically determined hierarchy of values. The result is that inner conflict becomes weaker as behaviour is increasingly integrated and oriented towards self-perfection and the service of others.

## Examples of spontaneous multilevel struggle in mystical lives

An example of multilevel conflict can be found in the early life of the Hasidic rebbe, Nahman of Bratslav, as reported by his biographer, Nathan of Nemirov:

No act in the service of God came easily to him; everything came only as a result of great and repeated struggle. He rose and fell thousands and thousands of times, really beyond all counting. It was terribly difficult for him even to enter into the service of God, to accept the yoke of his service. He would enter into worship for a certain number of days, then he would experience a fall. He would go back, start over, and then fall again. Finally after many such cycles, he would gain strength and decide that he would remain committed to God's service forever, allowing nothing in the world to lead him astray. From that time forth his heart was strongly with God -- but even afterwards he would constantly undergo countless rises and falls... (Green, 1992:40)

Another example of multilevel disintegration in a mystical life is provided by the German Dominican monk, Henry Suso (1295-1366). Suso speaks of himself in the third person and describes his internal conflict in terms of a battle between two voices:

After God's influence had touched him, he began to experience struggles in himself...The interior urgings, which arose in him from God, demanded of him a painful rejection of everything that could be an obstacle for him. Temptation stood in his way by suddenly posing this consideration: "Better think it over! It's easy at the beginning, but sheer drudgery to finish." An inner voice reminded him of God's strength and help. An opposing voice countered that there could be no doubt about God's power, but that what was open to question was whether he wanted to help... (Suso, 1989:64)

A final example of multilevel disintegration can be found in the autobiography of an Indian swami, named Purohit, who later in his life, (i.e., in the early twentieth-century ) brought Hinduism to Britain, and was a source of inspiration for the poet, W.B. Yeats. In this passage Purohit laments the fact that he was unable to control his mind.

[My mind] wavered and revolted in spite of my strenuous efforts. Unmarried, a strict celibate, I knew that unless my mind were under control all my professions would prove false. My thoughts made me angry; I would scold them, then coax them with spiritual texts into observance of the laws of religion. It was an incessant fight, which used up all my strength. (Purohit, 1992:29-40)

## Asceticism

For mystics, the organized multilevel response to spontaneous disintegration is a program of spiritual exercises, prominent among which are asceticism and meditation. With regard to the former, Dąbrowski has the following to say,

As a factor in development, we observe the activity of an instinct of partial death. It is a conscious and deliberate program of eradication of the lower personality structures. In order to accomplish this, the disintegrative activity of some dynamisms (for example, the rejection aspect of the third factor, the critical aspect of subject-object in oneself, or the containing aspect of self-control) may be increased in order to destroy the residual structures of primitive levels of the inner psychic milieu. This can take the form of asceticism, of resignation from personal ambitions for the sake of serving others, or deliberate and voluntary frustration of one's basic needs. (Dąbrowski & Piechowski, 1977:172-173)

In other words, the function of ascetical practices is to assist in the disintegration of lower level personality structures, in order to prepare the way for the reintegration of the personality at a higher level.

A portrayal of rather severe ascetical practice can be found in the autobiographical verses of the Maharashtrian saint, Bahina Bai (1628-1700). The description is in the form of a warning addressed to her "heart" (i.e., from Bahina's perspective, the inner part of herself that is in need of purification):

Oh my heart, your nature of attachment to worldly things was formed in a former birth, therefore the power of worldly things is great in you. I, therefore, pray you to listen to me. I have made my organs of sense willingly obedient to me. But if you do not mind what I tell you, I shall not let anything remain of my body. I shall fast, I shall stop my breathing. In the hottest season I shall sit in the midst of five fires (four at the sides, and the sun above); I shall torture my body by hanging head downward over a smoking fire; I shall wander to all the sacred bathing places of the earth; I shall adopt extreme fasting; I shall put my body to the saw. Then what will you gain by all this? Says Bahini, "Oh my heart, obey what I tell you. If you don't, you will have to go begging." (Bahina Bai, 1929:74-75)

The following is an account of asceticism by a modern Hindu mystic, Gopi Krishna (1903-1984), in which the developmental intent of gaining self-control is explicitly stated:

...I made it a point to assert my will in all things, beginning with smaller ones and gradually extending its application to bigger and more difficult issues, forcing myself as a penance to do irksome and rigorous tasks, against which my ease-loving nature recoiled in dismay, until I began

to feel a sense of mastery over myself, a growing conviction that I would not again fall an easy prey to ordinary temptations. (Krishna, 1993:82)

## **Meditation**

Dąbrowski's view of meditation is that it both inhibits lower level urges and strengthens those of a higher nature:

The dynamisms of inner inhibition are very strong as is the readiness to eliminate any "excitability" from lower sources. There is a program of methods and means of developing excitation on [a] higher level with simultaneous inhibition of dynamisms of medium or low level (that is, the interface of levels II and early III). The practice of meditation brings about inner quietude, calm awareness of one's weaknesses, calm equilibration of what has been achieved in the struggles of everyday life. This inner calm can be considered a meditative inhibition which strengthens our achievements. In rare moments, one may be given the chance to reach to very high levels of reality [i.e., in mystical experiences]. In such moments appear new insights which stimulate us "upwards." As an immediate result of the experience, this stimulation is full of positive and serene tension. It is calm excitation coming from "above." We would call it a contemplative excitation. (Dąbrowski & Piechowski, 1977, Vol.I:121)

In the case of the English hermit, Richard Rolle (1300-1349), the practice of meditation aroused strong positive feelings for his personality ideal, i.e., Jesus Christ.

