

The Sacrifice

I would like to propose two different ways to use the term “altered states of consciousness”.

You could see one as a sort of *tool*, a way, a method, in order to get to a certain depth inside yourself (or to heal or to come to a more intensive understanding of your inner world). This happens in shamanistic shape shifting, in using psychedelics, in certain forms of deep breathing, or sometimes in other deep ways of body work. Here, you get yourself into an altered state *in order to...* In order to heal, in order to understand etc.

The other one is an altered state in which you find yourself as a *result* of having lived or worked on yourself in a particular way – or, quite simply – as a *result of grace*, if you don't mind the term.

I want to invite you to look with me at the second one in the next hour or so. This is a form of being which is simply the opposite of *mechanical* life. Within “mechanical life” you can never, per definition, be in an altered state. The altered experience can never be found in the framework of repetition and routine, it is not part of the character structure (which is a defence system), but is mostly an expression of what you could call your *essence*.

By *essence* I understand what you truly are and not what you have *learned to be* in order to survive emotionally or physically – which is your *personality*.

In a way, you could say this second understanding of altered state of consciousness is very often an expression of the *flow of life* – a time, when everything is easy, goes by itself, flows like the river... because the interruptions of the personality, the ego, the defence system, don't disturb the flow of the river.

The ego - as necessary as it might be - the ego is an interruption of the flow of life.

May I ask you to turn to your neighbour for a couple of minutes and tell her or him briefly how you have experienced this flow of life. It does not have to be the moment of your first enlightenment, it can just be one of those mornings, when everything was right. -

Just so we all know what we are thinking and talking about.

In my experience, you cannot make this happen, but you can do certain things (or rather *not* do certain things, this talk is about *sacrifice*) in order to come close to it. I will say more to this later. First, I want to introduce you into what I would think as one of the major aspects of my transpersonal work. It is the base of my therapeutic understanding, and if I work with somebody and lose sight of this base, my work is not good.

I call it the “*central*”, “*das Zentrale*” in German. The *central* is something like the fundamental theme of or for your life and it has always a *dual* expression, like two sides of a coin. The neutral middle-term for it could be, e.g., “*giving*” - the one side of the coin would be being *generous* with money, being generous with your feelings, being generous in your expression, in involvement and engagement (in relationships e.g.) and so on. The other side of the coin would be being *stingy* – in the same way: clinging to your money and other possessions, holding back your feelings, being shy in contact with other people, finding it very

difficult to open your mouth in a larger group etc.

Looking from a very high level, it is not that one side is good and the other bad. You might want to learn to give yourself or to contain yourself, or both. The central is all around this theme and you are there to live a life around this theme. And even if you want to learn to be more generous, an experience of extreme stinginess might be a highly precious one (in the Creator's eye, so to speak).

However, it always seems that your "soul" (if you want) would like you to go in a specific direction. I have observed with hundreds of people – and very much with myself – that when I am "on the one side of the coin" the world is bright, people are open, life is easy and – as I say: more or less everything goes and flows by itself. And when you live on the other side, you often feel grey, depressed, nervous, anxious, grumpy, life seems to be against you, things are bumpy, clumsy, difficult, the bus leaves just at the moment when you arrive at the bus stop.

I have observed this so often that I find it hard to explain by only using *personal* criteria, such as: when I behave in a less neurotic way, people are more friendly. It is much more than this (and people who almost always live the "dark side" of their coin, find this hard to understand), but we seem to live here – according to the side of the coin - in two completely different worlds which follow different rules and laws.

And more: it does not seem *fair*: it looks as if the "flow-ers" and "easy-goers" get rewarded, and the sufferers get punished (it looks like!).

Please understand: the theme of generosity and stinginess is *one* example. With almost every example you think, oh, this is it, this could be mine. But *yours* is your very specific one, and you are the only one who can find out. There are hundreds of themes. People can help you, but you are the one who has to make the final discovery. With many clients, I have an idea, of course, but I can tell you: in the end, it has almost never exactly been what I thought it was. I might have been "in the area," but the final touch, the final phrasing, which came from the client, made everything slightly, but meaningfully different.

