SPIRITUAL PRACTICE AS AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PARADIGM: UNIVERSAL AND TRADITION-DEPENDENT STRUCTURES

I. Philosophical preliminaries: Ontological background for the description of Spiritual Practice

In this lecture we are going to analyze so-called Spiritual Practices (SP), that is ancient schools of spiritual, mystical and ascetic experience, which were created in most of the great world religions. Main examples of them are well-known: it is classical yoga, Tibetan tantric Buddhism, Taoism, Zen, and, further to the West, Islamic Sufism, Roman Catholic Spiritual Exercises and Eastern-Orthodox Hesychasm. Any concrete SP exists within a certain religion and can be described and interpreted in the context of this religion. This is the usual way of treating them, but it does not suit our goals. We want to consider the whole spectrum of SP in order to find out which elements are common to all of them and which principal distinctions are there between them. To this end we need a large conceptual context general enough to be valid for all religions. And it means that there is no choice: the only such context is a context of ontology.

Thus we must start from the ontological context and use it to come to the phenomenon of SP. The basic ontological fact that opens such way for us is the famous ontological difference: the difference between Being and an entity, or empiric being (regretfully, English has no good term for the second important notion here, that corresponds to the German Seiende or French étant). Implications of this fact are most far-reaching. First of all, it implies that the status of Man determined philosophically as «being-there», or «being-presence», is not identical to the status of just another entity determined completely by its belonging to empiric being, but includes a certain more general relation, that to Being. As Being cannot be reduced to empiric being, modes or horizons of Being different from the latter are thinkable as well as meta-empiric reality that, generally speaking, is not of spatial-temporal nature anymore. Reality is endowed with nontrivial ontological aspect or dimension, and hence Being and being-there can a priori be related to each other in many different ways. Man’s organization has many structural levels, and the relation of Man to other horizon(s) of Being can be realized and put to practice on various levels too. In philosophy or, say, speculative mysticism this relation is realized on purely intellectual level, while in religious cult, in rites, sacraments, etc. it is realized on symbolic level. Very often these two kinds of Man’s relationship with meta-empiric reality are considered as the only existing ones. This is not true, however. There is one more kind, the most radical, and difficult, and demanding. And it is this kind that is realized in Spiritual Practice.

Spiritual Practice is a unique anthropological strategy that aims to actualize Man’s relationship with the other horizon of Being on holistic level: i.e. in such a way that Man is involved into this relationship as a whole, on all levels of his organization, intellectual, psychic and somatic. In this strategy, a human person, unsatisfied with its present situation in Being, its ontological status, decides to reject all usual strategies of

---

1 The term structure would be not completely adequate here, since it is correlated to the notion of system, and the representation of reality as a system is a kind of reductionist thinking.
existence, which accept this status, and try to change the latter. In other words, a person decides on a radical attempt to realize an ontological alternative.

The ontological framework that we have outlined so far is minimal, but nevertheless it provides a sufficient starting ground for the description of such unusual and radical strategies.

II. Universal elements of SP: Ontological and methodological

1) The first principal property of SP is its nature of a directed and teleological process. Man’s relationship to Being, as SP sees it, is not something that is simply present and fixed. On the contrary, it should be changed, and SP is exactly the work of changing it to a certain well-defined form. It means that SP is a process of Man’s self-transformation, what is called practice of the Self (the term introduced by Michel Foucault, *pratique de Soi*). This process is directed to a definite goal called usually «higher spiritual state», but this term is not quite correct, since SP considers Man’s relationship to Being as holistic, which implies that its goal is holistic as well, and not just spiritual.

2) The next principal property of SP concerns the specific nature of its goal. The change of Man’s relationship to Being means the change of ontological status: leaving behind, transcending the present horizon of being and converting into a different horizon or mode of being, «Other-Being». It means that the goal of SP, or “higher spiritual state” does not belong to empiric being or being-there; never and in no way can it be identified and achieved as a certain thing or state of things present in this ontological horizon. Thus the very notion of goal needs a generalization in this case; and as a variant of such generalization we say that SP is rather oriented than directed, and not to a goal, but a trans-goal or telos. And a practice directed to the meta-empirc “goal” that means man’s entry in, union with, drawing into a different horizon of being is not just anthropological practice, but meta-anthropological strategy. Combining the two properties, we can say now that Spiritual Practice is a holistic practice of the Self oriented to a meta-anthropological telos.

