

Laurence Nixon
Religion Department
Dawson College

Nixon, L. (1994). Multilevel disintegration in the lives of religious mystics. *Advanced Development*, 6, 57-74.

Multilevel Disintegration in Mystical Lives

Abstract

In this article, I argue that scholarly analyses, of the inner struggle, reported by many mystics, correspond to Kazimierz Dabrowski's psychological account of the higher levels of personality disintegration. In addition to the case of St. Augustine, analyzed by Dabrowski himself, I cite Muslim and Neo-Confucian examples of mystical struggle, in order to show that personality disintegration in mystical lives is a universal phenomenon. Finally I compare the transition from spontaneous to organized multilevel disintegration in two additional mystics (separated by time, geography and religion) and suggest that such a transition is, at least for some traditional mystics, contingent upon a supportive environment and access to a mystical mentor.

Scholarly examination of the personal documents of a large number of mystics reveals a process in which intense inner conflict, accompanied by ascetical practices and meditation, is followed by illumination and psychospiritual transformation (e.g., James, 1929 & Underhill, 1960). It is my view that this general process of mystical growth corresponds in many respects with the stages of personality development as formulated by Kazimierz Dabrowski (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977). My concern in what follows is to focus on the similarities between the beginning of the mystical life, which I refer to as a period of mystical struggle, and the stages in personality development that Dabrowski calls spontaneous and organized multilevel disintegration.

Dabrowski's model of personality development

Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration identifies five stages of personality development:

(1) an initial stage of primitive integration in which emotional, imaginal and mental activities are subordinate to physiological drives or impulses; (2) three intermediate stages of personality disintegration; and (3) a final reintegration of the personality characterized by self-possession, responsibility, autonomy and authenticity, all of which flow effortlessly from a centre of consciousness that Dabrowski refers to as the personality ideal.

In order to arrive at the final stage of secondary integration, it is necessary to pass through three levels of disintegration which Dabrowski has called unilevel disintegration (level II), spontaneous multilevel disintegration (level III) and organized multilevel disintegration (level IV). All three are marked by inner conflict. In level II (unilevel disintegration) conflict arises as a result of the incompatible expectations of others with whom the individual has identified. Conflict also exists between the expectations of others and biological urges.

The shift to the next stage of multilevel disintegration is indicated by the advent of an intrinsic hierarchy of values. Here conflict is between satisfying biological drives and social expectations 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.

Two features of multilevel disintegration, especially of organized multilevel disintegration, are of particular relevance to this study. They are meditation and asceticism, and numerous references to them can be found in Dabrowski's writings, one example of which is his description of intuition at level IV:

Development and deepening of intuition is closely related to the increasing distance from lower levels of reality and closer approach to its higher levels....Intuition is, thus, developed by detachment from the needs of a lower level and by union with the personality ideal. Meditation and contemplation contribute to the growth of intuition. (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977, Vol.II:152)

Meditation is one of the means used by mystics to gain control over their minds and to communicate

with their inner selves (i.e., Dabrowski's personality ideal). The other means is asceticism which has as its goal detachment from the dominance of physiological and social needs.

According to the theory of positive disintegration, persons are predisposed toward personality growth if they possess a high degree of genetically determined psychic energy (or psychic overexcitability), particularly in the forms of emotional sensitivity (or emotional overexcitability), a heightened capacity for imaginative involvement (or imaginal overexcitability) and intellectual curiosity (or intellectual overexcitability). A role, albeit secondary, is also given to a variety of environmental factors, including that of a mentor, or therapeutic advisor:

We have...observed very many cases of vitiated development, one-sided development, and serious mental diseases which arose when an individual with personality indicators was not given proper help in his development. Therefore, although self-education is the main method of the development of personality, aid in this development by a competent person is advisable, and often necessary. (Dabrowski, 1967:145-146)

The divided self, the oscillating self and multilevel disintegration

Dabrowski's notion of spontaneous multilevel disintegration bears a marked similarity to what James calls the twice-born or sick soul. The correspondence has been noted by Hague in a study on religious and moral education:

...there is a remarkable consensus between Dabrowski's higher level individuals and the twice-born described by James. In contrast to the once-born or "healthy minded" individuals who bear much resemblance to people at Dabrowski's lower levels, the sick soul is searching, agonizing, hungering after truth and justice, dying and being born again in a process of positive disintegration. (Hague, 1986:156)

The correctness of Hague's assessment can easily be demonstrated by any one of a number of citations from James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, such as the following:

In the religion of the twice-born...the world is a double-storied mystery....Natural good is not simply insufficient ...there lurks a falsity in its very being...It keeps us from our real good, rather; and renunciation and despair of it are our first step in the direction of truth. There are two lives, the natural and the spiritual, and we must lose the one before we can participate in the other. (James, 1929:163)

Clearly James is here referring to a multilevel struggle between the personality ideal (the spiritual life) and, by implication, the desire to satisfy physiological impulses and the demands of others (the natural life).

