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## Spiritual Discipline and Psychological Dream-Work: Some Distinctions

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*Editorial Note: Well over a year ago Studia Mystica received from Philip Novak an essay on spiritual discipline and psychological dream-work. Correspondence with Mr. Novak and with Morton Kelsey, whom we had contacted earlier about a piece on dreams and spirituality, disclosed a divergence of opinion on the subject which we believed should be brought to the attention of our readers. In keeping with the innovative spirit of the journal, we decided to present the polemic, offering first the Novak essay, then the Kelsey reply, and finally a response from Mr. Novak to Mr. Kelsey's letter. The Novak essay is slightly revised from the original, which revision the author made to answer Mr. Kelsey's charge that he had engaged in "circular reasoning." (See the last paragraph of the Kelsey letter.)*

## *Spiritual Discipline and Psychological Dream-Work Some Distinctions*

*Philip Novak*

The world's great religious traditions and spiritualities commonly contain two essential elements. The first is doctrine, a distinction between the Real and the unreal; the second is method, a way for human consciousness to concentrate upon the Real. "Prayer" and "yoga" are probably the two most inclusive generic terms coming under what I here designate as method. They are ways that human beings, in their living consciousness, endeavor to lessen the existential 'distance' between themselves and ultimate Reality. For the purpose of this essay, let us group those psychotransformative strategies known to religious traditions under the common heading of "contemplative discipline."

Contemplative discipline, we may then say, has been the traditional means employed by the human soul to discover and deepen its relationship to the Creative Power in which it is grounded. Allowing for changes in vocabulary, this statement holds true for the majority of the great religious traditions of the world. By contrast, the attention paid to dreams in contemplative traditions is conspicuous by its relative absence. In three thousand years of interiority, the

contemplative strands of Hinduism and Buddhism, of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, have, as far as I know, payed comparatively little attention to dreams. All have remarked on the phenomenon of the dream and commented on dream meanings, but none seem to extoll dream work as enthusiastically or as consistently as they do their native forms of contemplative method.

The dreamscape of images, it seems, has rarely been an oasis, still less a home, for the advanced contemplative. Images, it is true, are the very fabric of human speech and thought. As such, they are part and parcel of all religious traditions and are often employed as inspirational or consciousness-focusing devices. Yet, it appears that the final thrust of contemplative discipline, in its varying forms, is toward the imageless. To cite just one example, John of the Cross, one of the normative voices of the entire Catholic contemplative tradition, construes the difference between meditation and contemplation, that is, preparatory and advanced forms of prayer-transformation, as the difference between imaged and imageless prayer.

Since the advent of depth psychology, however, and especially with the work of Jung, some theologians have enthusiastically sought to re-establish dream interpretation and reflection upon dream images as viable forms of spiritual method—i.e., a means employed by the soul to deepen its own reality, and thus, its relationship to Ultimacy. But it is here that one of the key questions in the dialogue between psychotherapy and sacred tradition rears its head: If we can agree on the metaphor of “the Center” as the destination of our psycho-spiritual pilgrimage, does the dream-opus carry us there as effectively as more traditional contemplative methods?

My suspicion is that it does not, but such a simple answer to an almost impossibly broad question requires that I make the following proviso before continuing. In matters of the inner life there can be no rigid prescriptions. Religious notions such as the freedom of God’s grace and the inscrutability of karma alert us to the folly of prescribing a single path to all spiritual pilgrims. The very art of the spiritual director or master consists in the ability to harmonize aeon-old contemplative technique with the unique individual psyche before him.

Having made that proviso, however, we may ask if there is any strategic element in the psychology of traditional contemplation, not present in dream-work, which may be said to effectively draw us toward our transpersonal Center. I propose that such an element is present in the cultivation of one-pointedness, which may also be conceived as the cultivation of imageless prayer or, to use still another



metaphor, "emptying." In other words, that element consists in a *psychological iconoclasm which refuses the lure of the contents of consciousness and instead elects to cultivate the still point 'beneath' them.* Below, I wish to briefly sketch the psychotransformative meaning of this unique element of traditional religious psychology. First, however, I would like to indicate two other elements of the interior journey which traditional contemplative method and modern dream-work seem to accomplish equally well. They are: 1) the development of interiority and 2) the development of creative receptivity.

