Realization and Embodiment: Psychological Work in the Service of Spiritual Development

John Welwood

Realization and Embodiment:
Psychological Work in the Service of Spiritual Development

John Welwood

Mill Valley, California, USA

The difficulty of fully embodying and actualizing spiritual realization in all the different areas of daily life is addressed. It is argued that psychological conflicts present a major barrier to integrating such realizations, and that psychological work can therefore be an important ally to spiritual work. This is especially true for Western seekers, who are prone to spiritual bypassing—using spiritual teachings and practices to circumvent their unresolved personal issues. The relationships between liberation and individuation, absolute true nature and individuated true nature, and impersonal and personal presence are also discussed.

The technique of a world-changing yoga has to be as multiform, sinuous, patient, all-including as the world itself. If it does not deal with all the difficulties or possibilities and carefully deal with each necessary element, does it have any chance of success?

—Sri Aurobindo

The impersonal is a truth, the personal too is a truth; they are the same truth seen from two sides of our psychological activity; neither by itself gives the total account of Reality, and yet by either we can approach it.

—Sri Aurobindo

WHEN I first encountered Zen in the 1960s, I found myself especially drawn to the mysterious satori—that moment of seeing into one's own nature, when all the old blinders were said to fall away, so that one became an entirely new person, never to be the same again. In D. T. Suzuki's words, "The opening of satori is the remaking of life itself...a complete revolution...cataclysmic" in its consequences. A revelation that led to a whole new way of being— I found this prospect compelling enough to turn my life in that direction.

Many of us who have been involved in meditative practices during the past few decades have had a direct taste of this realization, which inspires great joy and gratitude, while bringing fresh insight and clarity. Yet at the same time I have also developed a profound respect for how difficult it is to embody such realizations in everyday life—especially for modern Westerners who live in the world, rather than in monastic settings. Monastic or retreat situations are designed to help people devote themselves one-pointedly to seeing through the veils of the conditioned mind and realizing Being, spirit, or naked awareness as their own true nature. Yet the full embodiment of such realizations— manifesting as a wise and balanced way of engaging in livelihood, intimate relationships, and the complex challenges of modern society— presents another type of hurdle altogether. We who live as householders, husbands, wives, parents, or working people may also need other methods to help us integrate spiritual realization into our busy, complex lives.

❧ Realization and Transformation ❧

THE HARD truth is that spiritual realization is relatively easy compared with the much greater difficulty of *actualizing* it, integrating it fully into the fabric of one's embodiment and one's daily life. By *realization* I mean the direct recognition of one's ultimate nature, while *actualization* refers to how we live that realization in all the situations of our life. When people have major

spiritual openings, often during periods of intensive practice or retreat, they may imagine that everything has changed and that they will never be the same again. Indeed, spiritual work can open people up profoundly and help them live free of the compulsions of their conditioning for long stretches of time. But at some point after the retreat ends, when they encounter circumstances that trigger their emotional reactivity, their unresolved psychological issues, their habitual tensions and defenses, or their subconscious identifications, they may find that their spiritual practice has barely penetrated their conditioned personality, which remains mostly intact, generating the same tendencies it always has.[1]

Of course, there are many levels of realization, ranging from temporary experiences to more stable attainment that alters one's whole way of being. Yet even among advanced spiritual practitioners who have developed a high degree of insight, power, even brilliance, certain islands—unexamined complexes of personal and cultural conditioning, blind spots, or areas of self-deception—often seem to remain intact within the pure stream of their realization. They may even unconsciously use their spiritual powers to reinforce old defenses and manipulative ways of relating to others. For others, spiritual practice may reinforce a tendency toward coldness, disengagement, or interpersonal distance. How is it possible for spiritual realization to remain compartmentalized, leaving whole areas of the psyche apparently untouched? Why is it so hard to bring the awareness developed in meditation into all the areas of one's life?

Some would say that these problems are signs of deficiency in a person's spiritual practice or realization, and this is undoubtedly true. Yet they also point to the general difficulty of integrating spiritual awakenings into the entire fabric of our human embodiment. It is said in the Dzogchen teachings that only the rare highly endowed person attains full liberation upon realizing the essential nature of mind. For the rest of us, liberation does not follow quickly from realization. As Sri Aurobindo (n.d.) put it: "Realization by itself does not necessarily transform the being as a whole...One may have some light of realization at the spiritual summit of consciousness but the

parts below remain what they were. I have seen any number of instances of that" (p. 98). Because problems with integration are so widespread, we need to consider more fully the relationship between these two different movements in spiritual development: realization and transformation, liberation and complete integration of that liberation in all the different dimensions of one's life.

Realization is the movement from personality to being—leading toward liberation from the prison of the conditioned self. *Transformation* involves drawing on this realization to penetrate the dense conditioned patterns of body and mind, so that the spiritual can be fully integrated into the personal and the interpersonal, so that the personal life can become a transparent vessel for ultimate truth or divine revelation.

In the traditional cultures of Asia, it was a viable option for a yogi to live purely as the impersonal universal, to pursue spiritual development without having much of a personal life or transforming the structures of that life. These older cultures provided a religious context that honored and supported spiritual retreat, and placed little or no emphasis on the development of the individual.[2] As a result, spiritual attainment could often remain divorced from worldly life and personal development. In Asia, yogis and sadhus could live an otherworldly life, have little personal contact with people, or engage in highly eccentric behavior, and still be accepted, supported, and venerated by the community at large.

Many Westerners have tried to take up this model, pursuing impersonal realization while neglecting their personal life, but have found in the end that this was like wearing a suit of clothes that didn't quite fit. Such attempts at premature transcendence—taking refuge in the impersonal absolute as a way to avoid dealing with one's personal psychology, one's personal issues, feelings, or calling—leads to inner denial. And this can create monstrous shadow elements that have devastating consequences, as we have seen in many American spiritual communities in recent years. For whatever reasons, for better or for worse, it has become problematic in our culture to pursue spiritual development that is not fully integrated into the fabric of one's personal experience and interpersonal relationships.

Here is where psychological work might serve as an ally to spiritual practice—by helping to shine the light of awareness into all the hidden nooks and crannies of our conditioned personality, so that it becomes more porous, more permeable to the larger being that is its ground. Of course, what I am describing here is a special kind of psychological self-inquiry, which requires a larger framework, understanding, and aim than conventional psychotherapy. I am hesitant to call this psychotherapy at all, for the word *therapy* has connotations of pathology, diagnosis, and cure that place it in a medical, rather than a transformative, context. Moreover, conventional therapy often involves only talk, failing to recognize ways in which the body holds defensive patterns and also manifests the energies of awakening. Truly transformative psychological work must also help us unlock the body's contractions and gain access to its larger energies.

Of course, spiritual work has a much larger aim than psychological work: liberation from narrow identification with the self-structure altogether and awakening into the expansive reality of primordial being. And it does seem possible to glimpse, and perhaps even fully realize this kind of awakening, whether or not one is happy, healthy, psychologically integrated, individuated, or interpersonally sensitive and attuned. Yet after centuries of divorce between the spiritual and the worldly life, *the increasingly desperate situation of a planet that human beings are rapidly destroying cries out for a new kind of psychospiritual integration*, which has only rarely existed before. Namely, an integration between liberation—the capacity to step beyond the individual psyche into the larger, nonpersonal space of pure awareness—and personal transformation—the capacity to bring that larger awareness to bear on all one's conditioned psychological structures, so that they become fully metabolized, freeing the energy and intelligence frozen inside them, thereby fueling the development of a fuller, richer human presence that could fulfill the still unrealized potential of life on this earth.

