

PART ONE

## Buddha

The following four chapters, written as articles in the aftermath of my psychiatric residency, were inspired by my previous immersion in Buddhist thought and practice. The theoretical basis for them, on the Buddhist side, was the study of the traditional Buddhist psychology called *Abhidhamma*, which I undertook for my undergraduate thesis in psychology at Harvard. The experiential basis was a series of silent two-week *vipassana* retreats under the auspices of American Buddhist teachers Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein that I took between 1974 and 1982. These chapters represent my first attempts to combine a psychodynamic way of thinking with one steeped in Buddhist psychology, and they grew out of my efforts to explain to myself, in psychological language, what I had learned from my study of Buddhism. At the time, in the mid-1980s, a consensus was emerging in the California-based transpersonal psychology movement that spiritual development was something that best took place on a platform of psychological development; that psychotherapy, if it was necessary at all, could most effectively

be seen as a prelude to spiritual work. This point of view was most cogently summarized by the psychologist Jack Engler. "You have to be somebody before you can be nobody," he wrote at the time (Engler, 2003, p. 35).

Engler was responding to a disturbing trend noted by him and others: Western students of Eastern spiritual traditions who jumped into intensive meditation with little preparation sometimes experienced emotional distress. Many sincere practitioners, disillusioned with therapy or with the idea of therapy, turned to meditation in the hope of healing psychological issues and found that emotional material was uncovered that neither they nor their meditation teachers were prepared to deal with. Engler correctly noted the prevalence of borderline and narcissistic pathology in many of those drawn to meditation and proposed that psychotherapy was a better course of treatment for those having trouble maintaining a cohesive sense of self. Not only were analytically trained therapists better versed in the kinds of pathology such people suffered from, they were also trained in therapeutic techniques, knew how to handle transference issues, and were committed to the long-term one-on-one explorations helpful for such conditions. Buddhist teachers, on the other hand, whether of Eastern or Western backgrounds, were most often untrained in therapy, unprepared for the kinds of extreme distress that could emerge in Western practitioners, and uninterested in maintaining long-term personal relationships with students who might attend a workshop or retreat. Engler sought to remedy this very real problem by proposing that meditation was a kind of meta-therapy, appropriate for those who had already worked through the developmental tasks of selfhood, but inappropriate for those who had not yet done their psychological homework.

While this formulation was extremely helpful in exposing a very real problem, it never seemed completely right to me. Engler, in a later paper, has come to question it himself (Engler, 2003). In my own experience, meditation helped me come to grips with various narcissistic issues *before* I had any real therapy, helping me to become *somebody*. And therapy, far from promoting a strong and stable sense of self as envisioned by many schools of ego psychology, taught me how to let go, allowing me to be *nobody*. Many of my friends and acquaintances in the Buddhist world, some with a deep understanding of selflessness, still showed lots of evidence in their personality structures of borderline, neurotic, and narcissistic pathology, just as my psychiatric colleagues, many of them excellent therapists, did in their own personal lives. Spiritual communities were hotbeds of transference pathology, and many spiritual teachers, albeit highly realized, seemed just as vulnerable to acting out with their students as some therapists who could not help sleeping with their patients. It seemed incorrect to infer that those who were capable of Buddhist realizations of voidness or selflessness must be, by definition, psychologically intact or developmentally realized.

In a recent chapter, Engler (2006) has continued to rethink his original formulation, beginning his piece with an exchange between Phillip Kapleau, a respected American Zen master, and a student:

QUESTIONER: But doesn't enlightenment clear away imperfections and personality flaws?

ROSHI: No, it shows them up! Before awakening, one can easily ignore or rationalize his shortcomings, but after enlightenment this is no longer possible. One's failings are painfully evident. Yet at the time a strong determination develops to rid

oneself of them. Even opening the Mind's eye fully does not at one fell swoop purify the emotions. Continuous training after enlightenment is required to purify the emotions so that our behavior accords with our understanding. This vital point must be understood. (pp. 29–30)

As Engler makes clear, this vital point is not what most people want to believe.

The result is a kind of guilt in many Western practitioners over the persistence, and continuing subjective importance, of their emotional lives. As Engler puts it, "The Buddhist teaching that I neither have nor am an enduring self should not be taken to mean that I do not need to struggle to find out who I am, what my desires and aspirations are, what my needs are, what my capabilities and responsibilities are, how I am relating to others, and what I could or should do with my life. Ontological emptiness does not mean psychological emptiness" (2003, pp. 34–35).

