

SOME THOUGHTS ON INDIVIDUATION

Rahima Spottiswoode – January 2007

Individuation can be defined as a conscious striving for becoming what one is meant to be; it is about the inner journey of the ego to become more conscious of the Self, i.e. in Jung's definition, 'that potential in us which is beyond the ego and all its striving to become more than it is'. The ego is that in us which experiences itself as 'I', and so is different from the 'other' or the 'not I' in terms of our own sense of self-awareness; the knowledge I have of what I think and feel, the capacity to differentiate myself from another person. So it can be assumed that the ego, as the concept of who and what I am, involves an awareness of the continuity of body and mind experienced through space, time and causality. The ego functions as the centre of a consciousness of personal identity that in normal conditions continues through space and time and the sequences of cause and effect, and is able to think about itself and describe what it thinks, and how it feels and imagines.

Yet the ego as the feeling of 'I-ness' can become separated from the sense of personal identity. This can happen in some lucid dreaming states, in out of the body experiences and in so-called near death experiences. It also occurs in some psychotic states, and in certain drug experiences as with LSD and similar type drugs and sometimes under anaesthetics when consciousness seems to become separated from the physical body, and in some mystical states where there is a sense of enlarged or unified consciousness.

However we have only to look at our dreams to see examples of a changing and frequently shifting sense of ego. The dream 'I' can often act in ways that are quite foreign to the waking 'I'. For instance, it can sometimes say or do things we are unable to do in a conscious waking state, or we may lose some of our conscious ego values and act in what seem to be uncharacteristic or inappropriate ways. Or we may be unable to act at all; in a dream it may be impossible to move or run away from an apparently dangerous and terrifying situation. In a way in our dreams we are all multiple personalities, and perhaps it was this recognition that led to the Buddhist view that there is no central 'I' or Roberto Assagioli's concept of sub-personalities. Assagioli was influenced by Jung but took some of his ideas further in the development of psychosynthesis – as an integrative way of working with the psyche.

It seems that ego consciousness – the sense of personal identity – does not represent the totality of our psychic structure. As Jung described it: "In as much as the ego is only the centre of my field of consciousness, it is not identical with the totality of my psyche, being merely a complex among complexes".

Complexes, as Jung defined them, can be described as groups or clusters of thoughts, feelings and memories that function as parts or aspects of the personal unconscious and are related to the archetypal core. Through his early word-association experiments in which responses to certain stimulus words were spontaneous expressions of thoughts, feelings and memories which the subject associated with that word, Jung realised that these grouped themselves into dynamic clusters or 'feeling-toned complexes'. Jung concluded that the personal unconscious is composed of complexes which function as sub-personalities and 'personate' in dreams and fantasies. In their writings both

Freud and Jung emphasised the way in which such complexes can influence consciousness without our being aware of them.

We can also see a complex as an autonomous set of impulses expressed in the ways in which we react to certain situations, particularly when we seem to be taken over by them. These might include reactions to authority, unnecessary guilty feelings, the need to take on the victim role or to sabotage ourselves, all centred round ideas or emotions of which we may be largely unconscious.

At first the complex tends to show itself as if it were something outside of us, as if it were connected with an external object, either a thing or a person. For instance, someone who gets obsessed with having to tidy everything and sees the external reality as being essentially untidy and chaotic, may be having to deal with their own inner chaos projected on to the outside environment. And here a question arises; if all projections originate within one's own psyche, what is the difference between perceiving something and projecting? The difference is in the emotional feeling, the power of its affect and the way it takes us over so that we become unable either to accept or react adequately to that person or situation. Complexes are profoundly irrational and do not belong to the domain of reason. The psychiatrist and Jungian analysis Dr. Anthony Stevens has described them as repeating their feeling patterns and their influence like an old-fashioned gramophone record playing over and over again.

At the same time complexes are not necessarily pathological; they are the functional units of which the personal psyche is composed. They can be seen as archetypes activated in the mind. The psyche is made up of a multiplicity of part personalities which it is the work of individuation to bring into a more integrated whole.

Dreams can put us in touch with the emotionally charged memories of which the complexes are made and of how they may be interfering with our lives. We then have to work consciously to restructure them and liberate the archetypal potential for growth and adaptation trapped inside them.

