

DOUBT, HYPNOSIS AND SPIRITUALITY

I think it must have been at about 2 o'clock in the morning, almost exactly 26 years ago. I can't remember any longer whether it was raining or whether the moon was visible. What I know is that I was a medical student, on night-shift duty at Accidents and Emergencies as part of my stint as an intern. In one of the cubicles was a woman of about forty. I can't remember whether or not she was good-looking; I can only remember that she had black hair and had tried to kill herself by overdose. When questioning her, only one thing she said seemed important to me: she had been pondering for a long time about the meaning of life, but had never found an answer. In despair, she had swallowed drugs. When I spoke to the doctor in charge about this, he immediately replied: « She's schizophrenic ». After asking him why, I got the following reply: « Anybody who asks themselves questions about the meaning of life has to be schizophrenic. » At that, I felt my blood boiling. I looked him straight in the eyes and answered back: « Well in that case I must be schizophrenic too, because I've always been asking myself these questions. » And I went back home furious.

At the next psychiatry lecture, in the big auditorium, I put my hand up and asked : « We are being taught a lot of things about psychology, but what should we do about patients who ask themselves why they are alive, what they are doing here on Earth ? » Without the slightest pause for thought, the professor answered: « You're here to acquire the tools of the trade to become psychiatrists, not pastors or priests! You are being trained to treat people's psyches, not their spirituality! »

After this I started observing pastors and priests, only to find that they were equally helpless. Religion usually responds to the most varied questions with definite answers. Each religion bases its explanations and vision of the world on dogmas. Once you accept these, you can tick off, one at a time, questions such as: « Why am I here ? Where am I going? What is there after death? », because you receive answers to all these questions. The only problem is that each religion has different answers for the same questions! So we find that we are confronted with conflicting dogmatic statements, and this obviously explains why we feel threatened when faced with someone who has other explanations for the same problems. The answers assimilated during a whole lifetime suddenly appear inadequate, and we find ourselves confronting the yawning abyss of the unknown, just because someone else has a different explanation for the same thing.

When we push our questioning to its limits, there is one experience that always seems disconcerting to me. Have you noticed that at burials, death does not exist, because God's love for humankind transcends death? Because in the end the resurrection of the dead at the Last Judgement will allow us all to live again. But in the meantime, I nevertheless see those who have lost a loved one crying...

Religions most often try to provide answers at the human level, rather than to elevate the questions to a superior, spiritual plane. So to get around this problem, I tried to find out what certain patients thought who had suffered a great deal, or been through particularly serious crises. In my doctor's thesis, entitled « Ordeal, a Learning Experience - a study of the revelatory aspects of illness and misfortune », I examined what they had drawn from their ordeals and, above all, whether they had been strengthened or destroyed by them. And if they had been strengthened, what exactly had allowed them to acquire this strength? The response of practically all the patients interrogated was more or less the following: « Beyond the suffering, the ordeal we went through allowed us to gather extra strength, because it enabled us to think things over and reflect on the purpose of our lives, and because it allowed us to ask more questions of a spiritual nature. We did not get answers to everything, but we could go into these matters in more depth. We at last succeeded in feeling that life had a deeper, more essential meaning, and this feeling helped us and gave us the strength to continue. » Theories had of course been of no help to them. It was this feeling that had helped them.

A passage from *Synchronicity and Paracelsica* by Carl Gustav Jung is relevant in this context:

“Anima emergence is one of those extreme phenomena that have a tendency to occur in certain specific psychic situations. Such situations are always characterized by a more or less violent collapse of a form of life or way of living that had previously appeared as an absolute prerequisite, or as the basis for an individual's entire existence. When a disaster like this happens, not only are all the possibilities of going back cut off, but all the ways forward also seems barred ... That's the moment when the anima - an archetype of the objective soul, of the collective unconscious - puts in an appearance to be the interpreter of destiny...”

“We are faced with a dark, desperately impenetrable, field, of which the unfathomable emptiness is suddenly filled with a clearly perceptible vision, or tangible presence of a strange but helpful being, in the same way as, after a long period of solitude, silence and darkness come to life with a presence that we can see, hear or touch, and our own «unknown» inner being approaches us in the guise of an unknown figure.”

It's the same thing in the Sufi proverb that says that « God is hidden in the ruins of the heart ». In fact, God may be hiding in events that we don't understand or in unanswerable questions. It is interesting that in the Bible the only people who saw Jesus walking on the water were the disciples who were at risk of drowning. It is at the moments when we're at risk of drowning that we can begin to ask the important questions. For the simple reason that unless we are drowning, we will never seek help, we cannot see miracles, and especially without feeling a real need, we have no reason to go looking for anything at a higher level. Moreover, the word crisis comes from the Greek *krisein* meaning “decision”. A crisis is the crossroads where we

must decide between a left or right turn. And, paradoxically, it is at these moments that we can resolve no longer to be a victim of our own destiny, but rather a driving force in our own future.