Contemplative discipline, it may safely be said, aims at re-establishing the soul's interiority and receptivity. Turned outward toward the world of sense, the soul is easily distracted, caught in its own network of associations, aversions and desires, thrown hither and thither, often helplessly, by the magnetic forces that impel it toward or repel it from the objects of positive and negative emotion which fill its inner and outer worlds. Contemplative discipline attempts to calm and to focus the seeking soul, to restore its equilibrium, to channel its awareness from the frenetic periphery to the calmer center, and to reduce, often by simple attention—never by forcible suppression—the incessant discursive activity of the mind. Such efforts begin to bring about a tensionless receptivity toward the objects of both one's inner and outer worlds. The assumption of the sages and the testimony of contemplatives of many lands and various times is that the speech of the Real is heard by a being made thus receptive or in the process of becoming so.

Involvement with dreams, the nocturnal productions of the unconscious psyche, or for that matter, with its spontaneous productions in waking life (e.g. Jung's discipline of active imagination) promote with equal effectiveness the development of interior depth and creative receptivity. Paying attention to the autonomous arisings of one's inner images and moods demands a certain subtraction of attention from the drama of the outer world. The daily practice of remembering, reflecting upon and expanding the dream image leads, indisputably, to a deeper sense of interiority. Furthermore, the word "autonomous" is crucial. For dream-work demands a receptive attitude to the speech of the autonomous powers of the unconscious. This waiting upon, listening to and openness to a power beyond one—all of which are cultivated in dream-work—are also the foundations of spiritual discipline. It is this kind of activity which begins to undercut the claustrophobia of ego identity and isolation that is understood to be the root of spiritual malaise.

Moreover, dreams open us to what Ouspensky once called the world of the wondrous. To a person living in a flat, one-dimensional world, it is indeed a precious find to discover this teeming world of psychic images communing and interpenetrating within one's own breast. To have given modern man access to this world once again is no little contribution to the search for human meaning. Depth psychology, especially Jung's brand, is to be congratulated for re-membering and newly providing for such access.

At this point, however, the strictly contemplative path seems to branch off and go beyond the psychological path. The question becomes: How far, or along what path does one feel *called* to go? Or better, albeit oversimply: Having taken up residence in a world of images does one still feel God's call to a more intimate and immediate awareness of Him?

We said above that dream-work helps to undercut the severity of the feeling of fixated ego-identity and its consequent isolation. But as with all things in psychic and spiritual life, this undercutting has many degrees or levels of profundity. Contemplative discipline, we want to suggest, is more thorough in this respect than is the dream-opus, and we can see this by looking at the element I have called "emptying."

Consider the dream-life: an incessant flow, a boundless profusion of images spanning in import from the leftover psychic tracings of the previous days activities to the famous Jungian "big dreams"—mini-Revelations, one might say. In dream work one is encouraged to follow the image, to identify or differentiate oneself from it, commune with it, befriend it—as it leads one to a world of mythic proportions and saves one from the flat superficiality of a purely exterior life. Attention to dreams, it is true, seems to genuinely deepen and broaden the personality. But whether it leads to insights that evaporate infatuation with one's own melodrama, now perhaps raised to mythic stature, is highly debateable. To be freed from bondage to a one-dimensional world and released into an archetypal world charged with meaning is a gain indeed. But from the standpoint of contemplative discipline, the carousel of psychic life, though it has increased in circumference and volume, still continues to go round and round, perhaps sometimes viciously. It seems that a soul in dreamwork is in danger of losing itself in the welter of an inner world that takes it as far away from God as did the noise of the outer world. There is no normative vision in purely psychological dream-work, no traditional framework or metaphysical



map to guide the practitioner and to advise him as to what is valuable and what is to be rejected. Paying homage to the multiplicity of images resulting from the protean propensities of one's psychological unconscious thus tends to dissipate one's concentration and attention, and, very possibly, to undermine one's will.