3) Meta-anthropological nature of the telos of SP implies that the most specific means are needed to achieve such telos. Its nature its highly paradoxical: any SP conceives its telos as something very definite, having some necessary and concrete properties, it is not just a purely subjective and inexpressible ecstatic state. At the same time, however, it is absent anywhere in the horizon of Man’s experience and existence. How, if at all, can such «definite, but absent» thing be achieved? Here we touch upon the very heart of SP. The way to the telos of SP should be a way that leads very precisely to a very definite destination; but this destination is out of Man’s hiorizon of being, so that the direction to it can be neither calculated theoretically nor found empirically. Hence for such unusual, extraordinary way there should be found some special way to know the way, which is nothing but method, according to its Greek etymology: methodos = meta-hodos, hodos = way.

In any genuine SP, its method is its main treasure, gained by collective work of many centuries long. The special nature of the telos dictates a very special character of this method, that is unique in its essence and very intricate, sophisticated and complicated in its structure. (One can mention here that my reconstruction of the method of the hesychast SP takes a book of about 400 pages long.) This structure includes several big sections. The anthropological experience of SP needs first a special preparation and organization; then it should be carefully and thoroughly processed:
exposed and interpreted with the help of some system of criteria; tested rigorously in order to identify and reject various phenomena of false and illusory experience; and finally certified as a genuine experience of SP, corresponding to a definite part of its Way. This vast body of methodological, psychological, hermeneutical and other procedures forms a complete practical-theoretical canon of the experience of SP, and this canon corresponds exactly to the Aristotelian notion of organon. Thus the core of each SP is its organon, which it must build up and which characterizes it completely.

The creation of each organon demands a coordinated work of many generations of practitioners; then the organon must be preserved and transmitted in time, which is also a collective work, a work of some community that reproduces itself in generations. This adds new important dimensions to the phenomenon of SP. Obviously, SP is a (meta-)anthropological practice performed by an individual human person; but this performance is only possible, as we now see, in the framework of a certain collective body, which creates the organon of SP, operates it, applying its procedures to the performance in question, and transmits it identically in time. This collective body reproducing itself in generations is a social and historical phenomenon, which is exactly what is usually called Spiritual Tradition. Thus we discover that SP is, in fact, a dual structure, the dyad, in which individual Spiritual Practice and collective Spiritual Tradition are joined in such a way that the latter provides necessary conditions for the former, serving as a kind of organic milieu that surrounds it and ensures its functioning, its life. A structural parallel to such dyad is provided by biological species and individual specimen that belongs to it and cannot exist without it.

III. Universal elements of the SP: Anthropological

1) The most general anthropological characteristics of SP is that it belongs to the class of mystico-ascetic practices. What does it mean? Firstly, since SP is oriented to actual transcension, i.e. ontological transformation of Man’s mode of being, it enters the sphere of such phenomena, in which fundamental predicates of this mode of being begin to change: and this is, by definition, the sphere of mystical experience. Secondly, since SP is a holistic practice, it includes practices of systematic somatic autotransformation subordinated in some way to the global, holistic task. This is exactly what is meant by ascetic practices, so that SP has ascetic dimension as well.

2) The next property is one of the most important features of SP: SP has energetic character, which means that it deals solely with energies of human person. It does not use any abstract characteristics of human person, like essence or numerous notions associated with it, and it does not deal with man’s material composition either. Instead of it, SP considers human person as an energetic formation, a set of energies of all kinds, corresponding to all levels of its organization and changing permanently and irresistibly: a set that might be called the energetic projection or energetic image of a person. And it is over this set that the self-transformation realized in SP is performed.

