

Psychological Projections and the Spiritual Path

Proyecciones Psicológicas y el Camino Espiritual

José Jover*

Despertar Integral

Barcelona, Spain

SUMMARY

In this essay I discuss what for me is the core of the so called spiritual journey. A path in which our own consciousness awakes to certain inner truths about who we really are, and how such awakening brings us a profound transformation. I argue that ignorance is the main cause of suffering and that the process of self-knowledge is key in order to dissipate it. Throughout this journey I identify psychological projections as an important mean to unveil the truth hidden within us by our own ignorance. I point out at Mindfulness as a spiritual practice which allows us to become self-conscious in order to identify the different ways in which our psyche projects its contents onto the world.

KEY WORDS: Spiritual journey, Psychological projections, Awareness, Individuation, The shadow.

RESUMEN

En este artículo exploro lo que desde mi punto de vista constituye la esencia del llamado viaje espiritual. Un camino en el cual nuestra consciencia despierta a ciertas verdades internas acerca de quiénes somos, y sobre cómo tales despertares nos traen una profunda transformación. Argumento que la ignorancia es la causa principal del sufrimiento y que el proceso de auto-conocimiento es clave para poderlo disipar. En este viaje, la identificación de proyecciones psicológicas constituye un medio importante para alcanzar las verdades que están ocultas tras los velos de la ignorancia. Señalo la práctica de *Mindfulness* como un medio para desarrollar la auto-consciencia con el fin de identificar las diferentes maneras en las que nuestra psique proyecta sus contenidos al mundo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Viaje espiritual, Proyecciones psicológicas, Consciencia, Individuación, La sombra.

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“In Zen Buddhist meditation the master tries to teach his pupil how he can forever keep the inner mirror free of dust. To the extent that he lives in complete accord with the rhythm of psychic energy and with its regulator, the Self, he has no projections anymore; he looks at reality without illusion and more or less continuously reads the meaning of all the synchronistic events happening around him. He lives in the creative current or stream of the Self and has himself, indeed, become a part of this stream”.

von Fanz, M-L, 1993, p.199

After a long period of time experiencing and questioning myself about what spirituality and being called spiritual is about, I have reached the conclusion that it has to do with the transformative experience of approaching and reconnecting again with a dimension within us which is beyond our ordinary sense of ego and identity and frees us from suffering. In other words, spirituality is the personal journey towards *the discovery of who we really are*, and such gradual discovery and realization is completely life transformative. Spirituality is the adventure of searching the Truth about life. I agree with Luan Kohng (2003, p. 62), when commenting on the Buddha teachings, that what is important in this journey, “is seeing and understanding the truth for oneself, rather than following a set of beliefs based on ‘blind faith’” (Rahula, 1978). She goes on saying that “the Buddha encourages insight and understanding based on direct experience rather than from intellectualizing or following certain beliefs” (ibid.). To my mind here dwells the attitude that is needed to walk this path, to take personal responsibility rather than relying on an external source, which is made explicit in the Buddha’s advice for people “not do depend on others for your salvation [but to] develop your self-confidence to gain it” (Digha-Nikaya. II.100, *Treasure of the Dhamma*, 1994, p. 290, in Luan Khong, p. 62)

What I have also understood up to now throughout my personal journey is that the spiritual path is the path of awakening to our truest condition: *being multidimensional in consciousness and living in a multidimensional reality*. In this path, life itself becomes the journey where all its aspects, dimensions and situations become opportunities for self-knowledge and evolution. However, what makes the difference between perceiving life itself as spiritual or not is the internal call and appropriate attitude to search for something more real, deeper and meaningful than the limited, superficial and impermanent materialistic fulfilment. I have understood too, that as we approach and reconnect with that more real dimension within ourselves, wisdom, compassion, inner fulfilment, coherence, empowerment, freedom, happiness, joy, abundance and service towards others emerge as natural expressions and qualities of that fundamental essence inhabiting us. A vertical and horizontal expansion of our consciousness occurs as we go along the path. Vertical in the sense that we can experience ourselves in more levels and dimensions within us (more accessibility), and horizontal in the sense that the ultimate purpose of being alive is not just for ourselves but rather for transforming the world around (more active), for others.

