

*Morten Tolboll*

## **The value of having a religion in a spiritual practice**

Our suffering, our painbody is, through the inner evaluating ego, which the painbody is constructed around, connected with the more dangerous depths of the astral plane's collective history, which also are a kind of dark, ancient inertia, which opposes any change of the ego (see my article **The emotional painbody and why psychotherapy can't heal it**).

That is also the reason why you, through therapy, can't heal Man from the ground. In order to heal Man from the ground you need to go into a spiritual practice. It is only within the religions and their spiritual traditions they have knowledge and names for the more dark sides of the astral plane's collective history. The West has very precisely called this factor the original sin. The East has called it negative karma. The concepts indicate, that the inertia projects beyond the personal history (growing up conditions, traumatic bindings, painful experiences etc.) and far down into the collective inherit-backgrounds of history (genes, environment, society-ideals, the archetypes and the primordial images of the dreams, fantasies, fairy-tales, myths, and finally: instincts inherited from the animals). It is a factor, which lies in the evolution itself, in the genes, in the collective subconscious, in the collective history.

When therefore therapy requires a change, then the instinctive survival-preparedness in us reacts and protests. Man has survived on willfulness and a consciousness-structure, which mental and psychic sign is Ego-centredness. The bigger Ego, the bigger survival chance.

Seen from a spiritual perspective, this instinctive survival strategy (the Ego) appears as a resistance, an invincible inertia: original sin, negative karma. You can't, by therapeutic strategies, free the consciousness for its attachment to this inertia. You can therefore not dissolve or dilute or convert the original sin through therapy. Only the intervention of the Source (God, Christ, the enlightened consciousness) can basically help Man with a transcendence of the negative karma of the original sin. But in order to, that a human being should be able to receive this help from the Source (gift of grace), then this requires an eminently precise and profound preparation. And as part of this preparation serve the true spiritual practice within the religions.

So, when you in this way do your part of the work, then you will discover that the enlightened consciousness (God, Christ, Buddha), already have cleansed the negative karma and taken on, and forgiven, the original sin. All enlightened teachers of this Earth (Rumi, Krishna, Francis of Assisi, Rabia, Meera, Yeshe Tsogyel, Teresa of Avila) are doing the same: they take on the original sin and are purifying it for us.

I have in my book **A Portrait of a Lifeartist** set up six steps in such a spiritual practice:

- 1) The separation of the observer and the observed
- 2) Religion and supporting exercises
- 3) Passive listening presence
- 4) Discrimination
- 5) Creative emptiness
- 6) The wholeness of the observer and the observed

The first step, the separation of the observer and the observed, is the step where you are completely ignorant about your painbody; that is: where you are suffering. The next step is religion and supporting exercises. Religion and supporting exercises are a valuable early stage in a spiritual practice. In my book **Meditation as an art of life – a basic reader** I have described five supporting exercises. They are as follows:

- 1) The Relaxationmeditation
- 2) The Hara meditation
- 3) The Heartmeditation
- 4) The Change of suffering into Enlightenmen
- 5) The philosophical Diary.

In his *Yogasutras* Patanjali mentions religion and supporting exercises as the first six limbs of the eight limbs of Raja-yoga:

1) *Yama*: outer and inner cleanness. Outer cleanness is first of all based on a meticulous body-hygiene. Inner cleanness is based on the moral standards, you find in all systems of religion.

2) *Niyama*: self-denying life and devotion to God. This does not necessarily imply a life as a monk or nun, but it requires that you simplify your life, so that there is room for tranquillity and reflection.

3) *Pranayama*: mastery of breathing and through that: mastery of the vital energies and intellectual powers.

4) *Asana*: the, from Hatha-yoga, known positions and relaxation exercises.

5) *Pratyahara*: mastery of senses and sense impression. The ability not to be distracted.

6) *Dharana*: the ability to lead all thought-energy towards a single point and keep it fixed there. Correspond to concentration exercises and awareness-training.

7) *Dhyana*: the ability to letting the thought flow into an object, or a conception, and getting to the bottom of it. Corresponding to asking philosophical questions in a meditative-existential way, or purely and simply silence.

8) *Samadhi*: oneness-consciousness. The complete unification of the consciousness (the self, Atman) with it's source (The Good, the True and the Beautiful – or God, Brahman).

In Christian Mysticism the supporting exercises is called *Recollectio* and is described by Francis of Assisi, Meister Eckhart and Teresa of Avila. Moreover supporting exercises is seen in Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual exercises*, which perhaps is the practice within Christian Mysticism that reminds the most about the Greek (Socrates, Epicureans, the Stoics) understanding of philosophy as an art of life.

Concentration consists in the action, the exercise, in which the soul constantly is aimed at, and is remembering, God. When you walk and stand, speak and work, eat and rest: constantly remembering God. The Christian heart prayer (Jesus prayer), which consists in, to each heartbeat, to say a prayer – Kyrie Eleison ("Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.") – is also a technique of concentrative kind, which purpose is to create unity and direction in the mind.

