

COURSE SYNTHESIS NO. 18

THE DIFFERENT SPIRITUAL PATHS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO THE FOURTH WAY

Man has lost contact with the Absolute, Truth, God, with the perception of the spiritual world. But there have always been men and women who have striven to reestablish this contact. To this end they have sought out masters capable of teaching them a path of evolution that leads them to a contact with the spiritual world once again – because for this a path is necessary.

There exist a certain number of spiritual ways that can be grouped together into three essential paths: the Christian path, the Eastern path, and the Rosicrucian path; we will examine the three of them from the perspective of the Fourth Way, the common source of all paths. Each of them comprises obligatory stages, and each stage must necessarily be passed through.

The path of Christian Gnosis is above all the path of the purification of the human soul, of the emotions and feelings. It requires – at least for a certain time – a complete withdrawal from one's family, social, or professional life. In addition to this, it requires a belief, the belief in the incarnation, two thousand years ago, of the son of God, the Christ, in Jesus of Nazareth. This path begins with a study of the basic texts of Christianity, and particularly the Gospel according to St. John.

The first stage of the Christian path is the “washing of the feet.” This term corresponds to Jesus Christ's gesture in washing his apostles' feet, an act symbolising the absolute necessity of humility. For man, this means understanding and accepting his true state; he is nothing or practically nothing, and there is much to learn and to be done. Exclusively intellectual knowledge prevents humility.

The washing of the feet has another meaning: placing oneself at the service of other people and humanity. In the Fourth Way, we try to place ourselves at the service of those near us, in our family, professional, or social lives, or in the context of the School.

On the Eastern path, the stage of prohibitions, Yama, corresponds to the washing of the feet in the Christian path. The true Eastern path is a very hard path. It is also called the path of submission, since the pupil submits himself absolutely, down to the very last detail of his life, to his master, who is considered to be the representative of the spiritual world on earth. This path requires a complete withdrawal from the world.

Yama indicates everything the pupil must not do: steal, lie, kill, do anything in excess, and so on. Most of these prohibitions involve his relationships with other people and are at the service of other people and his guide.

On the Rosicrucian or Anthroposophical path, the first stage consists in study. On an inner path, a true initiatic path, study does not just consist in understanding intellectually, but in “humanising” the knowledge, that is to say, in verifying it in one's life in order to personally assimilate it, subsequently applying the principles one has learned in one's everyday life.

This is what shows that we have truly integrated the knowledge. Knowledge is an element external to man; he humanises it by integrating it into himself and truly living it. Understanding, for example, that outwardly manifesting our negative emotions means polluting other people and losing a great amount of

energy is synonymous with ceasing to do so. On the path, this is an essential stage.

One of the golden rules of the Anthroposophical path is that when we take one step on the path of knowledge, we must take three on the path of being. More modestly, Psychoanthropology proposes that we progress equally on both ways.

Progress is slow, but knowledge contains the seed of the transformation of being, and an inner transformation takes place, which naturally takes place more quickly when we have decided to adopt a certain discipline.

The second stage of the Christian path is flagellation, the patient acceptance of suffering we cannot avoid, which in the Fourth Way is called voluntary suffering; the fact that we voluntarily accept pain that cannot be avoided, for example, allows us to bear it much more effectively than by refusing or rebelling against it.

The second stage of the Eastern path is called “nyama,” the stage of obligations, of all the rules the pupil is required to follow, dictating the very ritualised manner in which the day is to pass: the time of waking, ablutions, meditation, prayer or offering, rites and rituals to be practiced, etc. This stage corresponds to the necessity of introducing a rhythm into the pupil’s life. These rites and rhythms strengthen his will and constitute an aid that permits him to continue in spite of his moments of weakness, doubt, or depression.

On the Rosicrucian path, the second stage is the stage of imaginative thought, a state of consciousness that permits us to perceive spiritual realities in the form of images or symbols. It is preceded by the study of the world of symbols.