From this understanding I see spiritual practices as tools that help us walk this path towards ourselves, withdrawing the veils of ignorance that separate us from the enlightenment state of being. As the Buddha said, ignorance is one of the main causes of the most common human illness: *suffering* (Harvey, 2003, p. 47, 53). In Sogyal Rinpoche’s words, “[...] the root of all our suffering in samsara is ignorance. Ignorance, until we free ourselves from it, can seem endless, and even when we have embarked on the spiritual path our search is fogged by it” (1992, p. 132). For me, the state of ignorance is a disconnected state from our truest source of being, where we hold many “misconceptions about the nature of self and reality which lead to craving, attachment, self-centeredness, and other unwholesome dispositions” (Ferrer, 2002, p. 127). This state is like trying to get out of a complex and large labyrinth full of traps in complete darkness. Because we cannot see, we will injure ourselves (suffer) all the time as it is not clear where we are going and where we are stepping on. I see the labyrinth as the complex architecture and territory of the intertwined inner and outer worlds. According to my view the key (the light) to step outside the

labyrinth is within us, nonetheless there are certain tools such as practices and specific knowledge that can help us to illuminate the way out and find the gate to freedom. These tools bring light to dissipate the darkness of the state of ignorance where there is lack of knowledge and awareness.

From my experience, one of the main practices that could free us from suffering is the constant observation of ourselves in order to discern and learn how our inner world and processes function. That is to move from an automatic state onto an awoken state. The constant observation brings us awareness of the unseen, of the unconscious, and by the simple act of observation a transformative effect starts to take place on what we observe. This observational practice has been called *Mindfulness* (in Pali language *sati*, meant activity) and according to Kyanaponika (1992), “the cultivation of right mindfulness is so important to the Buddha’s teachings, that it has been described as the ‘heart of Buddhist meditation (In Luan Khong, 2003, p. 66). The practice of mindfulness is rooted in the Buddhist meditation *Vipassana* (or ‘Insight’ meditation) and the basic framework for developing this ‘Insight’ practice is known as “the four foundations of mindfulness” (the *sati-patthana*’s) which are described in such *Suttas* as the *Maha-sati-patthana*. The four “foundations” are the spheres in which to develop mindfulness: body, feelings, states of mind, and *dhammas*, which comprise all aspects of personality, whether in oneself or others (Harvey, P., 2003, p. 254). Seth Robert Segall gives us a wonderful definition of this practice:

“It’s the practice of opening oneself up and being receptive to the flow of sense perceptions, emotions, and thought processes in each given moment while attempting to hold judgment in abeyance. This is done with no other goal than to be as present as one can possibly be within each and every moment. One does this with an intimate attention that is very different from a scrutinizing, objective stance. Rather than being a distant observer of a set of experiences, one is a participant-observer, and what one observes is not only the sense impressions of the ‘outside’ world, but also one’s own subjective reactions to that world” (2003, p. 79).

In my view, this practice becomes the core of any spiritual work, as it helps us explore the unknown territory within and start becoming aware and conscious of ignored regions and automatic mechanisms of our psyche. The spiritual path is a journey of becoming responsible for our entire being, thus for our thoughts, emotions, words and actions¹. However, in order to become so it is required to free ourselves from the automatic emotional responses. When we behave automatically (i.e., we react instead of consciously acting) we lose control and an unconscious level of our psyche (the shadow in Jungian terms) becomes in charge of our feelings, thoughts and behaviour (Jung, CW 9(2), pars. 15). In that situation we can’t really be responsible for ourselves as we have lost control of our inner dynamics. Consequently we might generate causes that will produce effects that may bring more suffering to us and the people around.

