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Imagination or Fantasy?

What is the difference between a spiritual experience and a psychic impression?

What separates us from the spiritual world? Nothing other than a cloud of emotions, often called “self-love”¹ by Rudolf Steiner and a “self-feeling mantle”² around the body by Georg Kühlewind. This mantle, covering our daily consciousness, is the basis of all of our egotism. In meditation we can make the mantle disappear – become transparent – and in that way we can come to spiritual experiences. We can meet the spiritual world without mediation; we can meet the beings of the spiritual world, or at least their utterances. The utterances of spiritual beings have no perceptual signs, but they are always “speaking”; they address us and we can understand.

The freeing of consciousness happens in several stages. Rudolf Steiner names three of them: *imagination, inspiration and intuition*³. This does not mean that these three levels must appear separately; it may happen that at a certain level we do not notice the higher ones yet. On the path of spiritual schooling, our spiritual faculties go through transformations: they become more and more understandable and conscious. The sick (selfish) ego remains more and more in the background and the healthy, true Self awakens. The direction of this path is exactly opposed to the common desires of modern human beings, and therefore it is a very difficult path to travel. Often it happens that instead of making the separating layer (the mantle) transparent, we “stir” it up, thus creating attractive or frightening, but in any case exciting, colorful and more or less opaque incomprehensible fantasy images. We may mistake – usually due to an impatient desire for an early success, for “enlightenment” or something similar – such fantasy images for *imaginings*, for spiritual experiences. If we stray on the way of the spiritual schooling into such a “dark wood,” it becomes extremely difficult to find our way back to the “straight way,” as Dante tell us at the beginning of his Divine Comedy⁴.

How can we understand the difference between a spiritual experience and a fantasy (which we could also call a *psychic impression*)? An external sign is obviously not available; the difference lies in the *quality* and *intensity* of the experience. To learn to discern this difference is one of the very first and most important steps of a modern schooling. If we lose our way right at the beginning, then every step we take increases the distance to the road we originally wanted to travel. If we begin on a path where we prefer the pleasures of psychic impressions to the clarity of spiritual experiences, then it may become very hard to find our way back.

¹ See e.g. Rudolf Steiner: *Ein Weg zur Selbsterkenntnis des Menschen*, 4th meditation, GA 16: “Actually, we see only on this level of the development [when the soul has gained the capability of observing the sense-body] first, how little we knew about ourselves. The power of self-love can be experienced in its full magnitude. And at the same time we can see to what a small extent we are ready to get rid of this self-love.”

² Georg Kühlewind: *Aufmerksamkeit und Hingabe*, Chapter on the divided attentiveness: “As long as attentiveness is unified, undivided, the human being cannot reflect. The human being lives in the present, without separation, in an undivided consciousness, in heaven. As soon as the division of attentiveness begins, this movement continues. A self-feeling and a free part of attentiveness appear ...”

³ See e.g. Rudolf Steiner, *Die Stufen der höheren Erkenntnis*, GA 12.

⁴ Dante, Divine Comedy: “In the middle of the journey of our life / I found myself in a dark wood, / for the straight way was lost.”

Spiritual experiences are qualitatively “different”

Imagine the following scene. The members of a big symphonic orchestra are gathering together for a rehearsal. The musicians make conversation, most of them on everyday topics, and some of them also on the piece they are going to rehearse. The conductor arrives and joins the conversation as well. Then he steps onto the podium, he raises his baton and the orchestra becomes silent – and in the next moment the first soft notes of the slow movement of a symphony sound. What happens in this moment is *qualitatively* different from everything that has happened before. The musicians could have spoken for weeks and months *about* music – the musical quality still wouldn't have appeared. Imagine that somebody is sitting in the rehearsal room who has never heard music before. Before the music begins, this person could have never guessed, never imagined, what experiencing music is. He could have read all books in the world on music theory and could have created some fantasy about music. But this fantasy would have been something totally different from the musical experience itself. This fantasy would have *nothing* in common with the actual experience.