In my experience, therapy and meditation, psychological development and spiritual realization, seem to be intertwined. One can facilitate the other, or retard the other, or subtly infuse or contaminate the other. Realized beings can still be competitive, or narcissistic, or vulnerable to transference projections. Troubled, neurotic individuals can still be capable of profound insight. I wrote these articles to tease out a more nuanced view of the interplay of psychological, emotional and spiritual life. My ultimate position was that both "somebody" and "nobody" are falsely reified positions that do not do justice to what it means to be a person or to grapple with self. The Buddhist path of meditation, it seems to me, creates the conditions for subtler and subtler confrontations with narcissistic issues rooted, developmentally, in pre-verbal, infantile experi-

ence. And therapy, when practiced from a Buddhist perspective, seems just as capable of yielding liberating insight into the nature of self as meditation can be. But both methods must confront the truth of what Margaret Mahler once wrote, that the narcissistic residue "reverberates throughout the life cycle," (1972, p. 333). Or, in the virtually immortal words of Samuel Beckett, "The old ego dies hard, such as it was, a minister of dullness, it was also an agent of security" (quoted in Foster, 1989, p. 93).

## References

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I  
Meditative Transformations  
of Narcissism  
(1986)

Attempts by theorists of transpersonal psychology to explain the place of meditation within an overall framework encompassing Western notions of the development of the self often see meditation as a “therapeutic” intervention most appropriate for those possessing a “fully developed” sense of self. This approach has been useful in distinguishing transpersonal levels of development from early, pre-oedipal levels, but appears to have sidestepped the issue of how Buddhist meditation practice, for example, could be seen as therapeutic for psychological issues that have their origin in the infantile experience of the meditator. The emergence of object relations theory and the psychodynamics of narcissism have provided a vocabulary more relevant for the discussion of such influences than was Freud’s original drive theory that stressed the evolution and persistence of unconscious (Russell, 1986) aspects of libido and

aggression. It has been noted that some of those attracted to meditation have demonstrable narcissistic pathology (Epstein & Lieff, 1981; Engler, 1983; 1984), but the role of meditation in *transforming* narcissistic pathology has not yet been explored. By focusing on two particular dynamic structures relevant to narcissism, the ego ideal and the ideal ego, and charting how these psychic structures are affected by the meditative path, it is possible to begin to unravel the complex relationship between meditation and narcissism.

### Somebody/Nobody

Transpersonal theorists, in general, have preferred to portray the meditative path as beginning with an already developed sense of self, as progressing onward from where conventional Western personality theory leaves off. This approach asserts that Eastern psychologies pay relatively little explicit attention to the infantile components of the personality and that the transformation that they promise consists primarily of proceeding beyond the limitations of an already cohesive self. First delineated by Wilber (1980) in his descriptions of the "pre/trans fallacy," made explicit by Engler (1983; 1984) in his comparison of psychoanalysis and Buddhism, and finally codified by Wilber (1984a; 1984b) in his recent papers, this view is expressed most succinctly by Engler in his statement, ". . . you have to be somebody before you can be nobody" (Engler, 1983, p. 36). Such an orientation has proven to be an effective balance to the heretofore prevailing psychoanalytically influenced view that mystical states in general fostered a regression to pre-oedipal levels of fulfillment, yet it has, I believe, obscured inquiry into the question of whether Buddhist meditation practices could, in any way, aid in the resolution of

infantile, narcissistic conflicts. When conceived as an either/or perspective, the pre/trans rationale does not easily allow for the examination of the infantile matrix or developmental roots of the spiritual experience, nor does it readily demonstrate how inherent narcissism is engaged and continually addressed throughout the meditative path. In classifying Buddhist meditation practice as an "ethnopsychiatric discipline" (Engler, 1983), one must be open to the possibility that such practices may be confronting primitive psychological conflicts with an eye toward resolving them, not through "analysis," but through experiences in meditation that ultimately allow such conflicts to be transmuted.

Engler indicates there is a sizable proportion of individuals with demonstrable narcissistic pathology who seem to be drawn to meditation. He also describes their tendencies to form transferences to their teachers, often paralleling those described by Kohut (1971) in the treatment of narcissistic personalities. Yet he seems to feel that it is an anomaly of Western culture that individuals with narcissistic vulnerabilities tend to gravitate to the spiritual disciplines. I suspect, however, that this tendency is not unique to this culture and that its existence suggests an underlying thrust of the spiritual disciplines toward the resolution of narcissistically tinged issues (Masson, 1980).

