

Narcissism – The Shadow of Transpersonal Psychology

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Abstract:

Narcissism comes in two variants: Ego-inflation and the Moses complex. While the former is exhibited by pathological grandiosity, the latter is marked by excessive self-devaluation and lack of self-esteem. In group contexts, both are found in the symbiotic appearance of charismatic leaders and worshipping followers. Both are subtle forms of spiritual defense mechanisms against the true spiritual task of finding and transcending one's "true" self. Because of its specific topic transpersonal psychology is particularly likely to attract people with narcissistic problems and one should be aware of this. Some practical implications are pointed out.

Key words: narcissism, self, spirituality, self-esteem

Introduction

C.G. Jung pointed out that ego inflation is one of the main dangers when coming into contact with what he called “transpersonal” content or the “collective unconscious” (Jung, 1984). By this he means that persons with a strong spiritual experience might identify to such an extent with it that they lose sight of their limitations and finitude, their personal problems and ongoing need for personal development. Such development normally entails that such a spiritual experience has to be realised in many steps, which may be cumbersome, difficult or boring. Otherwise there is the danger that a false, fragile and demanding ego will use the experience to compensate for its own shortcomings. This may well protect the ship from sinking, but will also prevent it from sailing. This paper addresses the principal danger embodied in the spiritual path, namely ego inflation. .

In the Thora, the Second Book of Moses (Exodus) gives an account of Yahweh’s call upon Moses. Moses is herding his father-in-law’s flock in the desert, while his people are suffering in bondage in Egypt, when Yahweh appears to him and calls upon him to free his people, the Israelites, from slavery, to go and confront Pharaoh, and challenge him to let him bring the Israelites out of Egypt. But in the first instance, Moses does not regard it as an honour to be called upon by God. He rather thinks this to be a presumptuous idea and declines (a fact which is frequently overlooked!). He claims that he is not a good speaker and that the Israelites, let alone Pharaoh, might not listen to him. God, however, calls upon him time and again, until, grudgingly, Moses agrees. However, he does succeed in obtaining a concession from God: his brother Aaron is to be the one to do the talking.

This story describes quite a specific definition of the second danger of the spiritual path: It is what I would like to call the Moses complex, i.e. the temptation to decline a clearly perceived calling and the refusal to live up to it by pointing out one's weaknesses, one's lack of training or accomplishments, or out of sheer fear or laziness. A very subtle form of the Moses complex is false humility or the refusal to face one's own inner dignity and strength. Ego-inflation and the Moses complex are the two poles between which the spiritual path winds. The point I wish to make in this paper is that they are two sides of one coin: narcissism. And because these two temptations are so deeply connected with the spiritual path, narcissism is the shadow of transpersonal psychology. The more we stand in the light - and who would not want to do this - the less we can see what is in the shadow. And only he who himself would be light, could rightly claim not to have a shadow. But who is entitled to do this?

Narcissism

Narcissism is, quite literally, love for oneself, or, more technically, the libidinal attachment to the self. More mundanely, by narcissism we mean the healthy and normal feeling of pride, competence, and well-being of psychologically healthy human beings, when they think of themselves or their attributes, plans or behaviors which are a part of their selves (Mertens, 1993). The older Freudian, psychoanalytic tradition believed narcissism to be one of the primitive sides of the human psyche. However, newer psychoanalytic approaches correct this one-sided view. With the observations of Heinz Kohut and Otto F. Kernberg (Kernberg, 1978, 1992b, 1993; Kohut, 1971, 1977, 1978) a new understanding of narcissism was coined, comprising a healthy sense of

well-being or pleasure directed toward oneself, i.e. a balanced feeling of worth and trust in oneself, which belongs to and is necessary for a healthy life.

As is well known, Freud's original teachings were subjected to criticisms and suggestions for elaborations quite early on. Some were pointing out the importance of the ego, like Heinz Hartmann (Hartmann, 1972), some the importance of objects relations, such as Melanie Klein and later Otto F. Kernberg. While ego-theorists like Hartmann emphasized the ego and started the discussion around a psychoanalytically informed notion of the self, objection relation theorists emphasized how experiences with early relationships in infancy and childhood translated into the ways a person sees, experiences and treats not only others, but also himself or herself. It was primarily Heinz Kohut who brought the discussion within traditional psychoanalytical theorizing forward by focusing on the interplay between the self and its environment.