By contrast, when contemplative discipline employs images, the images are fixed and limited in number. For example, Christian contemplatives and Tibetan and Theravadin Buddhists all have their traditional images functioning as tools for meditation and concentration, but these images are not the psychic products of the individual practitioners. On the contrary, these images have been produced and sanctioned by the collective life of an entire religious tradition. Moreover, these images are not used in associative techniques so as to beget yet other images but are utilized to focus conscious attention and to develop that one-pointed concentration which is the gateway to all further 'progress' in contemplation. At these early stages, the point is to focus one's awareness and to pay little attention to the image profusion of the personal mind, be it that of nocturnal or diurnal life. From the standpoint of contemplative discipline the inner world of images and the outer world of objects present the same opportunity for mistaken identification and thus idolatry (Christianity) or bondage (Buddhism).

In his book, *Reasons and Faiths*, Ninian Smart astutely points out that our imaginings, which we consider to be going on inside us, are, for the contemplative, as much a part of the external world as are perceptions and with them constitute the so-called worldly realm. We are thus led to understand the insistence, within Christian mystical theology and Zen Buddhism, for example, upon "disregard" as the proper stance toward the phantasmagoria of images and discursive conundrums that may arise in the mind. Emptying is a movement of the human faculties toward ever greater interiority, from wheel to wheel within the revolving mental network and ever closer toward the still point. It is, to use Christian terms, a psychological iconoclast which seeks to sweep out every idolatry in preparation for the arrival of the Imageless Guest. In Buddhist terms, as long as there are objects of thought, there arise in us the yes-no on-off reactions of clinging and aversion. These in turn produce karma, the subtle re-inforcement of reactions which keep us bound to old patterns of thought and behavior. Whether s/he is waiting upon God's grace with heart and mind open and directed toward Him, or practicing the "bare attention" of one of the forms of Buddhist meditation, the contemplative being acquires that watchful

receptivity which gently refuses the lure of even the most seductive images, and thus, gradually dissolves the mind's fascination with its own productions.

Finally, lest we vitiate what we have said here, we must guard against a common misunderstanding of the contemplative process of emptying. Emptying, as the most perceptive writers on mysticism have always pointed out, is not a progression toward a state of mental blankness. But we want to add, especially in a time when the language of "altered states of consciousness" is popular, that contemplative discipline is not, at least not primarily, a progression toward any "state" at all. Contemplation, it is true, can be and often is a means to the so-called mystical experience. But it is not often enough stressed that the fundamental and final aim of contemplative discipline, and that which makes it an end in itself, is not a "state of consciousness" but rather a mode of being in the world. "Poverty of spirit" and "emptiness" speak not of a transient mental state but of a permeating quality of human be-ing, a quality with endless nuances of depth. Spiritual method is truly effective only when it leads, not to an altered state of consciousness, but rather to an altered *trait* of life, a transformed and ever-transforming life in which the virtues of love and compassion, understanding and wisdom are ever more spontaneously manifested. Mystical experience, if grace permits (and that goes for Buddhism, too) may be a boon on the way to establishing oneself more firmly in the practice; but again, the real aim of contemplative life is not a singular mental experience, but rather the very continuation of that life. It is the treading of the path and not its completion that is of the greatest import.

As long as we spend time in the world, giving to Caesar what is his and taking up our *samsaric* labors, the mind will find its way back to its characteristic movement, a jumping about from object to object, discursive thought both clever and trivial and a ceaseless production of images. Contemplative emptying does not seek to abolish this psychological mode but simply to lessen the mind's automatic tendency to identify and define itself by its objects. Contemplative discipline suggests that a daily journey toward the landscape of the Imageless somehow makes our thought wheels less vicious, brings our mental wheels-within-wheels into new co-ordinations of harmonious movement and releases us increment by increment from bondage to our masks, be they egoic, dream-egoic, or archetypal.