Thus SP is basically a technique working with man’s energetic image. It forms up a rich collection of properties and attributes that characterize energetic images; using this collection, it classifies them into definite types, studies their relations and dynamics of their changes, and finds ways and means to steer this dynamics. This allows us to complement again our definition of SP: one can say now that SP is a process, in which a man transforms his own energetic image in a certain definite and controlled way, so that this image changes successively from some initial type to the...
type corresponding to the telos. Obviously, the telos itself is also treated energetically, a certain type of energetic image. However, due to its meta-anthropological nature, it is a very specific type which cannot be formed by usual man’s energies. The language of mystical experience speaks here about the union, the drawing into, the merging with God, the participation in Divine being, etc. etc. SP is the most self-analytical kind of mystical experience and it gives to its telos a rather constructive description. In particular, in hesychasm the telos is characterized as the “deification” (theosis) meaning the perfect union of all man’s energies with the Divine energy (the grace of God) and this concept has a quite specific nature and status, being the link between dogmatic theology and ascetic practice. In such descriptions, facts and language of experiential ascetic discourse are joined with those of theological discourse, whence it follows that it is here, in the description of the telos, that distinctions between SPs, connected with different religions and spiritual traditions, should manifest themselves. As we shall see below, it is the case indeed; and the distinctions in the (trans-)goal of SP inevitably produce some distinctions in the way to this (trans-)goal too.

3) The next structural property is now almost obvious. As a gradual (self-)transformation of man’s energetic image, SP is eo ipso a progressive process, and all SPs discover experientially that this process has discrete character: it consists of distinct stages or steps, so that most of SPs associate with the way to the telos taken in its entirety the image or paradigm of ladder (for instance, the first systematic treatise on the hesychast SP by St John Climacus (7th c.) had the name «The Ladder of Paradise»). By virtue of energetic nature of SP, the steps of this «Spiritual Ladder» have the same nature: each of them corresponds to a certain type of man’s energetic image. In other words, it is a certain configuration of human energies of all kinds, intellectual, psychic and somatic; and it should be stressed that it is not a stable state reproducing itself automatically, but a certain regime or mode of activity of the whole human being, an «energetic form», which is kept by incessant effort only.

As a result, all the way of SP presents as a strictly ordered hierarchy of «energetic forms», i.e. definite types of anthropological energetic configurations. The principal distinction of such forms is that any of them cannot be realized separately, out of the process; they only exist inseparably and in a definite succession (although the breaking-up of the process due to external factors is possible at any step, of course). This is the synergetic type of dynamics discovered and well-studied in physics. It explains, in particular, often heard statements that mystical experience is utterly unique and totally inexpressible: indeed, the configurations of man’s energies arising in the spiritual progress are not reproducible in usual empirical experience of non-alternative anthropological strategies.

4) The last universal property on our list concerns the structure of the Spiritual Ladder. Of course, the number of steps of the Ladder is not universal; it differs not only in different SPs, but even in different descriptions of the same SP. But still the structure of the Ladder includes very important universal elements. The main of them is the triple character of this structure: all the set of steps is quite distinctly grouped into three big cycles or blocks.

The approach to the Ladder has necessarily a core: a spiritual event of entering the path of the ontological alternative. This spiritual event is conversion, and all religions and cultures developed their own versions of it. Its universal character is reflected in language: in many different traditions removed far from each other we find the same term, «spiritual gate», which means conversion. One of its earliest descriptions was presented by Plato in the form of the famous mythologem of the
Cavern in the Book 7 of his dialogue «Republic». It is a complex anthropological phenomenon with the rich psychological and philosophical structure, which has also many universal elements; but we shall not go into the details now.

Then there follows the first big block: the group of initial steps, the purpose of which is to complete the separation from all the habitual, un-alternative mode of the existence. In their general character, they are the steps of purification, in its various aspects and meanings. The main part of this block is intricate techniques of removing so-called “passions”. These phenomena, very numerous and variegated, include, in the first place, the well-known basic sins of usual existence that SP leaves behind: gluttony, anger, envy, etc.; but the complete list of them is almost boundless, and it varies greatly in different traditions and historical periods. Still the techniques developed for removing passions and uprooting psychological mechanisms of their emergence have many universal elements, and the same formula «invisible battle», meaning the psychological work of struggling passions, is found in many traditions. Passions are treated in SP much like neuroses in the psychoanalysis: as cyclic configurations of the energies of consciousness. Due to their cyclic character, they are self-reproducible and stable and when the consciousness is trapped in one of them, its further self-transformation becomes impossible.