Kohut's basic thesis is simple. He postulates that just as there is a fundamental need for food, shelter, warmth, protection, and later on sexual bonding, so, too, there is an equally fundamental need for affirmation, mirroring and respect for one's own self. The term "narcissism" refers to this need. Kohut points out that as adults we are still unable to fulfill this need ourselves and that we need our social environment for that. As infants and children we are dependent on our parents. As adults we can satisfy most necessary needs ourselves. But we are still dependent on others to give us support, affirmation of our value and mirroring of our self-image. Thus, we will remain narcissistically dependent for the rest of our lives, even if as a result of a sufficiently supportive developmental history we have a strong sense of self and self-value. The basic metaphor for this fact is the "mirror". In the same way that we need a mirror to see what we look like, we need others to understand who we are, and to be sure that the

way we are is all right and that we are lovable as we are. Kohut calls this basic experience which transmits awareness of its basic worth to the infant the “spark in the mother’s eye”. Ideally, a loved child is so well mirrored by his parents that the love and warmth that he or she experiences is introjected and becomes part of the self. Psychologically speaking, the self is made up of these experiences with others, which in psychoanalytical jargon are called self-objects. If this process of introjection of positive regard is successful, a stable and good feeling for one’s self and one’s worth results. But if the process is disrupted, this results in smaller or larger narcissistic “holes” in one’s personality; these represent a lack of adequate mirroring. Depending on how strong these narcissistic threats are and at what time in the person’s developmental history they occur, psychological dysfunctions of varying severity and phenomenology result. While massive pathological narcissistic disorders are relatively obvious, either because of their threat to the environment or because of the individual’s suffering, there are also many “silent” narcissistic disturbances which do not appear as deviant, frequently because such individuals are eager to please others, because they are cooperative, diligent and active, and thus have a personality of a type which in our Western culture is reinforced. Especially when narcissistically weak individuals have strong, intellectual, artistic or other gifts, they often succeed in using them to compensate for their initial narcissistic deficits by achieving success, reward and acceptance within their professional arenas. This will then result in above average achievement in their professional lives. Precisely because these individuals need to rely on their social environment to provide them with the kind of narcissistic support they need, they often develop great social skills and an affable personality which they can use to prompt those around them into assuming a benevolent attitude towards them. Nevertheless,

narcissistic wounds can still hurt unseen, especially if the environment does not provide the necessary support.

The signature of narcissistic problems is the presence of a feeling of low self-esteem, together with fantasies of grandeur and importance. If things work out, such individuals find niches and ways of obtaining the narcissistic backing they need. But if positive feedback is too weak, or is interrupted or lacking, or if the individual's narcissistic needs are too strong to be met by a normal environment, narcissistic crises ensue, which the psyche signals with a feeling of emptiness, lack of drive and pleasure, and possibly suicidal fantasies. Delusions of grandeur are the complementary side and represent an attempt to overcome the basic tenor of low self-esteem. These fantasies often contain images of one's own importance which are not shared by peers. Consequently, sad and depressive affects or paranoid thoughts are frequent. Although the basic process is similar, the phenomenology of the disorder may vary. Thus, a paranoid acting out and a depressively masked suicide can have the same psychological root of a narcissistic deficit. When narcissistic threats meet with a relatively stable and consolidated personality later in developmental history or come only as single traumatic events, the chances are that the personality as a whole will not break down, but periods of inner emptiness and lack of purpose, loneliness and feelings of being distant to others might still result. If narcissistic threats are constant and happen from a very early age on, the personality might be trapped in a severe personality disorder such as a paranoid, an antisocial or severe borderline personality disorder.