Reply from Morton T. Kelsey, September 15, 1979

Mary E. Giles  
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6000 J Street  
Sacramento, California 95819

Dear Mary Giles,

It was a pleasure to receive Mr. Philip Novak's article from you. I have known Mr. Novak for many years and we have discussed our differences in point of view about mystical encounter and spiritual discipline on several occasions. It was good to see his point of view carefully articulated and to be asked to respond to it.

Mr. Novak writes that "the final thrust of contemplative discipline, in its varying forms, is towards the imageless." He also states that dream-work does not lead to a "unification and concentration of psychological energies, i.e., the cultivation of one-pointedness." Also, since dream-work involves the use of images it does not contribute to the final thrust of contemplative spirituality.

I would respond to these propositions with several observations. First of all let us look at the difficulties in discussing so weighty a matter in so few pages. Then let me sketch my own view of the complex nature of the spiritual life. Then let me give quite a different view of dream-work than that described by Mr. Novak. I would in conclusion call into question the fourth general characteristic of his analysis of the contemplative discipline.

It is difficult to cover a topic as broad as spiritual discipline in ten pages. It is equally difficult to cover dream work in that number of pages. There is little common consensus on either subject and many differing points of view. The words which one uses in each of these areas have very different meanings to different people. It is impossible to know which meaning the author has in mind unless the words are defined or the qualities they refer to are described with precision. Without this kind of clarity, discussion can become a mere word game which does not lead to growth in understanding. Mr. Novak is handicapped at the outset by the limitation of space. I personally wish that he would elaborate his ideas on the subject at greater length.

Recognizing the difficulties of discussion under these conditions, let me describe another view of the final thrust of the spiritual discipline. I have tried to outline this point of view at some length in Chapter 12 of *The Other Side of Silence*. It does not seem that Mr.



Novak has read this as he does not refer to its basic thesis as a possibility. My suggestion is that ultimately spiritual discipline has not one, but two foci like an ellipse. There is one focus of detachment and imagelessness and another of attachment and the use of images. I do not believe that there is enough evidence for us human beings to come to a final decision as to which is final or ultimate. Also there are good reasons to believe that both are essential to the final thrust of spiritual discipline. Both seem to contribute to the development of what Mr. Novak describes well as "an altered *trait* of life."

Von Hugel's description of these two poles of spiritual practice resonates with my own limited experience and with what I have read of many of the generally acknowledged spiritual masters. His words describe the dual focusing of the spiritual quest as well as I have seen it done.

. . . the movement of the specifically Christian life and conviction is not a circle round a single center,—detachment; but an ellipse round two centres,—detachment and attachment. And precisely in this difficult, but immensely fruitful, oscillation and rhythm between, as it were, the two poles of the spiritual life; in this fleeing and seeking, in the recollection back and away from the visible (so as to allay the dust and fever of growing distraction, and to reharmonize the soul and its new gains according to the intrinsic requirements and ideals of the spirit), and in the subsequent, renewed immersion in the visible (in view both of gaining fresh concrete stimulation and content for the spiritual life, and of gradually shaping and permeating the visible according to and with spiritual ends and forces): in this combination, and not in either of these two movements taken alone, consists the completeness and culmination of Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

When the thrust of detachment and imagelessness is absent, then the individual image can become too important, can be concretized and viewed as a final expression of reality. This can lead to idolatry and bigotry. On the other hand, I have not met anyone so developed that he or she did not need the corrections thrown up by both the outer life and the inner life. Living in a real world can often keep one from getting inflated and cut one down to size. There is also a deep center of the psyche which often provides in dream and phantasy

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1. Baron Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion as Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends* (London, J.M. Dent Sons, Ltd., 1927), vol. II, p. 127.

images a view of one's life which compensates the view of the ego. This center sometimes even leads one into confrontation with a reality beyond the bounds of one's own personal psyche. In some religious orders of contemplatives where neither of these correctives are heeded some contemplatives get into psychiatric trouble. In societies where no ultimate value is seen in either the inner world of images or the outer physical world, there is a strong temptation to downplay social issues and the value of the human living in the here and now.