Something similar you will also find in Jewish and Islamic mysticism, and in the philosophies of the East.

Also the Stoics used supporting exercises, either awareness exercises, meditation exercises, intellectual exercises and practical exercises. For instance the Stoics used the so-called Philosophical Diary.

In *Pierre Hadot: Philosophy as a way of Life. Spiritual exercises from Socrates to Foucault. 1995 Blackwell* - you can read about Socrates', the Epicureans', the

Stoics', the Christian philosophy's, and other Western philosophers' supporting exercises.

Religion and supporting exercises cleanses and prepares transformation on a collective, unconscious-instinctive, level.

The two main reasons why religion and supporting exercises is a necessity is partly, that the ongoing self-confirmation of the ego and its negative automatic thoughts, is replaced by a spiritual remembrance, partly that the collective inertia is purified and prepared, so that the Ego is made transparent along with that original sin and negative karma are transformed and transfigured in the contact with the Source (God, Christ, the enlightened consciousness, the saints etc.) And these two processes mutually fertilize each other (negative automatic thoughts are based on thought distortions – see my book **A dictionary of thought distortions**).

Religion has to do with the pious attitude and way of thinking, which stands for the observance of religious virtues, duties and rituals. In this way you can bring a unity and direction into the mind, an order and tranquillity in the thinking, a consistency between thought and conduct of life, an awareness of your relationship with persons, things and ideas, which no therapy is able to. In a spiritual practice it serves as a frame of reference.

The supporting exercises are the beginning of the spiritual practice, where you begin to activate the higher functions of the mind. In order to discover and break the identification with the samsarical producer of the mind, the subject must discover the hidden source in the awareness or in the innermost of consciousness. It happens by neutralizing the Ego's, or the thinking's, functions. This happens through meditation.

The Ego's functions constitute what you could call the ordinary consciousness. You can talk about four such, lower, functions of the ordinary mind:

1. Evaluation (accept/denial, yes/no)
2. Focus
3. Activity
4. Language (words, images)

The source of awareness, the naked consciousness, is hidden because it has melted together with these four functions. They have become a kind of veils, or layers.

Meditation is in all simplicity about separating and dismantling the consciousness' automatical identification with these functions. Then you can talk about four higher functions of the consciousness, which are becoming activated through meditation:

1. Neutral observation
2. Passive listening presence (or wordless prayer) (defocus)
3. Non-activity (non-action)
4. Non-language (wordless)

The whole proces is like a flower opening itself.

The steps in a spiritual practice can of course be described in many different ways. Another way to describe it is by saying that it contains three important concepts:

- 1) Critical thinking (spotting thought distortions, created by dualistic unbalance, both in yourself and in others - see my book **A dictionary of thought distortions**)
- 2) Investigating the shadow (ignorance, the unconscious, the painbody, the cause of suffering, your own dark side, the Ego - see my articles **The emotional painbody and why psychotherapy can't heal it** and **Suffering as an entrance to the Source**)
- 3) The spiritual practice (going beyond all ideas and images - see my article **Paranormal phenomena seen in connection with spiritual practice**)

If you include these three concepts in step 2, religion and supporting exercises, then you can say, that the critical articles in my book **Dream Yoga** also can be seen as frames of reference and supporting exercises. As you continue up the steps, then these references also must fall away, until you are completely naked in a state of alonebeing.

Spiritual practice is a philosophical art of life, and that religion and supporting exercises lead towards such a philosophical life, means that they affect the human existence as a whole; that is to say: both your thoughts and your conduct of life.

In order to lead towards a philosophical life, it is, as far as I can see, a great help, if you find a religion, which suits you, and practise the supporting exercises in connection with asking philosophical questions in a meditative-existential way (see my book **Meditation as an Art of Life – a basic reader**).

It is however likewise valuable to remember, that the spiritual practice - asking philosophical questions in a meditative-existential way - gradually will lead beyond the relative and limited concepts of the religion. It is necessary that you, just like the masters within the spiritual practices of the religions, only use the religion and the supporting exercises as a frame of reference, partly to describe the non-conceptual truth of the Source, partly to direct the thoughts towards this Source. You shall in other words not identify yourself with any religion. Avoid making it into an ideology, avoid making yourself dependent of it. The best way to avoid this, is probably to

avoid being a member of a religion, and just keep it as something private and personal.

In my articles **A critique of Stanislav Grof and Holotropic Breathwork**, and **Humanistic psychology, self-help, and the danger of reducing religion to psychology**, I show the dangerous consequences it can have, when you in a spiritual practice reduce religion to psychology and psychotherapy.

In my book **Dream Yoga** (in the article *The value of religion and supporting exercises*) you can read more about the value of having a religion in a spiritual practice.

*All articles and books referred to are available in free PDF Versions. Links can be found on my blog: [www.MortenTolboll.blogspot.com](http://www.MortenTolboll.blogspot.com)*

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