The Importance of Frustrations

I do not want to convey the picture that all the world's problems can be solved if children could only have their way. This widely held belief, stemming from a lay version and a fundamental misunderstanding of the psychology of the self, is most certainly wrong. Not only is such a world not possible, it would also be dangerous. Kohut has repeatedly pointed out that it is the everyday frustrations, the experiencing of limits, and the mini traumas of everyday life that enable children to let go of their massive, inborn and quite natural narcissism. These frustrations help children to introject and later to assume the functions exercised by life in general and their caretakers in particular, to reduce their demands to a realistic level, to set limits and point out boundaries, to find realistic ways for big plans, to set priorities for different and often conflicting needs and wants. Children can assume these functions if they experience frustration and if their overriding impulses are curbed constructively. Frustrating experiences throw children (and adults likewise!) back on themselves, they force them to rebalance their system and find new goals. This is the only way for us to learn that our own needs and their fulfillment are not the only important thing on earth. In this way, we can develop a realistic feeling for ourselves: that we are both valuable and unique, and yet at the same time not the only beings on earth. The result of such an optimal development, balancing warm support and narcissistic mirroring and experience of boundaries and limits is a healthy narcissism that knows both about one's own importance and one's relative place in the world. When children's grandiosity is mirrored and reinforced without frustrating, it is likely that a misplaced feeling of self-importance will develop which has no foundation in reality. The prototypical spoiled high society brats that will always bully others into doing it their ways are an example for this. If children are not given the chance to experience the frustrations that the

world will sooner or later hold in store for them, they will be unable to develop mechanisms for self-regulation. These individuals are likely to develop into bright narcissists who have such a high esteem of their own self and greatness that they are unable to conceive that other people might have at least as high a worth, great talents and the same rights. This variant of the egotistic narcissist, who celebrates the importance of his or her own personality in everything he or she does is the namesake of the syndrome. For in the original myth Narcissus is the beautiful youth, who, while looking into a pond, falls in love with his mirror image and becomes a flower. However, one should not forget the silent, covert form of narcissism stemming from lack of love and lack of self-esteem just because the more obvious form is so easy to spot.

This insight derived from psychoanalytical reconstructions matches well with empirical research stemming from personality theory: Wink was able to show that when factor analysed the common scales measuring narcissism did indeed exhibit a two factor structure of two unrelated factors, vulnerability-sensitivity and grandiosity-exhibitionism (Wink, 1991). Both forms of narcissism were negatively related with measures of psychological well-being, but the vulnerable form more so than the grandiose form, and, more importantly, the grandiose form seems to be well correlated with measures of social poise and self-assurance, whereas the vulnerable form is negatively related with such measures, demonstrating the two, quite opposite, sides of narcissism. Also, the psychoanalytically derived relationship between narcissism and boredom could be empirically replicated (Wink & Donahue, 1997). Most importantly, only healthy, autonomous narcissism is related to spirituality (Wink, Dillon, & Fay, 2005).

Both is necessary for the development of sound narcissism, a loving mirroring of the self and limiting of over-expansive impulses. In Kohut's version of therapy it is exactly

this mixture – mirroring, support and reinforcement of the client’s self revealing and adequate frustration – which helps to give support and structure to a narcissistically deprived person to allow a realistic and positive feeling for their own-self to grow (Kohut, 1987). I have taken up this basic idea in my four-dimensional model of psychotherapy, which incorporates a loving and a structuring component, coupled with a time and an educational component (Walach, 2002).

Narcissism as a Cultural and Social Problem in Western Societies

In her empathic treatises on narcissistic problems the Swiss psychoanalyst Alice Miller (Miller, 1979, 1981a, 1981b, 1988) has shown that massive frustration, a lack of frustration and the general spoiling of children have their roots in cultural and social norms. It is not only individual parents who, for want of better knowledge or guidance, or because of their own narcissism, make the occasional mistake in their children’s upbringing. It is rather the general cultural situation that tends to reinforce narcissistic problems. In his study of the fascist personality, Adorno pointed out that fascism is not a private problem, but a collective social one that grows from the collective passing on of cultural values, as well as in the conditions for bringing up and educating children (Adorno, 1950).