The next, central block of the Spiritual Ladder serves to the formation of, so to say, “anthropological mover”: in its steps the specific dynamics of SP is being formed which secures the ascent by the Ladder, the transition from one step to the next one. As we stressed, it is only some outer energy, which is perceived by a man in SP as not belonging to him, but coming from a certain «Source-Beyond-There», that can be a motive power for the advancement to the meta-anthropological telos. The experience of SP finds, however, that the dynamics of this advancement in its complete form includes not only the action in a man of this “outer” (by its source) energy, but also the action of “inner” energies which have their source within the access of the consciousness and can be operated by the latter. The inner energies must become oriented to the outer energy, must coordinate themselves with it and reach full accordance, harmony and coherence with it. This accordance of the two energies of different source and status plays a key role in the ontological advancement. Byzantine theology has expressed it with a special notion and term “synergy” (synergia), and some analogous concept can be found in the core of the organon of any SP. Thus it can be said that the task of the central block of the practice is to produce conditions for the synergy.

The conditions in question are of universal character too. They solve the double problem: to perform the advancement from one step of SP to the next one, one should, first, know how to protect the process from all disturbances, which threaten to destroy the Ladder, and, second, accumulate the energy needed for this advancement. The protection work is done by refined techniques of attention and concentration, while the accumulation of energy is achieved by means of some special system of prayer or meditation. To combine these two different activities is a special difficult problem, which is the very heart of SP, since it is exactly the union of the two activities in question that forms the «anthropological mover». We shall see, however, in the next section that the work of the «mover» may be different, depending on the nature of the telos of SP.

Finally, if the dynamics of the advancement was created, and achieved the fully developed form, SP enters into the third and highest block of the Ladder, a zone approaching the telos. It has a special distinction: on higher steps of the Ladder there
appear already some perceptible manifestations of a fundamental transformation of a man. As shown by experiential data, these manifestations become recognizable, first of all, in the sphere of perceptive modalities. This fact reveals the logic of the process: one can think that in the alternative strategy oriented to a different horizon of being a man must achieve, in the first place, a radical re-orientation of his perceptions since he will need to perceive radically different things. Consequently, the transition to a meta-anthropological reality needs first the development of a new meta-anthropological perceptive modality. In perfect accordance with this logic, experience of all SPs includes very similar firsthand authentications witnessing that on the higher steps of the Spiritual Ladder radical changes of the perceptive sphere and formation or “opening-up” of some new perceptions take place. In Hesychasm these new perceptions were long called the “intellectual feelings”; in Tibetan Tantra analogous phenomena are characterized by terms «siddhi» and «riddhi»; but, may be, the richest discourse of the perceptive transcendion is developed in Taoism.

***

Taken together, this vast and impressive repertory of common structural elements of all SPs proves undoubtly that there exists an universal anthropological «paradigm of Spiritual Practice». Summing up, we can present now a combined definition of this paradigm.

A. SP is a holistic practice of the Self oriented to a meta-anthropological telos (called «higher spiritual state») and having energetic character. The first thesis means that SP is a strategy, the goal of which is actual ontological transformation, transcension of man’s mode of being, «being-there». The last thesis means that SP deals exclusively with man’s «energetic image», the configuration of all energies of a human being, and elaborates a special fine art of controlled and directed transformation of this image.

B. SP has progressive nature and discrete (ladder) structure: it is divided into clearly distinct steps, all the series of which is strictly ordered. Each step is a definite type of man’s «energetic image», and the series goes from the initial step corresponding to Spiritual Gate to the final one corresponding to the telos. The telos is not universal, but different for each SP.

C. The way of SP includes the group of lower steps, which basically correspond to processes and procedures of preparatory purification. The purification is also holistic, including necessarily corporeal, emotional and intellectual components.

D. The central block of SP solves the key problem of building up the «anthropological mover». It is always a certain refined system or school of prayer or meditation that functions as a sui generis ontological auto-training, securing parallel achievement of concentration of attention and accumulation of energy.

E. With the formation of the «anthropological mover» SP enters its last big block, in which there appear clear manifestations of the approaching change of fundamental predicates of Man’s horizon of being. These manifestations include, in the first place, formation of new perceptive modalities.