There are some crucial differences between those forms of Buddhism which do indicate that the final stages of the contemplative journey are imageless and that large segment of Christian teaching and practice which follows the conclusions of the Seventh Ecumenical Council. In that council, the last one within an undivided Christian Church, the iconoclastic controversy was brought to a conclusion. The church agreed that the refusal to see religious value in images was not consistent with the doctrine of the incarnation. Thus the church said that God has a predilection for images and had come in one to reveal himself/herself in a very concrete way. Ignatian devotional practice stays close to this view of the value of the image in contemplative practice.

There is one strand of Christian contemplative practice which has stressed imagelessness as a final thrust in that practice. It springs out of the thinking of Plotinus, Proclus and the Pseudo-Dionysius. This point of view is championed by some modern Christians like Basil Pennington. It has some affinities with the common Eastern, Buddhist rejection of the image and the idea that the individual personality is absorbed in the imageless void.

However, there are differences and seldom is there total imagelessness in Christianity. In the thinking of the Eastern church, so well described by Jaroslav Pelikan, one comes into "light" in the final stages. *The Cloud of Unknowing* is still an image. Both St. Theresa and St. John of the Cross stress imagelessness. However in the spiritual poetry of St. John of the Cross there are luxuriant images, and St. Theresa stresses that moments of imagelessness last for only a few seconds and need be understood in terms of sacraments and other images. One does not go utterly beyond them. It must be remembered that both of these great spiritual giants lived in romantic times when many people thought that the totality of the divine might be captured in their own private images.

To maintain that the final thrust of contemplative discipline is towards imagelessness is to limit what one considers contemplative

to only certain forms of devotional practice. It ignores the wide and deep mystical practice within Christianity which John Yungblut describes so well in his recent book, *Discovering God Within*, and which I describe in *The Other Side of Silence*. One can reject these spiritual practices if one likes, but one should give one's reasons for such rejection or one opens oneself to the charge that one is either prejudiced or not fully informed.

There are many different ways of doing dream-work. Jung was once reported to remark that he was glad that he was Jung and not a Jungian! There are differences in Jungian thought. Jung certainly believed that the productions of the psyche in dreams and in active imagination are in part from an objective source beyond the personal psyche. He also believed that there was a center of meaning, the Self, which could manifest itself in dream-work. When people came into contact with this center of reality they often experienced the same transformation of total personality as manifested in those who followed spiritual disciplines. He believed that continued contact with this center was the source of transformation and he observed this change in many of those who followed his practice.

Of course, dreams do not lead one automatically to salvation. The very purpose of Dr. Jung's methods is to provide an understanding of the dream and the world it reveals to guide the individual to that center to find transformation. This is a difficult and dangerous way as is most contemplative practice, but Jung's goal is to help the soul which has been cut off from traditional spiritual disciplines to find its inner way without "the danger of losing itself in the welter of an inner world that takes it as far from God as did the noise of the outer world." It must also be remembered that even the method of Zen sometimes results in casualties as William Johnston observes in *The Still Point*..

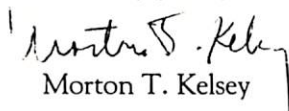
There are a group of modern Jungians who believe that they have to go beyond Jung and who do not take seriously Jung's ideas of the Self as an objective norm. They do get into the very problems which Mr. Novak suggests, but this is only one understanding of dream-work. The practice of dream-work described by Jung is similar to that which was followed by many Christian spiritual giants. In my book, *God, Dreams and Revelation*, I describe the dream theory of many of the great early Christian spiritual leaders. Gregory of Nyssa, Basil the Great, Gregory Nazianzen, Tertullian, Ambrose, Augustine, Synesius of Cyrene are but a few of the early Christian contemplatives who used their dreams as a way of contact with God. Their understanding has similarities to the method of Dr. Jung and



one large group of Jungians. I see no reason why the same method is not viable today.

