

Symbols of Transpersonal Experiences

Roberto Assagiolo, M.D.
Istituto di Psicosintesi

A discussion of what is transpersonal – and therefore, in a certain sense supernormal – should be prefaced by a clarification of what is meant by ‘normal.’ The current criterion of normality is generally considered to be represented by the average man and woman who observes the social conventions of the environment in which they live – in other words, one who is a conformist. But ‘normality’ understood in this way is a conception that offers little satisfaction; it is static and exclusive. This normality is a ‘mediocrity’ which either refuses to admit or condemns everything outside the conventionally accepted and thus considers it ‘abnormal’ without taking into account the fact that many so-called abnormalities in reality represent the first steps or endeavours to rise above mediocrity.

Now, however a reaction against this narrow-minded cult of ‘normal’ has set in; thinkers and scientists of our time are opposing it vigorously. Among the most outspoken one may mention Jung (1933), who has not hesitated to state:

To be ‘normal’ is a splendid ideal for the unsuccessful, for all those who have not yet found an adaptation. But for people who have far more ability than the average, for whom it was never hard to gain success and to accomplish their share of the world’s work – for them restriction to the normal signifies the bed of Procrustes, unbearable boredom, infernal sterility and hopelessness. As a consequence there are many people who become neurotic because they are only normal as there are people who are neurotic because they cannot become normal.

Another writer, Professor Gattegno of London University, has gone even further, stating that he regards the average ordinary person as a pre-human being and reserves the words ‘Man and Woman’ with capitals, only for those who have transcended the common level or stage of development and are in this respect, supernormal.

In the past, the veneration of superior beings was widespread. The genius, the sage, the saint, the hero and the initiate were recognised as the vanguard of humanity, as the grand promise of what each person could become. These superior beings, while in no way disdaining ordinary humanity, sought to arouse in it the urge and the longing to transcend the ‘normality’ and mediocrity in which it existed, and develop the transpersonal possibilities latent in every human being.

In speaking of the transpersonal we are faced with a serious difficulty and that is the inadequacy of the human language, particularly of modern language, which is rational and objective. All words designating psychological or spiritual conditions or realities are in origin metaphors or symbols based on concrete things. For instance, soul (anima) is derived from ‘anemos,’ meaning wind; spirit from ‘spiritus’ meaning breath. But the difficulty is not insurmountable if we remember and keep constantly in mind the symbolic nature of every expression, be it verbal or other kinds. Symbols properly recognised and understood possess great value: they are ‘evocative’ and induce direct intuitive understanding. Indeed, the fact that the words indicating higher realities have their roots in sensuous experience serves to emphasise the essential analogical correspondences between the external and the inner worlds.

Yet symbols have their dangers. In fact, they who take them literally and do not pass beyond the symbol to reality, but halts before it, does not arrive at the underlying truth. Moreover symbols are unilateral. No symbol can express more than an aspect, a quality, a partial conception of a given reality. This qualification can, however, be obviated by the employment of different symbols to indicate the same truth. Thus the sum, the convergence, the synthesis of many points of view can provide a greater and more integrated understanding of the reality they symbolise.

So, to designate the transpersonal experiences and achievements open to humanity, we find that there are fourteen categories or groups of symbols:

Introversion
2. Deepening-Descent
Elevation-Ascent
Broadening- expansion
Awakening
Light- Illumination
Fire
Development
Strengthening-Intensification
Love
Way-Path-Pilgrimage
Transmutation-Sublimation
Rebirth-Regeneration
Liberation

These symbols are not only suggestive and illuminating; they can be used as subjects of meditation, indeed of 'psycho-spiritual exercises.' This has already been done for anagogic and psychotherapeutic purposes. These meditations and exercises have proved themselves very effective, sometimes producing surprising transformations. (The Exercise of the Rose, a description of which is given at the end of this article, provides an example of such use.)

To the first group belong the symbols of introversion, of inner orientation.

Introversion is an urgent necessity for modern men and women; our present civilisation is exaggeratedly extraverted and man is caught up in a frenetic vortex of activities that become ends in themselves. 'Normal' men and women today may be said to live psychologically and spiritually outside of themselves. This expression – which in the past was applied to the mentally ill – is well-fitted to describe modern humanity. We have now reached the point of living everywhere except within ourselves; we are in reality 'ex-centric,' that is to say, living outside our own inner centre. (In French there is another apt expression: *desaxe*, off one's axis)

The external life must, therefore, be counterbalanced by an adequate inner life. We must turn back into ourselves. The individual must renounce their many and continuous escapist expedients and address themselves to the discovery of what has been recently termed 'inner space.' Recognition must be given to the existence not only of the external world, but of different 'inner worlds', and to the fact that it is possible, and indeed humankind's duty, to know them, explore them and conquer them.

