

# Spiritual Crisis and Psychotic Experiences

## *a transpersonal approach*

### **An upset balance**

What happens when you spend ten seconds focusing your attention on your right hand? You will probably experience a mild tingling or perhaps your hand will begin to feel a bit warmer. Attention focuses energy! With the help of your attention it is possible to activate energy somewhere in your body. *Energy follows attention*. This is the underlying principle of all esoteric doctrines. Attention not only enables us to direct energy to our hands, it also provides orientation for our life. Whatever we focus on (consciously or unconsciously) is activated and so we determine, by and large, the course of our life – including the problems and limitations we encounter in the process.

What will happen when we direct our attention to our head, for example through intensive study or meditation or perhaps through excessive worrying? In that case the energy in our head is activated, as are the centres of consciousness located in our head. These centres are connected to the higher levels of consciousness, the areas associated with spiritual experiences. The development of these centres is part of a natural process of growth which normally proceeds very gradually. If, however, we focus our attention too intensively on our head, we can end up forcing this process and over-stimulate those higher centres. As a result we may start suffering headaches or dizzy spells and feel as though we no longer have both feet firmly planted on the ground. Then, the resulting contact with the higher energies is not the outcome of a natural and balanced process. Rather, it feels as if our electrical wiring is short-circuiting. These higher energies represent exalted insights, but when their influx is too forceful for us to handle, we cannot grasp their true meaning. The result could be total physical, emotional and mental confusion. Or in other words: a spiritual crisis.

During a spiritual crisis we can experience ‘divine’ insights. As new worlds open up to us, our life can take on an entirely different meaning. The experience can be so intense that it may sustain us for the rest of our life. At the same time, the related energies can cause lifelong damage, since they are so powerful. Many people will feel blessed by the insights they receive. However, if they cannot properly integrate those energies they will end up with a distorted view of reality.

How those subtle energies are interpreted and what insights are derived from them depends on the level of consciousness of the person affected – and on the intensity of the process. The more baggage somebody has, the better he will be able to process those energies and the more meaning

he will derive from them. Not all the energies that are experienced in such confusing situations originate in the higher levels of consciousness. Many people who go through a spiritual crisis or a psychosis talk about their mystical experiences or their contact with the 'divine', convinced of the truth and the exalted nature of their insights. It is of course possible that they have been in contact with sublime levels of reality, but it is equally possible that their 'insights' originate in entirely different areas of consciousness and are in fact based on unconscious desires and suppressed experiences. Instead of visions they may be delusions or hallucinations but the person affected is incapable of making a clear distinction between both types of experience. That said, it is not actually that important to question the origins of the experience or examine them in great detail, given that the content of the consciousness experience has little or no bearing on the solution to the problem.

The practice of focusing attention on the higher levels of reality is not wrong in itself. In fact, it is something that ties in with the state of personal evolution. The conclusion of human development is accompanied by an increasing interest in the higher realities. It is a natural process in which the contact with the higher requires a mature personality, someone capable of carrying the wealth of the higher insights and the corresponding powerful energies. If, however, the attention to the higher originates in a sense of frustration and an inability to handle the earthly reality then this signals an escape from everyday life and an absence of the necessary talents to integrate the higher energies in a balanced way. As a result, these energies will become disruptive and may even cause a crisis.

### **Roads to recovery**

Most of my clients, especially those with a psychiatric diagnosis, suffer from an upset energy balance. Irrespective of their diagnosis, there is almost always evidence of over-activity of the energies in the head, especially among people with a spiritual crisis or psychotic experiences. Various symptoms can therefore be interpreted as variations on one and the same theme and an important condition for recovery is the restoration of the energy balance. To achieve this we can identify two steps:

1. The restoration of the energy balance as such by reducing the flow to the head; and
2. The eradication of the true cause of the upset balance.

The first is the easiest problem to tackle. The realization that your body's energy distribution is

upset is the first step to recovery. The energy balance can be restored by, for example, casually shifting your attention to your legs and feet, or, when seated on a chair, to your bottom. Feel the contact between your body and the chair! By being relaxed and feeling your buttocks, legs and lower back, the energy will automatically flow back in that direction. It also helps to put your hands on your abdomen and to direct your breath towards your hands. But remember to remain relaxed, almost casual while doing this in order to avoid building up tension.