The spiritual path is then a journey of gaining an understanding of how suffering is generated in order to free ourselves from it and radiate the light and warmth from the ‘Sun’ behind the veils. Enlightening our understanding of our inner world through constant *observation* and study of appropriate *knowledge* will transform us into more responsible and careful beings as we will understand the interdependence among all things and beings (minerals, plants, animals, humans, the Planet and inter-dimensional beings). As the understanding of life and of who we are increases, wisdom and compassion emerge naturally. However, as in any path there is not a straight line towards enlightenment, and many stages, turns, back sliding, challenges and difficult situations arise in this journey.

In this essay I would like to specifically point out one particular object of observation, which to my understanding is the core of this journey towards enlightenment (i.e., freedom). I’m talking about *psychological projections*, as I believe they are crucial in the journey of personal transformation because beneath them rest the unconscious automatisms and emotional reactions that make us lose control of

ourselves and suffer. Furthermore, as we become aware of them we have the chance to delve into the unknown territory of our unconscious² and expand our knowledge about ourselves. The development of mindfulness as the capacity to become aware of internal and external events, will help in the identification of these reactive and defensive patterns that enslave us to our unconscious.

Psychological projections are defined by C. G. Jung as “an unconscious, automatic process whereby a content that is unconscious to the subject transfers itself to an object, so that it seems to belong to that object” (CW 9, pars. 121). As von Franz comments on Jung’s definition, “Jung speaks therefore of a ‘hook’ in the object on which one hangs a projection as one hangs a coat on a coat hook” (von Franz, 1993, p. 1). Projections can be observed everywhere in the everyday life of human beings as all contents of the unconscious are constantly transferred onto the environment. As Jung puts it: “Just as we tend to assume that the world is as we see it, we naïvely suppose that people are as we imagine them to be” (CW 8, pars. 507).

Those contents are made up with the memory-images and peculiarities that are part of our own makeup (von Franz, p. 6), they are pieces of one’s own personality (p. 31) and can have negative and positive qualities (p. 3). These contents are stored in the depths of our psyche, and they come from what Jung called “the shadow” (i.e., the dark aspects of our personality)³. As Jung points out, “a closer look at these aspects reveal that they have an *emotional* nature, a kind of autonomy, and accordingly an obsessive or, better, possessive quality. Emotion, incidentally, is not an activity of the individual but something that happens to him” (CW. 9(2), pars. 15). According to Jung, “the effect of projection is to isolate the subject from his environment, since instead of a real relation to it there is now only an illusory one. Projections change the world into the replica of one’s own unknown face” (ibid., pars. 17).

As we see from the above, in order to attain enlightenment it is required to free ourselves from the chains that attach our being to our shadow. As long as we remain emotionally attached and unconscious of our projections we won’t be able to reconnect with the deepest being within that will set us free from illusions and suffering. Therefore, the spiritual path in order to be genuine must deal, in my view, with this important issue. In order to do so, self-awareness must be developed. As von Franz notes, “Jung says repeatedly throughout his work that common sense, reflection and self-knowledge are the only means of clearing away the clouds of projections of unconscious content” (von Franz, 1993, p. 161). As I’ve pointed out before, the development of mindfulness in ordinary life would become a powerful tool, as it is in the everyday circumstances and relationships where projections are activated and the chance to become freer arises. It is in these situations when “acquiring this awareness and understanding, the person develops the freedom to break the hold of compulsive habits” (Luan Khong, 2003, p. 69). In Jung terms, “the projection ceases the moment it becomes conscious, that is to say when it is seen as belonging to the subject” (CW. 9, pars. 121).

