

MEDITATION AND PSYCHOLOGY

(Zagarolo, May 2015)

* The XXI century announces itself as a period of intercultural maturity due to certain processes that demand (not only because of their mere existence, but also because of their ostensible complexity) a transformation of established ways of thinking and even modes of experience. By intercultural maturity I mean the capacity not only to accept patterns of behavior alien to one's own identity habits, customs and convictions, but also the possibility of partaking them (to a certain extent) in order to expand and transform one's own views. The conditions for this intercultural maturity are already given in the globalized world because of the already existing awareness of the specificity and the value of differences.

* It is in within this frame that I would like to situate my reflection on meditation and psychology. The relationship between these two "disciplines" (if we accept that meditation and psychology are related to learning and transformative processes: *discere* = learn) is tainted by prejudices on both sides. Even if we leave aside the most reductive forms of psychology (like behaviorism or cognitive branches based on a very narrow perceptual scale) and consider deep psychology (theories of the unconscious and the possibility of the expansion of consciousness beyond ordinary experience), we see clear limits in the interaction with Eastern doctrines, for example in the consideration of the psychological insights of Yogic or Buddhist meditation, and an utter rejection of Bhakti religiosity and Shamanism. On the other hand the fixed opinion of some Indian people who are into yoga and meditation with regard to Western psychology reveals sometimes a rather narrow-minded rejection based on the excluding difference between the psychological and the spiritual (remindful of the Gnostic division psychic and pneumatic), the sub-conscious and the supra-conscious or even the sacred and the profane.

* At the risk of oversimplifying and becoming too schematic, I would like to distinguish three types of misunderstanding concerning the relationship between meditation and psychology. The first one is the result of the conviction that we can psychologize Eastern doctrines, that is, we can reduce the whole range of self-realization experiences to the frame of auto-suggestion, mere invention, induced superstition or pathological dissociations. The second one is the opposite attitude: to consider that everything having to do with psychology (especially with the theory of the unconscious, because of the dark connotations of it) is a degradation of the spiritual path. The third one can be situated in the middle of the first two and consists in the conviction that there is no communication whatsoever between deep therapy and *sādhana*. They are not only different languages but also different universes. Jacques Vigne's work enables us to think of a way out of this strong dissociation. He is a psychiatrist and has never ceased to reflect as such. At the same time he has been practicing meditation for more than thirty years in Indian contexts. The most interesting point is not the fact that he is familiar with both disciplines in the specific context of each one of them, but that his experience in meditation led him to deeper insights concerning questions of psychology, and his psychological knowledge enabled him to better articulate some questions concerning the meditation practice. As far as I can understand his writings, Jacques Vigne is convinced that one can bridge over the gap between the two disciplines. Both psychology and meditation aim at a transformation of the human being in order to reduce or even overcome suffering. Both psychology and meditation can lead human beings to an expansion of their spectrum of consciousness. Where is the communication problem to be located? Once again at the risk of oversimplifying I would say: in the fact that for Western psychology everything going beyond the description of psychological states surpasses the realm of empiricism and loses its value, and for the Indian doctrines of salvation (Yoga, Vedanta, Samkhya) the number of processes on the level of the inferior psyche should be reduced and eliminated in order to make spiritual progress.

* It is not enough to say that the dialogue between psychology and meditation became possible with the influence of Hinduism and Buddhism in the Western culture. Something happened within

psychology that led to a reconsideration of religious and spiritual components beyond the negative connotation they had acquired in secularized Western sciences. I would like to call this event the (re)discovery of the transpersonal threshold. I say (re)discovery because the transpersonal existed already in Western metaphysical and religious doctrines which later on were “refuted” by the classical paradigm of modern science. It would be very complex to explain the whole process, but I would like to take the risk of affirming why this discontinuity didn’t take place in India the way it took place in the West. Of course there is a whole history of skepticism and materialism (lokāyata) in India, but the metaphysical side of Hinduism (related to the main branches of its religion) remained within a continuity of transmitted experience and never ceased to be a mainstream. As opposed to this, in Western culture metaphysics declined because the kind of mainstream speculation nurturing those views didn’t have any correspondence in the sphere of experience (if you know something about the medieval debates about the Trinity, the location of Paradise or the vicissitudes of the soul after death, you will immediately know what I mean).