For most of my career I have explored what the Eastern contemplative traditions have to offer Western psychology—an inquiry that has been extremely fruitful. I have only the greatest respect and gratitude for the spiritual teachings I have received and for the Asian teachers who have so generously shared them with me. Yet in recent years I have become equally interested in a different set of questions: How might Western psychological understandings and methods serve a sacred purpose, by furthering our capacity to embody our larger awakenings in a more personally integrated way? Is our individuality a hindrance on the path of awakening, as some spiritual teachings would claim, or can true individuation (as opposed to compulsive individualism) serve as a bridge between the spiritual path and ordinary life?

❧ The Challenge of Psychospiritual Integration ❧

THE QUESTION of how psychological self-inquiry could serve spiritual development forces us to consider the complex issue of the relationship between the psychological and the spiritual altogether. Confusions about this are rampant. Conventional therapists often look askance at spiritual practice, just as many spiritual teachers often disapprove of psychotherapy. At the extremes, each camp tends to see the other as avoiding and denying the *real* issues.

For the most part, psychological and spiritual work address different levels of human existence. Psychological inquiry addresses relative truth, personal meaning—the human realm, which is characterized by interpersonal relations and the issues arising out of them. At its best, it also reveals and helps deconstruct the conditioned structures, forms, and identifications in which our consciousness becomes trapped. Spiritual practice, especially of the mystical bent, looks beyond our conditioned structures, identifications, and ordinary human concerns toward the trans-human—the direct realization of the ultimate. It sees what is timeless, unconditioned, and absolutely true, beyond all form, revealing the vast open-endedness, or emptiness, at the root and core of human existence. Yet must these two approaches to human suffering work in different directions? Or could they be compatible, even powerful allies?

If the domain of psychological work is *form*, the domain of spiritual work is *emptiness*—that

unspeakable reality which lies beyond all contingent forms. Yet just as form and emptiness cannot be truly separated, so these two types of inner work cannot be kept entirely separate, but have important areas of overlap: Psychological inquiry can lead to spiritual insight and depth, while spiritual work, in its movement toward embodiment, transformation, and service, calls on us to come to grips with the conditioned personality patterns that block integration.

The question of whether and how psychological work might further spiritual development calls for a new type of inquiry that leads back and forth across the boundary of absolute and relative truth, taking us beyond orthodoxy and tradition into uncharted territory. If, instead of leaping to facile or definitive conclusions, we start by honoring the question itself in a spirit of open inquiry, it takes us right to the heart of the issue of how spirituality in general, and Eastern transplants such as Western Buddhism, in particular, need to develop if they are truly to take hold in, and transform, the modern world.

As a psychotherapist and student of Buddhism, I have been forced to consider this question deeply. My initial interest in psychotherapy developed in the 1960s, at the same time as my interest in the Eastern spiritual traditions. I was inspired to become a psychotherapist largely because I imagined that psychotherapy could be our Western version of a path of liberation. But I quickly found Western psychology too narrow and limited in its view of human nature. And I wondered how I could help anybody else if I didn't know the way out of the maze of human suffering myself. Although I had one great teacher in graduate school—Eugene Gendlin, a pioneer in existential therapy, who taught me much of what has proved useful to me as a therapist—I became quite disillusioned with Western psychology as a whole.

In looking for a way to work on myself and understand my life more fully, I became increasingly drawn toward Buddhism. After finding a genuine master and beginning to practice meditation, I went through a period of aversion to Western psychology and therapy. Now that I had "found the way," I became arrogant toward other paths, as new converts often do. I was also wary of getting trapped in my own personal process, addicted to endlessly examining and processing feelings and emotional issues. In my newfound spiritual fervor, however, I was falling into the opposite trap—of refusing to face the personal "stuff" at all. In truth, I was much more comfortable with the impersonal, timeless reality I discovered through Buddhism than I was with my own personal feelings or interpersonal relationships, both of which seemed messy and entangling, compared with the peace and clarity of meditative equipoise—sitting still, following the breath, letting go of thoughts, and resting in the open space of awareness.

Yet, as I continued studying Tantric Buddhism, with its emphasis on respecting relative truth, I began to appreciate many aspects of Western psychology more fully, perhaps for the first time. Once I accepted that psychology could not describe my ultimate nature, and I no longer required it to provide answers about the nature of human existence, I began to see that it had an important place in the scheme of things. Facing some extremely painful relationship struggles, I began to do my own intensive psychological work. Despite my clinical training, I was surprised at the power of psychological inquiry to help me uncover blindspots, address leftover issues from the past, move through old fears, and open up in a more grounded, personal way, both with myself and with others. This work also helped me approach spiritual practice in a clearer way, not so encumbered by unconscious psychological motivations and agendas.

❧ Cultural Factors East and West ❧

LEARNING TO appreciate the respective value of psychological and spiritual work brought up another set of questions for me: Why was it so easy to see the value of psychological work for Western people, yet so hard to imagine traditional Asian people utilizing the services of a psychotherapist? And why did most of the Eastern spiritual teachers I knew have such difficulty understanding psychological work and its potential value for a spiritual practitioner? What accounts for this disparity?[3]

In presenting my hypotheses about this, I am not attempting to advance a full-blown anthropological theory. Nor do I wish to idealize the societies of ancient India or Tibet, which

certainly had many serious problems of their own. Rather, my intention is to point out some (admittedly generalized) social-cultural differences that may help us consider how we in the West may have a somewhat different course of psychospiritual development than people in the traditional cultures where the great meditative practices first arose and flourished.

Some would argue that psychotherapy is a sign of how spoiled or narcissistic Westerners are— that we can afford the luxury of delving into our psyches and fiddling with our personal problems while Rome burns all around. Yet, though industrial society has alleviated many of the grosser forms of physical pain, it has also created difficult kinds of personal and social fragmentation that were unknown in premodern societies—generating a new kind of psychological suffering that led to the development of modern psychotherapy.

Traditional Asian culture did not engender the pronounced split between mind and body that we in the West know so well. In giving priority to the welfare of the collective, Asian societies also did not foster the division between self and other, individual and society, that is endemic to the Western mind. There was neither a generation gap nor the pervasive social alienation that has become a hallmark of modern life. In this sense, the villages and extended families of traditional India or Tibet actually seem to have built sturdier ego structures, not so debilitated by the inner divisions—between mind/body, individual/society, parent/child, and weak ego/harsh, punishing superego—characteristic of the modern self. The "upper stories" of spiritual development in Asian culture could be built on a more stable and cohesive "ground floor" human foundation.

Early child rearing practices in some traditional Asian cultures, while often far from ideal, were in some ways more wholesome than in the modern West. Asian mothers often had a strong dedication to providing their children with strong, sustained early bonding. Young Indian and Tibetan children, for instance, are continually held, often sharing their parents' bed for their first two or three years. As Alan Roland, a psychoanalyst who spent many years studying cross-cultural differences in Asian and Western self-development, describes Indian child rearing:

Intense, prolonged maternal involvement in the first four or five years with the young child, with adoration of the young child to the extent of treating him or her as godlike, develops a central core of heightened well-being in the child. Mothers, grandmothers, aunts, servants, older sisters and cousin-sisters are all involved in the pervasive mirroring that is incorporated into an inner core of extremely high feelings of esteem...Indian child rearing and the inner structuralization of heightened esteem are profoundly psychologically congruent with the basic Hindu concept that the individual soul is essentially the godhead (atman-brahman). A heightened sense of inner regard and the premise that a person can strive to become godlike are strongly connected...This is in contrast to the Western Christian premise of original sin. (1988, p. 250)

According to Roland, this nurturing quality of the Indian extended family helps the child develop an ego structure whose boundaries are "on the whole more flexible and permeable than in most Westerners," and "less rigorously drawn" (p. 250).[4]

Growing up in extended families, Asian children are also exposed to a wide variety of role models and sources of nurturance, even if the primary parents are not that available. Tibetan tribal villages, for instance, usually regarded the children as belonging to everyone, and as being everyone's responsibility. Extended families mitigate the parents' tendency to possess their children psychologically. By contrast, parents in nuclear families often have more investment in "This is *my* child; my child is an extension of me"— which contributes to narcissistic injury and intense fixations on parents that persist for many Westerners throughout their lives.