According to James, underlying the religious type of the twice-born or sick soul is a psychological condition of emotional intensity:

The psychological basis of the twice-born character seems to be a certain discordancy or heterogeneity in the native temperament of the subject, an incompletely unified moral and intellectual constitution....Some persons are born with an inner constitution which is harmonious and well balanced from the outset. Their impulses are consistent with one another, their will follows without trouble the guidance of their intellect, their passions are not excessive, and their lives are little haunted by regrets. Others are oppositely constituted... (James, 1929:164-165)

Here James attributes the multilevel conflict within the sick soul to a personality disposition (which he elsewhere refers to as the divided self) that bears a marked resemblance to the constitutional factor identified by Dabrowski as essential for personality growth, i.e., emotional overexcitability. Hence it would seem as though there are some significant correspondences between James' analysis of religious mysticism and Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration.

For Evelyn Underhill, the mystical life begins with the experience of an awakening of the self. This may take place suddenly or gradually, but once it has occurred the individual possesses a hierarchy of values:

[The] awakening...is a disturbance of the equilibrium of the self, which results in the shifting of the field of consciousness from lower to higher levels....it means the first emergence of that passion for the Absolute which is to constitute [the mystic's] distinctive character: an emergence crucial in its effect on every department of his life. (Underhill, 1960:176-177)

The consequence of perceiving a higher order of things is the inevitable comparison between "what is" and "what ought to be" and the manifestation of a variety of self-critical dynamisms such as dissatisfaction with oneself, shame, guilt, etc.:

The first thing that the self observes, when it turns back upon itself in that awful moment of lucidity...is the horrible contrast between its clouded contours and the pure sharp radiance of the Real; between its muddled faulty life, its perverse self-centred drifting, and the clear onward sweep of that Becoming in which it is immersed. It is then that the outlook of rapture and awe [that characterizes the awakening] receives the countersign of repentance... (Underhill, 1960:200-202)

In addition to indicating some of the dynamisms of spontaneous multilevel disintegration, Underhill's reference to asceticism seems to suggest the manifestation of dynamisms of organized multilevel disintegration. This is supported by Dabrowski's contention that asceticism is an expression of organized multilevel disintegration:

Asceticism in the present meaning of the term consists in the dampening of natural instincts with a view to attaining a higher goal, usually of a religious and moral character. We see in ascetic practices a clearly conscious introduction of multilevel disintegration into the process of self-perfection, through a multilevel struggle between soul and body, between instincts and higher aspirationsAscetic exercises and struggles with the instincts made one capable of separating oneself from one's lower level. (Dabrowski, 1967:130)

Underhill's explanation for the awakening of the self is that those who experience it are emotionally sensitive, i.e., possess a mobile threshold of consciousness plus an emotionally empowered inner self, which inevitably must result in an emergence of that inner self into consciousness:

Like all intuitive persons, all possessors of genius, all potential artists...the mystics have, in psychological language, "thresholds of exceptional mobility." That is to say, a slight effort, a slight departure from normal conditions, will permit their latent or "subliminal" powers to emerge and occupy the mental field. A "mobile threshold" may make a man a genius, a lunatic, or a saint. All depends on the character of the emerging powers. In the great mystic, these powers, these tracts of personality lying below the level of the normal consciousness, are of unusual richness... (Underhill, 1960:62)

Like James, Underhill explains the oscillating or divided self (i.e., the multilevel self) in terms that anticipate Dabrowski's concept of emotional overexcitability.

From the above discussion it can be seen how closely the reflections of James and Underhill on the beginning of mystical development parallel those of Dabrowski on the disintegrative process in the growth of personality. These correspondences are further confirmed by comparing the assessments made by James, Underhill and Dabrowski of the inner turmoil recorded by Augustine in Books VII and VIII of his *Confessions*.

Augustine's mystical struggle

At the end of Book Six, of his *Confessions*, Augustine relates that his female companion was forced to leave him due to pressure from Augustine's mother, Monica. Augustine was beside himself with grief and in response he "took another mistress." He then informs us that, "nothing prevented [him] from plunging still deeper into the gulf of carnal pleasure except the fear of death and [God's] judgement to come" (Augustine, 1979:131-132).

