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The Altered State of Consciousness and The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius

JAIME BULATAO, S.J.

Psychic processes have one thing in common: namely, that while they may have their proper definitions in a dictionary, the actual psychic process itself can only be defined by the individual in whose psyche it takes place. Take the well-known process called "love." While two people may agree on its dictionary definition when they mutually say "I love you," it is only years later that one realizes that the "love" in the other was very different from his own. Both were sincere, but both took for granted that the other applied the word to a twin process that was going on in himself. The difference in these subjective definitions did not appear till behavior made clear that what was originally meant was quite different.

This shortcoming of human words makes it possible for subtle phenomena to be missed or misinterpreted. The danger is especially there when the words have been put down in a book and when the author or his immediate disciples are no longer present to correct misunderstandings which arise. So imminent is the danger in matters involving such a subjective process as meditation that the Hindus and Buddhists refuse to leave their instructions in written words alone but insist on a living *guru* who can tell the meditator "Yes, you have it," or "No, you still must keep on trying."

Could a similar process have occurred in the book of the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*? Could a subtle but fundamental state of mind in which St. Ignatius meant the *Spiritual Exercises* to be taken have sometimes dropped out, lost in an era of rationalism? The contention of this paper is twofold: (1) St. Ignatius meant the meditations (or at least some) of the *Spiritual Exercises* to be undergone in an altered state of consciousness; and (2) the "Composition of Place" was meant as an instrument to alter the exercitant's consciousness.

ALTERED STATE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Central to this discussion is an adequate understanding (or, better yet, experience) of what is meant by the altered state of consciousness, sometimes called alternate state of consciousness, the Y-state, the mystic state, deep relaxation, cosmic consciousness, etc. It is said that almost everyone has experienced it at some time or another, perhaps in moments of intense ecstasy or extreme pain, in the moment of Pentecostal prayer or in the dark depths of the night. It may be artificially induced by prolonged chanting of "Om," or by acupuncture (notice the "ironed-out" face of the person undergoing an operation under acupuncture.) One sees it quite clearly in Philippine churches, in mass movements such as the Quiapo procession or in the lengthy vocal prayers of elderly *manang*. In its extreme (sometimes pathogenic) form, one sees it in the common phenomenon of *sapi*, when a person is supposedly "possessed" by a saint or other spirit and speaks prophecies or gives holy advice. All these are changes of consciousness, more or less profound, more or less voluntary.

Not everyone who undergoes a change of consciousness is aware of that change. Those, for instance, who are "lost" in an exciting movie generally lack the reflexive capacity at the moment to say to themselves "I am undergoing an altered state of consciousness." So, too, in transcendental meditation any effort at reflecting on one's state of consciousness generally cuts short the altered state. One can only say *after* the experience, "I was there." Those undergoing the experience for the first time do not even know (i.e., recognize) that they got there at all. But with sufficient repetition and deepening of the experience, one begins to recognize the condition and when it is attained, sometimes vaguely to control one's reactions, just as when a drunk person might say to himself, "I am drunk; I had better keep quiet."

HEIGHTENED SENSITIVITY

Until recently psychologists have attributed the contents of such consciousness states to the person's own imagination, to his suggestibility, to his personal consciousness. In other words, the hallucinatory quality of the "visions" seemed to indicate a break from reality, a "hallucination" in the traditional sense. True, well-

validated psi events have occurred. A notable example involved the Swedish Protestant mystic, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), who, while in Goteborg, saw in a vision the burning of Stockholm, 300 miles away, a fact attested to by messengers two days later.¹ Still such events were rare and difficult to study. Accordingly, they were usually attributed to a miraculous or supernatural intervention rather than to natural and innate powers of mind.

But recently there have been numerous experiments, mainly on trance states, under controlled laboratory conditions, to show that the mind under those circumstances perceives a reality that is not just its own making.² To quote an example that occurred in May 1977 at the Ateneo de Manila Psychology Laboratory within a group experimenting with a crystal ball (the crystal ball serves as a screen on which the crystal-reader's unconscious images are projected): a young man under hypnotic trance "read" the crystal ball thus:

I see you (he said of the girl in front of him) and behind you a big woman, I suppose your mother. You are disagreeing with her. You are pointing at a big bird, like a duck, and you want to fly with the duck.