Certain developmental psychologists have argued that children with deficient parenting hold onto the internalized traces of their parents more rigidly inside themselves. This might explain why the Tibetans I know do not seem to suffer from the heavy parental fixations that many Westerners have. Their self-other (object-relational) complexes would not be as tight or conflicted as for Westerners who lack good early bonding, and who spend their first eighteen years in an isolated nuclear family with one or two adults, who themselves are alienated from both folk wisdom and spiritual understanding. Asian children would be less burdened by what Guntrip (1969)

considers the emotional plague of modern civilization: ego weakness, the lack of a grounded, confident sense of oneself and one's place in the world.

In addition to fostering strong mother-infant bonding, intact extended families, and a life attuned to the rhythms of the natural world, traditional Asian societies maintained the sacred at the center of social life. A culture that provides individuals with shared myths, meanings, religious values and rituals provides a source of support and guidance that helps people make sense of their lives. In all these ways, a traditional Asian child would likely grow up more nurtured by what Winnicott called the "holding environment"—a context of love, belonging, and meaning that contributes to a basic sense of confidence and to healthy psychological development in general. By contrast, children today who grow up in fragmented families, glued to television sets that continually transmit images of a spiritually lost, fragmented, and narcissistic world, lack a meaningful context in which to situate their lives.

One way these differences manifest is in how people inhabit their bodies. In observing Tibetans, I am often struck by how centered they are in the lower half of the body and how much they are connected to the ground beneath their feet. Tibetans naturally seem to possess a great deal of *hara*—grounded presence in the belly—which is no doubt a result of the factors mentioned above. Westerners, by contrast, are generally more centered in the upper half of their body, and weak in their connection to the lower half.

Hara, which Karlfried Graf Dürckheim (1977) calls the *vital center* or *earth center*, is connected with issues of confidence, power, will, groundedness, trust, support, and equanimity. The child rearing deficiencies, disconnection from the earth, and overemphasis on rational intellect in Western culture all contribute to loss of hara. To compensate for the lack of a sense of support and trust in the belly, Westerners often try to achieve security and control by going "upstairs"—trying to control life with their mind. But behind the ego's attempts to control reality with the mind lies a pervasive sense of fear, anxiety, and insecurity.

Another difference that has important consequences for psychospiritual development is the greater value traditional Asian cultures place on being, in contrast to Western cultures that put more emphasis on doing. Winnicott in particular stressed the importance of allowing a young child to remain in unstructured states of being:

> The mother's nondemanding presence makes the experience of formlessness and comfortable solitude possible, and this capacity becomes a central feature in the development of a stable and personal self...This makes it possible for the infant to experience...a state of 'going-on-being' out of which...spontaneous gestures emerge. (In Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983, p. 193)

Winnicott used the term *impingement* to describe a parent's tendency to interrupt these formless moments, forcing children to separate abruptly from the continuity of their "going-on-being." The child is:

> wrenched from his quiescent state and forced to respond...and to mold himself to what is provided for him. The major consequence of prolonged impingement is fragmentation of the infant's experience. Out of necessity he becomes prematurely and compulsively attuned to the claims of others...He loses touch with his own spontaneous needs and gestures...[and develops] a false self on a compliant basis. (In Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983, p. 193)

Traditional Asian families often give the young child plenty of room and permission just to be, in an unstructured way, free from the pressures to respond and perform that Western parents often place on their children at an early age. Allowed to be in that way, these children would be more comfortable with emptiness, which we could define here as *unstructured being*. But in our culture, which emphasizes doing, having, and achieving at the expense of simply being, emptiness can seem quite alien, threatening, and terrifying. In a family or society that does not recognize or value being, children are more likely to interpret their own unstructured being as some kind of deficiency, as a failure to measure up, as an inadequacy or lack. Thus the Western ego structure seems to form in a more rigid and defended way, in part to ward off a terrifying sense of deficiency born out of fear of the open, unstructured nature of one's very being.

As a result of this brittle ego having to work overtime to compensate for a lack of inner trust and confidence, many Western seekers find that they are not ready, willing, or able to let go of their

ego defenses, despite all their spiritual practice and realization. On a deep, subconscious level, it is too threatening to let go of the little security that their shaky ego structure provides. That is why it also can be helpful for Westerners to work on dismantling their defensive personality structure in a more gradual and deliberate way, through psychological inquiry—examining, understanding, and dissolving all their false self-images, their self-deceptions, their distorted projections, and their habitual emotional reactions, one by one—and developing a fuller, richer connection with themselves in the process.

In sum, to the extent that traditional Asian children grew up supported by a nurturing holding environment, they would be more likely to receive more of what Winnicott defined as the two essential elements of parenting in early childhood: sustained emotional bonding and space to be, to rest in unstructured being. As a result, these children would tend to grow up with a more stable, grounded sense of confidence and well-being—what we call in the West, "ego strength"—in contrast to the self-hatred, insecurity, and shaky sense of self that modern Western people often suffer from.

In discussing Asian child development here, I am speaking of influences in the first few years of childhood, when the ego structure first starts to coalesce. In later childhood, many Asian parents become much more controlling, exerting strong pressure on children to conform and to subordinate their individuality to collective rules and roles. Thus Roland (1988) notes that most neurotic conflicts among modern Asians are found in the area of family enmeshment and difficulties with self-differentiation. Indeed, while Eastern culture more generally values and understands being and emptiness, as well as interconnectedness, the West values and has a deeper appreciation of individuation.

Cultivating one's own individual vision, qualities, and potentials is of greater significance in the West than in traditional Asia, where spiritual development could more easily coexist alongside a low level of individuation. Here is where psychological work may serve another important function for Westerners, by helping them to individuate—to listen to and trust their own experience, to develop an authentic personal vision and sense of direction, and to clear up the

psychological conflicts that prevent them from authentically being themselves.[5]

Robert Thurman (1998) has argued that since Buddhism is a path of individuation, it is inaccurate to characterize this tradition as not promoting individual development. Certainly the Buddha gave birth to a new vision that encouraged individuals to pursue their own spiritual development, instead of depending on conventional religious rituals. In that broad sense, Buddhism can be regarded as a path of individuation. But this is a different model of individuation from the one that has developed in the West. As Roland (1988) notes, individuation in Asian cultures was usually limited to the arena of spiritual practice, rather than supported as a general norm.

The Western notion of individuation involves finding one's own unique calling, vision, and path, and embodying these in the way one lives. To *become oneself* in this sense often involves innovation, experimentation, and the questioning of received knowledge. As Anne Klein (1995) notes: "Tibetans, like many Asians who have grown up outside Western influence, do not cultivate this sense of individuality" (p. 26).

In traditional Asia, the teachings of liberation were geared toward people who were, if anything, *too* earthbound, too involved in family roles and social obligations. The highest, nondual teachings of Buddhism and Hinduism—which show that who you really are *is* absolute reality, beyond *you*—provided a way out of the social maze, helping people discover the transhuman absolute that lies beyond all worldly concerns and entanglements. Yet these teachings rest on and presume a rich underpinning of human community, religious customs, and moral values, like a mountain arising out of a network of foothills and valleys below. The soulful social and religious customs of traditional India and Tibet provided a firm human base out of which spiritual aspirations for a transhuman absolute, beyond human relationships and human society, could arise.

Because the traditional Asian sense of self is embedded in a soulful culture rich in tradition, ritual, close-knit family and community life, people in these cultures did not lose themselves or become alienated from their own humanness in the way that Westerners have. And since soul—

the deep, rich, colorful qualities of our humanness—permeated the whole culture, the need to develop an individuated soul never assumed the importance that it has in the West. Never having lost their soul, traditional Asians never had to develop any consciousness about how to find it—that is, how to individuate in a distinctly personal way.

