

## MINDFULNESS, SPIRITUAL SEEKING AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

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*Charles T. Tart:* A topic of great interest to both of us, as well as to many colleagues, is the Eastern and Western traditions promoting *mindfulness* and personal growth. These disciplines are based on the recognition that people are often not clear about the actual state of affairs they find themselves in, what they are doing and why—we are all too *mindless*. Such mindlessness causes immense amounts of human suffering, suffering which is stupid and unnecessary, because if you knew what you were doing and why you were doing it, you would have the possibility of acting more adaptively.

Eastern spiritual traditions have specific techniques for developing mindfulness, usually formal meditation practices of some sort, such as *Vipassana* mindfulness meditation. These Eastern practices consider the development of mindfulness as an ultimate goal, leading to enlightenment.

In the West we have many kinds of psychotherapy which is our kind of recognition that peoples' experience and behavior are often determined by unconscious reasons. That is, people often do not fully know what they are doing, why they are doing it, or have a really accurate grasp of the situation they are in. Consequently there is a lot of unnecessary suffering. There are many techniques whereby you can train people in psychotherapy to become more mindful and insightful, and, as a consequence, lead a happier and more effective life.

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Now the question I am particularly interested in and that I would like us to discuss is this: Consider our Western mindfulness traditions-our psychological, psychiatric, and humanistic growth traditions, to give them a very broad name-what can they accomplish that is either not done at all or not done efficiently in the traditional Eastern mindfulness approaches? What do you do as a psychotherapist to help your clients become mindful, which would probably not happen if they sat on their cushions by themselves practicing Vipassana or other traditional Eastern forms of meditation?

DOES THE MIND THAT LOOKS INSIDE REALLY WANT TO KNOW?

*Arthur J. Deikman:* One of the basic ideas behind Western psychotherapy is that our minds have endeavored to protect us by shielding us from things that would make us too unhappy or frightened. Thus, if a person consciously decides *to* look inside and see what may be motivating certain actions, the same mind that is looking is also trying to make sure that he or she does not see something that his or her mind has classified *as* too stressful to bear in the past. This factor sets certain limits on what the person himself can see.

*the  
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On the other hand, an outside observer, the therapist, does not usually have the same blocks on seeing certain things that the client may have. So by virtue of the fact that the therapist is on the outside looking at the client's behavior, he or she is in a position to say, "Hey, this area here is pretty covered up; what is going on there?" The therapist can put pressure on the client's psychological systems in a way that the client would find hard or impossible to do. Thus the client, the person seeking greater mindfulness, has a blind spot; they do not see certain areas of mental and emotional functioning, especially if they are problematic areas. Much of the training of a therapist in Western psychotherapy has to do with learning to detect those places of restricted functioning and begin to open them up, so the underlying problems they conceal can be dealt with. Psychotherapy training is fairly systematic; it is directed specifically to that.

*CIT:* I would like you to elaborate on the training. Any intelligent person, for instance, can see that somebody else is behaving stupidly and give them advice on how to behave in a way that would be generally accepted as a more sensible (given cultural norms) way to behave. What is different about the therapist?

*AJD:* A therapist might say, "You must have received lots of advice by now on what you obviously should be doing, but you

are not doing it. So clearly there is something else going on. What are your own thoughts upon the fact that this comes up? How do you react inside when someone tells you that you should do such and such?" You direct the client's attention to the fact that he or she is making choices. The client may not know why he or she is making those particular choices, but there is an emotionally important basis for it. Instead of mistakenly seeing the maladaptive behavior as a lack of will power, you help the client see that the symptoms represent strategic choices, ways of apparently solving a problem. Then you can try to help the client become more mindful, to discover the unconscious assumptions) on which the presenting problems and solutions are based.

ISN'T MINDFULNESS ENOUGH?

*CIT:* Let me push this deeper. Suppose I am viewing this same situation of a client's maladaptive behavior from the perspective of an Eastern mindfulness tradition. I would agree that your analysis is right: if the person keeps doing something stupid, there must be a reason. But in terms of what to do, I would instruct the client that he or she should take up mindfulness meditation. "You must look inside and understand your mind by systematically focusing attention on it. Then you will understand what causes your problems and resolve them."

*maladaptive  
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perspective  
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*AJD:* Well, I would say that is naive because the same mind that is looking inside is, as I said before, also determined to protect the person by not getting into any areas that are dangerous. So some kind of outside assistance is needed, directed specifically to the problem areas, the areas that the client's mind does not want to look at.

*CIT:* How does the therapist get around this problem of resistance?

*AJD:* Basically the therapist has to be aware of what aspect the client is resisting and the nature of the resistance, and to skillfully point it out to the client. The symptom serves a function. The therapist needs to clarify that function. This skillful pointing out must be based on an attitude that combines a certain firmness and intent to break through the resistance, with a genuine respect for the client's nature and symptoms.