Some of my experiences in balloons have also led me to similar conclusions. In balloons, as in life, we are often pushed in directions that are not those we would have chosen. The winds of life cannot be brought under control. We have goals, dreams and objectives, but very often life decides otherwise and we are driven elsewhere.

When a balloon is blown in the wrong direction, the only thing the pilot can do is to change altitude, because the atmosphere is made up of very different meteorological layers, each of which has very different wind directions and speeds. In life, it is the same thing. In times of uncertainty, of loss of control, when we have absolutely no idea what is going to happen, we need to change altitude to find another level that corresponds to the direction we want to head in. Change altitude at a psychological, philosophical and spiritual level, so as to capture new ideas, new influences, other world-views, other ways of doing things, other strategies that will help us change direction.

The problem is that we can not really stop there. It would be a bit too easy to imagine that, if we lost control, we could just rise up, put ourselves in a trance, or whatever it may be, and immediately find the way out, the right direction. In fact, why does it not work so easily? Because we forget that in a balloon, if the pilot really wants to change altitude, he has to jettison ballast. In a balloon, it's easy, because you have water, sand, or old equipment you want to get rid of. You have to drop them overboard to make the balloon lighter and so able to climb. In life too, we must learn to relinquish ballast. And we have plenty of it. The problem, however, is that we have learned to be very attached to our ballast, to hang on to it through thick and thin. What is this ballast? Our certitude, our ready-made answers, our habits, prejudices and beliefs, our paradigms, our dogmas - in fact it is everything we hang on to because we believe that it will strengthen us, whereas all it really does is weigh us down. The only way we can really change altitude is to be prepared to jettison much of this ballast. But obviously, do not throw everything out at once, because that would make you climb far too high!

What I mean is that at those times when we lose control, or have absolutely no idea about what is going to happen, or when we believe that the whole world is going to collapse, we must be able to think and do exactly the opposite of what we have learned to think or do previously. I'm not saying that we should always do the opposite, I'm saying that we should always be ready to consider doing the opposite, and asking the questions: «What if there

was something else? And what if my certitude was partially or wholly unjustified? And if I could see the world, life, and other people differently, perhaps even the opposite way round to everything I've learned, what would the result be?"

The result would be that, from that moment on, the future would no longer be just one line that, possibly, led to somewhere. The future would be composed of every conceivable line leading in all possible directions, at all available altitudes, and it would be up to us to find the altitude corresponding to our chosen track. At this time, we can reinvent our lives since all directions are at our disposal. It is up to us to move around, it is up to us to search, like a cursor. The problem is that we usually learn to do the opposite, to be rooted to the spot, not to move around trying to find answers that will allow us to change the world. Don't forget that for each altitude or level there is only one direction, and it is up to us to make sacrifices (...drop ballast) if we really want to change something in our lives.

Obviously, for this we have to learn to stop being so sure of ourselves, even though our world, our society is so fond of exclamation points! We must learn to leave room for questions such as: *«If the cosmos has a border, what might lie beyond this limit or border? How is it that I can imagine an infinite number of stars? What does infinite mean? What is there beyond that? And if we go straight ahead, where are we going? What was there before birth? What is there after death?»* We need to ask these questions, because, like it or not, it makes us change altitude. Just the act of asking such questions can already enable us to drop a few ready-made answers overboard.

But letting go of convictions does not mean obliterating all the experience we have gained. It's the ballast of certitude that must be thrown overboard, not experience. And even then, not all the certitude at the same time; otherwise the abysmal chaos we will find ourselves in will be too difficult to manage. We should release it progressively. Whenever we come up against a certitude, we can ask ourselves: *«What if something else existed? «* It starts very basically. Take the next elections. Ask someone who intends to vote the opposite way to you the reason for his choice. Then, measure how long it takes before you interrupt him to tell him that he's understood nothing. Statistically, it is about 12 seconds! We must begin by practicing with simple examples, asking ourselves whether, instead of always voting one way, we could for once vote the other way? It is only later that we can ask ourselves: *«What if God did not exist?»*

Unfortunately, calling things into question is not something that our society values, even though it should be the very first thing we are taught in life! If we say to ourselves, "This is what I have believed up to now, but just suppose it was not true?", perhaps later, after

covering a lot of ground, we could say: “My experience now shows that this really is the way things are!” Then we can hang on to the belief a bit longer before perhaps dropping it later. We could already resolve many political, religious and interpersonal problems if we were capable of realizing that the way we see the world is not the only one that counts, that we can get rid of a great deal of our certitude, and that quite often it really is others who are right, not us! All of this is what constitutes experience, so let’s not throw all our experience overboard!