In the modern West, it is quite common to feel alienated from the larger social whole—whose public spaces and architecture, celebrations, institutions, family life, and even food, are lacking in nourishing soul-qualities that allow people to feel deeply connected to these aspects of life, as well as to one another. The good news, however, is that the soullessness of our culture is forcing us to develop a new consciousness about forging an individuated soul—an authentic inner source of personal vision, meaning, and purpose. One important outgrowth of this is a refined and sophisticated capacity for nuanced personal awareness, personal sensitivity, and personal presence.

This is not something the Asian traditions can teach us much about. If the great gift of the East is its focus on *absolute true nature*—impersonal and shared by all alike—the gift of the West is the impetus it provides to develop an *individuated expression of true nature*—which we could also call *soul* or *personal presence*.[6] Individuated true nature is the unique way that each of us can serve as a vehicle for embodying the suprapersonal wisdom, compassion, and truth of absolute true nature.

We in the West clearly have much to learn from the Eastern contemplative teachings. But if we only try to adhere to the Eastern focus on the transhuman, or suprapersonal, while failing to develop a grounded, personal way of relating to life, we may have a hard time integrating our larger nature into the way we live.

✷ Spiritual Bypassing ✷

WHILE MANY Eastern teachers are extremely warm, loving, and personal in their own way, they often do not have much to say about the specifically personal side of human life.[7] Coming out of traditional Asian societies, they may have a hard time recognizing or assessing the personal, developmental challenges facing their Western students. They often do not understand the pervasive self-hatred, shame, and guilt, as well as the alienation and lack of confidence in these students. Still less do they detect the tendency toward spiritual bypassing—using spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep personal, emotional "unfinished business," to shore up a shaky sense of self, or to belittle basic needs, feelings, and developmental tasks, all in the name of enlightenment. So they often teach self-transcendence to students who first of all need to find some ground to stand on.[8]

Spiritual practice involves freeing consciousness from its entanglement in form, matter, emotions, personality, and social conditioning. In a society like ours, where the whole earthly foundation is weak to begin with, it is tempting to use spirituality as a way of trying to rise above this shaky ground. In this way, spirituality becomes just another way of rejecting one's experience. When people use spiritual practice to try to compensate for low self-esteem, social alienation, or emotional problems, they corrupt the true nature of spiritual practice. Instead of loosening the manipulative ego that tries to control its experience, they are further strengthening it.

Spiritual bypassing is a strong temptation in times like ours when achieving what were once ordinary developmental landmarks—earning a livelihood through dignified, meaningful work, raising a family, sustaining a long-term intimate relationship, belonging to a larger social community—has become increasingly difficult and elusive. Yet when people use spirituality to cover up their difficulties with functioning in the modern world, their spiritual practice remains in a separate compartment, unintegrated with the rest of their life.

For example, one woman I know went to India at age seventeen to get away from a wealthy family that had provided her with little love or understanding, and no model of a meaningful life. She spent seven years studying and practicing with Tibetan teachers in India and Nepal, did many retreats, and had many powerful realizations. She experienced states of bliss and inner freedom lasting for long periods of time. Upon returning to Europe, however, she could barely function in the modern world. Nothing made any sense to her, and she did not know what

to do with herself. She became involved with a charismatic man, and wound up having two children by him before she knew what had happened to her. In looking back at that time she said: "This man was my shadow. He represented all the parts of myself I had run away from. I found him totally fascinating and became swept up in a course of events over which I had no control. Clearly, all my spiritual practice had not touched the rest of me—all the old fears, confusions, and unconscious patterns that hit me in the face when I returned to the West."

Using spirituality to make up for failures of individuation—psychologically separating from parents, cultivating self-respect, or trusting one's own intelligence as a source of guidance—also leads to many of the so-called "perils of the path": spiritual materialism (using spirituality to shore up a shaky ego), grandiosity and self-inflation, "us vs. them" mentality, groupthink, blind faith in charismatic teachers, and loss of discrimination. Spiritual communities can become a kind of substitute family, where the teacher is regarded as the good parent, while the students are striving to be good boys or good girls, by toeing the party line, trying to please the teacher-as-parent, or driving themselves to climb the ladder of spiritual success. And spiritual practice becomes co-opted by unconscious identities and used to reinforce unconscious defenses.

For example, people who hide behind a schizoid defense (resorting to isolation and withdrawal because the interpersonal realm feels threatening) often use teachings about detachment and renunciation to rationalize their aloofness, impersonality, and disengagement, when what they really need is to become more fully embodied, more engaged with themselves, with others, and with life. Unfortunately, the Asian emphasis on impersonal realization makes it easy for alienated Western students to imagine that the personal is of little significance compared with the vastness of the great beyond. Such students are often attracted to teachings about selflessness and ultimate states, which seem to provide a rationale for not dealing with their own psychological wounding. In this way, they use Eastern teachings to cover up their incapacity in the personal and interpersonal realm.

People with a dependent personality structure, who try to please others in order to gain approval and security, often perform unstinting service for the teacher or community in order to feel worthwhile and needed. They confuse a codependent version of self-negation with true selflessness. Spiritual involvement is particularly tricky for people who hide behind a narcissistic defense, because they use spirituality to make themselves feel special and important, while supposedly working on liberation from self.

Spiritual bypassing often adopts a rationale based on using absolute truth to deny or disparage relative truth. Absolute truth is what is eternally true, now and forever, beyond any particular viewpoint. When we tap into absolute truth, we can recognize the divine beauty or larger perfection operating in the whole of reality. From this larger perspective, the murders going on tonight's news, for instance, do not diminish this divine perfection, for the absolute encompasses the whole panorama of life and death, in which suns, galaxies, and planets are continually being born and dying. However, from a *relative* point of view—if you are the wife of a man murdered tonight—you will probably not be moved by the truth of ultimate perfection. Instead you will be feeling human grief.

There are two ways of confusing absolute and relative truth. If you use the murder or your grief to deny or insult the higher law of the universe, you would be committing the relativist error. You would be trying to apply what is true on the horizontal plane of *becoming* to the vertical dimension of pure *being*. The spiritual bypasser makes the reverse category error, the absolutist error. He or she draws on absolute truth to disparage relative truth. The logic might lead to a conclusion like this: Since everything is ultimately perfect in the larger cosmic play, grieving the loss of someone you love is a sign of spiritual weakness.

Psychological realities represent relative truth. They are relative to particular individuals in particular circumstances. Even though one may know that no individual death is ultimately important on the absolute, transhuman level, one may still feel profound grief and regret about a friend's death—on the relative, human level. Because we live on both these levels, the opposite of whatever we assert is also true in some way. Jesus' advice, "Love thine enemies" and "Turn the other cheek," did not prevent him from expressing

his anger toward the money changers in the Temple or the hypocritical Pharisees. Thus our everyday experiences may often appear to be at odds with the highest truth. This creates uncertainty and ambiguity. For many people, the disparity between these two levels of truth is confusing or disturbing. They think reality has to be all one way or the other. In trying to make everything conform to a single order, they become new age pollyannas or else bitter cynics.

Since we live on two levels as human beings, we can never reduce reality to a single dimension. We are not just this relative body-mind organism; we are also absolute being/awareness/presence, which is much larger than our bodily form or personal history. But we are also not *just* this larger, formless absolute; we are also incarnate as this particular individual. If we identify totally with form—our body-mind/personality—our life will remain confined to known, familiar structures. But if we try to live only as pure emptiness, or absolute being, we may have a hard time fully engaging with our humanity. At the level of absolute truth, the personal self is not ultimately real; at the relative level, it must be respected. If we use the truth of no-self to avoid ever having to make personal statements such as, "I want to know you better" to someone we love, this would be a perversion.

