

Introduction

Toward a Buddhist Psychotherapy

I have long been interested in the issue of psychological change. Immersed in Buddhism before beginning my study of Western psychiatry and psychotherapy, I could not help but examine the Western therapeutic approaches that were taught to me in college and medical school through the lens of the East. How consistent were they with what the Buddha taught? I wondered. Could Western psychologies be compatible with a Buddhist psychology that questioned the very reality of the self?

As I learned more and more about the psychoanalytic traditions of the West, I came to appreciate that in their own way they too question the ultimate reality of the conventionally appearing self. I also began to reflect upon how these Western traditions could help me to understand the processes of mental development charted by the great Buddhist psychologists of the past several millennia and modeled for me by the Buddhist teachers I had come in contact with. As I learned more about Buddhism, I came to appreciate that its central tenet of *anatta*, or no-self, does not mean what I had initially

assumed it to mean. The Buddha did not dispute the relative reality of the conventionally appearing self. But he did insist that we tend to give this relational self an absolute status that it does not possess. We think that it is more real than it is, and we expend an extraordinary amount of energy propping it up and protecting it, reinforcing the certainty of our own separate-ness. Both psychotherapy and Buddhist meditation have the potential to undo this tendency, relieving us of our defensive loads. In these chapters I insist that they can work together to sharpen our understanding.

Going back and forth between East and West has allowed me a great luxury. Simultaneously immersed in each, I have been tethered by neither. Instead, I have been able to question, as both traditions encourage, some of the basic assumptions that drive our understanding of the self. Can we transform ourselves? How does psychic change happen? Is therapy necessary? Does meditation alter personality or character? What does psychological healing really mean? The chapters in this collection chart the development of my own thinking as I have written a series of books about psychotherapy from a Buddhist perspective. They reflect the issues I have wrestled with as I have tried to puzzle out the relationship of meditation to psychotherapy, a relationship just at the dawn of its own evolution.

In the earliest series of chapters included here (grouped under the heading "Buddha"), originally articles written in the 1980s for the California-based *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, I looked at Buddhist psychology from a psychodynamic stance, thereby contributing to a translation process that Buddhism has had to go through every time it moves into a new culture. As Buddhism merged with the nature psychology of Taoism in China, for instance, it gave birth to the new form of Ch'an, or Zen, Buddhism. Similarly in the West, our

understanding of the psyche is entrenched in the psychoanalytic tradition, whose basic assumptions and vocabulary about the self have permeated our society. In order for Buddhism to be understood by our culture, it must be reinterpreted in the psychological language of our time. These early articles contributed to that process, taking such basic Buddhist concepts as egolessness, emptiness, the spiritual path, and the Four Noble Truths and discussing and defining them in psychodynamic language, opening up the potential for cross-cultural exchange. They were my own attempt to clarify what I had learned from Buddhism. What I came to appreciate was that the very attempt to interpret my understanding also helped to sharpen and clarify it.

The next set of chapters (grouped under the heading "Freud") were my first attempts to reach out to broader audiences to show how a Buddhist understanding of mind could be integrated with prevailing systems of thought in the West. Originally articles, some were written for psychoanalytic audiences and were designed to introduce Buddhist psychology to those clinicians who were drawn to, but perhaps wary of, the spiritual psychology of the Buddha. Others were written for those already familiar with Buddhism but more wary of Western psychiatry and psychotherapy, people struggling with issues of whether medications like Prozac or emotions like desire and anger could have a place in a Buddhist path. These chapters show the many parallels between the analytic, psychiatric, and Buddhist traditions and use Buddhist psychology to support and reinforce emerging trends in analytic theory that question the existence of a unitary, enduring self. They lay the foundation for an eventual integration of Buddhist and Western psychologies: the possibility of a mindfulness-based psychodynamic psychotherapy, a psychotherapy that does not

take recourse in an absolute, enduring self but that does not deny the sufferings of the self as it conventionally appears.

The third set of chapters (grouped under the heading “Winnicott”)—one article written for an international conference on the place of religion and psychoanalysis in the twenty-first century; another, an outgrowth of my book *Open to Desire*, dedicated to the memory of my dear friend, the psychoanalyst and composer Emmanuel Ghent; and others for presentation to gatherings of artists and curators interested in the interface between Buddhism and contemporary art—describe the paradigm shifts that the intersection of Buddhism with Western culture has evoked. From the making of art to the practice of psychotherapy to the appreciation of intimate relations, the Buddhist influence creates the possibility for both new understandings and new misunderstandings. These chapters, as a group, are the most recent of my writings. They reflect the influence of the work of the British child analyst D. W. Winnicott, whose musings helped pave the way for an interest in Buddhism and an acceptance of alternative models of psychic health by contemporary psychotherapists and their patients.

In the West, or at least in what we think of as the psychologically minded West, one of the most prevalent models of psychological health is of the person who is willing to go deeply into his or her own problems. This model even influences the way many Westerners approach meditation, imagining, as they do, that they should explore the dark sides of their personalities—their fears, anxieties, depressions, and conflicts—while sitting on their meditation cushions. Hidden within this view of mental health is a kind of secret agenda—one that has to do with establishing a sense of certainty about the self, as if it could be known, or exposed, completely; as if we could

dig down, as Freud wished, through the archaeological layers of the self to its roots in order to know it absolutely. Analysis, in this way of thinking, is something that can be directed by the conscious mind, aided in its quest by the analytic tools of free association, transference, and dream interpretation.