It would take an entire study to understand how it was possible that the labor conditions that emerged during the rise of industrialism and capitalism could so disrupt and hamper existing traditional supportive and nurturing social and family structures that overly-frustrated, narcissistically weak children, from which fascist regimes in Europe later drew their followers, became the norm. Among other things, the Third Reich was a collective attempt to act out its followers’ own lack of self-esteem

in a collective feeling of grandiosity. And the conditions faced by the generation following World War II prevented children from developing a sound sense of self-esteem. On the other hand, the generations following the immediate post-war generation, seem to have swung to the other extreme, at least in Europe. Parents were able to compensate for the deprivations they themselves had suffered by giving their own children what they craved for, at least materially. They were affluent enough to fulfill the promises given by an industrial society, they attempted to buy their own and their children's happiness by avoiding rather than suffering frustration. Thus, a lack of tolerance for frustrating experiences and a narcissism resulting more from grandeur than from deprivation ensued. It seems that during the past few generations, a social situation has prevailed, at least in Western cultures, which has furthered rather than prevented the development of narcissistic problems. Criticisms abound of the hedonism of the late 1960ies, the self-centred spirituality of New Ageism (Heelas, 1996; Wink, Ciciolla, Dillon, & Tracy, 2007; Wink, Dillon, & Fay, 2005), and it might well be that the problem is a problem of our whole culture, and not just of some individuals or aberrant trajectories of development (Lasch, 1991). The chances are that psychological problems are in many cases in fact problems due to misguided developments of narcissism. This is not to be taken as a strictly epidemiological statement concerning the rigid categories of narcissistic personality disorders, but rather in the very broad sense of problems in developing sound narcissism.

This must be taken into account when considering spiritual practices in Eastern cultures that presuppose, and are frequently collectively based upon, completely different psychological, social and cultural conditions. These Eastern cultures and spiritual practices presuppose a stable, narcissistically uncompromised self as a

precondition for a spiritual path. Narcissistic problems become widespread, wherever a narcissistically weak or grandiose self comes in contact with spiritual experiences during such practices.

The Narcissistic Potential of Spiritual Experiences and Practices

Spiritual Experiences and Narcissistic Distortions

When talking about spiritual experiences I am referring to such experiences that are deliberately sought in the context of regular and normally guided practice. If such an experience is authentic then it somehow always provides an immediate experience of one's "true" nature or "true" self. Different traditions have different notions of this experience, while possibly referring to the same basic experience (Enomiya-Lassalle, 1987): Buddha nature, spark of the soul, Christ within, the great I AM, and so on. Normally this experience also carries with it a recalibration of the psychological self and its importance, by experientially making available a unity with other beings, with the whole of reality, or with a sacred, godlike reality, across the boundaries of space and time (James, 1985). Loosing the small and gaining a larger, broadened self or the true self-nature are, it would appear, the phenomenological constants of such experiences across time and cultures. It also seems to be a consensus of all spiritual traditions that by itself such an experience is rather unimportant and only gains its momentum through intensive practice and by becoming embedded in everyday life, as well as by ethical conduct (Aitken, 1988; Daniels, 2005). Furthermore, a diligent analysis of different transpersonal approaches and a sound critique of a naïve perennialism reveals that, if there is any commonality between religions and transpersonal approaches, it is their common goal to emancipate the individual from self-centredness (Ferrer, 2000,

2002). Thus, religions taken seriously and transpersonal psychology as a practical development within psychology should not be defined by certain contents, but by their emancipatory thrust that allows people to grow beyond their individual limitations and restrictions using experiences as means, and not cherishing them as ends in themselves. However, if such an experience is not well integrated into the personality or into everyday life, or if it meets with a fragile personality system, then ego inflation becomes a realistic danger. In this case the experience is not a sail that carries one forward but a plug that fills a narcissistic hole. The consequences of such a distortion are dogmatism and egotistic leadership, or even the exploitation of relationships with others. In transpersonally-oriented psychological circles the danger of human exploitation seems to be greater than in other groups, because the dogmatic-ideological tools offered there are at hand to rationalise and justify such exploitative behavior. The sexually exploitative relationships between gurus and teachers and their students and followers are examples (Campbell, 1997).