*When you have come to understand your central, you have this "ah, yeah"-feeling in your chest – you breathe, you sigh, and you know, this is it.
And it is quite difficult to find by yourself.*

Let's do it together. You might only get an idea, don't worry, go as far as you can – and if you want to go further you will find an opportunity tomorrow, next week, next month.

*Please, sit back and get comfortable, close your eyes, if you want.
Imagine – and it does not matter whether or not you believe in reincarnation – imagine that you are up there in heaven and you think about coming down for the 379th time. You know that the last three, four times had already to do with a certain topic, life-topic, but you didn't quite come to terms with it. So this time, you want to reach a so far unknown level of clarity around this theme, and therefore, you might need somewhat tougher starting conditions than the last three times. Your "central" shows already up in the circumstances of your mother's pregnancy and in the way your birth took place.*

(Please let yourself be a bit dreamy with all this, don't try hard to figure something out, just see what pops up and let yourself be a bit foggy about it. Deep down inside you, you know what your central is.)

So, your birth. How was your birth...? Give it one or two words to describe it (...)

How was the situation of your first years? Just dream, please, just dream... There is a sort of theme that pops easily into your mind, if you don't think too hard about it, a theme of your first years...

What did your mother teach you about life...? Directly or indirectly... By "teach" I mean, what was her general attitude about life? Make it simple...(...)

What did your father teach you about life...? (...)

How was your life with other children....? (...)

What made you unhappy as a child? What was your conclusion about life? Dream, please, dream...

What made you very, very happy as a child...? (...) Please continue dreaming...

At the age puberty: when was your life awful, painful, embarrassing...? When was it easy, light, delicious..?

*In your job life: when are things stressful..? Please answer: when I...
When do you love your work with all your heart...? Please answer: when I...*

*In your private partnerships: What do you struggle with again and again and again...?
And when do you have the most exquisite times with your partner...? Please answer:
when I...*

*We could go on with other situations, your central shows in every area of your life, it is there all the time and everywhere. What is your first hunch, your first fantasy, your first inkling that it could have to do with? What goes like a red thread through your entire life?
(...)*

And now: the relevant question: Can you turn your idea about your central into a coin with two sides and see that when you live the one side of the coin, your life is more difficult, more tedious, more exhausting – and when you live the other side, your life is more like a river, easy, flowing, easy-going?(...)

Find some clear words and/or sentences for what you think your central could be or could have to do with. And it might help at some point to write it down. There is someone in you who wants to forget it.

Now, as I said and as you know: *You are – it seems – two: you are the one who you really are and you are the one you have learned to be in order to cope. The one you really are is infinitely richer than the one you have learned to be. As a matter of fact, the one you have learned to be (and with whom most of us obstinately still identify as “I”) is a rather brutal reduction of your essence. And you have come to live this reduction by, again and again, sacrificing elements of your pleasure and your passion, elements of your wonderful inner silence, elements of your dreaming capacities, huge aspects of your rich intuitive wisdom, and so on. You have sacrificed all these – and still do sacrifice many of them every day – in order to adapt yourself to the others, the grown ups, to their reduced ideas about life and how one should live. In large parts, you have given yourself up in order to be loved by them, accepted by them.*

So I think, it is rather evident that in order to return more and more to who you really are, *you won't have to learn anything new, or add something to who you already are. But the very simple procedure appears to lie in giving up what you have learned, to sacrifice the poor replacements the ego has offered you.*

Ridiculous as it is, this seems to be the most difficult thing in the world.

You remember the story of Abraham and Isaac. Sarah, Abraham's wife, was about ninety and he was a hundred, when God allowed her to become pregnant. It obviously needed these extraordinary circumstances, because God had extraordinary things in mind with Isaac: Isaac was to become the beginning of everything, the beginning of Israel, the expression with all its

consequences of the pact between God and his chosen people.

So when God asks Abraham to sacrifice his one and most beloved son, one can regard this as a cruel, patriarchal horror-story or one can understand that God asks Abraham to sacrifice what is most and utmost important to Abraham: his status, his reputation, his self-image as the founder of founders, the father of fathers, the Creator of the Son - this son who is the expression of the pact between God and His people.

One could call this the sacrifice of a seemingly fundamental and important part of his ego.