It may not be easy to see the defenses or the resistances and not be caught yourself by them. But an easy thing, one you learn relatively early in your training, is to begin to notice places in which there is a tiny gap, a gap in logic or a gap in emotional affect. The

client may be talking about something, for example, but the affect, the emotional tone, does not quite match. You may find it profitable to direct the client's attention to such gaps: "I notice you were saying such and such, but you did not seem very happy while you were talking about it." You pick up one of these places where the defenses are imperfect.

It is as if the mind tried to put everything under the rug, but it cannot get everything under the rug at the same time.

The free association technique, for example, is often used as a way of by-passing that controlled, hiding self. The more a person just allows their thoughts and emotions to flow, the more the underlying issue will manifest itself in the content. Then the client may begin to see connections where there was isolation before, as well as the therapist seeing connections that may be helpful in guiding therapy. Working with these gaps is a major dimension of Western psychotherapy. Freud was important in pointing out the usefulness of working *with* inconsistencies, although he certainly was not the only contributor in this area.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF THE THERAPEUTIC RELATIONSHIP

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Freud also highlighted another important dimension of psychotherapy. This is based on the observation that the client's strategic solutions will manifest in therapy in the relationship with the therapist—the transference—as well as in relationships with other important people. So in psychotherapy you can make use of that relationship manifestation, be aware of it, be alert for it, point it out, and explore it. This analysis or focus on the transference is very useful and important because it is a here and now situation.

If you look at the literature on the Eastern traditions, indeed on the mystical traditions in general, you can see in the anecdotes examples of where a master, if he is skilled, is using some daily interaction to reflect information back to the person about what he or she is actually doing, regardless of what he or she says or believes they are doing. They make use of everyday behavior to show students what they are actually doing.

Sometimes such teaching by reflection can involve transference responses, too. But apparently the use of transference is sporadic and we have to infer it from anecdotes. In the psychotherapeutic tradition you can do much more focused work with *it*, particularly in dealing with dependency and idealization of the therapist.

In the Eastern traditions veneration of the Master, the Teacher, the guru, the lama, or someone else like that, is usually built into the system as a central feature. The teacher is represented as vastly superior to the student or even as fully enlightened. While there is a sense in which this superiority is true, there is another sense in which it is not. Unfortunately the student may use that belief in the great superiority of the teacher as an excuse to avoid necessary self-confrontation. "Of course the Master can do that apparently unspiritual or negative action because he is enlightened and special, etc., and I am just down here, an ordinary sinner, so I cannot expect to understand what is happening, much less criticize it ... especially since I need the Master's blessing and guidance if I am to have any chance of spiritual progress." There are all kinds of evasions of growth that can take place in that framework of veneration of the teacher. The knowledge of human psychology gained from Western psychotherapy has shown us that analysis of dependency fantasies is extremely helpful for maturation.

*evasions  
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#### ACTIVE FOCUS ON RELATIONSHIPS

*CIT:* Let me play devil's advocate here. A master might respond by agreeing that students have projections about the master, but since the students are supposed to be mindful of what they are doing, you can see this simply as an opportunity for them to observe what they are doing. What is different in the psychotherapeutic approach to bringing about mindfulness of projections?

*AJD:* Our Western psychotherapeutic approach might say not only is there an opportunity, but we are going to be active in making sure that opportunity is realized. The fact that the opportunity is there does not mean the person is going to see it or use it. Western psychotherapy has to do with attempting to make sure the person sees it by using the technical approach of the psychotherapy situation.

*CIT:* Could you give me examples of the sort of techniques that would be used in an active way to make the person use the opportunity?

*AJD:* For instance, suppose a client might be rather embarrassed to talk about something or is afraid of bringing in some area of his or her life. When this area is touched on, you notice this embarrassment or fear. You might then inquire as to what they were expecting from you, and it might turn out they were

expecting a very critical, denigrating kind of response. So you might inquire further, "Why does that seem plausible to you?"

We assume, of course, that you are not the type of person the client expects to be dealing with, that you have not actually been behaving that way in the therapy sessions. Then, as you explore in depth the details of the fantasy the client has towards you, the underlying bias becomes more clear. You and your client can become aware of the specific images and tendencies that are distorting perception.

*responses  
to the  
therapist  
that  
are out of  
proportion*

What I have described is an example of transference, responses to the therapist that are out of proportion. Usually these responses are revealed only over time in certain behaviors. For example it might come out in the form that the client never presents his or her critical thoughts of the therapist, or the client is always presenting himself or herself as weak. Suppose your client is a therapist herself, for example. At some point you might say, "We have worked together for two years, you are a therapist, you are very bright, but apparently, I do everything right. Isn't it a *little* odd that you have never commented on a single mistake of mine or a single failing?"

*CIT:* So we have an interesting note here. The therapist admits weakness, admits his or her humanity, instead of being perfect. This is very different from working with a Teacher who claims to be or *is* seen as perfect.

*AiD:* I would not use the word "admit." The position would be: "Of course I make errors and mistakes, of course you have some awareness of this. So the fact that it is never voiced does not reflect either that I am perfect or that you are oblivious to it. It means you have certain concerns about what would happen if you were to voice them. It would be valuable-s-and would increase your mindfulness-to find out what those concerns are."