Of course this exercise does not remove the underlying cause of the problem. What caused the energy balance to become upset in the first place? Why has someone chosen to focus his attention so emphatically on his head, i.e. upwards? If, prior to the crisis, you spent a long time meditating this provides an explanation, but more often than not the problem will have an entirely different root cause. The underlying reason may be that you feel unsafe in this world, either because of unpleasant childhood experiences or because you come from a family fraught with tension. So in an attempt to move away from the world you focus your attention upwards.

If we can accept that we have had previous incarnations and that, between two successive lives, we also had a certain degree of consciousness, it is not that big a leap to imagine that we experienced a certain degree of bliss during the period between incarnations. This suggests that our birth here on earth is not necessarily a joyful occasion. We have effectively been driven out of paradise. If we end up in a happy and caring family, we will probably find our feet here. But if, on the other hand, we end up in a situation that is rife with tension, we will probably long for the blissful feelings that preceded our birth. If our parents tend to fight a lot or we are bullied in school, we will yearn back to the heavenly atmospheres we came from and we will be more inclined to focus our attention on the higher levels of reality, away from the world. As a result, our energy will rush to our heads and, in the worst case, cause a spiritual crisis or a psychosis. We need not even be aware of this yearning. It can be an entirely unconscious aversion to the world or an equally unconscious longing for the heavenly. This means that grounding exercises, no matter how intensively practiced, cannot offer a definitive solution. In order to tackle the problem at source we will have to remove the – unconscious – desire underlying it, and we can only do so by eliminating the emotional traumas that have accumulated in the course of our life.

There are also people who have had a perfectly carefree childhood with loving parents but whose energy balance is nevertheless completely upset. When we examine the underlying feelings of these people, we always arrive at an inner experience that is best described as an experience from a past life. In that previous life, something happened that prompted the person to decide that he no longer wanted to be on this earth. He took this resolution to the grave and subsequently, on a completely unconscious level, carried it with him to this life. In other words, he is born with a

subconscious desire not to be here and no matter how much love and attention his parents lavish on him, it will never be enough and he will always long to leave this world.

As ever, our attention determines the direction of our energy and with it the direction of our development. If we focus our attention on the higher levels of consciousness for a prolonged period of time, this could eventually result in a spiritual crisis or a psychosis. We must realize that in this case our spiritual longing does not represent a healthy growth but an escape from the world. It may be possible to manage the resulting psychological problems with the help of grounding exercises and/or antipsychotic drugs, but these rarely if ever yield a genuine solution. In fact, sometimes people struggle with their problems for dozens of years without ever finding a real solution. It can only be found when the underlying – unconscious – desire is removed and for this the – unconscious – emotional traumas and dysfunctional convictions must be eradicated. This can be achieved, in some cases surprisingly easily, with the help of visualisation exercises. Visualisation is a method through which, again through attention, we can detect and correct disrupted structures in our emotional consciousness. The more accurate the visualisation of that structure, the more accurate its correction will be. The motivation of the person affected is paramount, as it determines the quality of his attention. People who have no affinity with this approach or who are incapable of focusing their attention are unlikely to achieve positive results. It ought to be stressed that ‘visualisation’ does not necessarily mean that you should get a clear inner *picture* of the problem. It really is an inner ‘knowing’, which is sometimes rendered into symbols. Building on this ‘seeing’ or ‘knowing’, we can then use focused attention to correct the energy. Experience tells us that visualisation can be an exceptionally effective method for dealing with psychological problems, and since it tends to cause relatively little emotional distress the method can usually be applied to vulnerable psychiatric patients as well. But if, at the start of the therapy, it turns out to be too distressing, it is possible to do the exercise with one’s eyes open. This prevents the client from losing himself in irrelevant internal images. Before commencing, it is useful for the client to do grounding exercises to increase his stability. Next, he should start clearing up the smaller emotional problems before moving on to the bigger ones. With each new step, the client’s stability will be increased.