And this is how we often feel, when we know we could go into the Land of the Flowing River, where we would return home to who we really are. We can't get there without the sacrifice of what we have come to identify with. (And, by the way, the first step, for a long time, in this sacrificing procedure, might be to acknowledge that it seems extremely vital and existentially important to me to be regarded as the Father of Israel, e.g.)

Another example. There is this man who has learned to be a nice guy, who as a child has learned to, say, give up his spontaneous, gutsy directness. Not to be nice, to speak his mind in a relatively uncontrolled way, without considering whether he will be liked for it or not, is almost impossible for him. And yet, with evolution of his consciousness and with the expanding awareness that this has to do with the *central* of his life, he experiences, each time he does it, a sort of altered state of consciousness, a lightness, a flow. An easy-going of his life spreads out in him— whereas, particularly now, with heightened awareness, when he falls back into “being nice” with people, trying to say what he thinks they want to hear, his life becomes noticeably more dull or even depressive – and, actually, more and more people also show their dislike, when he tries to be nice. I have had quite a few clients like this - and one could think, oh, being a nice guy is not such a big thing, but I can tell you: for some people it is an enormous thing, it is, like with every *central*, the question of being yourself or being a facade (that means being what you have learned to be).

I call this whole process “transpersonal”, because life itself seems in an often miraculous way to rearrange itself, when one is ready to *sacrifice*, almost as if it wants to show its gratefulness to the person for living closer to who he or she really is. It helps to approach this from a transpersonal viewpoint: better not bring in your personal feelings too much, they will most probably tell you to keep behaving like a nice guy or to hold back with other people and so on. The *sacrifice* takes place in a spiritual context, it takes place *after* you clarified your personal story with all the feelings that belong to it. If Abraham had gone into his personal feelings, he could never have done what he did.

You must observe your own life, with your own *central*, under these viewpoints and find out whether this way of proceeding is true for you. Of course, the precondition for this is that you understand, in a perhaps very subtle way sometimes, what your life is all about, and what the sacrifice-part of it consists of.

And then, you find out what it means to you to more and more sacrifice the subtle life hindering aspects of your *central*. One of the “nice guys” I am thinking of, was for quite some time a client of mine, and he understood that being nice with people was what he had learned to be and how to get around in the world. He also came to understand gradually that people did not really love him for this and, at some point, he understood that it was about time to stop it. However, there was an enormous gap between his understanding and to really see all the subtle ways in which he tried to be nice. There were so many things which he took for granted (and believed they were “normal” for everybody) that he needed a long time to “discover” (uncover) them as “nice” things. When he visited his girl-friend and there were some unwashed dishes in the kitchen, it was clear for him that this would be his first action: to do the dishes. And he liked doing it! His girl friend appreciated him for doing so (he was so different from most other men!), she hugged and kissed him for it - and it was only in a fight after their separation that it sort of burst out of her that she hated, or rather, despised him for doing her dishes – which, of course, he could not understand at all (and she neither).

I remember the session, when he realised for the first time that he did something there which he had learned from his mother (his mother, by the way, always did his dishes first thing when she visited him) and that in many of his ways of being a nice guy he actually was a nice girl – not only with the dishes, but also the way he talked in a pleasing, flattering, smooth manner, the way he was always helpful, the way he had sex, the way he put himself always last “of course” etc. . All these were actually girl's ways - not because girls necessarily behave like this, but because he learned them from the girl who was his mother and who appreciated him tremendously when he was like she was.

I remember him seeing this clearly for the first time: he started to shake a little bit, he looked completely startled and then he said: *Das ist ekelig - this is nauseating*. But remember, this was long time after he had understood the whole personal context – understood in a mental way, but not with the cells of his body, so to speak.

So you might think you know what it is you could *sacrifice*, but you might also still have a long way in front of you to really get to know yourself profoundly in this particular way. This is transpersonal work: you must see all the subtleties of your personal *central* in order to become able to transcend it and arrive in the land of freedom.