The situation is very similar in the case of spiritual experiences. Rudolf Steiner writes: “First we have to imagine the supernatural world as lying entirely outside the common consciousness. That consciousness has *no means* through which it could reach the supernatural world. The soul can get in touch with the supernatural world only if its life becomes strengthened through meditation.”⁵

These sentences show the entirely contradictory nature of the situation. The common consciousness has *nothing* with which it can imagine the spiritual world. Nevertheless, the schooling must begin with precisely this consciousness. What else? At the beginning we do not have any other consciousness than the “common” one. It is not easy to admit this. The temptation is great to believe that our own consciousness is not common – only that of everybody else. How, from the common consciousness, can we “strengthen” the soul to such an extent that it becomes able to be transformed into something that is entirely and qualitatively different? It is obviously not just through some mental training and relaxation, as we might wish. The soul must be strengthened to such an extent that it is able to bear the loss of itself – of what it believed itself to be. The consciousness must be changed entirely; it must go through a metamorphosis into something that is “lying entirely outside” of it: the ego must die for the resurrection of the true Self. “One glancing back at one's entire mental life, at one's ‘ego’, as something that has to be put aside, if one wants to enter the supernatural world.”⁶ The musicians must stop chatting; they have to be transformed entirely to musicians, to music. In spiritual schooling this step is much more radical and often filled with pain, annihilating pain.⁷ “He stood there caught up in profound remorse for his absurd notion that he could pick off one single leaf from the laurel wreath of art, without paying for it with his whole life” – writes Thomas Mann in his *Tonio Kröger*, about a dilettantish, ridiculous poet. Whoever believes that he can have spiritual experiences without “paying with his whole life for it” deceives himself, and sometimes others too – only much more.

⁵ Rudolf Steiner: *Die Schwelle der geistigen Welt*, Chapter: About knowing the spiritual world. GA 17.

⁶ Rudolf Steiner: *Ein Weg zur Selbsterkenntnis des Menschen*, 4th meditation, GA 16.

⁷ As above: “This special knowledge about ourselves is painful...”

In identity

In each act of cognition (thinking or perception) we enter the spiritual world, at least for a moment, though usually unconsciously. We “sleep into” the spiritual world. In this “sleep of cognition” we are in identity with that, the outside of which we later call the “object” of the cognition. I have been identical with everything I have ever known, at least for a moment. The goal of the spiritual schooling is to become *aware* of just this journey into the spiritual world and back. When Rudolf Steiner speaks of an awakening from the common consciousness⁸, it is more than a metaphor. The difference between a spiritual experience and a psychic impression is not in the content of the experience, but in the level, the intensity and the quality of awareness. Most misunderstandings in “spiritual” issues stem from not noticing this.

Thinking, perception and sincerity

Ordinary cognition (thinking and perception) leaves us “cold”. We became aware of the content of cognition, without being especially concerned about it. We come through the abyss (another name for the mantle) between the spiritual and the common world in such a way that not even a dreamlike remembrance of the journey remains. The separating mantle remains opaque, more or less motionless, functioning like a good mirror. The process of cognition is stopped by the brain and the sensory organs, and dies in this “collision.” The process itself remains absolutely hidden, and we become aware only of the lifeless result.⁹ It is dead -- like a corpse.¹⁰ This is the kind of cognition we use in natural science. Materialistic natural science misunderstands cognition, by taking the accompanying physical processes in the brain and the senses as the primary phenomenon and thus in this way locating understanding in something that is in principle incomprehensible. Thus, the natural scientific view locates the original of its own light in darkness, usually without noticing the contradiction. Nevertheless, the “soberness” of this kind of cognition is an inevitable precondition for a modern -- by which I mean free -- spiritual schooling: “After all, the technique of natural science was enhanced by its opposition to the pretensions of some dark mysticism. And although only an awakening of consciousness can be called “spiritual research” with justification -- an awakening that leads to mental realms having the clarity and simplicity of mathematics -- those people, who would like to approach the highest questions of being for the cheap, tend to confuse such an awakening with their mystical confusions while at the same time calling it true spiritual research.”¹¹

This mathematical clarity is a minimal precondition for any modern approach to higher consciousness. It is not the goal, but rather the starting point. “What we are looking for is not thinking, but a non-thinking,” writes Georg Kühlewind.¹² But, the way to this “non-thinking” comes about through the clarification of thinking. Therefore, an appropriate modern schooling has to start with the development of a clear, healthy thinking that is free of any prejudice and

⁸ Rudolf Steiner: *Vom Menschenrätsel*, Chapter: Perspectives. GA 20.