Dabrowski's comments on this fear of death and judgement are as follows:

This fear deepened disintegration and led to a valuation of his inner attitudes, to a hierarchical structuring of his aims, to phenomena typical of multilevel disintegration and to the beginnings of integration at a higher level. It should be made clear that St. Augustine's apprehension,

resulting from a fear of justice and of punishment for his early life, was at that time not the manifestation of pure selfless love toward the highest Ideal; it was fear of a lower level, which in later years changed into selfless love. There developed [subsequently] an intense feeling of his own guilt and the feeling of shame in relation to himself, which were lacking in the former period. (Dabrowski, 1967:220-221)

At this point, according to Dabrowski's analysis, Augustine was on the verge of spontaneous multilevel disintegration.

To illustrate the subsequent "intense feeling of his own guilt and the feeling of shame in relation to himself" (indicative of spontaneous multilevel disintegration) in Augustine, Dabrowski (1967:221) cites the following passage from Book Eight of the *Confessions*:

...where I had placed it (his soul) so that I might see it not...that I might see myself, how deformed I was, how sordid, how full of spots and sores.

Dabrowski also cites, from Book Eight, a famous passage on the "two wills" as an additional example of the multilevel struggle experienced by Augustine:

...my two wills, one old and the other new, one carnal and the other spiritual, fight, one against the other, and by their discord they drag my soul asunder.

For James, Augustine's passage on the two wills is a classic example of the divided self.

Following his citation of the passage James comments to the effect that,

There could be no more perfect description of the divided will [a synonym for the divided self], when the higher wishes lack just that last acuteness, that touch of explosive intensity, of dynamogenic quality (to use the slang of the psychologists), that enables them to burst their shell, and make irruption efficaciously into life and quell the lower tendencies forever. (James, 1929:170)

For Underhill as well, the period in Augustine's life following Book VI is an example of the oscillation of the self (i.e., of mystical struggle), and she illustrates her point with a citation from Book VII, Chapter 17:

The great oscillations of the typical mystic between joy and pain are here replaced by a number of little ones. The "two thirsts" of the superficial and spiritual consciousness assert themselves by turns. Each step towards the vision of the Real brings with it a reaction. The nascent transcendental powers are easily fatigued, and the pendulum of self takes a shorter swing. "I was swept up to Thee by Thy Beauty, and torn away from Thee by my own weight," says St. Augustine, crystallizing the secret of this experience in an unforgettable phrase. (Underhill, 1960:178)

A comparison of James', Underhill's and Dabrowski's analyses of a specific mystical life, as well as a

comparison of their theoretical reflections, reveals some rather striking correspondences between the descriptions of James and Underhill of the early stages of the mystical path and Dabrowski's description of the psychological process of multilevel disintegration. Hence while the theory of positive disintegration is not primarily a psychology of mystical growth it can nevertheless be appropriately used in a psychological analysis of mystical lives. I would now like to demonstrate that the experience of multilevel disintegration is not unique to Christian mystics, such as Augustine, but can be found in mystics of other religious traditions as well.

Multilevel disintegration in the Muslim mystic Al-Ghazzali

Subsequent to an investigation of various religious doctrines and sects, the Muslim theologian, Al-Ghazzali (1058-1111), turned to a study of Sufism (Islamic mysticism) and arrived at the conclusion that true Sufism consists not of intellectual analysis but rather of mystical experiences and the ascetical preparation required for such experiences. However Al-Ghazzali's insight did not result in a decisive course of action. On the contrary, it precipitated an acute case of a divided or oscillating self:

...I considered the circumstances of my life and realized that I was caught in a veritable thicket of attachmentsOne day I would form the resolution to quit Baghdad and get rid of these adverse circumstances; the next day I would abandon my resolution. I put one foot forward and drew the other back. If in the morning I had a genuine longing to seek eternal life, by the evening the attack of a whole host of desires had reduced it to impotence. Worldly desires were striving to keep me by their chains just where I was, while the voice of faith was calling, "To the road! To the road! What is left of life is but little and the journey before you is long...." On hearing that, the impulse would be stirred and the resolution made to take to flight.

Soon, however, Satan would return. "This is a passing mood," he would say; "do not yield to it..."

For six months...I was continuously tossed about between the attractions of worldly desires and the impulses towards eternal life. (Al-Ghazzali, 1981:56-57)

Here is an account that reflects a condition of personality disintegration. It is not organized disintegration, since Al-Ghazzali was at this point unable to take charge of his own development, but it is multilevel since the account provides us with evidence of a hierarchy of values and, implicitly, of self-criticism.