When we are driven towards the unknown, it may be that we find it easier to ask such questions. The balloon flight then becomes a way of releasing a number of reference points. So I’d like to read you a passage I wrote during my second attempt to circumnavigate the globe. The only winds that we could find that were blowing the way we wanted to go were at 1,000 feet over India. I was sitting on the edge of the capsule watching what was happening below, watching Indian farmers plow their fields. We saw villages, a huge number of people, and we just sailed silently by, as if on a flying carpet:

« Their way of life is light years away from ours. In our technological monster, we are floating over vast areas that live by the rhythm of the sun and the monsoon, the rice-growing cycle and the birth of children. Time could not possibly mean the same thing for them as for us westerners. And that’s perhaps the only thing I have in common with them on this dreamlike day. Today, I dearly wish that time would stop for me too. I am sitting on the outer edge of the capsule. The balloon is perfectly trimmed, drifting soundlessly towards Calcutta. The countryside slips slowly by as I savour my happiness, but also ask myself questions. How can the inhabitants of the same planet have such different destinies? I am not ashamed of being happy, but I am ashamed of all the suffering I can sense beyond the horizon. I can feel only too well the fragility and precariousness of my situation. What is the point of all this, everything that I am experiencing? Of everything I can see, and everything I know - or don’t know? What is left of my scientific knowledge, my philosophical convictions, my boasting exclamations, once I start asking myself what is the meaning of life, of their lives and of mine?

Well, first of all there are answers, countless answers, all as incomplete and futile as the next ones, but reassuring, at least to me. For a moment, they fill all the gaps left by my lack of certainty, enabling me to start thinking again as usual, convinced that my mental reflexes are soundly based. But I haven’t moved forward an inch.

Then that question assails me again, more insidiously: what is the meaning of life ? I feel it taking root within me, and suddenly I realize that my brain alone will not provide the answer. Might it be easier to answer it with my heart ? I let my feelings and emotions rise to the

surface. All the misery in the world seems even more appalling to me. I find it even more difficult to tolerate the unacceptable suffering which is the unfair side of existence.

Beyond ideas, beyond emotions, the question remains, insistent, invading every cell in my body. I slowly realize that I don't live only in my brain and my heart, but somewhere else too. A kind of new vibration runs through me as I ponder over this question with no answer. Mysteriously, it makes me feel fully alive. The question has become as absolute as my self-awareness. The light has changed a little; it is now more precise, the colors more vivid, just like the sounds that now float up even more clearly. Curiously, my breathing has slowed down and passes right through me, from top to toe, giving me an intense sensation of fulfillment. Perhaps that's what people call the breath of life. I feel I am occupying every corner of my body. That same old question echoes around it like a new source of energy. Please don't give me an answer or make me convinced again! It would destroy at a stroke this state of grace and enlightenment. I am borne along by this mystery, which gives some clues not only about the meaning of life, but also about the very fact of existing at this precise time.

Since a moment ago, I have accepted not being able to find answers, to be soothed by doubt, to let the unknown take over my inner world. And I feel better without certitude. In this state, it is easy to follow a trace in the sky without having the slightest idea where it will lead. Strangely enough, the enormous question mark I find hanging before me opens up new, unexpected horizons.

But my intellect can't help cutting back in and nagging at me: «Right, you've got it at last. Spirituality isn't an abstract concept. It's the full and complete sensation of feeling that you exist. And the meaning of life is to be open to this miracle by accepting doubt and the unknown. Only mystery can provide you with this dimension of existence. » Very quickly, this thought generates answers and new convictions, causing my experience to disintegrate like a fragile veil torn in pieces by the storm. My sensation of truly existing disappears as I sit there, powerless, returning against my will to the world of known certainties. All that's left is the memory – already distant – of having experienced a few moments of a life of total fulfillment, and the intense desire once again to find that marvelous mystery: a question with no answer.»

We can see that sometimes doubts are doors opening onto something else, onto another state of being. But I would like to make clear that when I talk about doubt, I do not mean hesitation. Often, when we talk about doubts, people say, «But we should not have doubts. We don't know where we're going any longer, nor what we need to do! « I am not talking about hesitation, about hesitating every time, or not knowing what to do. What I value is simply doubt in the sense of the unanswered question, the uncertainty that allows us to say: «I

am sure of my doubts, and I doubt my certitude.» Then you can become like an artist facing a blank canvas. If he wants to cover his canvas with everything he has learned or already experienced, he will only be able to produce a pale replica of something else.