This is not to assert that those individuals functioning at a clinically defined borderline level of personality organization (Kernberg, 1975) could withstand the rigors of intensive meditation practice. Indeed, the available evidence suggests that they cannot (Epstein & Lieff, 1981). In this respect I agree with Engler's conclusions regarding a "prerequisite level of personality organization." Yet his conclusions could also imply that the meditative experience, in a developed form, does not

address infantile issues, that the ego must be "well integrated" and "intact" and its development "normal" for the meditative experience to unfold. Such a view might foreclose the use of the therapeutic potential of the meditative experience, or ignore the infantile origins of the attraction to spirituality, and neglect the narcissistic residue that may persist throughout the meditative path.

To assert that infantile issues can persist in their influence in the meditator's psyche even after he or she has successfully traversed the early developmental spectrum is not to contradict the major theorists of personality development, all of whom assert that the infantile residue "reverberates throughout the life cycle" (Mahler, 1972, p. 333). Those who have addressed narcissistic issues tend to agree on the essential point that the memory of the infant's blissful symbiotic union with the mother creates an ideal in the individual's psyche which inevitably becomes compared with his or her actual experience (Mahler, 1972, p. 338; Jacobsen, 1964, p. 39; Kohut, 1966, p. 246; A. Reich, 1960, p. 311; Guntrip, 1969, p. 291; Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1975, p. 6). This ideal is narcissistic at its core because it is rooted in a time when all of the infant's needs were immediately satisfied and when its self was not differentiated from that of its caretaker. Just as this narcissistic residue reverberates throughout the life cycle, affecting goals, aspirations and intimate interpersonal relationships, so it can be seen to reverberate throughout the meditative path, where psychic structures derived from this infantile experience must be, at various times, gratified, confronted or abandoned.

The concept of the ideal is not limited to the psychology of narcissism, however. One of the distinctive characteristics of Buddhist psychology (particularly in the Theravadan tradition) is that it clearly postulates an ideal personality, the *arahat*,

that represents the fruition of meditation practice (Johansson, 1970; Goleman & Epstein, 1983), as well as an ideal state, that of *nirvana*, where reality is perceived without distortion. The ideal personality is conceived of as one in whom even the potential for the arising of unwholesome mental factors, such as greed, hatred, conceit, envy or doubt, does not exist. It represents a personality cleansed of the kinds of mental states accepted as inevitable by Western psychology—cleansed by virtue of the repeated experience of the enlightened state. In order to actually reach this goal, the meditative path, as well outlined in traditional Buddhist texts, must be traversed. From the perspective of the psychodynamics of narcissism, in order for this ideal to be reached, there must occur a transformation of those psychic structures that embody the individual's internalization of the ideal. In other words, meditation must inevitably affect those aspects of the self that derive from the infantile experience of the ideal so that the Buddhist ideal may be realized. It is not just that the promise of *nirvana* speaks to a primitive yearning and motivates some people to undertake meditation, but that the actual practice provides a means whereby those narcissistic remnants that inevitably persist are seized and redirected. The manner in which this occurs can be explained, once the psychic structures involved are described more fully.

### Ego Ideal/Ideal Ego

The two representations of the ideal that inherit the energy of the infant's primitive narcissism (Grunberger, 1971) have been termed the ego ideal and the ideal ego (Hanly, 1984). They both derive from the infant's experience of undifferentiated, symbiotic fusion with the mother that predates cognitive

structures mature enough for conceptual thought, but, once established, each assumes separate and distinctive functions within the developing individual's psychic economy. The *ideal ego* is "an idea which the ego has of itself" (Hanly, 1984, p. 254), an idealized image of what the ego actually is, a secret, tenaciously guarded, deeply held belief in the ego's solidity, permanence and perfection. The *ego ideal* is that towards which the ego strives, that which it yearns to become, that into which it desires to merge, fuse or unite. It is as if the original fusion with "mother and the sensori-physical surround" (Wilber, 1984a, p. 89) splits into two archaic, disjointed remnants, one embodying the ego's memory of its own perfection and the other embodying the memory of the perfection in which it was once contained. These two remnants diverge, at times contradict each other, and assume separate functions thereafter. They essentially constitute what has been termed the "dual orientation of narcissism" (Andreas-Salome, 1962).