A client of mine who was desperate about her marriage had gone to a spiritual teacher for advice. He advised her not to be so angry with her husband, but to be a compassionate friend instead. This was certainly sound spiritual advice. Compassion is a higher truth than anger; when we rest in the absolute nature of mind—pure open awareness— we discover compassion as the very core of our nature. From that perspective, feeling angry about being hurt only separates us from our true nature.

Yet the teacher who gave this woman this advice did not consider her *relative* situation—that she was someone who had swallowed her anger all her life. Her father had been abusive and would slap her and send her to her room whenever she showed any anger about the way he treated her. So she learned to suppress her anger, and always tried to please others and be "a good girl" instead.

When the teacher advised her to feel compassion rather than anger, she felt relieved because this fit right in with her defenses. Since anger was terrifying and threatening to her, she used the teaching on compassion for spiritual bypassing— for refusing to deal with her anger or the message it contained. Yet this only increased her sense of frustration and powerlessness in her marriage.

As her therapist, taking account of her relative psychology, my aim was to help her acknowledge her anger and relate to it more fully. As a spiritual practitioner, I was also mindful that anger is ultimately empty—a wave arising in the ocean of consciousness, without any solidity or inherent meaning. Yet while that understanding may be true in the absolute sense, and generally valuable for helping dissolve attachment to anger, it was not useful for this woman at this time. Instead, she needed to learn to pay more attention to her anger in order to move beyond a habitual pattern of self-suppression, to discover her inner strength and power, and to relate to her husband in a more active, assertive way.

Given that compassion is a finer and nobler feeling than anger, how do we arrive at genuine compassion? Spiritual bypassing involves imposing on oneself higher truths that lie far beyond one's immediate existential condition. My client's attempts at compassion were not entirely genuine because they were based on rejecting her own anger. Spiritual teachers often exhort us to be loving and compassionate, or to give up selfishness and aggression, but how can we do this if our habitual tendencies arise out of a whole system of psychological dynamics that we have never clearly seen or faced, much less worked with? People often have to feel, acknowledge, and come to terms with their anger before they can arrive at genuine forgiveness or compassion. That is relative truth.

Psychological inquiry starts there, with relative truth—with whatever we are experiencing right now. It involves opening to that experience and exploring the meaning of that experience, letting it unfold, step by step, without judging it according to preconceived ideas. As a therapist, I find that allowing whatever arises to be there as it is and gently inquiring into it leads naturally in the direction of deeper truth. This is what I call psychological work in the service of spiritual development.

Many people who seek out my services have done spiritual practice for many years. They do not suffer from traditional clinical syndromes, but from some impasse in their lives that their spiritual practice has failed to penetrate: They cannot

maintain a long-term relationship, feel real joy, work productively or creatively, treat themselves with compassion, or understand why they continue to indulge in certain destructive behaviors.

I have often been struck by the huge gap between the sophistication of their spiritual practice and the level of their personal development. Some of them have spent years doing what were once considered the most advanced, esoteric practices, reserved only for the select few in traditional Asia, without developing the most rudimentary forms of self-love or interpersonal sensitivity. One woman who had undergone the rigors of a Tibetan-style three-year retreat had little ability to love herself. The rigorous training she had been through only seemed to reinforce an inner discontent that drove her to pursue high spiritual ideals, without showing any kindness toward herself or her own limitations.

Another woman had let an older teacher cruelly manipulate her. She had a habitual tendency from childhood to disregard her own needs and feelings, which, using "dharma logic," she lumped in the category of samsaric hindrances. In another community the head teacher had to step down because he had begun to feel like a fraud. In our work together he came to see that all his spiritual ambitions were infested with narcissistic motivation. They had been a way of avoiding his psychological wounding and achieving a position where others would see him as special and important, rather than the helpless person he felt like on the inside.

❧ Spiritual Superego ❧

IN ADDITION to spiritual bypassing, another major problem for Western seekers is their susceptibility to the "spiritual superego," a harsh inner voice that acts as relentless critic and judge telling them that nothing they do is ever quite good enough: "You should meditate more and practice harder. You're too self-centered. You don't have enough devotion." This critical voice keeps track of every failure to practice or live up to the teachings, so that practice becomes more oriented toward propitiating this judgmental part of themselves than opening unconditionally to life. They may subtly regard the saints and enlightened ones as father figures who are keeping a watchful eye on all the ways they are

failing to live up to their commitments. So they strive to be "dharmically correct," attempting to be more detached, compassionate, or devoted than they really are. In trying to live up to high spiritual ideals, they deny their real feelings, becoming cut off from their bodily vitality, the truth of their own experience, and their ability to find their own authentic direction.

Spiritual seekers who try to be more impartial, unemotional, unselfish, and compassionate than they really are often secretly hate themselves for the ways they fail to live up to their high ideals. This makes their spirituality cold and solemn. Their self-hatred was not created by the spiritual teaching; it already existed. But by pursuing spirituality in a way that widens the gap between how they are and how they think they should be, they wind up turning exquisite spiritual teachings on compassion and awakening into further fuel for self-hatred and inner bondage.

This raises the question of how much we can benefit from a spiritual teaching as a set of ideals, no matter how noble those ideals are. Often the striving after a spiritual ideal only serves to reinforce the critical superego—that inner voice that tells us we are never good enough, never honest enough, never loving enough. In a culture permeated by guilt and ambition, where people are desperately trying to rise above their shaky earthly foundation, the spiritual superego exerts a pervasive unconscious influence that calls for special attention and work. This requires an understanding of psychological dynamics that traditional spiritual teachings and teachers often lack.

❧ Overcoming Praise and Blame: A Case Study ❧

THE FOLLOWING case study illustrates both how spiritual teaching and practice can be used to reinforce psychological defenses, and how psychological work can be a useful aid to embodying spirituality in a more integrated way.

Paul had been a dedicated Buddhist practitioner for more than two decades. He was a husband, father, and successful businessman who had recently been promoted to a position that involved public speaking. At first, he took this as an interesting challenge, but after a few experiences in front of large audiences, he started feeling

overwhelmed by anxiety, worry, tension, sleeplessness, and other physical symptoms. At first, he tried to deal with his distress by meditating more. While these periods of practice helped him regain some equilibrium, the same symptoms would start to recur when he was about to face an audience again. After a few months of this, he gave me a call.

From the Buddhist teachings, Paul knew the importance of not being attached to praise and blame, two of the eight worldly concerns—along with loss and gain, pleasure and pain, success and failure—that keep us chained to the wheel of suffering. Yet it was not until his fear of public speaking brought up intense anxiety about praise and blame that he realized just how concerned he was about how people saw him. Recognizing this was extremely upsetting for him.

At first Paul waxed nostalgic about his periods of retreat, when he felt detached from such concerns, and we discussed how living in the world often brings up unresolved psychological issues that spiritual practice is not designed to address. As our work progressed, he realized that he used detachment as a defense, to deny a deeper, underlying fear about how other people saw him.

He had developed this defense in childhood as a way to cope with not feeling seen by his parents. His mother had lived in a state of permanent tension and anxiety, and regarded him as her potential savior, rather than as a separate being with his own feelings and life apart from her. To shield himself from her pain and intrusiveness, Paul had developed a defensive stance of not feeling his need for her, and by extension, for other people in his life.

Having tried all his life not to care about how people regarded him, he was particularly attracted to the Buddhist teachings of no-self when he first encountered them. After all, in the light of absolute truth there is nobody to be seen, nobody to be praised, nobody to be blamed—and Paul found great comfort in this. Yet on the relative level he carried within himself a denied and frustrated need to be seen and loved. In denying this need, Paul was practicing defensiveness, not true nonattachment. And he was using spiritual teachings as a rationale for remaining stuck in an old defensive posture.