⁹ Georg Kühlewind, *Die Esoterik des Erkennens und Handelns*, Chapter: The true nature of thinking.

¹⁰ Rudolf Steiner, *Das Ewige in der Menschenseele*, Berlin, GA 67. 24. January, 1918

¹¹ As above (P. 161 in the German edition)

¹² Georg Kühlewind, *Licht und Freiheit*, Chapter: Meditation, paragraph 83. Verlag Freies Geistesleben, 2004.

any illusion. Otherwise, the danger of “dark mysticism” is too high. “However, nowadays we are deficient not in super-perceptual experience, but in what is healthy logic, really healthy thinking, above all the power of sincerity. At the moment sincerity vanishes, super-perceptual experiences melt away; people cannot understand such experiences anymore.”¹³

“Really healthy thinking” is, however, *not* given; it is not what we usually call “common sense.” It first has to be developed with the help of schooling.¹⁴ If our everyday thinking were healthy, we could stay focused upon any arbitrary topic in full concentration and intensity without difficulties. But this is not the case at all, as we can convince ourselves easily by doing any elementary concentration exercise – assuming that we are ready to be honest with ourselves. But we are usually not. It is extremely hard to overcome our illusions about ourselves, our “self-love.” In the end, our adherence to our illusions is the only thing that keeps us from entering the spiritual world, from becoming free individuals. And unfortunately there is nothing we love more ardently than our illusions. The greatest obstacle on the way of spiritual schooling is this infatuation with our illusions. It is another name for “lack of sincerity.”

Common feelings (emotions)

Usually we are not satisfied with sober cognition. Cognition is almost always mixed with feelings – sympathies and antipathies of different kinds and intensities. In this case the mantle does not remain motionless; the mirror breaks. The light of cognition breaks on the mirror-pieces and creates different colors. The mantle, the layer of self-love, resists, and will be stirred up by the process of cognition. This gives the whole experience a certain emotional intensity, which causes a kind of pleasure. We enjoy even our negative feelings in a certain way, because even they pull us out from the monotony of sober cognitions. These feelings – our emotions – do not leave us cold, because they are not fully dead. Still, they are opaque and egoistic: they point at themselves. In other words, they are subjective; they don’t speak about the other, but about ourselves. The fact that I do not “like” this and that usually has much more to do with myself than with the actual “this and that”. Mixing emotions with cognition is a consequence of the “fall of mankind”¹⁵, of the influence of “Lucifer.” The fall means – in modern language – a huge change in the structure of the human consciousness. Rudolf Steiner describes this as an unhealthy shift in predominance between the constituents of the soul.¹⁶ Human beings begin to identify themselves with the feeling of their bodies: Adam “hides” himself from God, because he becomes aware of being naked. The human being is expelled from paradise.

This means in our language that the age of dualistic consciousness begins. In this consciousness, truth (mediated by thinking) and reality (mediated by perception) are

¹³ Rudolf Steiner, *Geistige und soziale Wandlungen in der Menschheitsentwicklung*, 18. January, 1920, GA 196.

¹⁴ Georg Kühlewind, *Umgang mit der Anthroposophie*, Verlag Freies Geistesleben, 1991.

¹⁵ Rudolf Steiner, *Die Welt der Sinne und die Welt des Geistes*, 29. December, 1911, GA 134: “This is the banishment from paradise, which appears to most people with a materialistic view as the highest enjoyment... So much has mankind changed that the being outside the paradise appears as a special joy.”