I understand, by the way, the word “sacrifice” more and more in this very sense of getting to know a particular aspect of yourself. It is a form of deep acquaintance, of profound exploration of your subtle and daily manners of behaviour, of being (of being nice, or being stingy, or being withdrawn, or being impressive, etc.) - really experiencing yourself while you are living it. Thus, “sacrificing” would not be comprehended as “getting rid of” or “trying to let go”, but rather observing and getting to know yourself in a more and more friendly way. It has been my experience with myself and with my clients that, if you understand yourself in this profound way (and with all the cells of your body, so to speak), the hindering aspect begins to dissolve all by itself. You comprehend that, from the depth of your being, you don't need this form of behaviour anymore, and then, it disappears by itself (perhaps not for ever and the rest of your life, but there will only be little relapses from time to time, when there seem to be moments of high emergency, and you don't remain stuck in them for too long). This must be clearly discerned from a purely mental understanding (“I know that I am this way”), which does not create much inner movement or change at all.

I shall tell you one last example about somebody whom I know relatively well: myself.

I was born by the end of world war II, my mother was pregnant with me, while the bombs fell on Berlin.

My birth took about 20 hours, I was told. There was obviously no way I wanted to come out.

My father came back from Russia, where he had been in a prisoner's camp, when I was three. I screamed and told him to go away, I did not want to have anything to do with him. I did hardly ever have anything to do with him, as long as he lived. The message I heard from him was: I don't like you. (I don't know whether this was the case, but this is what I heard.)

My mother adored me, I was her darling-treasure-charming boy and the better husband.

When I see myself between my father and my mother, it looks like this: My father says: “Life is something you have to go through. It is very rarely something to be enjoyed. If people seem to have fun, they only pretend. But it's not your choice. So be here, do your thing even though nobody will ever love you for it, and if you can avoid life, avoid it.”

My mother says: “Life is something *wonderful, even though dangerous*, so you better sing loudly, look as if you have a lot of terrific things happening to you. In relationships pretend you are happy as long as you can possibly afford it. Behind everything – even though life is wonderful - there is only fear and horror and loneliness. Therefore you must take every sun ray and praise it, sing as loudly as you can. At the end, there is always devastation and desperation, so pretend as long as it is possible.”

There I am, between these two people and I, in the middle, I *hesitate*.

I hesitate, because – for one reason – I mistrust him, for another, I mistrust her. (And you remember: it took me 20 hours already to get out of the womb).

So my life has always had to do with things such as: hesitating, keeping out, avoiding.

Postponing what I seem to be afraid of. As a consequence of this postponing, the fear and the mistrust usually grow immensely.

On the other side, when I *just go* and do things, my life is and has always been easy. Easy, often joyful, often successful.

I tried to engage myself in a large amount of relationships of every possible kind. Very often, shortly before we came to a point where I would ask myself: Do I really trust this person?, I left.

There is one person in my life, whom I never left. She died last year.

I very much like being with people. And I always have to have a back-door open.

I have very seldom started contacts from my side. *If I do*, my life is wonderful.

When I was 30, I had finished my studies with good notes and was to become a high school teacher in a few weeks' time. Just before that, there was an old Jewish woman who happened to spend some time in our commune in Berlin, where I lived. She stayed for a week or so, and at the end, she asked me:

"Rainer, have you ever thought about becoming a Gestalt therapist?"

"No", I said, "I am going to be a teacher in two weeks' time."

"Well", she said, "if you ever think about becoming a Gestalt therapist, you could live in my house in Los Angeles as long as you want."

I said: "Thank you, but you must be crazy."

Three weeks later, I was in Los Angeles. After long years of study, I just left about everything and went to live in California. The time there was probably the happiest in my life, everything fell into my lap, I had periods of time, when I thought that *nothing* was impossible for me.

When I *just go* for things without thinking – just trusting – it always feels as if I throw myself into a 2000 yards deep precipice hoping to arrive safely, but never thinking I would. Then, afterwards, my life is like a miracle, I live in an altered state of consciousness.

However, many, many more times, I prefer to hesitate, mistrust and postpone, and then, my life is narrow and full of anxiety.

I think, we can gradually learn to sacrifice what we think of as the base of our life – if the longing for being free - free of our story - if this longing becomes more enchanting and irresistible than the old promises of security and approval. The *central* offers constant opportunities. And we can start with small ones, small sacrifices.

As I said, some people call it "letting go". I prefer the term "sacrifice", because, in my ears, this comes closer to the often tremendously painful and fearful holy ritual of giving up who I believe I am – in order to come home.