The third stage of the Christian way is the crown of thorns, which represents true tolerance, the tolerance that accepts when another person or other people insult what is holiest to us, and accepts the other person’s error even when we know we are in the right. On an inner path, this means to not attempt to convert people with our words, but through who we are.

The third stage of the Eastern path is called asana. This is the stage of postures, for example the postures of yoga. But asana does not just mean the right outer posture, but the right inner attitude as well. The right attitude also means the right words. And keeping silent also means speaking when it is right to speak.

Inspired thought, the third stage of the Anthroposophical path, is the capacity to perceive supersensible realities, but also – and this is much more difficult – to interpret them correctly. This stage also permits the pupil to speak rightly of these realities.

The fourth stage of the Christian path is the crucifixion or way of the cross. It corresponds to the awareness and acceptance of the reality of the physical contingencies and limits imposed on us by our incarnation in a physical body. This corresponds, on the Fourth Way, to conscious effort.

On the Eastern path, the fourth stage is “pranayama,” right breathing. This consists both in respiratory exercises and in discovering the forces of life, prana, and the forces of death in one’s breathing, in order no longer to use the air in an exclusively egoistic manner. The disciple on the Path learns to better use the energies of life contained in the air and to no longer expel the forces of death toward other people.

The fourth stage on the Anthroposophical path corresponds to the transformation of the philosopher’s stone, the alchemical stage which is also related to the breathing. Here the pupil learns to correctly join his breathing to his consciousness, and to no longer allow his breath to be cut short by an emotion, for example.

The fifth stage on the Christian path is mystical death. The disciple has the experience of inner solitude, which is often accompanied by outer solitude: the monk isolates himself in his cell, for example, or the hermit withdraws into the depths of the forest. The lesson to be learned here is the true meaning of moral isolation.

Prajahara, the fifth stage on the Eastern path, consists in the mastery of the sense organs. The disciple learns to control his impressions – the impressions he receives from the external world as well as the impressions inside of himself. He learns to master his senses and the functioning of his physical organs.

This corresponds, on the path of the Rose Cross or Anthroposophy, to the knowledge of the microcosm, consisting of all the physical, etheric, and astral forces active inside man, and of the macrocosm, the same forces that are active in the universe and that created it. The pupil learns the way these forces work in man and in the different worlds. It corresponds to Socrates' saying, "Know thyself and you shall know the universe."

After mystical death, the experience of solitude, the sixth stage of the Christian path is the "placing in the tomb." The pupil had been isolated from his close ones, and now he returns not only to his close ones, but to all of creation, a sort of coming home, as it were. After the placing in the tomb, man is no longer alone, he is connected to the earth and to all creation. At the same time, a process of transformation of his physical body begins, which is destined to become what Christianity calls the "resurrection body." This is the stage at which the Christian mystic experiences the law of karma and reincarnation.

The sixth stage of the Eastern path is called "dharana," the mastery of the thoughts. With dharana, man begins to master his thoughts and progresses toward another stage, "dhana," the truly meditative state, in which he becomes capable not only of perceiving his thoughts, but of perceiving the process of thought itself, its origin, and its mode of functioning. The disciple becomes capable of completely stopping his thoughts, and of having access to the source of all thought and all reality. He then enters the eighth stage of the Eastern path, which is known as "samadhi" and of which cannot be spoken, corresponding on the Christian path to the ascension, the resurrection. This is the perfect union with God or the divine realities.

These are the different stages of these three ways. They are the criteria of every true initiatic or spiritual path.

It is not always necessary, however, to follow the stages in a strict order. For certain people, it is possible for the states characteristic of the later stages to manifest at an earlier moment. But this does not mean that the corresponding level has been attained yet. A person's true level is always determined by the manifestation of what is lowest in him.

As for the path of the Fourth Way, it does not require the pupil to withdraw from his family, social, or professional life. It presents a particular difficulty, however, since it requires the simultaneous practice of all the stages and a simultaneous action upon the physical, emotional, and intellectual realms.