A truth expressed in many different spiritual traditions is that before any kind of transforming process can occur, we have to waken to our true condition and this is an essential part of the individuation process. The Zen koan was designed to awaken students from their conventional ways of seeing and interpreting life, and many other spiritual traditions attempt to shock the seeker into awareness, making use of unconventional and unexpected ways to challenge our acceptance of ourselves. Dreams can and do perform this function by stirring up powerful emotions which act as catalysts for change, given that we cannot initiate change directly through the deliberate exertion of the will since this can only take place at the level of the ego. In dreams thinking becomes more flexible and symbols provide the necessary feeling and drive to transform psychic structures. Dreams give us direct access to unconscious complexes and if we can become more aware and objective in observing our reactions to them, they can often show us what needs to be changed. Dreams do this by putting us in touch with the emotionally charged memories of which the complexes are made. Dreams can also be a catalyst for changes in perception and feeling, freeing the archetypal potential that is unable to find appropriate expression because it is trapped within them.

Dreams can create a state when thinking becomes more flexible, less trapped by the need to be rational. In the dream state the dream ego is often free to see further and act in more innovative ways than in waking life.

Looking at dreams helps us to engage with our own personal myth or myths and, by making this more conscious, can help to liberate the energy that becomes trapped when myths have become dysfunctional and no longer appropriate because they are no longer able to fulfil their original purpose. The need to be too good and devalue oneself may have served a purpose in making sure a parent did not reject us; however, it also gets in the way of our living our own life and engaging with the other aspects of ourselves that we need in order to be more fulfilled and able to use more of our innate potential.

To quote from Jung: "Dreams are mirrors in which we see ourselves as we really are, warts and all; they enable us to see those spots where we are most blind, make us aware of those areas where we are most unconscious; show us up as stupid where we think we are most wise. Dreams speak with such objectivity because they have seen it all before; their memory is so much longer than ours; it goes back millions of years. This gives them their transpersonal power which is part biological and part religious."

In the dream, the personal subjective psyche speaking out of the experience of the ego, can dialogue with the collective unconscious which Jung termed the objective psyche; he saw this dialogue as an essential part of the individuation process. Integration is the first step in this, for it refers to the cohesion of the ego brought about through the bringing into consciousness of contents that have previously been unconscious because they have been repressed and rejected. The integration of unconscious contents leads to the extension and adaptation of the ego in the service of a personal identity.

Individuation is a wider and more comprehensive process since it involves the relationship between ego and self. It encompasses integration, the search for meaning in life and the relationship to our innermost self – the image of completeness and totality, the drive toward wholeness.

"Individuation aims at the achievement of optimum synthesis of conscious and unconscious processes and fantasies. It leads a person to experience his own individual uniqueness together with the recognition that there are forces both within and without him which transcend personal and conscious understanding. In consequence, the process of individuation encompasses the process of individualisation and through it moves a person beyond this essentially ego-building process and on towards the search for values, meaning and self-transcendence." (Rosemary Gordon. *Dying and Creating: a Search for Meaning* 1978)

Dr Anthony Stevens also points out how through the medium of the dream conscious thesis and unconscious antithesis create the synthesis of transcendent function and the process of individuation can go further. In his words: "The product of this symbolic dialectic is usually increased security, some transpersonal enrichment, and occasionally, happiness."

Dreams are ways in which the unconscious is endeavouring to alter the ego image in the direction of individuation. Dreams help this process by compensating for the often destructive models of reality held by the waking ego. Individuation is a dynamic process of constant inner change, leading to an acceptance of life as it is meant to be for oneself, while at the same time becoming more able to recognise the inevitability of death.

Changes of this inner kind can be seen as changes in the structure of the complexes which shape the image of ego, and are not always within the capacity of conscious ego choice because they function independently of the will. Yet with the help of the transcendent function, the symbol-making capacity of the psyche, can shift the conflict of opposites by creating a symbolic solution usually experienced through the dream which can create a wider frame of meaning through the experience of a dream image.

To interpret a dream can mean to know a dream, and in this knowing to come to know oneself with a deeper insight and more understanding. Dreams show us our hidden selves; whatever it is we hide from the world at large and from ourselves gets expressed in our dreams; our secret fears, guilt, shame, envies, the desire to excel, all we think of as unacceptable. Similarly dreams show us the temporarily lost or developing parts of ourselves, the power and potential we often find it hard to accept.

There is no theoretical model of either how a dream should be, or of how to see and interpret it for ourselves. Looking at dreams is much more like looking at artistic creation than scientific theory. This does not of course invalidate scientific discoveries about the function of the dreaming brain but this of itself cannot explain the whole subjective experience of dreaming, the numinosity of dreams.