After the session, the girl revealed a secret she had previously told no one, namely, that she had been invited to go with a dance troupe to Japan. Her mother had objected, but she had insisted anyway and had received her ticket to fly to Japan on Japan Air Lines (whose logo, the swan, was represented in the crystal ball as a big duck).

Such telepathic events become routine after a while and can be repeated almost at will. The key seems to be the altered state of consciousness. In this state the mind acquires a sensibility to a new dimension bypassing the senses. This point is confirmed by recent dream research such as that carried out at the Maimonides Medical Center in Brooklyn where a dreamer could be made to catch a message sent from a distant room in the same hospital.³ Even in artificially created hypnotic dreams, the mind can be raised to a new dimension as illustrated in another experiment in the Ateneo de Manila Psychology Laboratory, January 1979:

1. W. Van Dusen, *The Natural Depth in Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

2. C. Tart, *States of Consciousness* (New York: Dutton, 1975); L. LeShan, *Alternate Realities* (New York: Ballantine, 1976); and L. LeShan, *The Medium, the Mystic, and the Physicist* (New York: Viking, 1974).

3. M. Ullman and S. Krippner, with A. Vaughan, *Dream Telepathy* (New York: Macmillan, 1973).

Two persons were sent out of the laboratory to a room four doors away while the rest of the group entered into a dreaming "trance" state. The two had been given instructions to converse about something. Upon the return of the two, one of the group who had been in a trance blurted out "You were talking about the coming weekend and you said you were going to climb some mountains." The fact turned out to be that one of the two had talked of nothing else but of going up to Baguio (the mountains) to see his girl friend whom he had not seen in a long time. The two, the "sender" and the "receiver" of the message, were not acquainted with each other.

It seems quite certain that the mind in an altered state of consciousness is open to a new dimension of communication less accessible during the ordinary state.

BROADENED AWARENESS

While altered states of consciousness can have seemingly esoteric effects, they can also cause less dramatic but more deeply spiritual impressions. There is a broadening awareness of reality and a "zoom lens" effect upon the Spiritual Reality who is behind and within all created beings. Unimportant things are seen as unimportant, important as important. How such perceived realities are conceptually systematized ("gestalted") follows very much upon one's theology. But the overall effect is peace, inner strength and a redirecting of one's life in an integrated flow toward God.

Moslems making the pilgrimage to Mecca spend one afternoon on the side of Mt. Arafat, bareheaded under the afternoon sun, in a face-to-face encounter with Almighty God. In an attempt to imitate this exercise, a prayer group put themselves in meditative trance and on the mountain tops of prayer "touched the face of God." This is what one of their number reported:

Words can never express what I felt. The mountain-top experience was the deepest, most moving event in my life. I *saw* that God loved me and was all around me. I never wanted to go down from that mountain. (Ateneo Central Guidance Bureau, November 1978)

Vastness and ineffability combine into one momentous experience.

The discovery of the overwhelming value of this Spiritual Reality has been likened to the discovery of the pearl of great price or the treasure in the field, to being reborn, to the experience of being "lilies of the field."

The distinction between the esoteric events, the psychic wonders of ESP, tongues and the "gifts" on the one hand, and this deep insight into Reality on the other has been emphasized by St. Paul (cf. 1 Cor 12 and 14), St. Therese and other mystics, who warn against overemphasizing external wonders. So too Buddhist mystics distinguish the *siddhi*, wondrous phenomena which can distract, and the whole thrust itself toward Nirvana. But the fact remains that in general there are two sets of effects stemming from deep meditation, the main effect being the orienting of the human being toward his ultimate end.

ENTERING THE ALTERED STATE

How then does one enter this "Kingdom of God" which is within oneself? Traditionally the way has been the "straight and narrow" one of asceticism and self-denial. One has to await the "blowing of the Spirit," which is not within man's power to control. One must become like a little child, letting go of the rationalistic riches of the spirit and becoming poor in spirit. This is the emptying of the ego, spoken of both by the Christian scriptures and the Buddhist mystics. Penance, silence, fasting and abstinence from meat have been used as aids towards meditation.

Other aids have been used inside and outside the Catholic Church to help bring about the consciousness alteration. During the last twenty years the Cursillo movement has used group dynamics, the telling of green jokes, sleeplessness, concentration on an image of Christ, group singing — all these to bring about the consciousness change that leads to a renewal of life. More traditionally, Transcendental Meditators like their Buddhist forebears have used the *mantra*, a word repeated again and again until the senses close in upon themselves and the mind, freed from the limitations of the senses, reaches out to lose itself in cosmic consciousness.