* I will give an example of the former point: the notions of ahaṁkāra and asmitā, which refer to individuality (the ego-agent and the sense of I-am-ness) and play a crucial role in the Samkhya-Yoga context. The first term comes from the grammatical category of the first person singular pronoun (aham), and the second stems from the verb “to be” conjugated as “I am” (asmi). In the Samkhya cosmology ahaṁkāra stands for the reflection of the empirical self on prakṛti, that is, the imposition of the individual point of view or ego-principle. All mental processes (mind = manas) and all perception reduced to sense organs (indriya) depends on ahaṁkāra. The equivalent in Patanjali’s system is asmitā: emergence of empirical consciousness and also one of the five kleśas [afflictions] enumerated in the Yoga-Sūtra, since the sense of I am as reduced ego-consciousness is closely related to the false identification between the pure self and the finite manifestation of it. Why is this identification false? The answer to this question lies in the experience of the practice of yoga as an antidote to the problem of suffering (we don’t have to forget Patanjali’s words in Yoga-Sūtra, II-15: duhkameva sarva vivekinah – to the one with discrimination all is suffering). The empirical mode of experience related to individuation is expressed in the term vṛtti, usually translated as “mind-fluctuations”, which also refers to an associative kind of certitude. The soteriological view of individuated consciousness and the mental dispersion of vṛtti as factors of affliction is based on the experience of another kind of certitude which is not associative but isolated: samādhi. This is achieved if we put an end to vṛtti, and putting an end to (or inhibiting) vṛtti is all that what’s yoga is about: citta vṛtti nirodha [cf. rudh- “suppress”]. The deepest conviction of Samkhya and Yoga (in spite of their differences as philosophical systems) is that it is possible to distinguish between the individuated modes of consciousness (based on a permanent modification of finite states of mind) and a free mode of being which is related to the experiential abolition of that finite mode. The finite mode of mental experience is always obscured by the presence of objects. The very first object of individuated experience is reduced self-consciousness, but that does not exhaust the whole field of experience. Meditation [dhyāna] reveals the transparency of the self devoid of objectification (even in the form of individuated self-awareness) and frees the subject from the chains of false identifications in a context of permanent fluctuations and individuated craving. The Samkhya approach to mokṣa (which differs in some points from classical Yoga) also conceives states free from ahaṁkāra (expressed in terms like videha and prakṛti-laya). In these states, the intellectual organ (buddhi) is without vṛtti, which does not mean that the “flow” comes to an end. It remains, but in the form of primordial self-identity devoid of objectification. One of the Vedāntic arguments showing the experiential concreteness of samādhi is the differential analogy with deep sleep (suṣupti). In deep-sleep the mind is dissociated from the self (as individuated self-awareness) in immediate conscious attitude (according to Indian sages deep sleep is the consciousness of a blank), and samādhi is the actualization of the suṣupti state.

* What is the psychology underlying Yoga (and perhaps also Samkhya and Vedānta)? Everything that Western psychology seems to have discovered with regard to conscious and unconscious processes should be placed under the primordial influence of this modification of buddhi called ahaṁkāra or asmitā, since it is clear that for Western psychology there is no “experience” without “individuated awareness” and no dynamics of libido without positive (d. h. objectifying) willing

processes (icchā). The aim of classical Indian spirituality in general would be to surpass the limited range of psychophysical sphere [indriyas, manas, asmitā] by cleansing the mind (cittaśuddhi) of their own fluctuations and attaining Self-identification. The whole sphere of deep psychology would correspond to Patanjali's analysis of kleśas (constraining limitations), saṃskāras (psychological imprints) and vāsanās (behavioral tendencies), and for Western psychology there is no buddhi devoid of disturbing fluctuations (since these fluctuations are the movement of life itself and its whole spectrum from unconscious to conscious existence).