The fundamental difference between the two terms "ideal ego" and "ego ideal" is that the former connotes a state of being whereas the latter connotes a state of becoming. . . . The ideal ego is the ego insofar as it believes itself to have been vouchsafed a state of perfection—it refers to a positive state even if this state, in reality, is an illusion. In fact, the ideal ego is a self-image that is distorted by idealization but it may be experienced as more real than the ego itself. The ego ideal refers to a perfection to be achieved, it refers to an unrealized potential; it is the idea of a perfection towards which the ego ought to strive. (Hanly, 1984, p. 253)

The ideal ego, according to Hanly (1984), is the source of abstract ideas that the ego has about itself as perfect, complete, immortal and permanent. It is the wellspring of vanity and self-righteousness, the "source of an illusory ontology of the self" (p. 255) and the equivalent of a "wishful concept of the self" (Sandler et al., 1963, p. 156). It is given form when the ego gains the capacity to observe itself, when it senses its own presence (Federn, 1952, p. 60), yet its formation is "built up out of denials" (Hanly, 1984, p. 266) of many of the ego's attributes. Sustained by the on-going denial of what Federn (1952) has termed a "sense of unreality" or "estrangement" (p. 61) that arises when the "preceding state of perfect wholeness" (p. 269) is forever lost, the ideal ego does not permit inquiry into potentially contradictory aspects of the ego's true nature (Hanly, 1984, p. 260). The self, as experienced by the ideal ego, is not the constantly changing series of "fused and confused" self and object images that Jacobsen (1964, p. 20) described in her pioneering study of object relations theory, but is, instead, "an identification of the self with a part of the self which then becomes the 'true self' idealized by narcissistic investment" (Hanly, 1984, p. 255).

The ego ideal, on the other hand, embodies an individual's aspirations. It is derived from the boundless experience of infantile narcissistic omnipotence, in which there is no distinction between self and other and the entire universe is experienced as a part of oneself. First brought into existence by the "violent end to which the primary state of fusion" (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1975, p. 6) is brought, the ego ideal is characteristically projected outward either onto significant others into which an individual tries to merge or into moral attributes which the individual tries to live up to. Yet, as Freud

(1914, p. 116) first stated, "That which he projects ahead of him as his ideal is merely his substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood—the time when he was his own ideal." Unlike the ideal ego, whose function it is to assure the self of its own inherent perfection, the ego ideal is associated with a yearning to become something that at its root is an internalized image of a lost state of perfection. The ego ideal, says Chasseguet-Smirgel, a French psychoanalyst responsible for much of the repopularization of the concept, represents "a narcissistic omnipotence from which (the individual) is henceforth divided by a gulf that he will spend the rest of his life trying to bridge" (1975, p. 7).

Hanly (1984, p. 256) described the usefulness of these concepts in elucidating personality structure by comparing the relative strengths of ego ideal and ideal ego in various types of personality organization. His essential thesis is that relative strength of ideal ego and weakness of ego ideal predominate in borderline, narcissistic and neurotic disorders and that only as the personality matures does ego ideal begin to eclipse ideal ego in the psychic economy. This schemata assumes special importance as the fate of ego ideal and ideal ego in the meditative path is examined.

Attempts by psychoanalytic theorists to analyze mystical phenomena have traditionally resulted in interpretations that view meditation as a narcissistic attempt to regain an ideal infantile state. From early investigations of mystical ecstasies (Jones, 1913, 1923; Schroeder, 1922; Alexander, 1931; Federn, 1952) to Freud's well-known evocation of the "oceanic feeling" as a "restoration of limitless narcissism" (1930) to more contemporary attempts at describing mystical union (Rose, 1972; Ross, 1975; Lewin, 1950; Bonaparte, 1950; Masson, 1974, 1980), the essential point has always been a variation on the idea that

mysticism in general and meditation in particular represents an attempt to merge ego and ego ideal, an idea first proposed by Jones (1923) and fully amplified upon by Grunberger (1971) and Chasseguet-Smirgel (1975). "Mysticism . . . corresponds . . . to the need for the uniting of ego and ideal via the shortest possible route. It represents fusion with the primary object, and even when the latter is represented consciously by God, it is nonetheless, at depth, an equivalent of the mother-prior-to-the-loss-of-fusion" (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1975, p. 217).

With regard to the Buddhist path, this interpretation is but a half-truth, and, as such, it is revealing, incomplete and misleading. Such a formulation, while asserting that meditation strengthens the ego ideal, neglects both the fate of the ideal ego and the practices that affect the ideal ego. As psychoanalyst Joseph L. Thompson, writing under the pseudonym Joe Tom Sun in 1924 and the first analyst to appreciate this dimension of Buddhism, pointed out, "Buddha taught that the ego was not a reality, that it was non-existent, that it was an illusion" (Sun, 1924, p. 43), that the ideal ego, as a potent force in the psyche, must be surrendered.