Alan Wallace and Shauna L. Shapiro (2006) have developed an interesting model proposing that well-being arises from a mind that is balanced in four ways: *conatively* (intention and volition), *attentionally* (sustained voluntary attention), *cognitively* and *affectively*. This balance is achieved through the cultivation of mindfulness. In my view, if such observational skill, developed through mindfulness, is focused to detect and work with those psychological projections coming out from the shadow, the mind should, as an outcome, be balanced progressively in those four ways. This should happen because as we become aware of the projections “the shadow can to some extent be assimilated into the conscious personality” (Jung, CW9(2), pars. 15). In this process of assimilation lies what Jung called the *individuation* process, the one through which the unity of self is achieved (CW17. pars. 289). As Clarke (1992) points out, “the ‘heart and essence’ of individuation consists in the task of *self-knowledge*, and its overriding demand is to ‘*be yourself!*’, in accordance with your own nature, and not another’s, to be authentic rather than in bad faith. [...] Hence individuation means nothing less than the demand

consciously to realize or actualize one's full potential" (p. 158). From my understanding, actualizing one's full potential is what the spiritual path is about, and this potential (manifested in those four ways) unfolds as we walk the path of transformation.

Furthermore, it is interesting to look at how we can identify those psychological projections. As von Franz points out: "since projection is a preconscious, involuntary process, independent of consciousness, it is to be expected that the process itself will be depicted in products of the unconscious, such as dreams, waking fantasies, and mythological traditions" (1993, p. 20). However, although von Franz identifies here three types of projections, any expression can become one. Indeed, because we are constantly projecting our unconscious, the way we see the outside world becomes a projection of our inner world, as Jung said, the replica of one's own unknown face.

From my understanding, almost any expression and manifestation that comes from within becomes one. Some will be more or less meaningful thus with more or less transformative potential for the person when acknowledged. For example, we can find projections in any kind of artistic creation, in writings, in personal interests and preferences, in any activity we develop, our criticisms and evaluations, the decoration of our house, the way we dress up, move, walk and speak, as well as in our profession, the friends we choose and the partner we have chosen, and it is even present in any decision and step we make in our lives. Thereafter, our unconscious is playing a major role in all of the above aspects. The list, as we can see, could be endless as we express ourselves in many ways and circumstances. This is way any circumstance may become a source of self-knowledge and spiritual evolution, as any situation can lead us to a deeper understanding and psychological integration of ourselves. Life becomes then a mirror where our self is being reflected, giving us the opportunity to observe our inner world. However, mindfulness must be developed in order to see ourselves in the mirror of life.