Teachers with low self-esteem are at risk of using their probably profound spiritual experience and their own interpretation as an absolute truth, of becoming dogmatic and of stopping critical students. It is the hallmark of a narcissistically weak person that he or she is unable to tolerate in his or her proximity strong individuals who are likely to criticise him both as a teacher and for his grandiosity. An inflationary narcissistic system is comparable to a solar system: there can only be one central star and more or less bright planets to which the star lends its light. As soon as someone approaches this quasi-gravitational field, he or she is either drawn into it and positioned at some point, or else, should his own mass be too great, is expelled. Such systems are easily spotted, since there is only one unchallenged leader, and criticism is not permitted (and not

required, as one is assured). Normally, more than anything else, the topic is the leading figure's interpretation of the experience. When the system acquires a strongly dogmatic-fascist character, another ingredient, that of demonizing others, is added. People are categorised as those who belong to "us" and "others who are against us". This is like a collective acting out of the processes of splitting which is so typical of borderline patients (Kernberg, 1992a; Linehan, 1993; Masterson, 1980). In the recent history of transpersonal psychology such a process has been traced back to some of the first generation teachers of psycho-synthesis in the US (Schuller, 1988). In this case an inflationary circle was set in motion, starting with some charismatic leaders and a spiritual psychological system, namely psycho-synthesis (Assagioli, 1991). Evolving around the leaders, this process developed into demonising others, and into the emergence of an inner circle of good people who opposed the bad world outside. In the end it was the psychological ruin of those who were too close to the central star. They were either thrown out or broke loose with much pain. In the end, the remaining group resorted to illegal means, destroying all files, absconding with any remaining valuables, and as far as I know to date, literally disappeared. It might be the case that in this sense the whole system of psycho-synthesis is ill founded, because the sources have not been made transparent by its founder, Roberto Assagioli. It is known among insiders that a lot of his knowledge and practice came from esoteric circles surrounding the theosophical movement of Alice Bailey. In her autobiography she even mentions him as a student and co-worker (Bailey, 1975), p.224ff). It has been reported by some of Assagioli's early followers that he used to say that there were two sides to psychosynthesis, an open and a hidden one, and that Assagioli did not want the public to know that the sources of psychosynthesis lay in the theosophical, and maybe other

esoteric traditions (Schuller, 1988). It would not come as a surprise if this nimbus of secrecy, specialty and esotericism were attractive to subjects with some narcissistic needs and thus fostered and perpetuated narcissistic personality structures (Aron Saltiel, personal communication). The same can probably be equally well said of many other movements that circle around a special teaching, special experience, or both. That is the deeper reason why every traditional religion or spiritual tradition of long standing founded on profound experience has developed rites, rituals or practices which are at least meant to purge it of the danger of narcissistic inflation. We will come to that below. This is also the reason why religious, spiritual or sectarian groups founded on narcissistic collusion between master and followers are prone to create suffering in those who eventually break free, a fact that has now been laid down in the DSM category of “Religious and Spiritual Problem” (Lukoff, Lu, & Turner, 1992)

The Narcissistic Potential of the Group

While a guru or charismatic leader may succumb to the danger of exploiting their spiritual experience in an inflationary way, such a narcissistic system also needs the “flock” that support it, mostly because they can compensate for their own lack of self-esteem and narcissistic weakness by the grandiosity of the leader in whose radiance they can themselves bask. The leader needs the follower, the speaker his audience, the diva her fans, only then can they develop their genius in full. Conversely, disciples need their guru, the people their leader, the powerless the deliverer, in order to feel strong and worthy, to belong and to feel good. Inflation and the Moses complex belong together in the sense that the followers of a charismatic leader are needy narcissists who compensate for their own feelings of inferiority with the power the leader gives them.

These narcissistic problems are pertinent to many areas of society. However, they become most problematic within transpersonal psychology. This is because in the context of spiritual traditions spiritual experiences lend themselves ideally to inflationary or deflationary processing. Furthermore, spiritual traditions are embedded in group contexts, where narcissistically biased transactions and relationships are likely to be nurtured. Thirdly, since the central topic of spiritual traditions and paths is to let go of the ego and its transformation, they are bound to activate the narcissistic motive. It is unlikely that the ego will fail to resist an attempt to relinquish it and hand it over to its maker, the cosmos, the universe, to nirvana or to any other entity. Resistance is bound to be on the map.

