

Mysteries of the Soul

Reflection 1 - Living from a sense of unity

Spiritual text: Ashtavakra's song 1:1-20

As a human being you are so much more than simply a complex biological organism with intelligence. You are also much more than a psychological individual with personal thoughts, feelings and will power. Your very essence is pure consciousness. Your very essence is soul: a potential living connection between the unity and the multitude, between the eternal and the temporary, between the Holy and your personality. To experience this connection is a great joy, a supreme bliss. Every human being is invited to free himself from delusion, to sense this lasting peace and inner joy. This possibility may seem very distant from how you experience yourself, your life and the world right now. That is because you are living in a self-created prison of delusion which has arisen because you have placed externalities above yourself, because you have identified with transient forms. These words are all but flattering.

The author of 'Ashtavakra's song' certainly did not express them in order to make reproaches but to make an appeal to you to pay attention to who you really are, in essence: the witness of revelations of a magnificent reality, all-pervasive and perfect. The founders of movements that grew to become world religions encouraged their followers to no longer identify with their mortal personality but to merge into a higher soul life in order to become and to be a new man, animated by the spirit. The concepts 'consciousness' and 'soul' are essential to many religions and worldviews. There are enormous differences among world religions and there is also a wide range of teachings to be found within the separate world religions.

Numerous similarities

However, if we look at the more esoteric and contemplative traditions within religions, we find numerous similarities among them. That is logical, as esotericism and contemplation concern the living experience of a reality that is at odds with the world as perceived by our senses and observed with our psyche. Therefore it cannot be easily understood by everyone but only by the ones who are, in a sense, 'initiated' into the other reality. The structure of the living experience of humanity is universal – just as the anatomy of the human body is the same in different people – but it requires a certain education to gain access to that living experience.

In this book, 'Mysteries and Symbols of the Soul', we explore that aspect of ourselves known as soul, Self, inner man or consciousness. To our usual way of thinking, soul is a mystery. It is neither a subject nor an object, yet it can be experienced. It has no shape, it goes way beyond time and space and still it can grow within us. When we connect the concepts 'consciousness' and 'soul' with one another, then we mean being aware of your consciousness as something that characterises humanity. It is good to realise this fact since, according to spiritual principles, consciousness is the basis of all manifestations. A well-known Sufi saying expresses this idea as: *'God sleeps in the rock, dreams in the plant, moves in the animal and awakens in man'*.

We can define and understand the living experience of the soul only through the use of universal symbols, analogies and myths, all of which are part of the world of experience of the soul. Our rational thinking capacity is a great gift, one we very much need to be able to live in the sensory perceptible world. However it is not intended that we become stranded in it or further develop ourselves exclusively in that direction. As human beings we must not go back to the mythical consciousness of our remote ancestors; we can no longer linger in our intellectual brain consciousness, even though it could still be extended endlessly. We must advance to the gnostic soul consciousness – to the world of experience of the soul, to the domain of the archetypes – to which every human being is summoned internally.

The first part of this book is called 'Mysteries of the Soul', and it consists of nine classical spiritual texts and nine reflections about them. The selected spiritual texts come from nine different traditions, successively:

Advaita Vedanta;
Hermeticism;
Kabbalah;
Gnostic Christianity;
Raja Yoga;
Judaism;
Buddhism;
Zoroastrianism; and
Pauline Christianity.

These are the symbols that refer to the human soul. We link the following symbols of the soul to the nine reflections of the first part. In the nine essays of the second part, named 'Symbols of the Soul', these are further elaborated:

1. The soul and the centre;
2. the soul as tree;
3. the soul as flame;
4. the soul as traveller;
5. the soul as fortress;
6. the soul as creator;
7. the soul as sevenfold being;
8. the soul as mirror; and
9. the soul as world worker

To become receptive

The objective of this book is to make you conscious of the life of the soul and to increase your receptivity for its influences. As a consequence you will experience life differently. Not the life of your soul, because you do not have a soul, the soul has you, and it is barely able to express itself in you. You yourself form the barrier that makes it difficult or impossible for the soul to manifest itself.

This remark is not intended to be personal, because this fact applies to nearly everyone on earth. You have the right to be here, in this world. More than that: you must be here! And you can become transparent for the light of truth that glows imperishably. You can be renewed internally and experience great happiness. You can cooperate joyfully with the realisation of the divine plan of creation; however, for this purpose, you must first undergo a thorough transformation process.

Holy scriptures play an important role in many religious and esoteric traditions. Their origin is found in the world of the soul which manifests itself through an underlying numerical structure that has not been laid there on purpose. These scriptures are therefore often expressed in poetry – intended to be recited or sung – rather than prose. Among the holy scriptures that have been chosen for this programme are three songs: Ashtavakra's Song, the Song of the Pearl and a hymn by Zarathustra.

In translating the original holy scriptures into another language the particular numerical structure is most often lost, but they still enable you to connect with the high, shining level of consciousness that created them. The same applies, for instance, to visual arts and music. Artistic creations that are inspired by the world of experience of the soul possess the ability to temporarily raise the consciousness to the world of the soul. They therefore can be experienced as food for the soul. In this programme we will not explain the chosen texts very extensively, not only because we have no room for it within the chosen set-up but also and primarily because it would be of little use. If we would clarify phrase after phrase and verse after verse – assuming that we had the capability – you would process the information in a way that you are used to process other information. This raises your level of knowledge, but it does not make you a new you.