On the other hand, if he accepts at first not knowing what to paint on his canvas, if he agrees to consider without any preconceptions what appears, he could paint a masterpiece. Ultimately, we should do exactly the same thing with our lives. If we can accept risk, or rather the unfamiliar - at first threatening - feeling of having no idea of what is going to happen, of what we are going to build on the road ahead, we too can create a masterpiece.

We can create something that has never existed before, something totally new, totally different, and which reflects our traits in every respect, since at every moment in time we too are a bit different. Therefore, it is essential to cherish questions with no answers, and especially the effects these have on us. Accepting this risk gives us moments in which we can break with routine, moments of positive disruption which help us become more present within ourselves.

Paradoxically, sudden insight into one's own identity is perceived by some as an unacceptable risk. The risk posed by coming face to face with doubts and question marks, creates, in these cases, not moments of fulfillment, but the onset of panic.

Many patients come to see us (whether they express it like this or not) primarily to seek help in getting past moments when they stumble at the risky hurdle of calling their fixed assumptions into question. Far from providing them with answers, our role is therefore to support them at these moments when they face the unknown, these gaps or holes between jumping off, letting go of a certitude, and getting back on their feet again to continue onwards. It is clear that our patients need us for that, but I think we also need to work on ourselves, sometimes with outside help, because if we are not able to negotiate these moments in our own lives, how can we possibly help our patients?

All this may not really make sense if we cannot accept what we see before us - the reality of how we function as human beings. Despite all our high aspirations and grandiose theories, we still operate primarily like Pavlov's dogs. The same stimulus always produces the same behavior.

Obviously, it's not particularly polite to treat people in the 21st century as Pavlov's dogs. We could use much more technological words, such as saying that a man works like a computer, but it all boils down to the same thing. We are programmed in our psyches to fight against the unknown, which also makes us struggle to avoid loss of control and to keep our world exactly the way that we have understood and built it. Rather than create and invent the rest of our lives, we are content with simply reproducing as faithfully as possible what we have already learned. We are etched into habits and daily routines. We operate with barriers, we

impose limitations on ourselves, and we move about as though confined to a baby-walker, clutching the frame and only moving our feet.

Fortunately, we human computers also have - in addition to the software that drives us to fight against the unknown - some hardware, a hard disk that's a source of potential, of energy, solutions and intuition. Moments of doubt and sudden discontinuities force us to bypass the program containing our reflex actions and allow us finally to connect with our hard drive and use a bit more of our true potential.

It is in this sense that I am fond of quoting Mikhael Aivanhov's definition of spirituality, which summarizes everything I have been trying to say here. For Aivanhov «Spirituality consists of making the gestures of everyday life conscious, so as to imbue them with the spirit.»

But in this sense, what exactly is a conscious act? In fact, it can be defined only in relation to something else, by comparing it with what we're more used to, automatism, habit and routine. When we say that we are aware, what does this mean we are aware of? Can we be more - or less - aware? Of course, I am not talking here about neurophysiological consciousness, that is to say activation of the zona reticularis, which sends impulses to the cortex to keep us awake. I say awake advisedly, not alert. It is not at all this consciousness that I am talking about.

Rather it's a kind of consciousness that it is much more difficult to define, but which we may feel within us if we consent to confront the question mark that gives no answer. If we try to define consciousness, or awareness, in relation to the automatism of everyday life, we can see that it is an experience of disconnection. We are disconnected from the everyday world; and we are disconnected from our usual way of working. And here we can find some strategies that can be put to use in hypnosis.

Georges Ivanovitch Gurdjieff, an Armenian philosopher of the first half of the 20th Century, spoke not of "Consciousness" but of "Self-Observation". That is, he spoke of the need to remember that we're alive, living in our bodies, at a given moment of our lives moving along between the past and the future, and that all this can only be observed from the present moment. Self-observation obviously requires that someone or something reminds us that we're here, that we exist. That we exist how? By feeling the life in us, that is by realizing, not just thinking, that we exist.

It indeed seems that the natural state of the human being is the state of being distracted, as opposed to the more spiritual condition, one of disconnection, in which we observe from a

distance our usual way of operating, so that we feel much more alive in the present moment. It is therefore essential to learn how to distance ourselves from our natural, habitual everyday state. The problem is that in learning to put thinking above everything else, we have also learned to avoid feeling alive in the present, to avoid being more aware. Remember the words of Descartes: «I think therefore I am!»