When Al-Ghazzali finally left Bagdad, his experience of a divided self continued but it was met by a disciplinary programme of asceticism and meditation:

I left Baghdad...In due course I entered Damascus, and there I remained for nearly two years with no other occupation than the cultivation of retirement and solitude, together with religious and ascetical exercises, as I busied myself purifying my soul, improving my character and cleansing my heart for the constant recollection of God most high....

I continued at this stage for the space of ten years, and during these periods of solitude there were revealed to me things innumerable and unfathomable. (Al-Ghazzali, 1981:59-60)

Al-Ghazzali's commitment to solitude, meditation and asceticism may be understood as an expression of the fourth-level dynamism referred to by Dabrowski as education-of-oneself (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977:52).

Multilevel disintegration in a Neo-Confucian mystic

A brief but richly detailed description of inner conflict can be found in an autobiographical account of the process of self-cultivation, i.e., spiritual growth, written by the Neo-Confucian, Kao P'an Lung (1562-1626):

In 1593 I was banished because I had spoken out on certain affairs [he had defended some officials who were unjustly dismissed from their positions], but it did not disturb my thoughts. However as I was returning (home) I tasted the ways of the world and my mind became once again more agitated.

In the year 1594 during the Autumn I headed for Chieh-yang. I realized that within myself, principle and desire waged battle upon battle without peaceful resolution. (Taylor, 1978:126) Since the inner conflict, reported by Kao, was based on a hierarchy of values (i.e., "principle" versus "desire") it is clear that his condition was one of multilevel disintegration. This is further indicated by his willingness to be banished in the cause of justice for others, which is an expression of the dynamism of positive maladjustment.

Kao's response to his condition of multilevel inner conflict was to engage in a regimen of asceticism, study and meditation (the last-mentioned of which is referred to as quiet-sitting in the Neo-Confucian tradition):

The next day in the boat I earnestly arranged the mat and seriously set up rules and regulations. For one half of the day I practiced quiet-sitting 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...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)

From this passage we learn that Kao's ascetical practice included sleep deprivation and the immobility and social isolation that accompanies protracted periods of quiet-sitting or meditation.

The purpose of his meditation practice was to realize the Principle of Heaven -- a process that appears to be similar to the dynamization of the personality ideal. Subsequently Kao had an experience in which he perceived the unity of all things -- an experience of enlightenment (or wu) -- which experience he was able to integrate into his self-cultivation (Taylor, 1978:92-93).

Thus in the lives of Al-Ghazzali, Kao P'an-lung and a number of other mystics, evidence can be found for a developmental process that has marked similarities with the stages of multilevel personality disintegration described by Kazimierz Dabrowski. In both cases there was an experience of a divided self, i.e., of spontaneous multilevel disintegration, which precipitated a resolution to follow a mystical discipline involving study, meditation and some degree of asceticism (an expression of the level IV dynamism, education-of-oneself).

The close parallel, between mystical development and the stages in the theory of positive disintegration, provides scholars of mysticism with a valuable tool for the psychological analysis of the personal documents of mystics across time and across cultures. And these analyses, in turn, can contribute to a better understanding of the process of personality development and the factors that predispose persons toward this growth process.

As an example of such an analysis, I will apply the theory of positive disintegration to the lives of two contemplative nuns, the sixteenth-century Spanish Carmelite, Teresa of Avila, and the twentieth-century Japanese Buddhist, Satomi Myodo, thus enabling a comparison between the points at which the two experienced a shift from spontaneous to organized multilevel disintegration. For Teresa the transition took place between the ages of 39 and 42, whereas for Satomi it occurred at age 59. A striking difference between the two mystics, and one which may be an explanatory factor, is that Teresa had early access to a convent while Satomi was only able to enter a zen monastery late in life.

Analysis of Teresa of Avila in terms of the theory of positive disintegration

The well-known Spanish mystic, Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), entered a Carmelite convent in her native Avila in 1535, at the age of 20. At 23 she suffered a serious illness for three years consisting of heart pains, continuous fever, lack of strength and appetite, nausea, hyperesthesia and paralysis. During this illness she underwent a shift in her personality structure and developed the capacity to

meditate. In her thirty-ninth year, she underwent what she refers to as her "conversion" and at age 42 she experienced her first rapture (illuminative mystical experience).

I would suggest that the form of inner division she experienced from the time of her illness until her "conversion" bears a marked similarity to what Dabrowski has called spontaneous multilevel disintegration. Between her "conversion," and her first rapture, her multilevel struggle was both spontaneous and organized. And then, subsequent to her first rapture, her personality stage was exclusively that of organized multilevel disintegration.