Narcissism as Spiritual Resistance

Healthy narcissism has an adaptive and useful function. In Western psychology, Assagioli, the founder of psychosynthesis (Assagioli, 1965), was the first to point out that apart from the classically known forms of resistance there is also a subtle form of resistance against transpersonal experience and spiritual change (Assagioli, 1937, 1991). This can take two forms: inflationary and deflationary. The inflationary form of resistance is the over-importance attributed to oneself and one's own person. In this case, the person refuses to give up certain ideas, habits or attitudes because they are considered to be part of his/her core personality. Spiritual, theoretical or philosophical dogmatism is fundamentally a form of spiritual resistance against experience. It allows oneself to exclude the experiences and interpretations of others, and at the same time proves that one does not have to change one's own system and that there is no need for further development. A Chassidic story illustrates this: A rabbi is approached by his

students as an arbiter in a dispute. One of the students explains his opinion. The rabbi acknowledges this and says: "You are right". Then the other student explains his position. The rabbi agrees with him and says. "You are right". A third student then points out that it is not possible for both of them to be right since they have opposing opinions. The rabbi agrees and says: "You are right, too". A readiness to consistently acknowledge the relativity of models and systems is a form of protection against mistaking the map for the country and experience for its expression. This entails a readiness to abstract from one's own experience. One way to do this is by taking the experiences of others and their interpretation seriously, through personal contact and reading, and by acknowledging them as a possible option. Another possibility is to practice and to make oneself acquainted with other ways by experience, even if at first they might seem strange. Neurophysiologically and psychologically speaking our ego has a tendency to reduce novel and unusual facts to known structures, or otherwise reject them as irrelevant (Roth, 1997). This is done to protect our cognitive system from overload. But it is precisely this tendency that leads to a fatal calcification of the ego and to taking this ego as absolute. The problem can only be overcome by taking the trouble to address new and unexpected events. Thus, in the inflationary version of resistance, one sees oneself and one's experience as absolute and is thus ruled by one's own interpretation of life. This appears in the form of dogmatism. And the result is in fact a stabilizing of ego structures.

The deflationary version of resistance is the opposite of this. The danger of the Moses complex is not to take one's own experience seriously, to minimize one's importance and thereby to fail to appreciate one's true nature. A typical way one might back off would be by rationalizing one's experience as a strange kind of dream, or by suspecting

that everything was probably a big mistake or illusion. A wrong humility then emerges and neutralizes it. The causes may be varied, but quite likely narcissistic motives underlie it. Fear of consequences might be the reason, or fear of failure.

While a stable personality possesses enough mechanisms to cope with fear, draw-backs or disappointments, a narcissistically wounded person will feel threatened more quickly when something goes wrong or does not work out. Such a person will run the danger of giving up more easily for lack of narcissistic reward. False humility is the most subtle danger on the spiritual path for persons with narcissistic needs, i.e. being content with a position in life which provides the sort of narcissistic support one needs, but which is also fairly safe from frustration and narcissistic threat.

The narcissistic danger of resistance that emerges with the group context of spiritual paths has been already mentioned. The inflationary form is the temptation to become a guru. It is also a form of spiritual resistance if the institution of the guru or spiritual leader is not matched by the incorporation of institutionalized processes or rituals of self-humiliation which serve to destroy the image of an all-wise leader. The central image offered by the Christian tradition here is the washing of the feet. Individuals who are prone to a Moses complex must overcome their resistance to giving up the shelter of the group that gives them strength and the support of a leader who backs them. Ideologically, the role of a sheep within a herd or a group can be sustained easily: It is an exercise in humility, it is important to serve the guru, and thus to give up any egotistic impulses. In truth and reality it is very often simply a fear of one's own inner power with all its consequences.