Yet in Buddhism—and even in some more recent psychoanalytic schools—there has emerged a different model, one that is less about digging and more about opening. At the root of this difference lies an alternative view of the unconscious. In the classical Freudian view, the unconscious is the repository of forbidden urges and instincts, the awareness of which extends and completes the self. In the Buddhist view, the unconscious represents the potential for enlightened consciousness, the latent knowledge that the self that we normally take to be so real has only relative, not absolute, reality. As Adam Phillips has written, in his analysis of the correspondence between Freud and his colleague and student Sandor Ferenczi, Ferenczi succinctly anticipated this other model. “The patient is not cured by free-associating,” Phillips wrote about Ferenczi’s view, “he is cured *when he can free-associate.*” Ferenczi’s perspective moved in a more Buddhist direction: he felt that healing depended more on a shift in consciousness than an uncovering or resolution of conflict. Free association, for Ferenczi, became an end as well as a means.

There is a famous Tibetan story about a woman named Manibhadra that makes much the same point (Shaw, 1994, p. 22). A householder who was nonetheless engaged in an advanced meditation practice known as tantra, Manibhadra attained enlightenment while carrying water from the village well back to her home. Dropping her pitcher one day and seeing the water gush out of the broken gourd, she was suddenly liberated. The broken pitcher served as a powerful

model of what her meditation was trying to show her. Like the water breaking forth, her consciousness flowed out and merged with all of reality. This jarring loose, or breaking free—this going to pieces without falling apart—is what Buddhism acknowledges as one of the self's secret needs—to be released from a belief in its own absolute reality.

These two models of change—the one of digging and the other of breaking open—are currently in competition in our culture. The desire for self-certainty rubs up against the need to let go. These chapters make the case for a Buddhist corrective to our Western drive for self-certainty and chart a course of integration where psychotherapy can still be imagined, even without the constraint of an intrinsically abiding self. The Buddha anticipated this discussion in one of his most famous teachings in which he dramatically refused to talk about most of what he knew. His teachings, he insisted, were just a “handful of leaves,” tiny in comparison to all the leaves of the forest, to all that he had seen and understood. But they were all that were necessary for liberation, and therefore all that he would talk about. Like a good psychotherapist, the Buddha knew when to keep quiet.

To extrapolate upon the Buddha's insight, Buddhism teaches that it is not how much you know about yourself, it's *how* you relate to what you *do* know that makes a difference. This is a point that one of my American Buddhist teachers, Joseph Goldstein, has made to me over and over again when leading retreats that I have been to. “It's not *what's* happening to you or in you,” he would insist, “it's *how* you relate to it that matters.” The common tendency, Buddhism teaches, is to use whatever is happening to reinforce a distinct feeling of self: to take everything very personally. The alternative, as discerned by the Buddha, is to hold that very feeling of self up for critical

examination whenever it arises. How real is this feeling that drives us, which we ordinarily take so much for granted?

Of the few leaves that the Buddha did display, the ones he talked about most often came to be known as the Four Noble Truths. When I was first learning about Buddhism, I traveled to Thailand with several of my friends and teachers and went to the forest monastery of a renowned meditation master named Achaan Chah. Gathering around him after our arrival, we asked him to explain the Buddha's teachings. He motioned to a glass sitting to one side of him. “Do you see this glass?” he asked us. “I love this glass. It holds the water admirably. When the sun shines on it, it reflects the light beautifully. When I tap it, it has a lovely ring. Yet for me, this glass is already broken. When the wind knocks it over or my elbow knocks it off the shelf and it falls to the ground and shatters, I say, ‘Of course.’ But when I understand that this glass is already broken, every minute with it is precious.”

There is a lot in this story about Buddhism and what it has to offer to Western psychotherapy. The First Noble Truth comes through loudly and clearly: ordinary life, even pleasant and rewarding ordinary life, is tinged with a sense of pervasive unsatisfactoriness because of how fragile and transient everything is; the glass is already broken. The Second Noble Truth is also evident, that clinging to an idea of perfection or permanence or of an absolute, unchanging reality is the cause of suffering. The Third Noble Truth, that there is a kind of happiness not dependent on controlling the outcome of things, came through in the peace of mind that Achaan Chah was modeling for us. And the Fourth Noble Truth, known as the Eightfold, or Middle, Path, was also implicit in his response. Changing the way we relate to what happens to us and in us makes a different relationship possible with transience

and fragility. This change in perspective can be practiced and learned; it allows us not to retreat into nihilism or indulge mindlessly in materialism, but permits us to enjoy the preciousness of the glass while we have it. It is this positive stance that is essential to Buddhism and, I believe, is the source of much of its appeal to the West.