¹⁶ As above.

separated. We have the impression that our own thinking is not part of reality – the foundation for all the absurdities of our times. The everyday consciousness lives enclosed between two different kinds of unconsciousness. What is “above,” the heavens, the source of our spiritual capacities, Georg Kühlewind usually calls the “super-consciousness”¹⁷ – the realm of our cognitive and creative capabilities. With this heaven we are connected only by a thin thread (e.g., in thinking, if we think anything new). The other one is “below,” hell – the “sub-consciousness” of psychology – which consists of those attentive powers that take on definite forms, that are taken prisoners of our habits. The more we free this prisoner-attention – the more we transform it into creative attention – the more we move from hell to heaven. Unfortunately, the opposite is true as well. Returning to heaven is extremely difficult, because the enjoyments of the non-cognitive, non-transparent emotions are so powerfully attractive. This is the realm of pleasure, of fantasy.¹⁸ Nowadays we live our everyday waking life in a mixture of cognition and fantasy, and this seems to be absolutely normal, even desirable.¹⁹

It is more ominous, however, if we lose ourselves in fantasy in the course of spiritual schooling. Even the “normal mixture” of cognition and fantasy is unhealthy.²⁰ Our soul gets hopelessly ill and trapped if we cultivate this kind of mental activity, usually accompanied by an intensive purposeful enjoyment: “If we apply will to our thinking life as described above, and it does not go in the direction shown above, but rather towards everyday wishes, desires etc., this will not lead to an awakening of clairvoyant consciousness, but, quite the opposite, to a degradation of the common consciousness, to daydreaming, fantasy, and visionary experiences.”²¹ Instead of heaven we arrive at hell, which may seem even attractive – for a while. This danger today is probably greater than ever before. Many of us feel attracted by some kind of “spirituality.”

Imagination

Fantasy pictures created by stirring the mantle of self-feeling have nothing to do with “imagination” (in the sense of the first higher level of consciousness of Steiner).²² Imagination appears when the mantle becomes transparent and our cognitive activities accordingly begin to become more and more aware. We become aware not only the *products* of our cognition (thought, image, perception), but also the otherwise completely invisible, transparent *process* (of thinking, imaging and perceiving). This occurs not because the activity becomes contaminated and loses its transparency, but because we start to be able to make distinctions in transparency, in the light. Even for the everyday consciousness nothing can enter but different forms, metamorphoses of our own attentiveness. Attention, in every act of cognition, becomes identical with what we cognize. While in everyday consciousness we become aware solely of the reverberation of the metamorphosis (fully dead in common

¹⁷ Georg Kühlewind, *Das Leben der Seele zwischen Überbewußtsein and Unterbewußtsein*, Verlag Freies Geistesleben, 1986.

¹⁸ Rudolf Steiner, *Die Stufen der höheren Erkenntnis*, GA 12. (P. 12 in the German edition).

¹⁹ Georg Kühlewind, *From Normal to Healthy*.

²⁰ As above.

²¹ Rudolf Steiner: *Vom Menschenrätsel*, Chapter: Perspectives. GA 20.

²² Rudolf Steiner: *Die Stufen der höheren Erkenntnis*, GA 12.

thinking and perception, or half dead in the images of fantasy, in the emotions), in imagination we become aware of the movement of our own attentiveness, and on a still higher level we become aware of its silence, of its “non-movement”. We begin consciously to experience the *life* of our own attention, before it dies from its contact with the brain and the sensory organs. This experience may enable us to observe other life processes as well. Life can be observed only by an attentiveness that is continuous -- we might say “liquid.”²³ Liquid attentiveness is not a simple enhancement of common thinking and perceiving, but a radical reversal of the whole human being – a conversion. It is new and very poignant, just as when the musicians stop the conversation and music sounds.