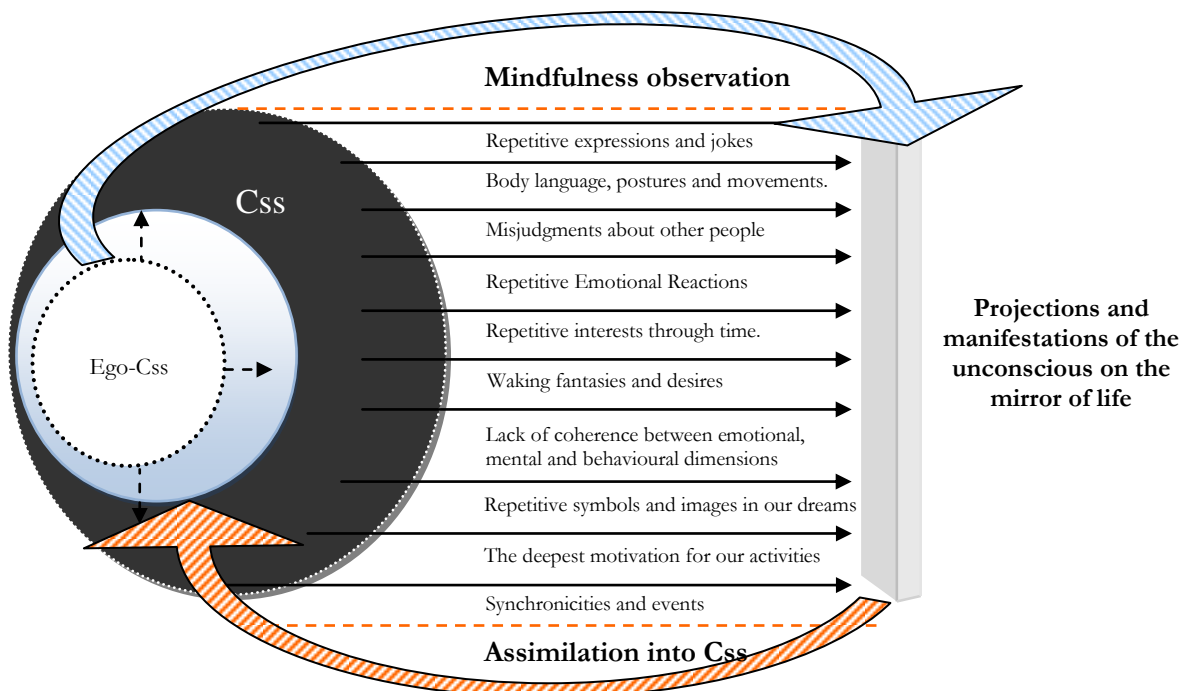
However, there are certain situations in which the projections are more related with the "dark aspects of our personality" and those appear, among others, in strong emotional reactions, dreams and waking fantasies, when we repeatedly reject or defend ourselves from something from the external world, when we make misjudgements of other people or as von Franz points out, when the subject defends himself strenuously against correction (1993, p. 3). From my experience, these kinds of projections appear to have two common qualities, *reactivity and repetition*. When self-awareness is developed through mindfulness, repetitive patterns of reactivity become more a more conscious, and as we try to understand "why do we behave in a particular way", we start *assimilating* the projected contents from the shadow into the conscious personality. It is interesting to notice, that as more conscious we become of certain reactive patterns, more and more subtle they appear to be, so more difficult it becomes to identify them. However, as those patterns are identified, understood and assimilated, our personality undergoes a transformation and becomes more balanced. It is important to point out that we can only deal with just certain amount of unconscious material at the same time. Von Franz comments that Jung "once compared the ego-complex to a man who sails out in his boat onto the sea of the unconscious to go fishing. He must take care not to haul more fish (that is, more unconscious contents) from the sea into his boat than the boat can carry, or it will sink" (*ibid.*, p. 13).

Furthermore, there is even a deeper level of understanding when we deal with projections, which from my perspective stretches the meaning of the term. This level emerges when we start to acknowledge the connection between the macrocosm (universal level) and the microcosm (human level). In this connection is where in Jung terms "...the great principle or beginning, heaven, is infused into man the microcosm, who reflects the star-like natures and thus, as the smallest part and end of the work of Creation, contains the whole" (CW8. pars. 926). This connection is seen, for example in what Jung called *synchronicity*. He defined it as: "a coincidence in time of two or more causally unrelated events which have the same or a

similar meaning” (ibid. pars. 849). Therefore, synchronicities consist on two factors “a) an unconscious image comes into consciousness either directly (i.e., literally) or indirectly (symbolized or suggested) in the form of a dream, idea, or premonition. b) An objective situation coincides with this content. The one is as puzzling as the other” (ibid., pars. 858). To exemplify this, Jung gives an astonishing example that occurred to him while in therapy: “the patient was in recounting a dream in which she was presented with a golden scarab, and at that very moment a scarab began insistently to knock against the window. The scarab was a classic example of a rebirth symbol, and the startling event just referred to was enough to move the patient forward after a period in which she seemed stuck and unable to make any progress” (Clarke, 1994, p. 96)

In this case, synchronicities appear to be the manifestations of the deeper connection between our consciousness and the reality in which we are embedded. They can be seen as projections of a deeper level of reality in which we are co-creators and thus what emerges comes also from deep within. Jung called synchronistic events, *acts of creation* in time, and they indicate that the experiencing subject should realize something which has been constellated in the unconscious (von Franz, 1993, p. 198-9). These situations can bring us, when acknowledged, deeper meanings about our spiritual journey as well as the experience of belonging to a deeper and larger reality with which we interact.