Prior to the illness which she suffered in her twenties, Teresa was preoccupied with the opinions of others and exhibited clear evidence of ambivalence and ambipendencies. Following this illness, there was a marked change in the quality of Teresa's inner conflict. Instead of a preoccupation with what others thought of her and a concern for her reputation, typical of unilevel disintegration, the conflict she experienced was distinctly multilevel. There are numerous expressions of this new dynamic in her autobiography. The following example is illustrative:

On the one hand God was calling me; on the other hand I was following the world. All the things of God made me happy; those of the world held me bound. It seems I desired to harmonize these two contraries -- so inimical to one another -- such as are the spiritual life and sensory joys, pleasures, and pastimes. In prayer I was having great trouble, for my spirit was not proceeding as lord but as slave. And so I was not able to shut myself within myself (which was my whole manner of procedure in prayer); instead, I shut within myself a thousand vanities. (Teresa of Avila, 1976:62-63)

Many of the dynamisms of spontaneous multilevel disintegration find expression in the above quotation. There is a hierarchy of values: in Teresa's case it was God versus the world. There is dissatisfaction, disquietude and astonishment with herself. There is anguish over the fact that she was unable to live according to her chosen ideal. She was no longer dominated by ambipendencies; she had one tendency, to surrender herself completely to her highest value. Teresa continued in the stage of spontaneous multilevel disintegration until her "conversion" at 39, at which point there was an increase in self-awareness and control over the developmental process, characteristic of organized multilevel disintegration:

It was the first time the Lord granted me this favor of rapture. I heard these words: "No longer do I want you to converse with men but with angels..." These words have been fulfilled, for I have never again been able to tie myself to any friendship or to find consolation in or bear particular love for any other persons than those I understand love Him and strive to serve

Him...from that day on I was very courageous in abandoning all for God, as one who had wanted from that moment...to change completely... (Teresa of Avila, 1976:161)

Teresa's reference to freedom from dependence on particular, or specific, relationships means that the source of her feelings of self-worth was now within herself rather than in other people.

However this does not mean that she ceased to be involved in other people's lives. On the contrary, as Culligan (1983) has shown in an analysis of her letters, written in the mature years of her life, Teresa took an active interest in the welfare of others.

The presence of self-awareness and a concern for self-perfection is even more dominant subsequent to her first rapture, as is indicated by the following quotation from one of Teresa's "Spiritual Testimonies," written at age 45:

I greatly loved those who I see are more advanced and who are determined, detached, and courageous; and they are the ones with whom I would want to converse; it seems they help me....All...kinds of things that have to do with very sublime perfection it seems are impressed upon me in prayer, so much so that I am amazed to see so many truths and so clearly... (Teresa of Avila, 1976:314-315)

In addition Teresa now possessed fortitude and the heightened intuitive capacity (Teresa of Avila, 1976:171) characteristic of organized multilevel disintegration (Dabrowski & Piechowski 1977:151). Whereas in level III she felt remorse following her failures, at this point she was able to anticipate and avoid them (Teresa of Avila, 1976:171).

According to Teresa, one of the factors that made this transition possible was the spiritual direction she received in the convent. By encouraging her to mortify certain attachments, her spiritual director hastened the process Dabrowski calls partial death -- or the "conscious and deliberate eradication of the lower personality structures" (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977, Vol.I:172). Teresa's account is as follows:

He [her spiritual director] ordered me to perform some mortifications which were not very pleasing to me. I did everything because it seemed to me the Lord commanded it, and God gave him the ability to command me in such a way that I obeyed him. My soul began so to feel any offense I committed against God, however small, that if I was holding on to some superfluous thing, I could not recollect myself until I gave the thing up. (Teresa of Avila, 1976:159)

In fact the spiritual exercises recommended by her director were the occasion of her first rapture (the point at which her personality level became exclusively that of organized multilevel disintegration):

This father [her spiritual director] began to lead me to greater perfection. He told me that to

please God completely I must leave nothing undone; he did so also with great skill and gentleness because my soul still was not at all strong but very fragile, especially with regard to giving up some friendships I had. Although I was not offending God by them, I was very attached...He told me to commend the matter to God for some days and to recite the hymn *Veni Creator* so that having spent a long time in prayer and begging the Lord to help me please Him in all things, I began the hymn; while saying it, a rapture came upon me so suddenly that it almost carried me out of myself. (Teresa of Avila, 1976:160)

It would seem as though the spiritual direction received by Teresa of Avila was a factor in her decisive entry into the personality level described by Dabrowski as organized multilevel disintegration.