Modern men and women have learned to control nature and exploit her energies, but generally is not aware that in reality all they accomplish externally has its origins in them and their minds and is the result of desires, drives, impulses, programmes and plans. These are psychological, that is, inner activities; every external action has its source in inner causes. First of all, therefore, these causes should be known, examined and regulated. Goethe, a genius who well knew how to play the part of the 'normal man' when he wanted, said: "when we have done our part within, the exterior will unfold itself automatically."

Interiorization, besides giving balance and nervous and psychic health, is the way to experiences of a transpersonal character. Turning within ourselves, we discover our Centre, our true Being, the most intimate part of ourselves. Here belong the 'peak experiences' so ably described by Maslow (1962).

The second group of symbols is composed of those associated with deepening with the descent to the 'ground' of our being.

The exploration of the unconscious is symbolically regarded as the descent into the abysses of the human being, as the investigation of the 'underworld of the psyche.' This symbol has come into use particularly since the development of psychoanalysis-although not discovered by it. Its origin is remote and indeed in antiquity it carried a deeper meaning. Let us recall the descent of Aeneas and Hades in Virgil's Aeneid and Dante's description of Hell. Furthermore, many mystics have spoken of the 'abysses of the soul.' Besides Psychoanalysis in the strictest sense, there is the 'depth psychology,' represented by Jung and others. Its fundamental principle is that men and women must courageously become aware of all the discreditable and obscure aspects of their being, those which have been called 'the shadow,' and then incorporate them into their conscious personality. This recognition and this inclusion are acts of humility and at the same time, of power. Those who are courageous and willing enough to recognise the lower sides of their personality, without having this knowledge to overwhelm them, achieves a true spiritual victory. But this carries its own dangers: The allegory of The Sorcerer's Apprentice contains a warning of how easy it is to make the 'waters' gush out, but how difficult then to control them and command them to retreat.

In this connection the practice of Robert Desoille (1945) with his method of the 'reveveille,' is valuable. He makes the use of the symbol of the descent but puts greater emphasis on that of the ascent. Of the descent, he observes that it is to be used prudently and 'fractionatedly,' i.e., commencing by seeking to activate the higher realisation and then as the subject becomes stronger, cautiously exploring the zone of the lower unconscious. The aim is the elimination of the dissociation between the consciousness and the lower unconscious, which has been produced by repression and condemnation on the part of the conscious ego and his unwillingness to admit from pride or fear that there exists this aspect of the personality. To repress it serves no useful purpose; far from eradicating it, it exacerbates it, while it is our task to redeem it. But to accord it recognition does not mean surrendering oneself to its demands; it is preparing the way for transformation.

The third group of symbols is of widespread use. It includes elevation, ascent, and the conquest of 'inner space' in an upward direction.

There is a series of inner worlds, each of which has its specific characteristics and its higher and lower levels. Thus the first, the world of emotions and feelings, exhibits a marked difference of level between blind passions and the loftiest sentiments. Then there is the world of the intelligence, of the mind; and here also are found different

levels: those of the concrete analytical mind and of the higher philosophical reason (nous). There are, moreover, the world of the imagination; the world of the intuition; the world of the will and –higher still- the ineffable world which can only be indicated with the designation, world of transcendence.

The symbolism of elevation has been used in every age. Every religion has temples erected in high places, on mountain tops; and in antiquity many mountains were considered sacred. Moreover, there are symbolic legends such as that of Titirel's ascent of the mountain to build on its summit the Castle of the Holy Grail. The symbol of the sky, or heaven as a superior realm, the habituation of the gods and the goal of human aspiration is universal.

The symbols of the fourth group are those of expansion or broadening of the consciousness.

It is well to note that although the different symbols may appear to be contradictory in reality they are not so but indeed are integrative. In the same way that the descent does not exclude ascent it is in fact advisable as we have said to ascend first in order to be able to descend without danger so the ability to expand the consciousness without losing oneself in its vastness, requires taking up of a firm stable position at the centre of one's being. Those two realisations complement and do not exclude each other.

The psychiatrist, H. Urban speaks of the 'spectrum of consciousness,' and maintains that we are only conscious within a limited area corresponding to the band of the light spectrum between red and violet, while there are other psycho-spiritual areas corresponding to the infra-red and ultra-violet bands. Our consciousness can be enlarged or broadened to include increasingly larger zones of impressions and contents. This expansion must be conceived spherically, that is in all directions vertical as well as horizontal that is from the individual to the group, to society, to the whole of humanity. But it is necessary to maintain one's self awareness within the whole and not 'lose' oneself therein.