The analytic view, traditionally, has been that meditation constitutes a regression to an infantile narcissistic state, a shortcut in the ongoing attempt to gratify the ego ideal. It is correct in pointing out that the potential for such gratification does exist through meditation, but, by failing to recognize the confrontation with the ideal ego that is also required, it has not recognized that restructuring of both ego ideal *and* ideal ego is demanded by the meditative path. On the other hand, transpersonal psychologists may not have recognized sufficiently the persistence of narcissistic structures in those undertaking meditation, and so may have overlooked the fate of those structures from an analytic point of view.

## Concentration/Insight

As has been well described elsewhere (Nyanamoli, 1976; Goleman, 1977; Goleman & Epstein, 1983; Nyanaponika, 1962; Brown, 1986), Buddhist literature contains a series of highly systematized texts of psychological thought that detail not only the varieties of day-to-day mental states but also how the configurations of those mental states can be re-patterned through the application of meditative techniques. Called Abhidhamma in the Theravada school, these texts provide a detailed cartography, in phenomenological terms, of the psychological effects of sustained meditation practice; they outline the substance of the meditative path. Goleman (1977) has clearly described the traditional Buddhist division of meditation techniques into "concentration" and "insight" practices. Concentration practices stress the development of one-pointed attention to a single object, inevitably producing concomitant feelings of tranquillity, contentment and bliss that can culminate in absorption, or trance, states. Insight practices depend on an attentional strategy called "mindfulness" that stresses the moment-to-moment awareness of changing objects of perception. In this practice, attention is developed such that thoughts, feelings, images, sensations and even consciousness, itself, can be observed as an endless fluctuation characterizing the human mind and body process. A series of insights into the temporary, unstable and impersonal nature of the personality are said to occur as the path of insight is traversed, culminating in the experience of enlightenment.

What is not so often emphasized, once this distinction is accepted, is that the Buddhist meditative path demands a delicate interplay of the two techniques and consists of a series of alternating plateaus that reflect the affective concomitants of

first one strategy and then the other. While the development of the concentration practices to their limit is seen variously as a diversion or as a stepping-stone to more advanced insight practices, the development of concentration, and the feelings associated with it, also constitute an essential part of the technique of mindfulness and the path of insight.

Concentration allows the mind to remain fixed, without wavering, on a single object such as a sound, sensation, image or thought. Mindfulness allows attention to a rapidly changing series of objects but, as such, demands a sufficient degree of concentration to facilitate that process. Mindfulness combines the relaxed tranquillity of the concentration practices with an active, alert scrutiny of the field of consciousness that gradually matures into insight. Indeed, when the path of insight is analyzed carefully, stages with predominantly two contrasting affective tones can be discriminated, what the *Visuddhimagga*, the classic textbook of Buddhist psychology, calls experiences of "terror and delight" (Nyanamoli, 1976, p. 765).

The experiences of delight are essentially derived from the concentration practices or from the stabilizing elements of the mindfulness practice. They are characterized by feelings of contentment, harmony, tranquillity, bliss, rapture, expansiveness, wholeness and delight. They promote stability, equanimity and equilibrium and are essentially anxiolytic in that they directly counteract mental states of anxiety, worry and restlessness and evoke a state of well-being. These states may be associated with sensations of bright light, feelings of unlimited love or compassion, or bodily feelings of rapture or bliss. The precise configuration of these mental states depends upon where in the meditative path the individual happens to be, on which factors are most developed or most refined; but the thread that binds all of these states is clearly

the delight elicited by the development of concentration. Within the traditionally outlined meditative path (Nyanamoli, 1976; Brown, 1986), the stages of delight are most pronounced at the levels leading up to and including what is termed access concentration, in the series of eight *jhanas*, at the level of pseudo-nirvana, and at the stages surrounding knowledge of contemplation of dispassion (see Figure 1).

The experiences of terror, on the other hand, derive from the investigating aspects of the mindfulness practice and from the insights that precipitate out of such practice. They are characterized by clear perception of the impermanent, insubstantial and unsatisfying nature of the self and the field of experience. These experiences are profoundly disturbing; they evoke discomfort, fear and anxiety, require the meditator to relinquish fundamental beliefs and identifications, and tend to be fragmenting and anxiogenic. They can only be withstood and tolerated if the counterbalancing forces of concentration are sufficiently strong. These are the experiences that Western psychologists fear will unbalance those with inadequate personality structures; yet from the Buddhist perspective equilibrium is maintained by the stabilizing effects of concentration. That such concentration might also solidify ego development could be explained by the identification of concentration with gratification of the ego ideal.