Holy scriptures can be seen as gifts that invite you to work with them. Only if you start your inner work with holy scriptures can they have a transforming influence. Certain holy texts are repeatedly spoken or sung as mantras in spiritual traditions, thus deeply engraving them in the subconsciousness of those involved. This conditioning not only creates new, powerful neural connections in the brain, but also allows forces to be absorbed from the domain of the soul, the world of experience of the archetypes. These energies transform the living experience, purifying and renewing it down to the level of the physical body.

Kōans

The Zen tradition often works with so-called kōans. The Zen master gives a kōan – a kind of riddle – to the pupil. It is the task of the Zen pupil to 'crack' this kōan in order to find both understanding and also the right answer. Ultimately, the answer that the pupil produces is not the primary objective, but rather the efforts that he or she has made to come to a correct answer, as it is only the effort and not the answer that works in a transforming way. The efforts are needed to transcend the usual way of thinking.

Inner renewal is not a merit but a result of grace, of heavenly forces that are given. As a result of aspiration – that is your longing and efforts to be inwardly renewed and better equipped to serve – you can receive divine grace; the all-encompassing love can then manifest itself and new capacities will gradually develop. If you would consider yourself as the source or the

cause of spiritual growth that you are experiencing within yourself, you would fall prey to self-identification and you would not form a living connection between heaven and earth.

Like many other holy texts, Ashtavakra's song can be seen as a large collection of kōans. Every verse contains wisdom that we can probe further. The scripture begins with a genuine and profound question that Janaka poses to the wise Ashtavakra. Janaka is a mighty and influential personality who has become conscious of the fact that he is bound and does not live in the truth. For this reason he is longing for liberation and detachment. Ashtavakra tells him, and us too:

'O friend, if you wish to be free, shun the poison of the senses. Seek the nectar of truth, of love and forgiveness, simplicity and happiness. Earth, fire and water, the wind and the sky – you are none of these. If you wish to be free, know you are the Self, the witness of all these, the heart of awareness. Set your body aside. Sit in your own awareness. You will at once be happy, forever still, forever free.'

Here Ashtavakra encourages Janaka to give up his fascination for the sensory perceptible world in order to allow the qualities of the soul – like selflessness, simplicity, compassion, peace of mind, sincerity – to manifest. He also advises Janaka not to identify with all the forms that appear in his consciousness but to be a witness to them, because only if he is a neutral witness will his very nature be happy, peaceful and free from bonds.

Mindfulness

In fact, Ashtavakra here advises practicing 'mindfulness', a phenomenon that has gained popularity during the past decades. Called 'self-observation' by the esoteric teacher George Gurdjieff, mindfulness is one of the aspects of the eightfold path that was described by Buddha as 'right mindfulness'.

Someone who is mindful is attentively present in the here and now, observant without judgement and accepts what is. When there is no judgement and a situation is accepted entirely as it is, there results a certain unity, or non-duality. Living from this state of unity (or non-duality) of the soul provides great advantages. Numerous scientific studies have proven the beneficial effects of correctly-practiced mindfulness. In society, mindfulness is used mainly as a means to reduce stress and overcome and prevent physical and psychological complaints, thus improving the functioning of the personality. Within spiritual traditions it is not the body or the personality that is central, but the soul. Buddhists speak about 'loving friendliness', a quality of the soul that is nowadays referred to as tenderheartedness or compassion. Genuine spirituality aims at a new genesis, based on the soul, which Ashtavakra calls 'awareness'. He says:

'Right or wrong, joy and sorrow, these are of the mind only. They are not yours. It is not really you who acts or enjoys. The heart of awareness, you are everywhere, forever free. Forever and truly free, the single witness of all things. But if you see yourself as separate, then you are bound.'

According to Ashtavakra, the thinking capacity makes distinctions and gives meaning to events. That approach is recognised not only within spiritual traditions but also, to a certain extent, within psychology. For example people are taught during therapeutic sessions that they should be conscious of how the reality that they experience is determined by their thinking, due to a certain sequence in which something is expressed.

Thinking and reality

When you experience a certain event, it evokes a certain thought in your mind. This thought subsequently leads to a certain feeling and that feeling then results in a certain behaviour. Finally the behaviour leads to certain consequences. So if in your life you experience certain consequences that you do not want, then you should begin by changing the events (Image 1).

Naturally, that is not always possible because you cannot completely control your life. It is possible though to direct your thoughts about an event for a large part. If you begin to do this, your feelings and behaviour are influenced and thus also the consequences.

On a spiritual path people gradually free themselves from the prison of delusion through inner detachment, thus enabling them to dedicate themselves to their actual assignment: to give soulful significance to revelations of reality so that they are in accordance with the domain of the soul, with the world of experience of the archetypes. The essence of that is thinking, feeling and acting from the world of the soul. When earthly forms are connected with heavenly structures in this way, then actual liberation appears on the horizon both for the person concerned and, at the same time, for all humanity as well as other life-waves.

In the earthly dimension we primarily experience repetition, attachment and fear. When we gain access to the dimension of the soul there will be an experience of unity, freedom and love. Thus we can signify much more for humanity when we live from the soul rather than from our self-preserving personality, as the development of the soul benefits everything and everyone.

Ashtavakra's Song says:

*'Your nature is pure awareness. You are flowing
in all things, and all things are flowing in you. But beware the narrowness
of the mind! You are always the same, unfathomable awareness,
limitless and free, serene and unperturbed. Desire only your
own awareness. The heart of awareness whatever takes form is false.
Only the formless endures. When you understand the truth of this
teaching, you will not have to be born again.'*