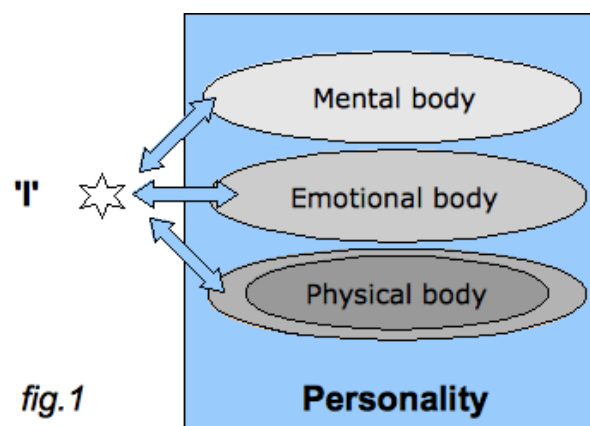
Both conscious and unconscious motives have a major impact on us, because they determine the direction of our lives. When these motives upset our balance and cause illness, we must not only restore that balance, but also uncover, examine and adjust the underlying motives. In this light, conditions such as a spiritual crisis can be viewed as a symptom of an underlying problem that requires attention. Dealing with current complaints is good for the here and now, but removing the underlying causes can pave the way for further consciousness development.

## Esoteric framework

We are all familiar with our body, as well as with our emotions and thoughts. In addition, we may also experience inspiration and intuition from our soul. All those aspects of ourselves constitute a more or less harmonious whole, but at times that harmony is brutally shattered by a spiritual crisis. A spiritual crisis is experienced as the ultimate inner confusion and is linked to a disruption of the energetic balance. In order to rectify this problem it is important to have an insight into our internal structures and how they relate to one another. This interrelationship is described in various mystical and esoteric traditions, but the clearest explanation, in my opinion, is the one offered by the Swedish esoteric Henry T. Laurency. A brief summary follows below.

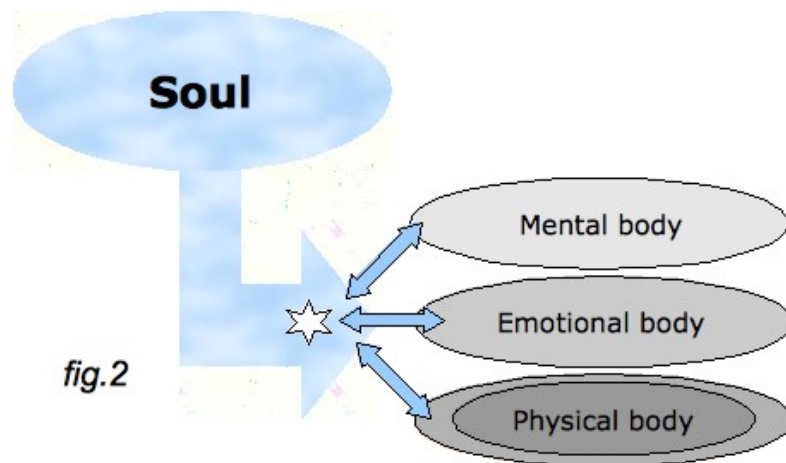
The body with which we function in the physical world, the *physical body*, can be described as the instrument we have at our disposal here on earth. Similarly, we can combine our emotional properties into something we might call an ‘emotional body’. The quality of this *emotional body* determines our functioning on an emotional level. Finally, the sum total of our rational ideas and mental insights can be viewed as a *mental body*.

Taken together, our physical, emotional and mental bodies form our personality, the person we are in daily life and with whom we tend to identify. But we are more than this personality alone. We can observe our body, emotions and thoughts from a distance and marvel at ourselves. This is something we do in mindfulness meditation, for example, when we step away from ourselves. This effectively makes us the observer, the witness, of everything. (*fig.1*)



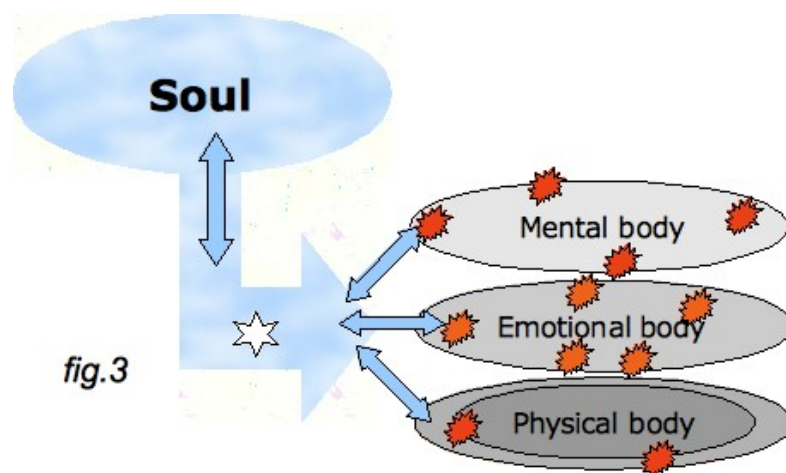
Most of the time we are not aware of this inner witness and we simply *are* our personality: our body with all its thoughts and emotions. The witness, who is separate from the personality, is our true ‘I’.