In order to represent in an image what I have been explaining up to now, I’ll use the diagram below to exemplify the process of this spiritual practice. The blue arrow on top represents the developed awareness through mindfulness (“the observer behind your eyes”), in order to become a better *participant-observer* of what happens in the interaction between us and the world. The arrow comes from the Ego-Consciousness structure and looks at the mirror of life to reflect back the observed projections (represented by the orange arrow below) which assimilates them into the Ego-Css structure. When that happens, the Ego-Css structure expands as it assimilates those unconscious aspects that belonged to the shadow. Here I use the term shadow in a broader sense, including what Assagioli called the lower, middle and higher unconscious (1993). In my opinion this is a part of consciousness itself, even if it is unconscious for us. That’s the reason why I identify it by Css. Coming out of the shadow I’ve put 10 examples of different types of projections. They reflect on the mirror of life which represents the external world. If we start to observe repetitive emotional reactions, expressions and jokes, for example, they can reveal meaningful insights to us.



As Michele McDonald points out, without mindfulness the cycles of repetitive patterns, meaning projections only continue because there's still identification, but as mindfulness develops the defences of the ego drop naturally (1998, p. 173-4). She also points out how important it is to deal with this because there is considerable "acting out", and there's a denial of the body and emotions, called by her "disembodied clarity"; the idea that freedom is ascending out of the body and emotions, so that we're somehow no longer human. As she says, there are many spiritual people, especially spiritual teachers, who may be charming and excellent speakers, however if we look behind the scene, we often discover that their life's are a disaster and their spiritual attainment is at least questionable (p. 174). McDonald points out the main risk, in my opinion, of leaving aside the psychological work in any spiritual path, becoming *incoherent* between what we feel, think, say and do. The risk however can be bigger because as less awareness of one's projections and more knowledge is acquired about what it is called the "spiritual path", more chances for the ego to get inflated and distort the reality in which lives.

This process of expanding our awareness onto the unconscious territory is for me the journey of self-knowledge, the spiritual path, which at the end leads to enlightenment. As Jung said once: "*one does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious. The later procedure, however, is disagreeable and therefore not popular*".

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Foot Notes

1.- Becoming responsible is part of the eightfold path of the Buddha's teachings, where the Right Thought, Speech, Action and Livelihood must be developed (among other 4 virtues).

2.- C. G. Jung defines the unconscious as follows: "the totality of all psychic phenomena that lack the quality of consciousness. These psychic contents might fittingly be called 'subliminal', on the assumption that every psychic content must possess a certain energy value in order to become conscious at all. The lower the value of a conscious content falls, the more easily it disappears below the threshold. From this it follows that the unconscious is the receptacle of all lost memories and of all contents that are still too weak to become conscious. These contents are products of an unconscious associative activity which also gives rise to dreams. Besides these we must include all more or less intentional repressions of painful thoughts and feelings. I call the sum of all these contents the "personal unconscious". But, over and above that, we also find in the unconscious qualities that are not individually acquired but are inherited, e.g., instincts as impulses to carry out actions from necessity, without conscious motivation" (CW. 8 pars. 270)

3.- According to my view, the content of what is unconscious has two main aspects, the dark parts of our personality, as Jung says, and those aspects of "light" that remain unconscious for us. These "light" parts can be described as the potentialities of becoming aware of being multidimensional in consciousness and living in a multidimensional reality. As we become aware and experience them, we expand our worldview and thus our values, objectives and understanding of life, undergo a deep transformation. This transformation leads us undoubtedly to a freer state of being where suffering dissipates.

***José Jover** is psychologist, master in Consciousness and Transpersonal Psychology by the Liverpool John Moores University. Member of Oxigeme. He works in Spain as lecturer and private practice. He has reviewed the Spanish publication of Shadow, Self and Spirit written by Michael Daniels.

Email: jjover@copc.es