When we think, we are not aware of the present moment. Either we are projected into the past, and get depressed because things didn't turn out as we would have liked them to; or into the future, which makes us anxious, thinking about the problems to which we do not yet have solutions. The way of becoming aware of the present moment is to feel, not to think. The dictum should therefore read «I feel, therefore I am!»

We can see now that everything that disrupts or destabilizes, any unanswered question, can be used as an impulse that puts us back in touch with ourselves, allows us to distance ourselves from our habitual behavior and observe it from the outside. One could say that the moment when consciousness or enlightenment arrives is nothing other than the instant when we succeed in observing with one part of ourselves how the other part operates in normal, ordinary circumstances. In this sense, the connected state of life would end up being the inferior state, whilst the disconnected condition would be the state of consciousness, awareness and lucidity.

We can see now that there are perhaps one or two corrections to make to our notions of what hypnosis is. And more than that, we can try to address the eternal question of whether the hypnotic trance is therapeutic in itself, or whether it is only the work done under hypnosis that heals. If dissociation from our ordinary state can induce a moment of true consciousness - a moment when we can finally feel that we are living life to the full - then yes, the simple fact of trance can induce profound changes in how we view our lives, or even life in general.

In fact, we are all familiar with these moments of enlightenment, of true consciousness - moments of grace. We can experience them when another person, a landscape, some music or a memory suddenly reconnects us with ourselves, producing a feeling of being fully alive. Most often, these moments are just delivered to us; they happen by chance, and we speak about receiving a gift, a blessed moment or a moment of grace. But might it not be possible to create them, to trigger and encourage them to occur much more often, so that they don't just suddenly appear at random, but also and above all when we need them most?

Well, unanswered questions, moments of disruption, doubt, and loss of control are of course, inevitable, and if our goal is merely to live through them with as little pain as possible, then we

can just anchor them in a safe place. Every time we are destabilized, we are automatically relocated to our safe place. In the end, it's almost Pavlovian! We have not learned anything; we have just managed to endure a bad experience, but without succeeding in putting it to good use.

To gain access to a spiritual level, to a level that would allow us to evolve and understand a little more about what we are doing here on Earth, we should be able to anchor these moments not just in a safe place in our psyche, but in the very feeling of existing, in an enlightened consciousness of the present moment and of ourselves. This presence would resurface very naturally every time we ask ourselves the really fundamental questions, whenever we find the courage to accept one of these unanswered questions.

We could try it together. In this case, we note that inducing a trance is not the calm rhythm of our breath getting deeper and deeper, becoming more and more comfortable, our pleasure of relaxing in an armchair. No, it's not that at all ! Our method of induction will be a series of nagging questions: What are we doing here on Earth? Where did we come from? What were we before we were born? What will we be after we die? Where are we bound for? What's the use of being here? Of course we can't give an answer. There is only the question.

So let us allow this question to enter calmly within us, to permeate our beings. And not just our minds. Of course it must first pass through the mind, but then where does it go? It can go down; it can spread out and grow branches. This unanswered question can even flow out into our limbs, as far as our extremities, the tips of our fingers, of our toes, and perhaps even further. If it comes from somewhere else, there's certainly no reason why it cannot pass through us on the way to somewhere more distant.

Then, we can feel inhabited by this current passing through us. And maybe, whether with eyes open or closed, we will be able to see that the light is changing. Colors may be a little brighter, shapes a bit more precise. This energy that is flowing through our body - could this be what they call the "breath of life"? We can allow ourselves to be permeated and inhabited by these questions or doubts, until we feel completely fulfilled by them.

From that point, we can decide to go further. Do we want to go further with our consideration of these questions, or is that enough for us? We can stop there, or else we can allow the question to take us further into this feeling of perceiving that we are here in our body, at this very moment, at a particular point on the pathway of our life, fully present, in possession of all our faculties. In fact, everything we need right now and for the future, is to feel the connection between the unanswered question and our feeling of existing in our body, somewhere along the path of life.

And we can anchor this connection, so that in the future whenever we encounter a situation or occasion when we lose control, don't know which way to turn, no longer know what to think, each time that we ask what may lie beyond the edge of infinity, we can summon back this feeling of simply being a human being asking the questions we must ask ourselves, if we have the courage to do so. The one who asks the questions is not the sickest, he's the most courageous. This is why the greatest of all adventures is life itself, the search for what guides our steps.

Now we can focus again on our breathing to return, at our own pace, to so-called ordinary life, but this time knowing that at this normal level of life we can find the doors that open to let us continue on our way ...

So enjoy the journey!

Lectures of Dr Bertrand Piccard

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