How could Paul be truly detached from praise and blame as long as he had a buried wish to be loved and appreciated, which he couldn't admit because it felt too threatening? Before he could truly overcome his anxieties about praise and blame, he would first have to acknowledge this wish—which was frightening and risky.

Along with his conflicted feelings about being seen, Paul also had a fair share of buried self-hatred. As his mother's appointed savior, he had desperately wanted her to be happy, and felt guilty about failing to save her. In fact, he was stuck in many of the ways his mother was stuck. His guilt and self-blame about this made him hypersensitive to blame from others.

So Paul was doubly trapped. As long as he could not acknowledge the part of him that felt, "Yes, I want to be seen and appreciated," his frustrated need for love kept him tied in knots, secretly on the lookout for others' praise and confirmation. And his inability to say, "No, I don't exist for your benefit," kept him susceptible to potential blame whenever he failed to please others.

Yes and *no* are expressions of desire and aggression—two life energies that philosophers, saints, and psychologists, from Plato and Buddha to Freud, have considered particularly problematic. Unfortunately, many spiritual teachers simply criticize passion and aggression instead of teaching people to unlock the potential intelligence hidden within them.

The intelligent impulse contained in the yes of desire is the longing to expand, to meet and connect more fully with life. The intelligence contained in no is the capacity to discriminate, differentiate, and protect oneself and others from harmful forces. The energy of the *genuine, powerful no* can be a doorway to strength and power, allowing us to separate from aspects of our conditioning we need to outgrow. Our capacity to express the basic power of yes and no often becomes damaged in childhood. And this incapacity becomes installed in our psychological makeup as a tendency to oscillate between compliance and defiance, as Paul exemplified in his attitude toward others—secretly feeling compelled to please them, yet secretly hating them for this at the same time.

As long as Paul failed to address his unconscious dynamic of compliance and defiance, his spiritual practice could not help him stabilize true equanimity, free from anxiety about praise and blame. Although he could experience freedom

from praise and blame during periods of solitary spiritual practice, these realizations remained compartmentalized, and failed to carry over into his everyday functioning.

There were two defining moments in our work together, in which Paul connected with his genuine yes and no. These two moments are also of interest in highlighting the difference between psychological and spiritual work.

Before Paul could find and express his genuine yes—to himself, to others, to life—he had to say no to the internalized mother whose influence remained alive within him: "No, I don't exist to make you happy, to be your savior, to give your life meaning." But it was not easy for him to acknowledge his anger and hatred toward his mother for the ways he had become an object of her own narcissistic needs. Quoting spiritual doctrine, Paul believed it was wrong to hate. Yet in never letting himself feel the hatred he carried unconsciously in his body, he wound up expressing it in covert, self-sabotaging ways. I did not try to push past his inner taboo against this feeling, but only invited him to acknowledge his hatred when it was apparent in his speech or demeanor. When Paul could finally let himself feel his hatred directly, instead of judging or denying it, he came alive in a whole new way. He sat up straight and broke into laughter, the laughter of an awakening vitality and power.

Articulating his genuine no, the no of protection—"I won't let you take advantage of me"—also freed him to acknowledge his hidden desire, his dormant yes—"Yes, I want to be seen for who I am, the being I am in my own right, apart from what I do for you." The second defining moment happened as Paul acknowledged this need to be seen and loved for who he was—which triggered a surge of energy coursing through him, filling his whole body. Yet this was also scary for him, for it felt as though he were becoming inflated. And for Paul, with his refined Buddhist sensibilities, self-inflation was the greatest sin of all—a symptom of a bloated ego, the way of the narcissist who is full of himself.

Seeing his resistance, I encouraged him to explore, if only for a few moments, what it would be like to let himself become inflated, to feel full of himself, and to stay present with that experience. As he let himself fill up and inflate, he experienced himself as large, rich, and radiant. He felt like a sun-king, receiving energy from the gods above and below, radiating light in all directions. He realized that he had always wanted to feel this way, but had never allowed himself to expand like this before! Yet now he was letting himself be infused by the fullness that had been missing in his life—the fullness of his own being. To his surprise, he found it a tremendous relief and release to allow this expansion at last.

As Paul got over his surprise, he laughed and said: "Who would have thought that letting myself become inflated could be so liberating?" Of course, he wasn't acting out a state of ego-inflation, but rather feeling what it was like to let the energy of desire, fullness, and spontaneous self-valuing flow through his body. In this moment, since he was according himself the recognition he had secretly sought from others, he did not care about how others saw him. Nor was there any desire to lord his newfound strength over anyone. He was enjoying the pure radiation of his inner richness and warmth—let others respond as they may.

Many spiritual seekers who suffer, like Paul, from a deflated sense of self, interpret spiritual teachings about selflessness to mean that they should keep a lid on themselves and not let themselves shine. Yet instead of overzealously guarding against ego-inflation, Paul needed to let his genie out of the bottle before he could clearly distinguish between genuine expressions of being such as power, joy, or celebration, and ego-distortions such as grandiosity and conceit.

Since *need* was such a dirty word in Paul's worldview, he had used his spiritual practice as a way to overcome it. However, trying to leap directly from denial of his need for love to a state of needlessness was only spiritual bypassing—using spiritual teachings to support an unconscious defense. When he stopped fighting his need, he was able to connect with a deeper force within it—*a genuine, powerful yes to life and love*—which lessened his fixation on outer praise and blame. Paul discovered that this essential yes was quite different from attachment and clinging; it contained a *holy longing* to give birth to himself in a new way. Indeed, as Paul discovered his inner fire, value, and power through unlocking his genuine yes and no, he became less defensive, more open to others and to the flow of love.

๏ Differentiated and Undifferentiated Being ๏

THIS CASE example illustrates how unconscious psychological issues can distort someone's understanding of spiritual teachings and interfere with fully embodying them. In addition, Paul's ambivalence, self-denial, and self-blame blocked his access to deeper capacities such as strength, confidence, and the ability to connect with others in a genuinely open way. We could call these capacities *differentiated expressions of being or qualities of presence*. If the absolute side of our nature—undifferentiated being—is like clear light, the relative side—differentiated being—is like a rainbow spectrum of colors contained within that light. *While realizing undifferentiated being is the path of liberation, embodying qualities of differentiated being is the path of individuation* in its deepest sense: the unfolding of our intrinsic human resources, which exist as seed potentials within us, but which are often blocked by psychological conflicts.

While realization can happen at any moment, it does not necessarily lead, as we have seen, to actualization. Although I may have access to the transparency of pure being, I may still not have access to the human capacities that will enable me to *actualize that realization* in the world. I may not be able to access my generosity, for instance, in situations that require it, if it is obstructed by unconscious beliefs that reinforce an identity of impoverishment and deficiency. If these unconscious beliefs are not brought to light and worked with, generosity is unlikely to manifest in a full and genuine way.

In the Buddhist tradition, differentiated being is often described in terms of "the qualities of a buddha"—wisdom, great clarity, compassion, patience, strength, or generosity. Although some lineages do not emphasize these qualities, others, such as Tibetan Vajrayana, have developed a wide range of transformational practices designed to cultivate various aspects of them.

Since these deeper capacities are often blocked by unresolved psychological issues, working with these conflicts directly can provide another way, particularly suited to Westerners, to gain access to these differentiated qualities of presence and integrate them into our character and functioning. After all, most problems in living are the result of losing access to those capacities—power, love, flexibility, confidence, or trust—that allow us to respond creatively to the challenging situations at hand. In the process of recognizing and working through our psychological conflicts, these missing capacities often become more available.