Thinking, perceiving and feeling are converted into new cognitive capacities. This thinking, and this perceiving are not “cold” any more, but free from any sentimental feeling, from any emotion. Our approach to nature and to other people and also to ourselves changes radically. We start to develop *qualitatively* new ways to feel and to understand. We do not feel our own, subjective emotions (I like it, I don’t like it etc.), but we allow new and completely unknown feelings to be created that no longer point inward to us but reveal the other, just as when we encounter and understand a new artistic style. Thinking and perceiving are becoming alive, feeling is becoming cognitive. the will is reversed, as if we were saying with our whole being: “Thy will be done.” “There is another direction of will, which is in a sense the opposite to the previous one... a will, developed in devotion, which directs the soul; it does not originate from the soul, but, quite the opposite, it has its effect in the soul. We would be naturally inclined to believe that it has its origin in the soul. But in experiencing the process, we will know that in this reversal of the will, the spirit outside the soul grasps the soul.”²⁴

Devotion means here that the mantle of egotism disappears, it becomes transparent – at least for the time of the meditation. There is no mirror any more; we do not see “through a glass darkly; but face to face”.²⁵ At least we move in this direction. The “spirit outside the soul” is not a fantasy; it is reality, which is “not only as real as the sense world, but ... it is much more real”.²⁶ Corresponding to this greater reality and the security of the liquid element, is the image of “walking on the sea”. The security that we usually experience only on the basis of everyday consciousness, can be also experienced in the fluid element, in the Water of Life. This image is at the same time a good example of an imagination. The goal is not to try to make mental pictures of how the Lord could have walked on the sea, but to *experience* the security in an attention, which is liquid and alive, i.e., free of dead objects of solid shape. This experience can be expressed as an image. Whoever knows the experience, will recognize it in the image.

²³ See *The Water of Life* by the author (http://www.-itec.uni-klu.ac.at/~laszlo/Antr0/Water_of_life.pdf).

²⁴ Rudolf Steiner: *Vom Menschenrätsel*, Chapter: Perspectives. GA 20.

²⁵ I. Corinthians, 13, 1.

²⁶ Rudolf Steiner, *Die Stufen der höheren Erkenntnis*, (Page 20, in the German edition) GA 12

The way of spiritual schooling

The first step of the schooling is the transformation, the healing of thinking.²⁷ It is unlikely that we will succeed at first in opening our attentiveness fully. We have to learn to collect our scattered attentiveness. Usually we do not experience our own attentiveness – but at most the lack of it. Therefore, we have to learn first to concentrate our attentiveness on one single object.²⁸ This is not the goal itself, but is a preparation. If we want to hammer a nail into the wall, we first move with our arm backwards, in order to gather power. Concentration has just such a role in the schooling. During the concentration exercises distractions may appear, *i.e.*, we lose the object we selected (preferably a simple, human made object) from our attention. Distractions can also be emotional – upon a closer look we find that all distractions are emotional. It may happen, for example, that we envision the object as especially beautiful or ugly, attractive or repulsive, in our imagination. This is also a distraction. If feelings appear during the exercise they should come from the object itself, not from our emotional associations. If for example I see the spoon I am inwardly concentrating on as particularly beautiful, because I connect nice remembrances to it, then this may attract my full attention. This might be a pleasant feeling, but it does not strengthen my free, autonomous attention, and therefore, it is a distraction as well. The goal of the schooling is not to come to pleasant feelings, but to come to real spiritual experiences. On the other hand, a feeling of the “idea,” the function of the spoon may arise, which is there *before* the image of it can be built. Note that the image of a spoon is already a result of ... well of “something” we could call its idea.

Such feelings are at first usually very subtle, but they show that our attentiveness begins to open. Such open, non-subjective feelings are so different from our usual emotions that we usually do not call them feelings at all. They are similar to those emotion-free feelings, which we experience in each act of cognition: the feeling of evidence accompanying each thought and the feeling of reality accompanying each perception. These feelings are *cognitive*: they tell me something about something other than myself, but, they “tell” this in feeling. As long as we cannot make the distinction between the open, “sober” but intensive cognitive feeling and the closed, “self-feeling” emotions, we can be sure that the direction of our exercises is not right. When this happens, exercising may soon become boring, particularly if we repeat it. This shows that concentration is poor and attention not autonomous. If I am doing something genuinely concentrated, then it cannot be boring. If the level of concentration rises, then the intensity of the attentiveness can reach such a high level that we experience our own attentiveness, in the process of creating its own objects. In this pure – self-forgetting, selfless – spiritual activity we become aware of our own activity in its actual presence. This is the first monistic, the first real spiritual experience, born of the true, selfless Self. Until then, everything is just preparation..