Analysis of Satomi Myodo in terms of Dabrowski's stages of personality development

In spite of her references to her worldly inclinations, Teresa of Avila led a relatively sheltered existence, going from her parental home directly into a Carmelite convent. Such was not the case with the Japanese Buddhist nun, Satomi Myodo (1896-1978). Although born at the end of the last century in a small farming village on the culturally conservative island of Hokkaido, Satomi was a relatively free spirit. She had aspirations to become a writer, studied at Tokyo University, had a child with a man to whom she was not married at the time, performed in an acting troupe, served for a time as a Shinto medium, and in later life became a Zen Buddhist nun.

From at least young adulthood Satomi experienced periods of spontaneous multilevel disintegration. According to the theory of positive disintegration, the developmental resolution to the spontaneity (and hence, powerlessness) of this stage is organization, or taking control over the process of one's disintegration and reintegration. However in Satomi's case this teleological need was not adequately met until she had access, at a relatively late age, to a Zen Buddhist monastery and the teaching, modeling, direction and support that it provided.

At the age of 20, Satomi, involuntarily pregnant, reluctantly returned home from her studies in Tokyo. Her description of her feelings indicates a condition of incipient multilevelness:

Every day the three of us [Satomi's parents and herself] silently arose, and silently we went to work in the fields. As for me -- with my body, which couldn't be more shameful, and my face, which one could hardly bear to look at -- I just wanted to crawl into a hole and disappear. Looking like a barrel whose hoops were about to burst, and in a condition of utter despair, I was incapable even of dying. I could do nothing but sit back and watch my shame grow. I felt wretched, miserable, ashen -- as if I were traveling alone at night through an endless wilderness, wearily dragging one foot after the other. (Myodo, 1987:7)

The intense experience of shame, even when it results more from external circumstances than from consciously perceived moral deficiency, as is the case in the above passage, is a manifestation of self-criticism and hence marks the beginning of multilevel disintegration (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977:38 & 46). And Satomi's reference to sitting back and *watching* her shame grow, since it is an expression of self-observation, indicates a precursor form of the multilevel dynamism of subject-object in oneself which can be found at the interface between levels II and III (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977:49).

At this point Satomi had an emotional experience of a noetic, or revelatory, character. It may not have been as intense as the type of experience referred to by Underhill (Underhill, 1960:176ff) as a mystical awakening, and the content is more moral than religious, but it seems to have served a similar psychological function:

I had never known such a wonderful world as the one I experienced in that moment. I saw the grass and trees, the hills, river, fields, and stones, the hoe and sickle, the birds and dogs, the roofs and windows -- all shining brightly under the same sun. For me it was a wonderful breath of fresh air. Both the animate and inanimate were vividly alive, familiarly addressing me and waving their hands. Struck by the unearthly exquisiteness of this world, I broke into tears and lifted up my face, weeping, in ecstasy. I saw right through myself and completely emptied my bag of emotional problems. All those words about morality that I had heard in elementary school, and that I had thought were just lectures to be forgotten, suddenly took on the form of living truth for me. (Myodo, 1987:9)

The experience opened up a new direction for Satomi, and it resulted in a measure of self-criticism typical of spontaneous multilevel disintegration:

I never realized that until this time I had been impure and cold-hearted. I had never so much as shed one tear for truth. I had never thought of others nor felt the need to do so. Self-centered and capricious, I had thought I could play with others in any way I wanted. I had thought "honest person" was another term for "great fool." I had cherished the superiority complex of an evil person. I was haughty, but in truth I was an insignificant nobody. (Myodo, 1987:10)

The father of her child came to stay with her and her parents, during which time he worked in the fields with the family. He and Satomi were married, Satomi became pregnant again, the husband had a quarrel with Satomi's father and then left for Tokyo.

Sometime after the child was born, Satomi left one of her children with her parents and returned to Tokyo with the other. She attended classes at Tokyo University, leaving the baby alone at home during this time. Her husband came with his mother and his aunt and took the baby away. As a result,

Satomi experienced a particularly intense period of disordered grieving, so intense that it precipitated a nervous breakdown and she had to be institutionalized. On her release, Satomi joined an acting troupe, got involved with a man several years her junior and then began training to become a Shinto medium.

Throughout this period, Satomi's life exhibits various manifestations of spontaneous multilevel disintegration:

"What makes life worth living?" I wondered. "Surely it is to exhaust all one's strength for the sake of the world and for the sake of humanity and to sacrifice oneself to this end." Thus I gave my projects my all and ran about in all directions. I couldn't find satisfaction in any other way.

