

Spirituality from the bottom up!

by

Jean-Marie Decuyper

Ed.--For many people, 'spirituality' is a lofty and elevated thing that hovers high above them, something that is opposed to the material, to the body, and to reality. In this article, Jean-Marie Decuyper challenges this notion of spirituality and argues in favour of obliterating the artificial dividing line between 'the material' and 'the spiritual'. Dr. Jean-Marie Decuyper, M.D., is a psychiatrist/psychotherapist in private practice at Zoersel, Belgium.*

I. Hunger for Self-Deception?

For most religions, the material world has always been suspect, not in the least because of the vexing presence of a body (that source of dubious pleasures) that leads man away from his true goal and destination. From time immemorial, in fact, we have associated the divine with something that 'hangs over our heads' rather than with something that could lie beneath our feet. Saints are depicted with haloes around their heads, and rarely with shining feet. In our modern times, we give more spiritual credit to what goes on in our minds than to what we can touch with our hands. It makes one wonder what the earth and our body owe this to.

Many people describe themselves as seekers. By that, they mean they are searching for answers to the questions 'Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I heading? What is the meaning of all this?'. These great existential questions are, of course, addressed by the religions these people profess. But in these religions, they often get the impression that the pastors who are supposed to give the 'expert account' don't have the answers either, but that they, too, have to take other people's word for it or accept the authority of their holy scriptures. It is clear that sincere people have believed – and still believe – in the most various (and often contradictory) things. It seems that the sincerity of the act of believing is no guarantee for the contents of the belief. Or, to put it more strongly: the human capacity for self-deception is inexhaustible!

More and more people are growing dissatisfied with the institutionalised religions and are joining the many apparently non-conformist religious or semi-religious movements and groups. But fundamentally, they're not any better off for it. They have simply switched from one belief to another, or from one stationary train to another... Moreover, they run the risk of having to pay dearly for their choice and of getting trapped in a spiral of personality cult, communication in a closed system, social isolation, and increasing sectarian fanaticism. In fact, all these groups with a faith of their own doubt their

exclusive truth. But this secret doubt needs to be suppressed, and so their intolerance increases and their style grows more and more fanatical. According to JUNG (1935), fanaticism is always a sign of suppressed doubt. Devoid of a sense of humour, sect leaders are clearly more interested in the purity of their teachings than in the purity of their feelings. The excesses that this can lead to can be seen on TV every day.

II. The Golden Mean

Modern man has therefore grown sceptical and has either totally rejected spirituality, or has turned towards a more existential religiosity. He wants not only to believe in the (possibility of) a transcendental reality, but first and foremost, to experience it. That explains the growing interest in metaphysics, yoga, and the many schools of esoteric philosophy which, each in their own way, try to contribute to the *Know Thyself*. They offer a broader and deeper answer to the great existential questions than the established religions, and they want to guide people towards fathoming and experiencing these answers themselves. At least, that is what they profess to do. But experience shows that a naive seeker can count himself lucky if he does find a school that really preaches the golden mean and encourages its students to grow both downwards and upwards (just like a tree does) with the same enthusiasm. Most followers have to make do with much less than that. It is understandable, then, that so many people have reservations about calls to follow the 'spiritual path', even if only because this beaten path (whatever the *couleur locale*) enjoys the bad reputation of being more interested in what goes on above the waist than in what goes on beneath it. Even though the physical-material world is hardly considered 'sinful' anymore (who would dare to use that word nowadays?), it is still often seen as being of a 'lower vibration level' and, correspondingly, as something that people should urgently let go of, or transcend. Nonsense!

There is no point whatsoever in letting go of or transcending anything at all. It is not for nothing that C.G. JUNG's credo was "*Es geht um die Erfahrung der Fülle des Seins*" (AALDERS et al. 1975), which comes down to: the point is to experience reality to the full, both above and below, both the material and the spiritual, both the visible and the invisible. Unless you want to call this strive another spiritual path, of course, in which case no more needs to be said.

In this experiential view, the extreme polarisation of the material versus the spiritual is a false distinction, created in the minds of mainly religious and now also esoteric 'thinkers'. The idea of a balance between the material and the spiritual world, and ideas about how that balance can be reached, are, in their turn, fabrications. They are the consequences of the original fallacy: first, the mind created a separation where there was none, and then it started wondering how the (imaginary) parts could be joined together again.

III. 'Spiritually advanced'?

In any case, certain schools of 'aura and chakra healing' take a more subtle view. According to them, all of reality is one, and we have a range of senses (the material senses and the 'chakras') with which to perceive that reality. To be able to do so, we have to keep these 'doors of perception' clean. If your ears are blocked, you can't hear a thing. If there is dust in your eyes, you can't see properly. In this view, a regular cleansing of our energy system (aura and chakras) is a form of elementary hygiene for our psychic body, just like we take a shower and brush our teeth every day to keep our physical body clean...

But here too, our old habit of searching only in the 'higher' regions is just around the corner. Apparently, we cannot get rid of it. A good example is the training in the cleansing and use of the forehead and crown chakras, aimed at enhancing 'clairvoyance' and 'intuitive knowledge', respectively, which enjoys great prestige in esoteric circles. In subdued voice, and with due respect, it is suggested that the adepts at these skills are very spiritual and highly advanced...

What a remarkable quirk of the mind! No-one would ever think of calling a person who washes his face every day, but who has dirty feet, for instance, 'clean'. The two highest chakras may be important, but so are all the others. In that perspective, we may benefit from giving the same attention and appreciation to our lower chakras (including our knees and feet), unless we want to evolve, in the long term, into some kind of winged-headed creature. This caricature of the hovering seer is exaggerated, of course, but it is not totally unfounded.

Spiritual people do indeed often make a clear impression. But everything that has to do with more worldly situations and common human emotions is literally fought down. Practically without exception, they are more interested in meditation than in psychotherapy. These people obviously feel resistance to matter and have difficulty maintaining contact with their body. They are (naturally) often badly grounded, and they seldom feel at ease with the subjects of sexuality and emotionality.

Of course, it doesn't have to go that far. But it is good to be reminded that descending *into* the body is just as great a stunt as learning to rise *above* it. And that the lone perfectionist who seeks enlightenment should illuminate his whole lamp, and not just the very top of it...

*This paper, initially presented in the Netherlands (BRES 138, okt./nov. 1989, pp. 4-7), was published in *Human Nature* (International Journal for the Study of Spirituality, Psychological Research and Survival of Death), January 2000, pp. 66-68. *Human Nature* is no longer available.

References

AALDERS, PLOKKER and QUISPEL (1975), Jung, een mens voor deze tijd, Lemniscaat, Rotterdam, p. 127, not translated.

JUNG, C.G. (1935), Analytical Psychology: its Theory and Practice (The Tavistoc Lectures), Routledge and Kegan, Paul, London, fifth lecture.