Leaving behind one's "small" ego and committing oneself to a larger reality is a common denominator of all spiritual traditions. Even if that larger reality has broken

into one's life in deep and revolutionary experiences, it is not the end of the road, but only the beginning. This is nicely illustrated by the Zen Buddhist pictures of ox-herding, to show the way. In the second picture the seeker very quickly finds the ox, which symbolizes the true self, but it takes eight more pictures before the taming, riding, and in fact leaving behind of the experience or ox is completed. The 'small' ego continuously fights against the implications of this experience, which will necessarily lead to its being declared superfluous. Basically, the spiritual path is a big and continuous narcissistic hurt. For its very nature is to leave behind one's limitations and concerns for one's self and just continue down the path, saying farewell to one's narcissism. But this process can only really start once a positive and stable feeling for one's self has been established in the first place. A fragile self will grasp for those exceptional experiences, which seem to be a way for our psyche to try out new options during times of crisis (Day & Peters, 1999; Jackson, 1997). If spiritual experiences are used well, they can heal a wounded self, because in it the experience of unconditional inner value can be central and very powerful. If skillfully combined, spiritual work and the experiences that go with it can support psychological work and speed it up. We will now turn to these practical implications.

Practical Variations on Narcissism and Spirituality

Because of the connections described above one would expect teachers and students alike to have narcissistic problems within the context of spirituality. Thus, the central task teachers face is to become aware of their narcissistic wounds and needs, in order to be less prone to narcissistic temptation. Spiritual experience on its own does not protect against narcissistic distortion. On the contrary, it is those unconscious

narcissistic wounds which offer the ideal precondition for abusive use of spiritual experiences, and as far as teachers are concerned mainly in an inflationary way. Students can help prevent their teachers' narcissism from becoming too expansive. Some signs of narcissistic problems on part of the teacher are a lack of humour, dogmatism, a missing culture of debate and contradiction, financial, personal or sexual abuse and the subtle and silent elimination of critics. Students who witness such tendencies in their teachers should start reflecting on whether they are still prepared to go along with such a system, or whether they might even have the strength to bring about changes. But care should be exercised. Nothing is more dangerous than a wounded narcissist. Narcissistic rage is one of the most enduring things on earth, and, moreover, one of the most destructive. Whoever does not trust in his or her ability to exert criticism in a careful and empathic way, will have little chance of changing anything. The key is to maintain an inner closeness and relatedness. If a narcissistically wounded person feels that he or she is accepted as a human being, there is a chance that factual criticism of specific aspects of his or her behavior will be accepted. If on the other hand, one feels that this relatedness and feeling of empathy is missing, it is wise to think twice before uttering criticism. For ethical reasons it is sometimes necessary to confront abusive behavior publicly. This is especially important when persons have been deeply wounded. This may entail confrontation that is painful to both sides, and may even involve the civil courts. It is always easy to find narcissistic defects in others and more difficult to admit them in oneself. Nevertheless, understanding one's narcissistic deficit is part of spiritual and psychological hygiene. Symptoms and signs of our own narcissistic problems could be:

- Feeling hurt by and at the same time envious of others

- carrying on our work without much pleasure and hiding our feelings of inner emptiness,
- giving in to impulses – of eating, drinking or sexual activity – mostly in situations when things have not worked out the way we would have liked,
- distancing ourselves from others.

The triad of envy – rage – distancing is typical of narcissistic problems. If one discovers these traits in oneself, they may serve as a useful insight, because it is then more difficult to simply act out these feelings with depressive, aggressive or impulsive behavior. Constructive alternatives may be found by purposefully dealing with problems. If at all possible, this might be done by joining a group that is supportive rather than abusive, or else by looking for otherwise stable and helpful relationships, which offer a sense of belonging or by acting in a way that one may gain the recognition one lacks. This might be through charitable behavior, for instance by helping to clean something or simply by offering help or doing something through which one can feel one's strength and competence, be it sports or exercise, creative, artistic or intellectual work. Becoming aware of one's own narcissistic weaknesses also helps one to assess oneself realistically and get a feeling for what one can actually achieve and to realize which of our ambitions are more due to our delusions of grandeur.