Another series of symbols of magnitude and breadth is based on the Sanscrit root 'mah' which means great and from which are derived 'magister' (master), magician, mahatma, etc. One generally speaks of 'great' men and women in distinction to 'little' ordinary men and women. The expansion that leads to the inclusion of other beings in oneself is associated with the symbolism of love (see group 10).

Time provides another direction in which expansion takes place. Men and women generally live in the present absorbed in the interest of the moment; but we can expand our consciousness to include ever wider cycles, a temporal continuum of vary dimensions. This leads to the comprehension that the meaning and value of a human life do not lie in any one isolated moment, but in a process which unfolds, at the very least between physical birth and death. This expansion of time, this inclusion of ever widening cycles serves as a preparation for the passage, one might say leap, from time to the eternal, understood not as unlimited duration, but as an extra temporal transcendental dimension in which our inner centre, the Self, exists and persists above the flow of the temporal current.

We come now to the fifth group of symbols which are among the most suggestive and effective: The symbols of awakening.

The state of consciousness of the average man and woman can be termed a dream state in a world of illusions. The illusion of the reality of the external world as our senses perceive it and the many illusions created by the imagination, the emotions and mental concepts. As far as the external world is concerned modern physics has demonstrated that what appears to our senses as concrete stable and inert is on the contrary constituted of congeries of infinitesimal elements in extremely rapid motion of energy charges animated by a powerful dynamism. Thus matter as our senses perceive it and as it was conceived by materialistic philosophy does not exist. Modern science has thus arrived at the fundamental Indian conception according to which all that 'appears' is maya, illusion.

Then there are the emotional and mental illusions which concern us more closely, conditioning our life and continuously producing errors of evaluation and conduct and sufferings of every kind. In this field also modern psychological science has reached the same conclusions as the ancient wisdom, that is, men and women see everything and every being through a thick veil of colouring and distortions deriving from our emotional reactions, the effect of past psychic traumas, external influences etc. The effects of this are mental illusions which lead us to believe that we are thinking objectively while instead we are being affected by what Bacon called 'idols,' by preconceptions and by collective influences.

All this creates a veritable dream state from which one can and should wake up. This awakening, demands first of all an act of courage and the confrontation with reality. We have to reach the recognition of our psychological multiplicity, of the various sub-personalities co-existing within us, to the extent that every human being can be said to be a Pirandello character. The first step consists therefore in becoming aware of all that exists and stirs restlessly within us; the second in discovering what we really are: a centre of self-awareness, the Self, the spectator of the human tragi-comedy.

The doctrine and practice of the awakening are of ancient date. The Buddha laid particular insistence upon it in his teachings, so that he became known as the 'Perfectly Awakened One.' An effective exercise for promoting the awakening can be performed after the normal waking up from sleeping in the morning, by passing from this state to a true second awakening in the world of transpersonal awareness. The relationship between the two states might be expressed in the form of an equation: Sleep is to ordinary waking state as this state is to transpersonal wakefulness.

In the sixth group of symbols are found those of light, of illumination.

Just as ordinary waking marks the passage from darkness of the night to the light of the sun, so the awakening transpersonal awareness marks the transition that has been designated 'illumination.' The first step, which corresponds to the first stage of the waking state is a simple (but not on that account easy) ability to see clearly within ourselves; the second of illumination, is the solution of problems hitherto appearing insoluble, and this by means of the specific instrument of inner vision the intuition. Thus intuitive awareness comes to replace intellectual, logical and rational consciousness, or better to integrate and transcend it. The intuition in fact

leads to identification with what is seen and contemplated and to the recognition of the intrinsic unity between object and subject.

There is a further degree or kind of illumination: it is the perception of the light immanent in the human soul and in the whole of creation. We have numerous evidence of this; many mystics have described their inner illuminations. In Buddhism and particularly in Zen, special disciplines aim at producing a sudden illumination with its accompanying revelation of reality.

The seventh group – the symbols of fire- is one of the most comprehensive and at the same time most essential.

The worship and veneration of fire are found in all religions. Everywhere, on altars, in torches and in lamps, the sacred fire burns – the flames glitter. The flame of the Olympic torch is a symbol of contests in which athletes strive to give proof of exceptional physical prowess. The inner experience of fire has been lived through by many mystics: it is sufficient to mention St Catherine of Siena and Blaise Pascal. The function of fire is primarily one of purification and it is employed with this intent in 'spiritual alchemy.'