And yet, no matter how much I ran busily about, a touch of sadness and dissatisfaction remained deep in my heart. Feeling my spirit wasn't getting enough nourishment, I began to read everything on moral self-cultivation that I could lay my hands on. (Myodo, 1987:64)

At this point, Satomi was not entirely certain about the direction of her life, but there was an incipient hierarchy of values, as is indicated by her engagement in community service and her feelings of sadness and dissatisfaction at not having a clearer set of values.

Subsequently Zen Buddhism provided Satomi with a purpose for her life. She attended lectures which proved to be the occasion for a deepening of her multilevel conflict:

I was gloomy. Dissatisfied with the Hoganji Temple's Dharma talks, I felt I had no spiritual home. When I saw the perfectly peaceful appearance of my fellow seekers, I felt that I was the only one who hadn't found spiritual liberation. (Myodo, 1987:70)

Her multilevel condition further intensified with her decision to engage in prolonged meditation practice (an expression of the emergence of the dynamism of education-of-oneself):

At first I felt I would reach satori [i.e., enlightenment] within a week. Then the spring equinox came and went, then the fall equinox approached. I had still not achieved satori! I didn't intend to meet Roshi [i.e., the Zen master] personally until I achieved satori; I thought it would be useless. In truth, I thought I would easily attain satori and then meet him. But the more I practiced *zazen* [i.e., meditation], the less things turned out the way I expected. (Myodo, 1987:73)

Satomi was beginning to take responsibility for her development, and after continued practice she had her first *kensho*, or enlightenment experience, as a result of which other dynamisms of organized multilevel disintegration began to emerge, such as self-awareness:

I felt as if a chronic disease of forty years had been cured in an instant....Very early the next morning...I said, "Roshi, I saw Mu [i.e., realized the omnipresence of the Buddha nature]"....Then Roshi examined me in a number of ways, and *kensho* was confirmed....I felt as if I had finally gulped down some big thing that had been stuck in my throat a long time....It

seemed as if I had been going around and around in circles, repeating the same mistakes over and over for forty years. But now that I have awakened from the dream and can see clearly...Not a single step is given to repeating the past or to useless efforts. I can see now that things which seemed redundant or insignificant at the time were all necessary conditions for what followed....All things in the universe have together nurtured small and insignificant me. (Myodo, 1987:106-107)

As well as becoming aware of "sharing in the community of mankind," which is typical of organized multilevel disintegration (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977:156), Satomi was able to see that her 40 years of struggle were not only not wasted, but were part of a necessary process for the emergence of her personality ideal (i.e., the Buddha nature). This insight appears to be a manifestation of the dynamism of the creative instinct at the fourth level of personality (cf. Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977:52).

Just as Teresa of Avila emphasizes the importance of spiritual direction for her mystical growth, so also does Satomi Myodo:

It is difficult to meet a true teacher. Without a true teacher, one cannot obtain the True Way. If perchance one were to find it, one could not master it...Fortunately, thanks to Roshi, I found my mind's serenity at last. (Myodo, 1987:108)

Among other things, her *roshi*, or spiritual mentor, gave her instruction regarding meditation:

...Roshi spoke to me in detail about *zazen* -- the right way to do it, things to watch for, and so forth... I was deeply impressed with his meticulous guidance, which exhausted the limits of his kindness. (Myodo, 1987:103)

An example of the kind of guidance Satomi received in order to help her make progress in her meditation practice is given in the following passage:

...I received permission to join a five-day *sesshin* [i.e., a meditation retreat] at Shinkoji Temple.

At the first *dokusan* [i.e., interview with the zen master], Roshi examined my mental state. Even there I couldn't help speaking of the baggage of past experiences that I lugged around [i.e., the sensation of being in touch with spirit entities].

Roshi said, "This is *makyo* [illusion]. Please try to start all over again."

"Really?" I thought. "All right, if that's the case, I *will* get a fresh start." Thus making up my mind, I sat [i.e., meditated] enthusiastically... (Myodo, 1987:103)

If Satomi Myodo's experience of the mystical path is compared to that of Teresa of Avila, it can be seen that both women, although from different times and cultures, underwent a shift from unilevel to spontaneous multilevel disintegration at about the same time -- i.e., in their twenties. The transition actually took place in Satomi's life a few years earlier than it did in Teresa's. But while Teresa had early access to a mystical institution, which meant access to mentors, models of spiritual development,

information on how to practice meditation, spiritual direction, financial support and emotional encouragement, Satomi had this access only after years of search. This difference seems to be one of the most important reasons why Teresa's account of her life shows solid evidence of organized multilevel disintegration from the age of 42 onward, while the same stage was not reached by Satomi until she was 59 years old (the age of her first *kensho* experience).