While the stages of delight must be worked through—they can prove so satisfying that it becomes difficult to move beyond them—the stages of terror must be continuously integrated. The meditator often receives the first inkling of terror at the very beginning of meditation, when confronted with the tumultuous nature of his own mind. As the concentration practices gradually calm the mind, this sentiment usually fades, only to resurface as mindfulness begins its investigation

of the process of mind. As mindfulness develops the ability to discriminate successive moments of awareness, the emphasis is usually first on noting the successive arising of new mind moments. These perceptions begin to shake the foundations of what is termed “false view,” that is, the identification of the individual with the products of his own psyche. As insight develops, the emphasis becomes increasingly shifted to awareness of the dissolution of each mind moment, and the stages of terror become more pronounced. The meditator experiences “all formations” continually “breaking up, like fragile pottery being smashed, like fine dust being dispersed, like sesame seeds being roasted, and he sees only their break-up” (Nyanamoli, 1976, p. 752).

Following this stage, known as the Contemplation of Dissolution, comes a more intense realization, known as the Knowledge of Appearance of Terror, in which the threat to the ego is most vivid.

As he repeats, develops and cultivates in this way the contemplation of dissolution, the object of which is cessation consisting in the destruction, fall and break-up of all formations, then formations classed according to all kinds of becoming, generation, destiny, station, or abode of beings, appear to him in the form of a great terror, as lions, tigers, leopards, bears, hyenas, spirits, ogres, fierce bulls, savage dogs, rut-maddened wild elephants, hideous venomous serpents, thunderbolts, charnel grounds, battle fields, flaming coal pits, etc., appear to a timid man who wants to live in peace. (Nyanamoli, 1976, p. 753)

It is here that the experience of terror is most raw and visible.

The division of the meditative path into experiences of terror and delight is instructive when considering the fate of the narcissistic psychic structures of ego ideal and ideal ego. The concentration practices clearly promote unity of ego and ego ideal by encouraging fixity of mind in a single object. Such fixity allows the ego to dissolve into the object, to merge with it in a suffusion of bliss and contentment extremely evocative of the infantile narcissistic state. Hindu practices, most of which are of the concentration variety (Goleman, 1977), are, in their own literature (Masson, 1980), said to bring about states most comparable to mother-child union. These are the practices conventionally referred to by analytic investigators of mysticism and described by Freud in his vision of the oceanic feeling. Alexander (1931) remarked on the similarities of a newly translated Buddhist description of the second *jhana*, or state of absorption, to the then evolving theory of narcissism and implied how such practices could gratify the demands of the ego ideal.

This phase of positive attitude towards the ego is described in the Buddha text in the following words: "In this condition the monk is like a pool, fed from a source within himself, which has no outlet . . . and which also is not replenished by rain from time to time. This pool is fed from the cool stream of water within itself, with cool water streamed through, filled and flooded entirely, so that no single corner of the pool remains unsaturated: just so does the Bhikku drink from his physical body, fills and saturates himself completely from all sides with the joy and pleasureable feelings born out of the depths of absorption, so that not

the smallest particle remains unsaturated." This is the second *jhana* step. I think no analyst can more fittingly describe the condition of narcissism than is done in this text, if we substitute the word "libido" for "stream of water." For this reason this description seems to me especially interesting and important, because it is the description of a condition which we have only theoretically reconstructed and named "narcissism." (Alexander, 1931, p. 134)

The experience of terror, however, and the fruits of the insight practices, have little to do with the ego ideal. There is no satisfaction of a yearning for perfection in these experiences, no evocation of grandeur, elation or omnipotence. Rather, these experiences directly challenge the grasp of the deeply buried and highly treasured ideal ego. They confront the "illusory ontology of the self" (Hanly, 1984, p. 255), expose the ego as groundless, impermanent and empty, and overcome the denials that empower the wishful image of the self. When faced with these experiences, the meditator has nothing to fall back on; he must surrender his most closely guarded identifications, relinquishing them as "not me" and "not mine." As described in the *Visuddhimagga*,