* But if classical meditation schools (for example Patanjali's yoga, Vedānta and Buddhism) depict a way of attaining the transpersonal sphere (of a self "freed" from individual modalities of experience) by means of a reductive method of suppressing, inhibiting or even disregarding all forms of mental activities alien to the direct intuition of the objectless self (emotions, imagination, object-related willing and thinking), the rediscovery of the transpersonal sphere by Western psychology was focused on the role of a power or energy that is ultimately not dependent on individuated consciousness or the products of it, but which is at the same time intrinsically related to them. In his exposition of transpersonal psychology, Stanislav Grof refers to Carl Gustav Jung as the first one who opened the door to a realm absolutely unknown to a Western science dominated by the Newtonian-Cartesian paradigm. The turning point is the theory of the archetypes of the collective unconscious. Archetypes are defined at the same time as patterns of behavior (a kind of psychological pendant to instinct) and collective representations taking place in transcultural contexts and occurring spontaneously (that is independent of conscious activity) in the psyche of human beings. There is a hierarchy of archetypes, at the top of which Jung poses the Self or (as he says) the God-Image. The therapeutic work consists in an integration of autonomous contents of the unconscious psyche with the aim of expanding the capacity of conscious life in the individual. Jung developed a method in order to delve into the collective unconscious: active imagination. The adjective "active" points to a special activity: at the same time a "focused intensification" and a "loosening up" of the conscious mind. It is worth quoting a passage from one of his letters: "The point is that you start with any image. Contemplate it and carefully observe how the picture begins to unfold or to change. Don't try to make it into something, just do nothing but observe what its spontaneous changes are. Any mental picture you contemplate in this way will sooner or later change through a spontaneous association that causes a slight alteration of the picture. You must carefully avoid impatient jumping from one subject to another. Hold fast to the one image you have chosen and wait until it changes by itself. Note all these changes and eventually step into the picture yourself, and if it is a speaking figure at all then say what you have to say to that figure and listen to what he or she has to say". The type of observation Jung describes differs from the kind of focused attention of dhāraṇā and dhyāna in Patanjali's Yoga Sūtra because it aims at going deeper into the dynamics of the psyche instead of unloading its contents in order to reach the state of kaivalya (realization of puruṣa in jīva; destruction of the limitations of prakṛti but not of prakṛti herself). His first serious encounter with the Yoga tradition took place as a result of a clinical case in which he applied active imagination and the patient (Christiana Morgan) came up with images presenting similarities to the description of the energy centers (cakras) in a modern Tantric text by Swāmī Pūrṇānanda which the legendary Sir John Woodroffe had translated into English already in 1918: śaṭ cakra nirūpaṇa (description of the six centers, originally the sixth chapter of the work on Tantrik ritual Śrī tattva-cintāmaṇī). As a result of this Jung decided to devote a whole seminar to the psychology of Kuṇḍalinī Yoga together with the German indologist Wilhem Hauer. This seminar of the 1930s is the most valuable testimony of the first encounter between Analytical Psychology and the Yoga tradition and at the same time a turning point in Jung's approach to the East.

* I would like to point out that in his seminar Jung analyzes only the psychology of the first three cakras. With the upper ones he has difficulties because he says that the exposition of the matter becomes very intricate and for psychological parameters also abstract. I think that the problem is twofold: 1. śaṭ cakra nirūpaṇa is a text focused on a Tantra sādhanā integrated into the mainstream of non-dual soteriology. 2. Jung himself uses elements in his analysis that do not belong to Tantrism but rather to the classical Yoga of Patanjali, for example the treatment of the kleśas and the

purification of the mind. But in fact Jung is closer to a form of Tantrism prior to the reintegration of Tantric ritual into the advaita mainstream. The kind of absorption leading to the recognition of the primordial identity (an upaniṣadic motive) is called *samāveśa*. But in Tantric ritual there is the encounter with an external deity defined as possession (*āveśa*), something quite similar to what Jung says when he speak of the encounter with an archetype.

* With regard to the method of active imagination and its difference to the Yogic *dhyāna*, it has to be pointed out that this opposition concerns only classical Yoga doctrines. If we take for example Tantric methods of visualization, we find that the word *dhyāna*, as André Padoux says, has to do with the internal vision of the image [*mānasapūjā*] and in that very context does not essentially differ from the term *kalpanā*. In the case of Tantric ritual, imagination is not what comes in place of an absence, but rather that which reactivates a presence. The experienced image is not *mūrti* (murch = to become solid) but *svarūpa* (*sva* + *rūpa* = true nature), and its modifications and transformations guide the adept in his path of self-realization. Imagination is capable of producing the real objectivation of the image that is subjectively conceived. Here the question remains open whether the progressive confrontation with archetypal images in the context of Analytical Psychology does not present a parallel to certain types of Tantric rituals in which there is no ultimate merging of subject and object but a play of energy that transforms the degree of consciousness of the ones involved in them. If we take the example of *The Red Book*, we have the testimony of a healing process through self-induced active imagination, which would mean that archetypal patterns have in themselves an integrating function for the psyche.

* Further reflexion: *vr̥tti*. Wandering of the mind. According to Patanjali it has to be controlled by focused attention [*ekāgratā*] and detachment [*vairagya*]. Mental activity has to directons: *prav̥rtti* (expansive and finitising) and *niv̥rtti* (contractive, reabsorption, in Samkhya pure reflection; in Yoga there is a *vr̥tti*-arresting will). Extreme version: Nagarjuna's distinction between *kalpanā* (conceptual constructions) and *nirvikalpa-jnāna* (non conceptual wisdom). However, *kalpa* has the meaning of a regular rhythm, of an arrangement according to a rule. All restrictive realization techniques aim at an interruption not only of empirical agitations, but also of the life-flow in the form of *veśa* (as opposed to *prana* or *jivatman*, vital principle). Active imagination (in the psychology of individuation and in Tantra) aims at a patterned interaction of forces and a transformation of energy on the individual level, a conscious awareness of the impersonal forces with which our ego interacts and therefore an expansion of our perceptive field.