But there is another interpretation of Achaan Chah's parable, one that relates to the way we experience the self, which is also of potential interest to the psychotherapist. Ordinarily, we assume that our feelings of having a self mean that the self is utterly real: unbreakable, enduring, permanent, and absolute. "Really real," as Professor Robert Thurman likes to say. But the Buddhist understanding is that, although the self appears to be real, it is only the appearance that *is* real. The self is not a lasting entity in its own right. It is not separate and distinct from the circumstances that give rise to its appearance. Understanding this crucial distinction enables one to enjoy the self's manifestations without trying to make them more than they really are. The glass can be valued, even treated as precious, while knowing that it is already broken.

While Freud had only glancing contact with the Buddha's psychology, he would have been sympathetic to the succinctness and coherence of his thought. He certainly understood, as the Buddha did, the mind's potential to both obscure and enlighten. His own aspirations were less global than the Buddha's, or Achaan Chah's, but they were marked by a similar economy. He famously remarked, for instance, that the best he could do with psychoanalysis was to bring someone from a state of neurotic misery to one of common unhappiness. He developed a number of strategies designed to elude the ever vigilant, and fearful, ego, including hypnosis, free association, dream analysis, and the analysis of transference, all of which he

hoped to use to dig down into the archaic underpinnings of the self. In his reliance on techniques that could circumvent the rational mind, it was as if he were always searching for something like meditation. By the end of his life, though, Freud became frustrated with the limitations of psychoanalysis and began to talk of it as interminable. Perhaps to free himself from this dilemma, Freud turned his attention to a "death drive" that he named for the Buddhist nirvana. Balancing his earlier focus on eros, he saw in his death drive an urge to destruction or disintegration that seemed to parallel his understanding of the Buddha's definition of nirvana. The Buddha's ideas cast a spell on Freud, but he did not have a true understanding of the word he appropriated.

Nirvana was the Buddha's way of describing the freedom he found when he saw through the mirage of the self, the freedom that Achaan Chah was also trying to communicate in his parable about the glass, recognizing its preciousness while knowing that it was already broken. The Buddha's nirvana is not a drive toward death or disintegration, as Freud naively assumed; it is an ability to accept death and disintegration without falling apart; without twisting, distorting, or tormenting the mind in response. While nirvana once connoted "freedom from rebirth" in South Indian cultures where the endless rounds of death and reincarnation could seem even more interminable than a lengthy psychoanalysis, the freedom that the Buddha taught might more accurately be described as the ability to maintain one's composure in the face of an impermanent, always changing, and apparently imperfect, world (Epstein, 2001, pp. 121–126). While it was most certainly a psychological achievement, nirvana also suggested an underlying reality, one that could be uncovered, or opened to, by those willing to take seriously the Buddha's handful of leaves.

In this way of understanding, nirvana came to represent the freedom that is possible when the self is no longer clung to as an absolute entity. The freedom of nirvana is the freedom that emerges when self-centeredness is no longer organizing reality.

Freud, it seems, was in search of what the Buddha taught. Dreams, jokes, hypnosis, free association, and transference all undermine the sense of a separate, distinct, and unitary self. They take us from our habitual states of consciousness and move us to somewhere less structured, less sure, and less fixed. Yet Freud did not quite grasp the Buddhist unconscious. He mistook nirvana for disintegration and death. It was left to a later generation of psychoanalysts to come a little closer to the Buddha's stance.

In particular, the British analyst D. W. Winnicott moved therapy from a focus on unacceptable instincts and urges to a focus on the unintelligible aspects of emotional experience. "We are poor indeed if we are only sane," he remarked once in a famous footnote. Winnicott had the idea that the opposite of integration (the state of an apparently cohesive self) is not disintegration but something he termed *unintegration*. Here he was moving away from Freud and toward the Buddha. He compared unintegration to what it is like for a child to surrender himself in play, knowing that his mother is in the next room providing what he called "good-enough ego coverage." He also compared it to a lover's consciousness "after intercourse," when the urges are relaxed and the mind and heart are open, and to an artist's mind when unburdened in the studio. He saw the state of unintegration as the foundation of creativity and wrote volumes about the consequences of failing to tap into it. When a child has to manage an intrusive or ignoring parental environment, Winnicott suggested, he or she is forced to develop

a "false" or "caretaker" self, centered in the thinking mind, in order to survive. This false self (which can paradoxically seem "really real") is created at the expense of unintegration, and the capacities for spontaneity, subjectivity, and authenticity are all compromised as a result. Winnicott, in his own way, seemed to be describing something akin to how the Buddhist unconscious could be covered over by early experience.

In bringing, in this book, a psychodynamic light to bear on Buddhism and a Buddhist light to bear on psychoanalysis, I hope to further the dialogue between the two. While Freud and Winnicott were two of the pioneering psychoanalysts of the past hundred years, the Buddha may have been the greatest psychoanalyst of them all. It is a happy accident that his teachings survive in the present day, ready and able to engage with the psychodynamic traditions of the West. Through the quirks of my own personal history, I was in a position to appreciate the words of the Buddha before beginning my official training as a psychotherapist. This work charts the course of my own progress in understanding how the two worlds fit together. It may be read with an eye toward how the confluence of the two traditions helped one therapist envision the exhilarating possibility of surrendering the false self.

References

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