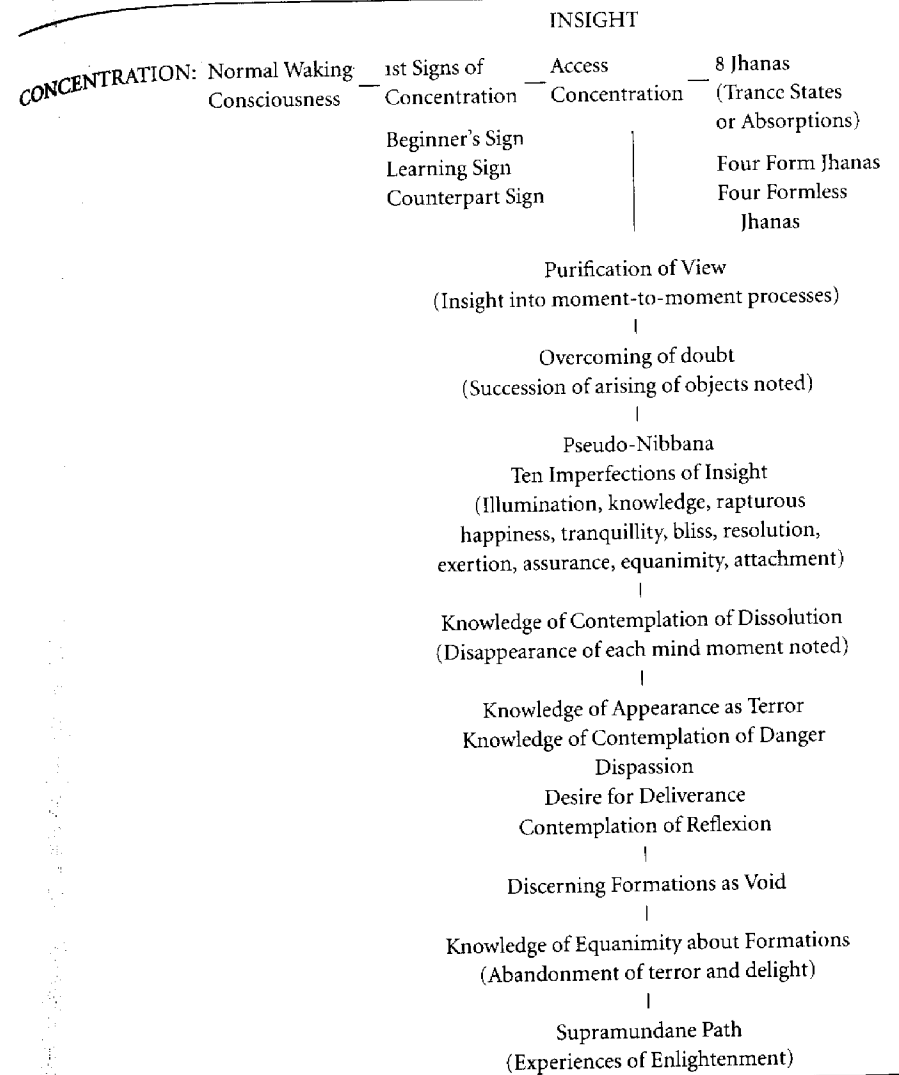
He sees the non-existence of a self of his own . . . he sees of his own self too that it is not the property of another's self. . . . He sees the non-existence of another's self, thus 'There is no other's self anywhere.' He sees of another that that other is not the property of his own self thus 'My owning of that

other's self does not exist.' So this mere conglomeration of formations is seen . . . as voidness of self or property of a self. . . . (Nyanamoli, 1976, p. 763)

Thus, the idealized image that the ego has inevitably held of itself since its infantile origins must now be extinguished, an event that is without parallel in Western dynamic theory.

The meditative path profoundly affects both residues of infantile narcissism. The ego ideal is strengthened while the ideal ego is diminished. These effects directly counter the prevailing intensities of the two that are thought to characterize the pre-meditation, immature personality organizations, where ideal ego outweighs ego ideal (Hanly, 1984).

In the meditative tradition, the emphasis is continually on balancing the forces of concentration and insight, as if the stabilization and gratification of the former allows one to withstand the destabilization of the latter. Even at the threshold of enlightenment, what is said to be required is the simultaneous arising of "concentrated absorption and appreciative analytical understanding" (Guenther, 1974, p. 139), the two processes that have been cultivated up until that point. It is as if the ego ideal must be sufficiently assuaged in order for the hold of ideal ego to be lessened. At the point where absorption and insight precisely balance each other, allowing the full discernment of the voidness of self, the meditator is able to move beyond all residues of the ideal, beyond the last vestiges of narcissism, and into the experience of enlightenment. "Seeing nothing to be taken as 'I' or 'mine' . . . (the meditator) abandons both terror and delight" (Nyanamoli, 1976, p. 765), finally leaving behind the remnants of ego ideal and ideal ego. It is not until this point that the psychic structures of narcissism lose their potential force.



Note: Path of Concentration reads across; path of Insight reads down.

Figure 1. The Buddhist Meditative Path According to the *Visuddhimagga*. Adapted from Nyanamoli, 1976, and Brown, 1986.