We thus, return to the theme of this paper, namely, that the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius are meant as an aid to bring about a union with God through an altered state of consciousness and that the composition of place is a visual "mantra" to bring about the altered state of consciousness itself.

ST. IGNATIUS' EXPERIENCE OF THE ALTERED STATE

The term "altered state of consciousness" never appears in the *Spiritual Exercises* and is, in fact, of post World War II coinage. However, St. Ignatius does seem to have experienced the state described by the term, as may be read in his autobiography.⁴ For instance he narrates

. . . he one day saw the Bachelor Hocez entering heaven. He had many tears and deep spiritual consolation at this, and he saw this so clearly that if he said that he did not, he would feel that he was lying. (no. 98)

While carrying out his abstinence from meat without any thought of changing it, one morning as he got up, a dish of meat appeared before him as though he actually saw it with his eyes. (no. 27)

One day while he was reciting the Hours of Our Lady on the steps of the same monastery, his understanding began to be elevated as though he saw the Holy Trinity under the figure of three keys. (no. 28)

When he was at prayer, he often and for a long time saw with the inner eyes the humanity of Christ. The shape which appeared to him was like a white body, not very large or very small but he saw no distinction of members. (no. 29)

While imagery played an important part in the internal experience, as in the above examples, in some of the deepest alterations of consciousness imagery was less clear, as in his account of his extremely deep experience beside the river Cardoner:

As he sat, the eyes of his understanding began to open. He beheld no vision, but he saw and understood many things, spiritual as well as those concerning faith and learning. This took place with so great an illumination that these things appeared to be altogether new. He cannot point out the particulars of what he then understood, although they were many, except that he received a great illumination in his understanding. This was so great that in the whole course of his past life right up to his sixty-second year, if he were to gather all the helps he had received from God, and everything he knew, and add them together, he does not think that they would equal all that he received at that one time (*Autobiography*, no. 30).

In these accounts, one finds indications of that inner state which may at the same time be untouchable and dreamlike and yet sweeping in its force and conviction. Thus the expression, "He saw this so clearly that if he said he did not, he would feel that he was

4. *St. Ignatius' Own Story*, trans. William J. Young, S.J. (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1976).

lying," indicates a consciousness different from the ordinary state and also quite different from the dream. Furthermore, the dream-like quality is seen in the emergence of symbols: the dish of meat, the keys, the white body without distinction of members. Still, in all of these there is the utter conviction that what has been seen is real, in fact so real as to be a guiding principle of a whole lifetime, "in the course of his. . . life right up to his sixty-second year."

THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

Having had these deeply moving experiences, Ignatius' next step was to structure a way to predispose others to similar experiences. Naturally for him these structures took the form of a how-to-do-it manual, the *Spiritual Exercises*.⁵

These *Spiritual Exercises* are a masterpiece as an expression of a genius' introspection into his own experience. One may compare the book of the *Exercises* to the inspired introspection of a Sigmund Freud in the ability of both to trace out some of the deepest traits of human nature itself within one's own personal experience. But an immense difference exists between the two. Freud's main contribution was the conceptual working out of a thought system (a "model") to explain the dynamics of the human mind. Until today, perhaps, psychoanalysis as psychological theory remains the unique theoretical system attempting to understand the human mind in its normal and deviate forms. But Ignatius' contribution was less in the form of abstract theory, in a "why" dimension, as in a "how to" form of instruction. He taught you how to get there without philosophizing on why's and wherefore's. Thus, the way to understand the *Exercises* is not by analysis of the words of the book but by carrying out the instructions of the book and then by reflecting on what happened. (As a matter of fact, Ignatius taught that reflection should come after meditation, not during it, probably lest the reflection itself might kill the experience which was being sought.)

In this open-minded spirit, one can thus approach an exercise like that of the third method of prayer (no. 218), which uses breathing as a help to prayer:

5. *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, trans. Louis J. Puhl, S.J., (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1959).