As far as my study of scripture goes, I have found that to love Christ above all else will involve three things: warmth and song and sweetness. And these three, as I know from personal experience, cannot exist for long without there being great quiet. (Rolle, 1981:88-89)

I used to delight indeed to sit alone, so that away from all the racket my song could flow more easily. With heartfelt fervour I would feel the sweetest joy... (Rolle, 1981:148)

Gopi Krishna describes the effect of meditation on his thinking and behavior in the following words:

With the practice of meditation and the control I started to exercise over my thoughts and behavior, I felt a new vigor coming to my mind. The languor and lassitude which I felt in applying myself to the study of my texts began to disappear. A new self-confidence was born in me. I became more sober in my conversation and exchange of thoughts with others. (Krishna, 1993:113)

In addition to a direct influence on personality growth, not infrequently the developmental effects of persistent asceticism and meditation occur indirectly through mystical experience.

An example of a mystical experience resulting from persistence in a disciplined program of study and meditation is given in the autobiography of the Ming dynasty Neo-Confucian, Kao P'an-lu (1562-1626).

The next day...I earnestly arranged the mat and seriously set up rules and regulations. For one half of the day I practiced quiet-sitting [i.e., meditation] while for the other half I studied...At night I did not undress and only when I was weary to the bone did I fall asleep. Upon waking I returned to sitting, repeating and alternating these various methods of practice. When the substance of the mind was clear and peaceful there was a sense of filling all Heaven and earth, but it did not last. (Taylor, 1978:126-127)

That mystical experiences, of the kind alluded to by Kao, have a developmental function is made explicit by Dąbrowski.

### **Dąbrowski on the psychological function of mystical experience**

In the following passages from *Personality-Shaping Through Positive Disintegration*, Dąbrowski gives his view on the way in which contemplation and ecstasy influence the growth of the personality:

The capacity for contemplation...implies a passage from sensual to mental life, from external to internal experiences, from reactive emotional life to deepened emotional life coupled with the intellect, and from unrelated experiences to integrated experiences. But, above all, it is a sign that a man is becoming harmonized at a higher level. The state of contemplation implies a level of development at which a man...enters the world of higher values, from which he may draw inspiration and power, both of which are of great help in life. (Dąbrowski, 1967:32)

Ever more frequent and deeper ecstatic states fill a man with increasingly greater energy, thus enabling him to win ever stronger control over his instinctive nature. (Dąbrowski, 1967:34)

The developmental function ascribed, by Dąbrowski, to contemplation and ecstasy (i.e., to mystical experience) can be seen in numerous passages from the personal documents of mystics, such as the following from the fourteenth-century lay Catholic mystic, Rulwin Merswin:

[There] came an inner sense of the divine Being dwelling within me, so that I felt, whenever I looked at another man, that I could recognize in him that same kind of divine grace to some

extent...And I was aware, too, that the threefold powers -- faith, hope and love -- had been strengthened in me and took on a new significance for me. I felt an extraordinary peace of mind and joy in the Holy Spirit. I felt also a kind of inner satisfaction, so that all worldly things had become as nothing to me. I found such serenity of soul as is impossible to imagine. This was such an indescribably exhilarating experience... (Merswin, 1960:47-48)

Another example is a mystical experience of a Zen master (Yuan-chon Tsu-chin) who lived in China in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries:

I passed many years under the master Wu-chin, listening to his sermons and asking his advice, but there was no word which gave a final solution to my inner disquietude, nor was there anything in the sutras or the sayings of the masters, as far as I read, that could cure me of this heartache. Ten years thus passed without my being able to remove this hard inner obstruction. One day I was walking in the Buddha Hall at T'ien-mu when my eyes happened to fall on an old cypress tree outside the Hall. Just seeing this old tree opened a new spiritual vista and the solid mass of obstruction suddenly dissolved. It was as if I had come into the bright sunshine after having been shut up in the darkness. (Cited in Kubose and Umemoto, 1980:4)

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of the above has been to demonstrate in the lives of mystics: (1) the presence of multilevel personality disintegration; (2) the expression of organized multilevel disintegration in the form of asceticism and meditation; and (3) the role of mystical experience in personality growth. As a result of this demonstration it is possible to see the value of mystical lives as examples of advanced personality development.

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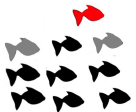
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