The conscious impression of a remembered dream is usually a kaleidoscope of shifting imagery which we somehow on waking, and sometimes while still engaged in the dream, translate into words. Words are often needed to build bridges between the images of the sleeping and waking world. Yet dreams use the language of images and not the language of words, yet words are the symbols used in the communication of the waking world. Although dreams may occasionally make use of distinct words or phrases, they are essentially pre-verbal and universal. Although they portray visual images that may differ according to the culture and environment known to the dreamer, such images can be universally understood in a way language cannot be. Part of the bridge building between understanding what the dream may be telling us and the actual dream experience has to do with recognising the structure of the dream and the associations it has for us. Yet many remembered dreams seem lacking a visible structure, or feel like fragments of a longer dream although no less meaningful, since they can also effectively portray profound changes in ego identity and help us to be in touch with different images of ourselves. Shifts of ego-identity can also be symbolised in dreams, often taking the form of crossing a border or a boundary, or passing across water, a river or a stream, going across a bridge, or undertaking a sea-journey.

Dream images frequently portray aspects of the persona. The persona is the public mask, the part of the ego involved with outward social adaptation. It

lays a large part in the kind of clothes we wear, how we like to portray ourselves through our style of living, the way we talk, how we want to project ourselves in relation to external reality, and is often very much about how we want to be seen by the world. To have a persona is natural and necessary to the way in which we relate to outer circumstance. But it can also get out of control, suffocating other needs of the ego. When there is an over-identification with the persona dreams will tend to mirror it in a negative way, alerting us to something that is constricting and limiting. Persona roles are only negative if they are identified with, rather than being seen as a structure for relating to an outer situation where they can facilitate the activity of the ego in social interaction. In dreams persona aspects are often emphasised by clothing, or by roles such as playing a part in a drama or doing something professional. They can be experienced as either competent or inadequate – as in the use of inappropriate clothes, or situations. Sometimes the 'false personality' constructed out of the need to hide our real feelings from ourselves and others, can also be seen as the persona, often appearing in dreams as a vulnerable child or as someone needing help.

Another very important dream image is whatever represents the shadow, that aspect of ourselves we often want to disavow and hide from.

Shadow images in dreams usually seem to carry a sense of being negative, although they can stem from the original dissociation from shadow aspects in early childhood, when the child, by having to conform to the demands of the family, comes to recognise how certain feelings are taboo and must not be expressed. Yet there is a need for the shadow to be owned and worked with, and this includes the negative dream figures through which this complex gets expressed.

One way of imagining the shadow is to see that although the Self contains all human potentialities, the ego does not. Often the ego cannot recognise much that is in the Self, let alone acknowledge it, and there is an inevitable discrepancy between what the Self is and what the ego thinks it is. Integrating the shadow does not mean handing over to it, but as long as the shadow remains unrecognised and unacknowledged, its actions can unknowingly take us over. We need to remember that the archetype of the enemy lies at the core of the shadow complex, and an important aspect of the individuation process is about learning to live on better terms with the enemy within, rather than projecting it on to other people and situations.

The Self, the regulating centre of the psyche, can also appear in dreams along with other archetypal images. It can appear in a very structured form, as a centred mandala image, occasionally as a voice, usually making a short, often gnomic, statement. Or it may be expressed as the ego-image being observed by or dependent on something larger than ourselves.

Throughout life the Self exerts a continuous pressure on the ego both to face reality, and to participate in the process of individuation and this happens with or without the consent of the ego. The Self can be imagined to unfold during the whole course of life, and this unfolding is part of becoming more of whom we really are. We are born with the potential for Self to unfold and the first unfolding may be connected to the first drive for survival, the inner

predisposition to find the mother's breast and nipple, and gradually to discover more and more of what she represents for us and us for her. Out of these first discoveries and the impetus behind them, the ego begins to gradually develop. We become able to feel, sense and know what is happening around us and relate to it.

Dreams showing the ego being forced to deal with threatening situations often project the need for further development. Dreams of threatening figures that become less so as they approach the dream-ego, can tell us something about the fear of facing unintegrated contents of the psyche and the need for them to become more integrated. Here the archetypal imagery of the heroic struggle or quest is relevant, for the less mature ego is faced by fearful and potentially threatening situations in the quest for maturity. And many parallels in myths and fairy stories come to mind. Fairy tales in particular seem to be a rich depository of ways of ego development for they illustrate its many varied forms. There is usually a fearful or regressive force or situation to be overcome personified by the dragon, or a hostile uncaring parental situation such as the old king or the jealous stepmother. And then there are the helping characters, the small dwarfs, or talking animals. Often a helpful animal can indicate that the unconscious is ready to assist the ego in its task. The role of dream animals in shamanic cultures comes to mind, and it can be important to find ways of connecting with our own dream animals and the ways in which they portray aspects of ourselves.