Because Western seekers generally suffer from a painful split between being and functioning, they need careful, specific guidance in bridging the gap between the radical openness of pure being and being in the world. Unfortunately, even in spiritual traditions that emphasize the importance of integrating realization into daily life, special instructions about how to accomplish this integration are often not very fully elaborated. Or else it is not clear how the instructions, formulated for simpler times and a simpler world, apply to handling the complexities of our fast-paced world, navigating the perils of Western-style intimate relationships, or overcoming the apparent gap many people feel between realizing impersonal being and embodying it in personal functioning. By helping people work through specific emotional conflicts that obscure their deeper capacities, psychological work can also help them bring these capacities more fully into their lives. This kind of work is like cultivating the soil in which the seeds of spiritual realization can take root and blossom.[9]

The more we cultivate the full range of human qualities latent in our absolute true nature, the richer our quality of personal presence becomes, as we begin to embody our true nature in an individuated way. This type of individuation goes far beyond the secular, humanistic ideal of developing one's uniqueness, being an innovator, or living out one's dreams. Instead, it involves forging a vessel—our capacity for personal presence, nourished by its rootedness in a full spectrum of human qualities—through which we can bring absolute true nature into form—the "form" of our person.

By *person* I do not mean some fixed structure or entity, but the way in which true nature can manifest and express itself in a uniquely personal way, as the ineffable suchness or "youness" of you. How fully the suchness of *you* shines through—in your face, your speech, your actions, your particular quality of presence—is partly grace, but also partly a result of how much you have worked on polishing your vessel, so that it becomes transparent. Thus

individuation, which involves clarifying the psychological dynamics that obscure our capacity to fully shine through, is not opposed to spiritual realization. It is, instead, a way of becoming a more transparent vessel—*an authentic person who can bring through what is beyond the person in a uniquely personal way*.

In the secular humanistic perspective, individual development is an end in itself. In the view I am proposing here, individuation is not an end, but a path or means that can help us *give birth to our true form,* by clearing up the distortions of our old false self. As we learn to be true to our deepest individual imperatives, rather than enslaved to past conditioning, our character structure no longer poses such an obstacle to recognizing absolute true nature or embodying it. Our individuated nature becomes a window opening onto all that is beyond and greater than ourselves.

❧ Conscious and Subconscious Identity ❧

SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS generally explain the cause of suffering in global, *epistemological* terms—as the result of ignorance, misperception, or sin—or in *ontological* terms—as a disconnection from our essential being. Buddhism, for instance, traces suffering to the mind's tendency to grasp and fixate—on thoughts, self-images, egocentric feelings, and distorted perceptions—as well as to ignore the deeper source of our experience—the luminous, expansive, and creative power of awareness itself. Western psychology, by contrast, offers a more specific *developmental* understanding. It shows how suffering stems from childhood conditioning; in particular, from frozen, distorted images of self and other (object relations) that we carry with us from the past. Since it understands these distorting identities as relational—formed in and through our relationships with others—psychotherapy explores these self-other structures in a relational context—in the healing environment of the client-therapist relationship.

Since spiritual traditions do not generally recognize how the ego-identity forms out of interpersonal relationships, they are unable to address these interpersonal structures directly. Instead, they offer practices—prayer, meditation, mantra, service, devotion to God or guru—that shift the attention to the universal ground of being in which the individual psyche moves, like a wave on the ocean. Thus it becomes possible to enter luminous states of transpersonal awakening, beyond personal conflicts and limitations, without having to address or work through specific psychological issues and conflicts. Yet while this kind of realization can certainly provide access to greater wisdom and compassion, it often does not touch or alter impaired relational patterns which, because they pervade everyday functioning, interfere with integrating this realization into the fabric of daily life.

Spiritual practice exerts a powerful global effect on the psyche by undermining the central linchpin of the ego—the identification with a fixed self-concept, which I call the *conscious identity* (Welwood, 1996). The conscious identity is a self-image which allows us to imagine that we are something solid and substantial. From a Buddhist or ontological perspective, this egoic identity serves as a defense against the reality of emptiness—the open dimension of being, with all its uncertainty, impermanence, and insubstantiality—which the ego interprets as a threat to its existence. Yet looked at from a psychological perspective, the conscious identity also functions as a defense against an underlying sense of inner deficiency, which we originally felt in childhood in response to lack of love, connection, or acceptance. Even though our conscious identity is designed to overcome this sense of deficiency, inadequacy, or unworthiness, we nonetheless tend to identify subconsciously with the very lack we are trying to overcome. This deeply embedded sense of deficiency—originating in our childhood helplessness in the face of primal fear, anxiety, or pain—is what I call the *subconscious identity*.

The ego structure as a whole thus contains both a deficient, subconscious identity and a compensatory, conscious identity. Because subconscious identities are more hidden and threatening than conscious identities, they are also much harder to acknowledge, dislodge, and transform. If we are to liberate ourselves from the whole compensatory/deficient ego structure, it seems necessary to address the interpersonal dynamics that are embedded in its fabric. The relational context of psychotherapy can often provide a direct, focused, and precise method of working through the subconscious dynamics that keep this whole identity structure intact.[10]

Paul, for example, had developed a conscious identity based on being in control of his life and "not caring what people think." This defensive control structure was a way of compensating for an underlying sense of deficiency that caused him to feel overwhelmed in interpersonal relations. His spiritual practice had partially undermined this conscious identity by providing direct access to his larger being. But since he also used spiritual practice as a way to bypass, or not deal with, his subconscious identity—his deeper sense of deficiency, stemming from childhood—it could not totally free him from the grip of his identity structure.

Since Paul did not like to feel his deficient identity and its associated feelings of anxiety, frustration, and tension, he was happy to practice spiritual methods that helped him move beyond, and thus avoid, this aspect of his ego structure. Indeed, it was much easier for him to be present with the open, spacious dimension of being than with his anxiety and helplessness when they were triggered. Since his capacity for presence did not extend into the totality of his psyche, it was not of much use to him when he was up against his worst demons.

Through the psychological work we did together, Paul was able to acknowledge his underlying sense of deficiency and open up to the feelings of vulnerability and helplessness associated with it. Always before, in situations where obsessive thoughts of praise and blame overwhelmed him, he would try to let go of these thoughts as he would in meditation. This was certainly of value in its own way. But our work together also gave him another way to work with this situation. He learned to bring his attention into his belly, feel into the sense of deficiency directly, and bring attention to the subconscious belief at its core: "I can't handle this." In this way, he began to work directly with his subconscious identity when it became activated, instead of just trying to move beyond it. In conjunction with his meditative practice, this kind of psychological work helped Paul deconstruct his whole identity structure, so that he could begin to relax in situations that triggered his deepest fears.

Of course, some might argue that Paul's problem was that he failed to truly understand or apply the spiritual practices and teachings he had received. That may well be. But I don't believe his spiritual practice was a failure. It served him well in many ways. It also brought him to the point where his most primitive, unresolved psychological issues were fully exposed and ready to be worked with. Yet he needed another set of tools to address these issues directly, to penetrate the unconscious roots of his tendency to distort and compartmentalize the spiritual teachings he had received, and to become a more integrated human being.

In the end, Paul felt that his psychological and spiritual work were both of great benefit, in complementary ways. The psychological work also had a clarifying effect on his spiritual practice, by helping him make an important distinction between absolute emptiness—the ultimate reality beyond self—and relative, psychological emptiness—his inner sense of lack and deficiency. Because he had previously conflated these two types of emptiness, his spiritual practice had often served to reinforce his subconscious sense of unworthiness.