With each breath or respiration, one should pray mentally while saying a single word of the Our Father, or other prayer that is being recited, in such a way that from one breath to another a single word is said. (*Spiritual Exercises*, no. 218)

What is the effect of such rhythmic breathing? With some, especially those whose orientation is strongly conceptual such as academicians or other learned individuals, an hour of prayer may be passed quietly in this way, perhaps with some boredom, almost certainly with distractions. But with many who are more "child-like" in disposition, a consciousness change can gradually or suddenly grip the mind so that without knowing it one experiences a bursting through of a new reality, as when after a rain, sunshine falls upon distant mountains and they stand out nearer, clearer, than they ever did before. The mind willy-nilly is caught in this vision. ("For it is not much knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul, but the ultimate understanding and relish of the truth." [*Spiritual Exercises*, no. 2]). The truths were there all along. It is the consciousness of the man that has changed.

Of course, rhythmic breathing as a means of altering consciousness is not new. The Hesychasts used it, the Buddhists still do. The present writer knew a girl who had only to breathe deeply fifteen or sixteen times to experience the presence of God the Father. Like other creatures, breathing is to be used by man "to help him in attaining the end for which he is created" (*Spiritual Exercises*, no. 23). As to whether or not one merely hallucinates or does get in contact with reality, ultimately only the informed, experiencing person can make a judgment.

IGNATIAN CONTEMPLATION

Unfortunately not all who make the Exercises discover their ability to alter consciousness. The proportion of those who do will probably depend upon circumstances such as culture, the exercitant's personality, his epistemology, the awareness of the one giving the exercises. But perhaps for a large number the first experience of consciousness change will occur during the contemplations of the Second Week, particularly the so-called application of the senses.

The basic principle inducing consciousness change seems to be some kind of a turning inwards of the attention, a removing of the

mind from the external world. This is why the beginner typically has to start with closing the eyes to shut out external stimuli. Only later, once inner concentration has been learned, can he enter trance with eyes fully open. But closing the eyes is not sufficient. One must turn the inner eye of the mind upon an internal image, feeling or movement. For instance, a common way to "hypnotize" a child undergoing a tooth extraction is to have him imagine a basketball game, to watch the ball as it leaps from hand to hand to basket, to hear the shouting and the cheering, to feel the heat and the pushing in the stands, and to taste a hamburger sandwich.

There can thus be a similar effect when doing the "Application of the Senses" provided that like a child, one gives one's attention wholeheartedly (yet passively) to the scene being envisioned, without criticism, without reflection, without even asking, "How well am I doing?" The Scriptural scholar must for a time forget his footnotes to the history of the scene. The theologian must for a while suspend his rationalizations. Like children, they must merely look, experience, *be present* and suddenly the scene begins to move.

In general, two types of persons are unable to enter into a gospel scene: those who say they cannot and those who try too hard. The best attitude is simply to let go, let happen what will happen. Those who can thus let go without reservation can then enter this marvelous, timeless world, can discover a new *reality*, whereas those who use only reason can only say, "You just imagined it; I have poor imagination."

THE COMPOSITION OF PLACE

Perhaps it is not just those exercises which are strictly called contemplations that St. Ignatius hoped would produce consciousness change in the exercitant. Quite possibly he meant the same thing to happen in other exercises as well. The hint is given by the fact that he places as a prelude to all the exercises the composition of place: "a mental representation of the place," "seeing in the imagination the material place where the object is that we wish to contemplate" (*Spiritual Exercises*, nos. 47, 49).

Once more, the composition of place can have different effects depending on the way it is carried out. If done in one-two-three fashion, without delay, simply as a formality, the effects remain simply conceptual. But if lovingly dwelt upon, patiently, without

pushing, *waiting for the scene to move*, one may be surprised to see the scene move. People move across the scenery as they would on a stage. The dust flies and swirls in the streets. Infants wail. Dogs bark. The incense or the marketplace smells become overpowering. All these things happen without the contemplator's foreseeing them or willing them to happen.

One thus can conceive of the "composition of place" as a visual mantra. The mantra as ordinarily understood is a sound that one repeats to oneself, or allows to ring inside one's head, and in the course of the repetition, one's consciousness shifts. What the mantra does through the "audio," the composition of place does through the "visio." There is a turning in of the senses, like the folding leaves of a plant in the evening. As the external senses fold inwards, an inner sense opens. New sensitivities, new powers unfold. One perceives a new reality or an old reality in a new way.