The dialogue between the waking ego and the dream mediated by the dream ego, is part of the larger dialogue between ego and Self. The Self, of course, is only rarely imaged in a dream, or at least not recognisably, but it is often evident as the unseen construction of the dream creating a role for the dream ego.

The individuating ego realises that neither the dream ego nor the waking ego is the total ego. The sense of 'I' is merely the current subjective point of reference for the process of individuation which always implies movement and change. The dream can be seen as the symbolic structure that presents the dream ego with chosen aspects of the waking ego, an interplay between the different aspects of ego identity. In the relationship between the dream ego and the waking ego, we can postulate the sources of the feeling of 'I-ness'. We can see the Self as the archetypal core of the ego, the point of centred order and continuity out of which the unique feeling of the ego complex is formed. The second, less archetypal, is the sense of continuity and identity that comes from the awareness and reliance on certain complexes that are accepted as the context of the ego image. This source of continuity is threatened when aspects of the ego image are threatened, either from without in interpersonal relationships, or from within when our dominant ego image becomes threatened.

Individuation could be described as the gradual re-shaping of the ego under pressure from the Self whenever there is a loosening of the ego's transient identification with any one particular ego image. Then the ego becomes more able to reflect those contents of the total psyche that are co-ordinated by the Self and given expression through the growth of the individuating ego. It is this which creates a continued feeling of self-existence in spite of shifting ego

contents; it is this apparent paradox between movement and stillness, continuity and change, that generates the unfolding of the Self through the medium of the time bound ego, in the work of individuation. The point at which this process can be most clearly observed is in dreams which can be seen as nourishing the ego through changing images of self-expression.

Dreams only rarely communicate directly in immaterial or abstract terms; dream imagery shows us a world of material objects often experienced in a heightened or more intense way but which can be taken to represent something more abstract and more symbolic. In this context all dream images can be seen as symbols.

Dream associations usually have some association to previous life experience, particularly of childhood; in bringing the associations together, meaning begins to emerge. The realm of the psyche where dreams are formed naturally communicates through symbols, either personal or collective. Working with dreams is about allowing the symbol to come to life for oneself as an individual, noting the interaction between the collective and the personal through the meaning a collective symbol has for us personally.

The word 'symbol' comes from ancient Greek, 'syn' meaning 'together' and 'bol' from 'ballo' meaning 'to throw'. In classical Greece a 'symbolon' was a mark or token like a notched stick slit down the middle in such a way that the same two pieces would fit perfectly together. Symbols can be understood as a bringing together of the personal and the collective, past and present, image and feeling, in ways that fit in a unique matching way with the individual. When there is this fit, the symbol has meaning and the power to change the way something is seen or experienced, with the power to widen and enlarge our vision.

A dream, like waking experience, has the structure of subject and object, 'I' and 'it', the setting in which the dream ego is placed, the connection between the dream ego and other figures in the dream. Incidentally, the dream ego can be of any age, although often this is indeterminate, but there is a sense in which the ego, in so far as it reflects the Self, is ageless. Nevertheless to dream of ourselves at a certain age can be specific. If, for instance, we dream of ourselves as a child, this could be telling us of the need to reconnect with the image of the child inside us.

The ebb and flow of sleep and wakefulness sustains the link between conscious and unconscious, primordial and contemporary, while the pulsating interchange between consciousness and dreaming creates a setting for human self-awareness and self-understanding. Valuing and paying attention to our dream life is also a way of valuing our human capacity for imagination for it is that imaginative knowing which is so important to the development of consciousness.

Individuation is to begin a journey towards a more evolved consciousness represented by the need to heal the frequent dissociation between thinking and feeling, between ego and Self.

I would like to end with a quote from Dr Anthony Stevens: "To work on dreams is not a form of self-indulgence but a spiritual ritual of cultural and ecological significance and meaning. The more conscious we become as individuals, the more hope there is for our tiny portion of the universe ... Through science and technology we have achieved remarkable things in the material world, but our capacities for consciousness and development of the personality have only just begun to be explored. The scientists will further elucidate the neurological basis of consciousness, but what will continue to matter to us and to our planet is what we do with the consciousness that we have. In this application of nature's supreme achievement, our dreams will always have an indispensable role to perform." (Anthony Stevens, *Dreams and Dreaming*. Routledge 1995)