## Complications

From the identification of the ego ideal and ideal ego with the concentration and insight practices, respectively, it is possible to describe the effects of meditation on narcissistic pathology and to understand some common psychological concomitants of meditative practices. The strengthening of the ego ideal by the concentration practices leads to a sense of cohesion, stability or serenity that can significantly relieve narcissistic anxieties of emptiness or isolation, producing a kind of "transitional object" to which an individual can turn for refuge. From a psychodynamic perspective, this is a major explanation of the many reports of positive psychotherapeutic effects of meditation in beginning practitioners. Yet if the ego ideal is strengthened without simultaneous insight into the nature of the ideal ego, the experience of the concentration practices may fuel an increasing sense of self-importance or specialness that can paradoxically strengthen the hold of the ideal ego. Individuals affected by such a dynamic may become self-righteous after tasting the fruits of meditation practice, believing themselves to be possessed of a special experience unattainable by those outside their circles. Others, especially those participating in religious groups centered around a charismatic leader, could become vulnerable to a kind of group merger with the idealized leader, who comes to personify the shared ego ideal, that can often lead to a suspension of critical judgment as the ego ideal becomes all important. "Basically, the identification with each other of the members of the small or large group permits them to experience a primitive narcissistic gratification of greatness and power" (Kernberg, 1984, p. 15) that often leads to a desire to act out that merger through unanticipated be-

havior, such as sexual relationships between teachers and group members, or violent acts aimed at non-believers.

When the ideal ego is investigated without sufficient support from the ego ideal, however, other effects occur. Without the stabilization of the concentration practices, those who undertake a too vigorous regime of the insight practices may become vulnerable to a range of fears, anxieties and inadequacies that can prove overwhelming to some. Those practitioners who become morbidly preoccupied with emptiness, show a lack of enthusiasm for living, and become overly serious about themselves and their spiritual calling probably represent a partially compensated attempt to deal with these anxieties. They suffer both from a forced and premature attempt to let go of belief in an abiding self, and from an inadequate ego ideal. Failing to experience union or the exaltation that such union engenders, and failing to satisfactorily project their image of perfection onto objects that can then stimulate their intrinsic capacities for love, they become overly serious, dry and rigidified. In most cases they succeed only in superimposing a new image of the ideal ego onto their preexisting one, this time cloaking the ideal ego in vestments of emptiness, egolessness and non-attachment. Yet the narcissistic attachment to such an image persists.

While these personality characteristics represent but the extremes of each imbalance, their descriptions can be instructive of the various ways in which narcissistic pathology can grow out of the meditative experience. The Buddhist texts are very clear about the need for precise balancing of concentration and insight practices, and, while they do not use the contemporary language of narcissism, it is clear that they are counseling an approach that balances an exalted, equilibrated,

boundless state with one that stresses knowledge of the insubstantiality of the self. When these two experiences are not properly aligned, the jump into enlightenment is prohibited, and the attachment of the self to its own accomplishments remains possible. Meditation may ultimately be conceptualized as a vehicle for freeing an individual from his own narcissism, a liberation that is not complete until the experience of enlightenment. Until that point, the individual is subject to the pressures of his own narcissistic impulses, and the experiences of meditation may be recruited to satisfy those impulses, at the same time that those experiences force a confrontation with narcissistic attachments.

As has been shown, it is possible to trace the impact of the various meditative techniques on the psychic structures of narcissism, two of which, the ideal ego and ego ideal, have been outlined here. The relatively unfulfilled ego ideal, of which the individual may be vaguely aware in the form of yearnings to achieve a state of perfection, and the overly invested ideal ego, of which the individual is likely to be unaware, through the process of denial, are both accessed and transformed by the meditative path. Traditional Buddhist psychology lays great stress on the careful balancing of factors of concentration and insight, on experiences of terror and delight. This emphasis can also be interpreted, in the language of narcissism, to imply a need for the balancing of experiences of the ego ideal with those that confront the ideal ego. It is only when this balance is achieved that both may be abandoned and narcissism, itself, overcome.

To assert, therefore, that the meditative path can begin only when a cohesive self is attained is to run the risk of ignoring meditation's impact on the infantile narcissistic residue. To see meditation as usefully beginning only where Western per-

sonality theory leaves off may preclude an appreciation of how narcissism, itself, can be transformed by the experience of meditation. Eastern psychologies show us that growth need not stop at the so-called "mature" personalities, but in moving beyond these personalities, Eastern methods must confront narcissistic attachments that are recognized by both East and West, although described in different languages. Narcissism is rooted in the infantile state, persists in the adult, and inevitably interacts with the meditative experience. To understand this interaction is to recognize both the transformative power of meditation and the pervasive influence of narcissism.

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