The symbols of the eighth group are among the most closely associated with human experience and are indicated by the words evolution and development.

In a certain sense these words might be said to be synonymous. Development signifies release from encumbrances and denotes the passage from the potential to the actual. The two principal symbols of development are the seed and the flower: the seed which enfolds within itself the potentiality of the tree, the flower which opens from the closed bud and is the precursor of the fruit.

Familiarity has bred in us indifference to the miracle by which the acorn develops into the oak, and the child into the adult. Where in reality is the tree in the seed, and where the oak in the acorn? Aristotle speaks of 'entelechy' others of 'model' and 'archetype.' An Immanent Intelligence must be admitted which directs the various phases of the development of the seed from the tree, from the cell or germinal cells to the complete organism.

The other symbol, widely used since ancient times, is the flower: the Golden Flower (in China) the lotus (in India) and the rose (In Persia and Europe). The symbolism of the lotus is closely associated with what happens in humanity. The lotus has its roots in the earth, its stalks grow in the water and its flower opens in the air in response to the action of the rays of the sun. It is an apt symbol of women and men who have a physical body as a terrestrial base and develop psychologically in the sphere of the emotions (water) and of the mind (air). The realisation of the self, the inner centre, corresponds to the opening of the flower brought about by the vivifying action of the sun, the symbol of the spirit. Some Eastern methods of development and meditation are based on this symbolism of the lotus.

The same applies to a great extent to the rose, whose symbolism originated in Persia where the mystic poets speak of the rose in this sense. In Europe we find Le Roman de la Rose, Dante's mystic rose and certain more or less secret movements, in particular those of the Rosicrucians. I have used the symbol of the rose in a special exercise which has proved very effective in stimulating and promoting the opening, or blossoming of the transpersonal consciousness.

The symbol of development is applicable to two different stages: the first extending from childhood to adulthood; the second from the state of 'normal' individual to that of 'awakened' individual. Maria Montessori, who devoted herself to the education of children and revolutionised preceding educational systems, is justified in saying:

Development of the child into the adult takes place actively within and the child pursues this task joyously when the adult does not interfere by dispensing the treasures of their wisdom. The child is the human seed: as the oak tree subsists in the acorn, so the adult subsists in embryo in the child.

We may recall that Plutarch had already said: "Humanity is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to kindle." To educate in fact should be as its etymology indicates, (to) e-ducere, to draw forth (from within), that is to develop.

Of the second phase of our development it may be said to be truly representative of the passage to a transpersonal stage.

The ninth series of symbols includes those of strengthening or intensification.

Transpersonal experiences may be regarded as a reinforcement or intensification of life consciousness a tension or psychological voltage higher than that in which the average persona lives. Herman Keyserling (1938) speaks of a 'dimension of intensity' associating the symbolism of intensification with that of proceeding along a different dimension which he terms 'vertical' (the other dimension being horizontal). In using this term 'vertical dimension' he refers to a verticality that rises from the world of becoming, or flux towards the world of being and transcendence. He applies this symbol also to time, a 'vertical passing' from time to the extra-temporal eternal. Strengthening also has two stages or degrees. The first consists in the reinforcement of all our latent underdeveloped energies and functions. In his essay *The Energies of Men*, William James draws attention to a new number of energy potentials existing in men and women, waiting to be brought into manifestation when they will to discover, activate and use them. The second degree of reinforcement permits the passage from the personal to the transpersonal level referred to above, in which also the manifestation of various para-psychological powers may occur. At times such powers when associated with the higher ethical and spiritual endowments have been ascribed to illuminates to the 'awakened', to 'initiates' from Moses to Pythagoras, from Buddha to Christ and various mystics. Some have employed them deliberately and consciously; in others they manifested spontaneously, even against the will of the subject. One might say that these powers are sometimes a consequence, a by-product as it were of transpersonal experiences.

The symbols of the tenth group are those of love.

Human love itself is in a certain respect a desire, an attempt more or less conscious to 'come out' of oneself, to transcend the limits of separate existence and enter into communion to fuse oneself with another being with a 'thou.' The devout and mystics

of every age have spoken of their experience of communion with God or with Higher Beings, employing the symbolism of human love. One may recall the Song of Songs in the Bible and the expressions, sometimes of a surprising audacity, used by St Catherine of Siena and St John of the Cross.

The symbols of the eleventh group include those of the Way, the Path and of pilgrimage.

These two have been and are universally used. The religious employ the term 'mystic way.' The symbol of 'pilgrimage' has often been and still is used in a physical and external manner in connection with the pilgrimage to various sacred places. Dante's passing through the Inferno, Purgatory and Paradise has been called a pilgrimage. Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress will also be recalled in this connection.