THE ACT OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD

There may be another element just preceding the "composition of place" in the Ignatian contemplation which by its very nature relaxes the contemplator and prepares him passively to enter into the composition of place. This element is the instruction given by Ignatius that at the start of the exercise one should "recollect himself for a while" and "with his mind raised on high consider that God, our Lord beholds him" (*Spiritual Exercises*, nos. 239, 75).

When done leisurely, the awareness of God's presence relaxes all the senses and allows one to enter where God is, in one's deepest self. It is a stripping off of masks. It allows prayer to well up from one's deepest feelings. After this movement of relaxation and after the prayer of offering in God's presence, the contemplator is ready to step into the composition of place and become present to a new reality.

ILLUSTRATION

A woman graduate student, making the *Spiritual Exercises* at the Novaliches Renewal Center, reported her experience thus:

I was meditating alone in the chapel on the words of Scripture: "I have loved you with an everlasting love. . . . I called you by your name, you are mine." As I fixed my mind on the cross behind the altar I saw a dove

perching on it. I prayed "Come, Holy Spirit," and the dove flew towards me and entered into me through my head. I felt something I had never felt before, so that I knew how much I was really loved by God. I do not know what happened but my whole life has changed.

A young man, a teacher, likewise making the Spiritual Exercises, described his consciousness change thus:

All of a sudden I found myself a part of a crowd who were shouting "Crucify him, crucify him." I was shouting together with them and was pointing at Jesus. Suddenly I noticed what I was doing. I put my hand over mouth and said, "What am I saying?"

Others described visits to Bethlehem or to Nazareth, where the Holy Family asked them to partake of their meal. The common characteristic of such "visions" was that the contemplators were *present* at the event, also that there was an element of involuntariness about the way this happened, i.e., things *happened* and were not under the contemplator's control.

Sometimes, the composition of place itself went out of control, changing so completely that the contemplator found himself in a place quite different from what he expected or intended. A young professional described his experience thus:

I was praying to the Holy Spirit to bring me to the Holy Land. Suddenly I found myself in Los Baños (a town 50 kms. south of Manila) and talking to Fr. — — —, who had been dead many years, but whose Mass I used to serve when I was a boy. He looked very tall and he was smiling. He said to me, "Don't worry. I will take care of you." Now I feel so happy that I saw him again even though I have almost forgotten about him. Maybe he represents somebody else, maybe God.

Such, then, are the experiences of contemplators following the instructions that St. Ignatius gives in the Second Week of the Exercises (especially nos. 102-126). They had also been taught to relax completely in God's presence and then to stay with the composition of place "until it moved," and just to "let happen what wants to happen." It may well be that the added existential clarifications of the act of the presence of God and the composition of place helped to bring about the altered state of consciousness, which then lifted the contemplation from an exercise of the imagination to an unforgettable confrontation with God. Perhaps it was the boost added by the expectations created in the exercitant by the director. But fundamentally all they did was to follow the instruction given in the *Spiritual Exercises*.

CONCLUSION

It is difficult enough (if not impossible) to understand another person's subjective experience. And it is even more difficult to do so with a man who lived over four hundred years before our time. But the genius of Ignatius lay not in this describing his own subjective experience but in having invented a means by which he could somehow re-create the experience in persons living four hundred years after himself. When a man who does the Spiritual Exercises today fails to gain insights similar to those of Ignatius, could it be that he has not been doing them properly? Could he have been overrationalistic in his approach, unable to "let go?" If the thesis offered by this paper is correct, "properly" among other things means entering an altered state of consciousness when contemplating.

When done merely under the usual state of consciousness, meditation is difficult, groping, pedestrian. To see the greater vision one needs to fly. There are these powers of mind in man which he has been using with more or less awareness for centuries. Sometimes these powers are called "supernatural," "mystic," "occult," "charismatic," "spiritual," "extrasensory," "suprarational." But by whatever names they are called, these powers have been used by men throughout history, probably with more psychological awareness and more deliberation. If given the choice of doing the Spiritual Exercises one way or the other, rationally or suprarationally, will differences of labels prevent a sincere man from choosing that which most helps toward "preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments, and, after their removal, of seeking and finding the will of God in the disposition of our life for the salvation of our soul (*Spiritual Exercises*, no. 1)"? The altered state of consciousness is such a help. Happy the man who discovers the ability within himself. He will be like a man who finds a treasure in a field.