In conclusion I note Mr. Novak defines the fourth characteristic of contemplative discipline in the following way: "emptying—a psychological iconoclasm which refuses all image-profusion in its path to the imageless presence of the Real." Once one accepts this as a characteristic then one is, of course, led to Mr. Novak's conclusion about the final thrust of contemplative life, but this is circular reasoning. His statement might be true as a description of certain forms of Buddhism. As I have already indicated, there are Christian contemplative disciplines which would deny this attitude and which do not find the final thrust of contemplative life as "a movement towards the imageless." We can find the same attitude in Jewish, Islamic and Hindu contemplatives. Neither arguments nor evidence are presented to support this fourth characteristic. It is presented as obvious. There are many contemplatives who would not agree.

Sincerely yours,

  
Morton T. Kelsey



*Excerpts from the reply from Philip Novak, December 2, 1979*

Dear Mary Giles,

There is a major clarification to be made in regard to my use and understanding of the phrase "final thrust of contemplative discipline" and the use to which Professor Kelsey puts it. "Contemplative discipline" has (at least) two senses: 1) that which a religious contemplative is instructed to do in that intimate area where he/she, as a subject, confronts the objects of consciousness; and 2) that which refers to the entire praxis of the contemplative, to his lifelong attempt to realize his "ultimate" and to manifest the fruits of that realization by way of a compassionate ethic. Though I enter the second sense in the closing pages of my article, my discussion of emptying-imagining takes place in reference to sense 1. Kelsey's response seems to be coming from sense 2. Let me elaborate.

On pages two and three of his letter, Professor Kelsey quotes Von Hugel. Unless I have missed something, Von Hugel is pointing to that archetypal rhythm governing *contemplative life as a whole* (sense 1), i.e., withdrawal and return, silence and speech, God and world, vertical and horizontal, contemplation and action. As such spiritual

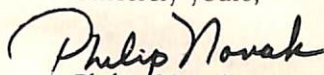
life is an ellipse around two foci; I have absolutely no quarrel here. But if that is what Von Hugel is saying, it in no way speaks to the subject of my presentation, which is based on sense 1.

As early as paragraph one (paragraph three of the new draft) I indicate sense 1. to be the focus of my paper. A religious contemplative works with his interiority. In the actual practice of his specific intramental discipline, his field of reality is defined by the objects of his consciousness. Thus, there are basically two options open to the contemplative subject: He/she can either attend to (reflect upon, etc.) the contents of his consciousness (thus coming under the general heading of discursive meditation) or he/she can refuse the lure of the contents of consciousness in order to cultivate the Center, the still point, from which all contents are said to originate. This we may call, though cross-cultural terminological problems abound here, contemplation proper.

Therefore, when I say that the "final thrust of contemplative discipline is toward the imageless" I am saying that in regard to a subject confronting objects of consciousness, contemplative authorities often prescribe the apophatic way, the way of imagelessness, as the ultimate intra-mental discipline.

Professor Kelsey then seems to suggest that though this might be true for a tradition like Buddhism, it is not so for Christianity. But I think the burden of proof rests with him. He refers to "one strand" of Christian contemplative practice that stressed imagelessness and links it with the names Plotinus, Proclus and Pseudo-Dionysius. The mention of the (non-Christian) Platonists Plotinus and Proclus is misleading indeed. The tradition that flows from Dionysius represents the *major* strand of Christian mysticism. Among those who have stressed imagelessness are Eckhart, Tauler, Suso, the fourteenth century English mystics (*The Cloud of Unknowing*), Maritain and Merton in modern times, and most importantly, John of the Cross, who, along with Teresa of Avila, is still considered to be the authoritative mystical psychologist (if such a phrase is permissible) of the Catholic tradition. Consequently, what Basil Pennington in *Daily We Touch Him* and Pennington, Keating and Clark in *Finding Grace at the Center* offer by way of instruction in the imageless "centering prayer" is not an introduction to an obscure strand of Christian contemplative practice, but a re-introduction to the major contemplative tradition of Catholic Christianity.

Sincerely yours,

  
Philip Novak