❧ Toward a Further Dialogue Between East and West ❧

THE ESSENTIAL difference between Western and Eastern psychology is their differing emphasis on the personal and the impersonal. Unfortunately, contemporary interpretations of the Eastern spiritual teachings often make *personal* a synonym for *egoic*, with the result that the capacity for richly expressive personal presence becomes lost. Although personal presence may not be as vast and boundless as impersonal presence, it has a mystery and beauty all its own. Martin Buber regarded this "personal making-present" (*personale vergegenwärtigung*) as central to what he considered the primary unit of human experience: the I-Thou relationship (Schilpp & Friedman, 1967, p. 117). Indeed, to appreciate the power and meaning of personal presence, we need only to look into the face of someone we love. As the Irish priest John O'Donohue once remarked, "In the human face infinity becomes personal." While impersonal presence is the source of an equal concern and compassion for all beings (*agape*, in Western terms), personal presence is the source of *eros*—the intimate resonance between oneself, as this

particular person, and another, whose particular suchness we respond to in a very particular way.

We in the West have been exposed to the most profound nondual teachings and practices of the East for only a few short decades. Now that we have begun to digest and assimilate them, it is time for a deeper level of dialogue between East and West, in order to develop greater understanding about the relationship between the impersonal absolute and the human, personal dimension. Indeed, expressing absolute true nature in a thoroughly personal, human form may be one of the most important evolutionary potentials of the cross-fertilization of East and West, of contemplative and psychological understanding. Bringing these two approaches into closer dialogue may help us discover how to transform our personality in a more complete way—developing it into an instrument of higher purposes—thus redeeming the whole personal realm, instead of just seeking liberation from it.

Buddhism, for one, has always grown by absorbing methods and understandings indigenous to the cultures to which it spread. If psychotherapy is our modern way of dealing with the psyche and its demons, analogous to the early Tibetan shamanic practices that Vajrayana Buddhism integrated into its larger framework, then the meditative traditions may find a firmer footing in our culture through recognizing and relating to Western psychology more fully. A more open and penetrating dialogue between practitioners of meditative and psychological disciplines could help the ancient spiritual traditions find new and more powerful ways of addressing the Western situation and thus have a greater impact on the direction our world is taking.

In sum, we need a new framework of understanding that can help us appreciate how psychological and spiritual work might be mutually supportive allies in the liberation and complete embodiment of the human spirit. We need to re-envision both paths for our time, so that psychological work can function in the service of spiritual development, while spiritual work can also take account of psychological development. These two traditions would then recognize each other as convergent streams, both furthering humanity's evolution toward realizing its potential as:

—the being that can open, and know itself as belonging to the universal mystery and presence that surrounds and inhabits all things, and

—the being that can embody that larger openness as human presence in the world, through its capacity to manifest all the deeper resources implicit in its nature, thus serving as a crucial link between heaven and earth.

Notes

1. Certainly, under the right circumstances, spiritual practice by itself can totally transform the personality—for instance, under the close personal guidance of a great teacher, or in a person with strong innate aptitudes, or in spiritual retreat of many years' duration. (In Tibet, certain kinds of transformation were said to require a twelve-year retreat.)

2. Although living an otherworldly life was a common and accepted lifestyle in traditional Asia, I am not suggesting that all or even most Asian spiritual adepts display this otherworldly strain. Many have lived in the world with a high level of personal integration.

What is true in general is that the essential Eastern teachings focus on realizing absolute true nature, rather than on cultivating an individuated, personal expression of that nature. Of course, different Asian cultures and traditions, and even different schools within a single tradition, such as Buddhism, differ greatly in how much they stress the impersonal element. I have chosen not to address these distinctions here, since to do so would require a much longer treatment.

3. This is of course a generalization. I am speaking here of most Tibetans who have grown up in a traditional family/community context. I do know some modern Tibetans, even teachers, who suffer from personal, psychological wounding, for whom psychotherapy might be of benefit. I have also spoken with one Tibetan who has a sophisticated understanding of Western psychology and recognizes its benefits for Tibetans who live in the West. In his words:

> Tibetans will need more psychological care as they come into the modern world, even in India. We are seeing more disruptive behavior as well as cognitive problems in children coming out of Tibet.
>
> For myself, since I've chosen to live in the West, rather than in a monastery, I find that Buddhist teachings alone are not adequate to meet my own

needs to function effectively in this world. I have to turn to Western psychology for basic things like interpersonal skills, learning to communicate well, and having meaningful relationships.

Considering how some Tibetan monks who come to the West deal with emotional and relationship problems they encounter here, we can infer that the traditional spiritual practices alone are not enough for helping them deal with these problems. In many ways Buddhism does not have the specificity that is required to handle the emotional and relational situations that they encounter in a Western cultural context.

4. One telling sign of the difference between Eastern and Western child rearing influences: Tibetan teachers, who traditionally begin compassion practices by instructing students to regard all sentient beings as their mothers, have been surprised and dismayed by the difficulty many American students have in using their mothers as a starting point for developing compassion.

5. Roland (1988) reports an interesting case of two Indian women married to American men whom he worked with for whom "it took many years of psychoanalysis with a warm, supportive analyst gradually to be able to have a more individualized self" and thus function normally in American society (p. 198).

6. This is not to say that most Westerners are truly individuated or even interested in this. Unfortunately, individualism—which is a lower-level approximation—is the closest most modern Westerners come to individuation. Nevertheless, genuine individuation is a real possibility here, and often the most alienated are those who feel most called in this direction.

7. As Karlfried Graf Dürckheim (1992) points out, for most Eastern teachers:

> ...the individual form acquired in the process [of spiritual awakening] is not taken seriously as such...This, however, is the very thing that counts for Western masters...[freedom] *to become* the person that one individually is. For us in the West, it is more important that a new worldly form should emerge *from* true nature and witness to Being...than that the ego should dissolve *in* true nature and *in* Being. (p. 100)

Speaking of the Japanese Zen masters he studied with, Dürckheim notes:

> As masters, they appear in a supreme form in which every personal element has been converted into something suprapersonal, almost remote from the world, or at least not involved in it. One rarely, if ever, meets the happy or suffering individual, through whose joy-filled, sorrow-filled eye the otherworldly glimmers in a unique personal sense...Is such a master a person in our sense of the term? (p. 101)

8. Teachers from the Far East—often from China, Japan, or Korea, who work with the body-mind, emphasizing the connection to the earth in their teaching—are one major exception to this. For example, teachers of T'ai Chi, Ch'i Kung, and Aikido always stress the importance of the belly center and good grounding. Many Zen teachers also rarely speak of spiritual realization, but instead have their students attend to the earthy details of chopping wood and carrying water.

9. Of course, personal psychological work is not in itself sufficient for spiritual transformation or for the integration of our larger being into our personal functioning. In addition to finding a spiritual teacher or practice that strips away egocentricity, particular individuals may also need to work on their body, their livelihood, their intimate relationships, or their relation to community. But psychological work can help people recognize the areas where they need work and clear away some obstacles in these areas.

10. The relationship with a spiritual master can also address these dynamics, especially for those rare students who have a close, personal connection with a teacher who carefully supervises them.

References

Aurobindo. (n.d.). *Letters on Yoga*. Vol. 1. Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Birth Centenary Library.

Dürckheim, K. G. (1977). *Hara: The vital center of man*. London: Unwin.

Dürckheim, K. G. (1992). *Absolute living: The otherworldly in the world and the path to maturity*. New York: Arkana.

Greenberg, S., & Mitchell, S. (1983). *Object relations in psychoanalytic theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Guntrip, H. (1969). *Schizoid phenomena: Object relations and the self*. New York: International Universities Press.

Klein, A. (1995). *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: Buddhists, feminists, and the art of the self*. Boston: Beacon.

Roland, A. (1988). *In search of self in India and Japan: Toward a cross-cultural psychology*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Schillp, P. A., & Friedman, M. (Eds.). (1967). *The philosophy of Martin Buber*. LaSalle, IL: Open Court.

Thurman, R. (1998). *Inner revolution: Life, liberty, and the pursuit of real happiness*. New York: Riverhead Books.

Welwood, J. (1996). *Love and awakening: Discovering the sacred path of intimate relationship*. New York: HarperCollins.