As a next step we can turn our strengthened attention towards meditative texts and the phenomena of nature: “In following our goal, it can be a particularly great help, if we turn with an inward attention towards nature. We try, *e.g.*, to observe a plant in such a way that we not only follow its shape, but – with a kind of sympathy – also its inner life, as it strives

²⁷ Rudolf Steiner: *Vom Menschenrätzel*, Chapter: Perspectives. (Page 20 in the German edition) GA 20.

²⁸ Georg Kühlewind, *From Normal to Healthy*.

upward in the stem, unfolds in the leaves horizontally, opens its inner life against the outer world in the flower, and so on. In such thinking the will is working silently; and this will is the one, developed in devotion, which controls the soul; which does not originate from the soul, but, quite the opposite, which depends upon its effects.”²⁹

The task is *not* to observe the plant and add the above thoughts! First, we have to learn to observe a plant– with such an “inward” sharing attention – that during this process we have no thoughts at all. All thoughts and emotions come to a standstill, without losing concentration.³⁰ This is extremely difficult, and being honest and patient is no less important here than in the previously mentioned concentration exercise. If we succeed in quieting down and bringing to a halt the everyday consciousness, then the will reverses direction and the living form of the plant expresses itself as a higher idea, which can be followed, up to its source: the idea becomes an “ideal”.³¹ Then we can follow the inner life of the plant with “sympathy”. Instead of cultivating this latter experience, trying to *imagine* and to enrich it by *associative emotions* does not help a bit. Quite the opposite, it takes us away from our goal, possibly forever. We have to forget everything we learned, read, thought and felt – such is the precondition for attentiveness opening itself. This is anything but easy. The difficulty is that it flies in the face of our everyday life practice and our closed, egotistic being. No success, no appreciation, no self-realization in self-love awaits us on this path; only the partly painful awakening of the true Self. But if we want to go our way in freedom, free from illusions, then we cannot avoid this way. Freedom cannot be attained through a gimmick, by stealing it; it cannot be even had as a gift. Freedom must be only brought to fruition by our own activity. Everything else would be self-deception. Therefore, it is better if I practice my exercises slowly (maybe very slowly), patiently, honestly and without success, than to deceive myself in my eagerness. The new capacities must be *born* in us– they cannot be forced. It is not a problem if I cannot meditate, if I have no spiritual experiences – I can still learn. But if I convince myself that I am able to meditate, but I cannot, then I will not be likely to learn meditation. “If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth.” (John 9, 41).

And anyway, someone who has been even slightly touched by the deep seriousness, intensity and purity of a spiritual experience, will never be satisfied by the pleasures of the everyday consciousness. The purity of striving sparks a new light in our life. Life does not get colorless for us, but quite the contrary, we start to see even everyday life in a new light. Everything can tell us something and we become aware that we can see behind every phenomenon to its source. As we sometimes notice the endless depth in the look of another person, we start to feel behind every appearance the look of its creator. We leave the wasteland of loneliness and we are able to build spiritual communities with others.³² The striving is no longer so difficult, and exercising is not a duty. It induces the purest joy in us, close to what we feel in waiting for a beloved person. Devotion is not a sacrifice. It is love, pure love.

²⁹ Rudolf Steiner: *Vom Menschenrätsel*, Chapter: Perspectives, GA 20.

³⁰ Rudolf Steiner, *Die Stufen der höheren Erkenntnis*, GA 12.

³¹ Rudolf Steiner: *Wie erlangt man Erkenntnisse der höheren Welten?* GA 10: “Every idea that does not become an ideal kills a power in your soul; and every idea that becomes an ideal creates powers of life in you”.

³² See *Wachen in der Nacht* by the author (<http://www-itec.uni-klu.ac.at/~laszlo/Anfro/Wachen.pdf>)