If we discover a tendency for inflation in ourselves, we might deliberately perform acts of humility. This can be achieved by doing menial jobs, such as doing one's photocopies oneself instead of having them done, doing the dishes or cleaning the floor. This is especially necessary and helpful if one believes these jobs to be below one's dignity. Humility may also be reflected in the grateful appreciation of all those small things by which our narcissism might be hurt, which life provides on a regular

basis, and against which we are prone to react by showing rage or anger. However, people with a tendency to handle narcissistic needs in a deflationary way might act along the lines that more is better than less, and higher is better than too low. In this case, small daily rituals of acknowledging and recognizing oneself are important, such as rewarding a small success by spoiling oneself, or acknowledging one's own beauty when one looks at oneself in the mirror in the morning or by making a list of the successes of the day in the evening, by going out for a good meal with friends, to the theatre or cinema, by taking a day off and so on and so forth. In all these cases, it is important not to perform these things automatically, but to be aware of the context while doing them. After all, in dealing with oneself the same educational rules apply that are most promising in children: loving care and reinforcement, and at the same time setting boundaries to egotistic demands. The task is to find the delicate balance between support and frustration, acknowledgement and negation, which is also the golden path for parents when dealing with their children. If one is conscious of one's own narcissistic weaknesses and works with them psychologically, the chances are promising that spiritual experiences can be channeled more effectively. Without this psychological work it seems that spiritual work on its own, especially for individuals coming from the collectively narcissistically wounded culture of the West, is not enough and may even be dangerous.

The topic of the spiritual path, the relinquishing and handing over of the self, rings deeply with our narcissism. It is difficult enough for a healthy self to give itself up spiritually. The fact that those spiritual metaphors speak of the death of the ego in varying pictures is telling. Therefore, narcissism, be it in its weakened or strong version,

is always the issue in spiritual development. If not consciously reflected upon it is the shadow that grows ever darker as the light becomes brighter.

An Image of How to Deal with Narcissistic Tendencies

An appropriate image of how to deal with one's own narcissistic tendencies on the spiritual path is the story related in the New Testament about the temptation of Jesus. All three synoptic evangelists report this story at the beginning of the public mission of Jesus. After 40 days of fasting, Jesus experiences three temptations, which can basically be interpreted as variations on the theme of narcissism. They can, of course, also be interpreted in the context of different basic psychological needs, depending on which particular psychological system is favoured. But it is also possible and useful to interpret in terms of different forms of dealing with narcissistic impulses. Jesus is tempted to fulfill his needs himself, find himself food and transform the stones into bread. This is an image for wanting to make things happen oneself in order to meet one's needs. Those of us, who have a long experience of meditating without a deeper nourishing experience, know times of inner thirst and aridity. Saint John of the Cross called this the Dark Night of the Soul, and this experience is well known in Christian ascetic-mystical literature (St. John of the Cross/Johannes vom Kreuz, 1940; Scharfetter, 1991). Jesus answers this temptation by pointing to the scripture. We can interpret this as a faithful adherence to the spiritual tradition, even in times of aridity. The second temptation is one of narcissistic grandeur: to be placed on top of the temple and to demonstrate to the world one's own greatness by jumping down and remaining unhurt. It is interesting that dreams and fantasies of flying and being able to fly are frequently narcissistic images. Churchill, for instance, reports in his memoirs that as a child he

thought he could fly and jumped off a bridge, which he barely survived. Jesus answers this temptation by quoting the scripture “Thou shalt not tempt thy God”, thereby pointing to humility. The final temptation is power – “All those kingdoms I shall give you if you will fall down before me”, says the devil. It is the temptation to act out one’s power as leader, teacher or guru. This temptation can only be overcome by clearly recognizing its nature. Jesus overcomes these three types of narcissistic temptation – the needy, the grandiose and the powerful. And it is only after that, the New Testament says, that “angels and wild beasts came to his service”. Only when those temptations are overcome, can one’s deeper nature shine. And this comprises everything, the higher and the lower nature, angels and beasts. However, this cannot be achieved actively, for it is the natural consequence of a spiritual path, followed with confidence and faith, by which narcissistic temptations must first be overcome. In the life of Jesus this was only the beginning. The real giving up of the self and handing it over was another, very painful, process.

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