F. The necessary condition of the achievement of the telos of SP is the participation of some energetic factors («energies of the Source-Beyond-There») that are neither provided nor controlled by a man himself. This point draws a demarcation line between genuine phenomena of mystical experience and all kinds of purely psychological practices, techniques and trainings.
IV. Tradition-dependent elements of the SP

For a long time the phenomenon of SP remained almost unnoticed by European science. It was not identified and singled out as a special holistic (meta-)anthropological strategy, its dual mystical-ascetic nature was ignored and it was not separated from other forms of mystical experience. It is well-known that the old European science was superficial in its treatment of phenomena of mystical experience. It had no well-founded theory of such phenomena, and usually accepted the view that all the forms, traditions and schools of the world mysticism coincide basically «at the top», on the highest levels of their experience, in final ecstatic visions of unworldly reality. The new comparative science did not bring forth any substantial revision of this view. The opposite view was also expressed sometimes, but it was usually the view of adepts of some school or tradition, who stated that the vision and experience provided by their tradition are unique and fundamentally different from those provided by all other traditions.

Now, we hope that the treatment of SP presented here makes it possible to see at last the clear picture of both universal and tradition-dependent elements of SP in their balance. Obviously, analysis of tradition-dependent elements has to be more detailed and dealing more with specific features of concrete SPs. Today the existing data are not yet sufficient for such detailed work, and I shall only point out principal facts and draw principal lines that determine the situation.

As said above, the telos is the main element of any SP, which determines many other structural elements of it. At the same time, the telos is deeply connected with basic views and dogmas of the religious tradition, to which SP in question is related. Hence it follows, as we noted already, that telos cannot belong to universal elements of SPs. Going over to concrete SPs and traditions, we immediately confirm this general conclusion, and then the distinctions discovered in the teloses of different SPs provide the necessary starting ground for disclosing and analyzing the whole range of tradition-dependent elements of SPs.

The main characteristic of telos is ontological: telos belongs to «Other-Being», a horizon of being different from being-there and to the union with which SP is oriented. This horizon of being is, in its turn, characterized by basic postulates of the corresponding religious tradition. And it is here that we find the first and most important demarcation line: «Other-Being» can be represented either in personal or impersonal way. This ontological dichotomy is at the same time geographical: roughly speaking, Other-Being or Absolute Being is conceived in the personalist paradigm in so-called Abrahamic traditions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which originate from the Mediterranean area and in the global, planetary perspective can be considered as Western religions; while the impersonal paradigm for Other-Being is adopted in all religions and spiritual traditions of the East. Let us give a description of both paradigms, very generalized and simplified, for brevity sake.

Clearly, the personalist paradigm for Absolute Being can be neither coinciding completely nor completely different from the idea of human personality. It does not include basic concepts of classical Western metaphysics concerning the latter, such as subject, individual, etc.; but it shares with this idea the aspects of perfect autonomy and self-sufficiency, as well as dynamic character, nature of a center of activities and volitions. On the other hand, the main predicate that differs Other-Being from being-there is its absolute actualization, the identity of the potential and actual, which excludes, obviously, the main predicates of being-there, its finiteness (Endlichkeit) and
spatial-temporal character. So far it is enough for us: personal Other-Being can be thought as characterized by presence of some positive contents and their complete actualization (explicitness, openness, etc.) realized by means of dynamics of a very special kind, ontological dynamics, which does not imply any gradual unfolding or temporal process. These basic features are expressed in different traditions in a very different way and language. In Christianity the dynamical aspect of the personalist paradigm is emphasized most strongly and visibly due to the concept of three Persons or Hypostases connected by well-defined dynamic relations and common (Hyper-)Essence. This concept was developed further in Late-Byzantine and modern Eastern-Orthodox theology, which has elaborated the important notion of perichoresis (from the Greek verb, meaning literally «go round, making full circle»). Theologically, perichoresis is exactly the notion that conveys ontological dynamics of the Christian Holy Trinity, describing it as a complete and perfect mutual exchange of being between the Hypostases. This exchange of being is then interpreted as love, which connects the Hypostases, and also as communication or communion between Them («personal being-communion» is widely used formula for Divine being in modern Christian theology). Emerging ontological identity of the three basic concepts: perichoresis – love seen as an ontological principle – personal communion, can be considered as a concise, but still in a sense complete characterization of the personalist paradigm of Other-Being, and hence of the telos of the corresponding class of SPs.