We now come to the twelfth group the symbols of transmutation.

The body and the psyche can be transmuted by means of a regenerative transformation. This produces an organic and harmonious unification of all aspects, a 'bio-psycho-synthesis.' 'A psycho-spiritual alchemy' is achieved. When one speaks of alchemy one thinks of the attempts to make gold (something which used to appear incredible, but now seems less fantastic since we have learned to transform one element into another by the manipulation of atoms). But in reality the Arabian and medieval alchemical books often veiled in chemical terms the psycho-spiritual alchemy, that is, the transmutation of mankind. This has been recognised by some modern writers notably Jung (1940), who devoted much time during the last years of his life to the study of, and writing about, alchemical symbolism. In his book Psychology and Religion, he discusses it extensively and relates how he discovered this symbolism in the dreams of his patients and in the drawings of both the ill and the healthy.

Transmutation and transformation occur in two different ways, in two opposite directions, but ways which are not in opposition; they alternate and complete each other. The first is transmutation through sublimation; the second is the transformation produced by the descent, the irruption of superconscious energies into the personality, including the body. Their combined action brings about a complete bio-psycho-synthesis.

The thirteenth group comprises the symbols of regeneration of the 'new birth.'

It is related to the previous group since a complete transmutation prepares or opens the way to regeneration, which in its most profound and essential meaning constitutes a 'new birth,' the birth of the new person, of the spiritual essence within the personality. In India Brahmins are called Dwijas, that is twice-born. This symbol has been much used in Christianity and mystics have spoken of the 'birth of the Christ in the heart.'

The symbols of the fourteenth group are those of liberation and have a relationship with those of development.

They mean the elimination of the encumbrances, a process of liberation from our complexes, our illusions and from identification with the various parts we play in life, the masks we assume, with our idols etc. It is a release in the etymological sense of the term, a freeing and activation of latent potentialities.

The symbolism of liberation has pervaded all the great world religions. In India, the Buddha said: "As the water of the sea is all pervaded by salt, so my whole teaching is pervaded by liberation." In Christianity, Paul affirms the "liberty of the Sons of God."

In our times during the second World W, Franklin D. Roosevelt proclaimed the Four Great Freedoms: Freedom of Expression; Religious Freedom; Freedom from need; Freedom from fear. The last, the freedom from fear is fundamental, since only they who are free from fear are truly free.

Here however we find ourselves confronted by a paradox. In contrast with our spontaneous yearning for freedom we fear it at the same time. This can be explained by the fact that freedom implies commitment, self-control, courage and other qualities. It has been justly said: "The price of freedom is eternal vigilance." Freedom must be won again and safeguarded everyday, one might say every moment. People, even if unaware of this, feel it intuitively, they fear this burden of freedom and in consequence recoil from it. This fear is one of the motives of the wish to remain at the pre-adult level, or even to regress into infancy and take refuge therein. This is a general tendency, and if we look with sincerity within ourselves, we can find a number of infantile and regressive elements. The nostalgically minded of all ages, who lament 'the good old times,' are examples of this. But it is a useless and dangerous tendency – useless, because every attempt to arrest the irresistible forward course of life in us and around us is doomed to failure; and dangerous, because it is apt to create serious neuropsychic conflicts and disturbances. All these symbols can be utilised in psychological exercises for fostering the corresponding transpersonal experiences and to bring about an increasing synthesis between the personal and the transpersonal aspects or levels, the manifestation of the Whole person.

Exercise on the Blossoming of a Rose.

Let us imagine looking at a rose. Let us visualise its stem and leaves with a bud closed. This appears green because the sepals are closed, but at the very top a rose-coloured point can be seen. Let us visualise this vividly, holding the image in the centre of our consciousness.....Now begins a slow movement; the sepals start to separate little by little, turning their points outward and revealing the rose-hued petals, which are still closed.....the sepals continue to open.....we can see the whole bud of a delicate rose colour.....the petals also slowly separate....until a perfect full-opened rose is seen.

At this stage let us try to smell the perfume of the rose, inhaqling its characteristic well known scent.....so delicate, sweet, pleasantLet us smell it with delight.

Let us identify ourselves with the rose itself; let us 'introject' it into ourselves.....Symbolically we are a flower, a rose.....That same life that animates the Universe and has created the miracle of the rose is producing in us a like, even greater miracle.....the awakening and development of our spiritual being and that which radiates from it.

Through this exercise we can effectively foster the inner flowering.

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