Like Teresa, Satomi, as indicated in a passage cited above, made use of meditation in her spiritual growth process. She also engaged in asceticism, and while it was initially undertaken, in her twenties, to assist her in becoming a Shinto medium (Myodo, 1987:46), Satomi's ascetical practice also appears to have served a function similar to one it can serve in personality development (Dabrowski, 1967:130): i.e., the function of "dampening of natural instincts with a view to attaining a higher goal, usually of a religious and moral character."

Satomi continued to engage in an ascetic lifestyle even after she became committed to the practice of Zen:

In order to practice meditation, I quickly left my family [in the village in Hokkaido] ("severing all karmic bonds") and moved into a hut attached to the back of that Kannon shrine by the waterfall where, until the previous year, an old charcoal maker had lived...Inside, the hut was gloomy. The coarse tatami mats were sooty and laid out loosely, unattached to anything...Living the most meagre of lives, I continued with zazen. (Myodo, 1987:72-73)

As a Zen Buddhist her asceticism was less severe than it was as a apprentice Shinto medium, and she consciously related it to her practice of meditation, but it served a similar psychological function -- i.e., one of deliberately frustrating a lower level structure of dependency, in order that the dynamisms of a higher level of personality might emerge, as indeed they did with her first kensho experience.

Consideration of the lives of Teresa of Avila and Satomi Myodo from the perspective of the theory of positive disintegration makes it possible to trace a number of changes in their personalities over the years covered by their autobiographies. Through an identification of developmental dynamisms, the transition in their personality level from spontaneous multilevel to organized multilevel disintegration can be compared. The comparison indicates that, at least for some traditional mystics, the mystical institution (e.g., *ashram*, convent, monastery) appears to be critical for that transition.^[1] And even in these very brief analyses, one can see something of the psychological function of asceticism and meditation in the process of disintegration.

In this article, I have argued that the descriptions, of the inner struggle so frequently found at the beginning of a mystical life, by two of the seminal scholars of religious mysticism, William James and Evelyn Underhill, correspond to Kazimierz Dabrowski's account of multilevel personality disintegration. My purpose in doing so was to show that Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration is an appropriate psychological model for analyzing mystical autobiographies. I then cited non-Christian examples of mystical struggle (one Muslim and the other Neo-Confucian) in order to demonstrate that multilevel disintegration in the early stages of the mystical life is a universal phenomenon. Finally I compared the transition from the personality stage of spontaneous multilevel disintegration to that of organized multilevel disintegration in two additional mystics in order to make the argument that such a transition is, at least in part, and in some cases, contingent upon a supportive environment, specifically access to a mystical mentor.

References

- Culligan, Kevin (1983). Teresa of Jesus: A personality profile. *Spiritual Life*, 29: 131-139.
- Dabrowski, Kazimierz (1967). *Personality-shaping through positive disintegration*. London: J. & A. Churchill.
- Dabrowski, Kazimierz & Piechowski, Michael M. (1977). *Theory of levels of emotional development*, Vol.I. Oceanside, N.Y.: Dabor Science.
- al-Ghazzali, Abu Hamid Muhammad (1981). *The faith and practice of al-Ghazzali*. Translated by W. Montgomery Watt. Lahore, Pakistan: Sheikh Muhammad Ashraf (orig.ed. 1953).
- Hague, William J. (1986). *New perspectives on religious and moral development*. Edmonton, Alberta: University of Alberta Department of Educational Psychology.
- James, W. (1929). *The varieties of religious experience*. New York: Random (orig. ed., 1902).
- Myodo, S. (1987). *Passionate journey: The spiritual autobiography of Satomi Myodo*. Translated and annotated by Sallie B. King. Boston: Shambhala.
- Piechowski, Michael M. (1992). In N. Coangelo, S.G. Assouline & D.L. Ambrosion (Eds.). *Talent development*. Proceedings from the 1991 Henry B. and Jocelyn Wallace National Research Symposium on Talent Development. Unionville, N.Y.: Trillium.
- Taylor, R.L. (1978). *The cultivation of sagehood as a religious goal in Neo-Confucianism: A study of selected writings of Kao P'an Lung*. Missoula, Montana: Scholars.

Teresa of Avila (1976). *The collected works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Vol.I. Translated by Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodriguez. Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies.

Underhill, Evelyn (1960). *Mysticism*. London: Methuen.

[\[1\]](#) On the other hand, most religious traditions contain examples of exceptional mystics who required very little spiritual guidance. For a study of three twentieth-century mystics who similarly required very little in the way of mentoring, see Piechowski (1992).