It is also the centre from which we can direct our attention. This 'I' is embedded in a much subtler body, the *causal body*, or the *soul*. (fig.2)



The bodies that comprise our personality are the tools through which we observe the world and with which we function in the world. And the more perfect those bodies are, the better we function.

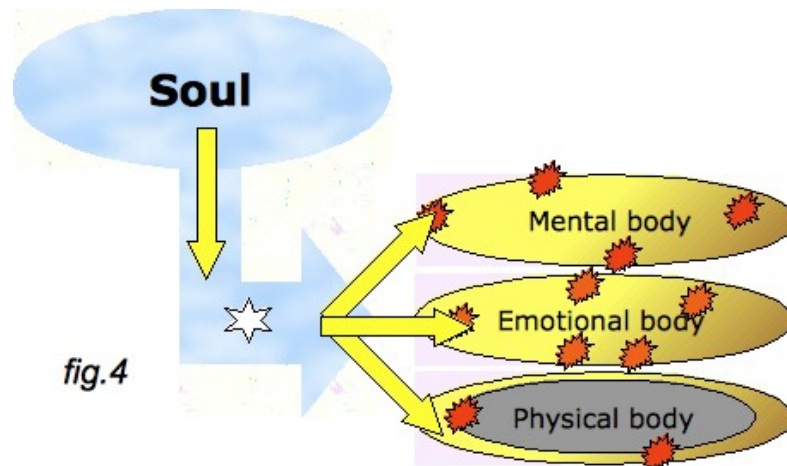
In practice, however, those bodies are never perfect. They are plagued by all kinds of physical ailments, emotional traumas and dysfunctional mental convictions. As a result, our personality is riddled with idiosyncrasies and prejudices, causing us to have a distorted view of the world and problems in the way we function. These problems create conflicts with the world around us, which in turn alert us to our shortcomings. As a result of our problems we may no longer want to focus our attention on the world because it is too painful, but prefer to withdraw from it and concentrate instead on the peaceful reality of our soul. (fig.3)



If we focus our attention intensively and persistently on the soul, we reduce our contact with the

earthly reality and set in motion a flow of energy, down from the higher levels of consciousness. While this energy can be inspirational, it can also become so powerful and uncontrollable that our physical, emotional and mental bodies become overloaded. As a result, we can sustain more physical problems such as headaches and insomnia, emotional problems such as anxiety and depression and mental problems such as total confusion.

Many people do not really know what to do in such a situation. They fail to understand the wisdom they receive and as a result, spiritual insights turn into chaotic experiences. (fig.4)



When someone has activated so much soul energy that his system has become overloaded, we speak of a spiritual crisis. He then experiences an entirely different reality with completely new insights, coupled with total confusion because all those insights are distorted and cannot be integrated.

Recovery requires, first and foremost, a rebalancing of the energy, but eventually the inner disturbances (such as old traumas and dysfunctional mental views) must also be cleared up to allow the insights of the soul to be experienced undistorted.

More detailed information about this approach can be found in:

Kees and Marijke Aaldijk, *The Secrets of the Soul*. Dutch edition published in 2009 by Uitgeverij Elmar: Rijswijk.

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Kees Aaldijk is a psychologist and runs a practice for transpersonal psychotherapy. He specializes in the treatment of people who no longer respond to regular psychotherapy and psychiatry. For nine years he was a member of the board of the Dutch association of transpersonal psychiatry (Vereniging voor Transpersoonlijke Psychiatrie). He has several articles and two books to his name: *Vensters op een transpersoonlijke werkelijkheid* (Windows on a Transpersonal Reality, Uitgeverij Ankh-Hermes 2007) and *De geheimen van de ziel* (The Secrets of the Soul, Uitgeverij Elmar 2009). More information is available on [www.transpersoonlijk.nl](http://www.transpersoonlijk.nl).