As for the impersonal paradigm adopted by great Eastern traditions, it considers any dynamical aspects, and even more, any positive contents as incompatible with the ideal nature of Other-Being. Hence the negative and apophatic discourse is predominant in this paradigm. Some traditions and schools, especially Japanese and Chinese, refrain even from ontological notions as such; they would not characterize Other-Being as «ontological horizon». All various notions used for the telos of SPs in Eastern traditions – Nirvana, Heaven, Great Void, etc. – share principal predicates, which express the absence of any dynamics and any positive contents, phenomenal or noumenal: absolute cosmic calm, void, stillness, immobility, etc. etc. Such Other-Being is usually characterized in a very sophisticated apophatic way: it is basically Non-Being, but at the same time one states that it is not identical to either Non-Being or Being.

Thus we find the two kinds of telos, which are opposite to each other. Inevitably, this sharp distinction should generate considerable distinctions also in the preceding steps of SPs that lead to the telos. The study of these distinctions has never been performed on a systematic level; there are only scanty and scattered empiric data. Hence, as I said already, I shall only point out a few principal facts.

The most important point is, probably, the nature of the key mechanism of SP, which we called the Anthropological Mover. In the case of the personal telos, the Spiritual Ladder must lead to the mode of being, which has the rich structure of personal being-communion and is characterized, in particular, by the presence of love, i.e. emotional dimension. Hence it follows that the Ladder must represent here a hierarchy of «energetic forms» of the synergetic type, which are more and more highly organized dynamical structures (similar to some extent to the ordered chaos structures in physical processes). The formation of such hierarchy needs permanent accumulation of energy and intensification of the process, or «heating up» the inner reality of a man in SP. And it is exactly what the Mover does in such SPs.

Detailed texts of hesychast teachers describe the key mechanism of the hesychast art, or «Praxis noera», as the union of attention and a special kind of
incessant prayer, the Jesus Prayer. This mechanism is directly opposite to contemplative mysticism (though this fact is very rarely noticed in both old and modern studies). It is stressed by the teachers that the union demands driving away and complete removal from the consciousness of all images; but instead it demands the cultivation of emotions, «the heating up of emotions» (by the formula of St Theophan the Recluse, the famous Russian hesychast teacher of 19th c.), not arbitrary ones, of course, but strictly chosen and controlled and organized by love.

But what do we find on the opposite end, in SPs, which follow the impersonal paradigm? Here the Spiritual Ladder is present too, and for the advancement by it the anthropological mover is needed and built up. However, the Ladder leads one now to Great Void devoid of any dynamics and any structures. Hence it follows that its steps form the hierarchy of «energetic forms» with less and less complex organization; structures that form the «energetic image» of a man in SP are gradually getting dismantled and dissolved. Such process was well-known in ancient mystical traditions in the Greco-Roman world, like neoplatonism, and given the name «haplosis», meaning simplification. Obviously, the adequate temperature metaphor is now not the «heating-up», but «cooling-down» the inner reality of a man in SP. As for the mechanism of the process, it was always well-known that it should be based on driving away and complete removal of all emotions, achieved with the aid of contemplation of images and meditation; and in the final stage images disappear too, giving place to perfect emptiness. Thus we find (quite naturally) that the opposite kind of telos gives birth to the opposite kind of Anthropological Mover.

This is the conclusion of principal importance, and it makes intelligible other distinctions of the two types of SPs, which manifest themselves in the final block of the Spiritual Ladder, in the neighborhood of the telos. Now we shall only point out that human consciousness and self-consciousness, man’s personal identity have also opposite destiny in the two cases. In the impersonal paradigm, as one of the classical Yoga-Sutras puts it, when approaching the telos, or Samadhi, «self-consciousness is devoid of its own form and is completely dissolved in the essence of the contemplated», where Being and Non-Being are indistinguishable (Sutra III, 3); while in the personal paradigm it is transcended into personal being-communion with its rich structure. In this being of love neither consciousness nor personal identity are not lost, but acquire the higher form of hypostatic being – so that all the way of SP is characterized as the acquiring of personality in its absolute form of Hypostasis.

Thus we see that the subject that we discussed, the Spiritual Practice, is far from being just one of particular phenomena in the periphery of religious and cultural life. In the two types of anthropological and meta-anthropological strategies that this practice discovers and cultivates, the great spiritual bifurcation lies that is crucial for the Mankind.