*CIT:* Let us go back a little more to the issue of directing the activity of therapy. Insofar as I understand them correctly, the Eastern traditions would generally argue that a person cannot observe himself or herself very well when they first begin to practice meditative mindfulness. This is because there are "obscurations," blocks to clear perception, in the mind. *But* the really important thing people need to develop is the power of observation *per se*. In classical Vipassana mindfulness meditation you are supposed to watch what is happening *now*. You get distracted, but the instruction is to come back to the focus of attention as soon as you know that you have become distracted. Quite aside

from specific insights you may have while doing this, what you train is the ability to observe *per se*. You build up general purpose "observation muscles" by keeping up the practice, always bringing your mind back to the task.

I have no doubt that with this kind of practice many people do develop a greatly increased capacity to observe internal events in general. Why do you feel this is not enough from the therapeutic point of view? Elaborate on why active assistance from the therapist is an improvement over pure mindfulness cultivation.

#### WHY ISNT PURE MINDFULNESS ENOUGH?

*AJD:* It does not seem to be enough, judging by my own scattered observations of people who practice only meditative disciplines. From a theoretical point of view, it comes back to what I said earlier, that such training of the mind may be to observe more clearly what it sees, but there can be a dynamic there, an activity in the person to make sure that certain things are *not* seen. That dynamic is not necessarily taken care of by meditation exercises *per se*. (I will add, though, as I discussed in *The Observing Self* [Deikman, 1982], that I think this heightening and focus on the observing self is an important activity in both meditation and psychotherapy, and an important link between them.) So developing skill in self-observation is helpful, but Western psychotherapy is a more dynamic process. An important component of the Western view of the mind is that we are continually trying to resolve conflicting wishes, needs, hopes, and aspirations. The importance and subtlety of resolving conflicts is not dealt with sufficiently in the Eastern traditions, insofar as I understand them.

*developing  
skill  
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self-observation  
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helpful*

To elaborate on this, conflicts arise not so much because reality is so inherently conflictual, although it is complex enough, but because each of us grows up in a world comprised primarily of one or two vitally important people, our parents, and they represented the world to us in a particular way. So we took in their distortions, produced by their own conflicts and adapted to their bias as if they were an accurate representation of the world. These early, distorted adaptations then become forgotten or are repressed or otherwise shut off from conscious awareness. In our present life we react to the general world on the basis of what we learned earlier, that is we systematically bias our perceptions of the world and our relationships with other people through this early, distorted learning and its subsequent projection onto current reality. The projection of this early learning onto one's spiritual teacher can be quite an obstacle.

**CTT:** So you would agree with the position I have advanced (Tart, 1986) that it is possible that someone might practice some kind of insight meditation and in general get very good at observing more and more precisely what is happening, get relatively enlightened, but still have certain areas of personal functioning that they never looked at because of defenses that deflect attention?

**AID:** Absolutely.

#### MEDITATIVE INSIGHTFULNESS AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

**CTT:** Now there is something implicit in what we have discussed earlier, and I would like to see if you will agree with this. A person who became skilled at insight meditation or other forms of self-observation, such as Gurdjieffian self-observation, will probably have an advantage at being able to pick up things quickly if they go into psychotherapy. Yes?

**AiD:** What does "skilled" at insight meditation mean?

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**CTT:** Suppose we *start* with a model of a person who is relatively insensitive to their inner feelings and the subtleties of their experience. Psychologically sophisticated outside observers might independently agree, for instance, that this person is fairly agitated in a given situation, but the person honestly reports that he feels calm. Or outside observers might independently agree that the person's behavior suggests a mixture of fear and jealousy, but the person reports, to the best of his or her ability to sense their experience, only that they are feeling jealous. After successful training in traditional insight meditation or other self-observation techniques, the person is now able to sense agitation in a similar situation where he could not sense it before. If he now can report a mixture of feelings of both fear and jealousy, I would say that person is becoming better at self-observation, "skilled" at it. As Shinzen Young expressed it, gross experiences become more articulated into subtler components of experience (Young, in Tart, 1989).

**AID:** I generally find that people's styles do not change all that much. There are people who are very well tuned in on inner processes and they sensitively pick up cues about situations, and there are people for whom that sensitivity is almost like a foreign process. These latter kind of people can make some progress in the direction of more sensitivity, but a therapist might have to work differently with them than with the other clients. So I do not know if you can take various personality styles, have them do



insight meditation and get the result that someone who was relatively obtuse in that respect becomes sensitive. If that happened, I would think that would be an advantage for someone undergoing psychotherapy, but I do not know enough about the empirical data of what happens to those who practice meditation to say much about it.

*CIT:* So you are saying people might maintain their habits of sensitivity or lack thereof.

*AJD:* It might be a cognitive habit, a personality style or a genetic predisposition.

*a cognitive  
habit,  
a personality  
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genetic  
predisposition*

*CIT:* To recognize anger, an insensitive person might simply have to learn to observe that their fists are clenched and infer anger, even if they have not internally "felt" it yet. Another person might get a subtle little tight feeling in their chest long before anything manifests in their observable behavior, and immediately know they are feeling angry.

*AJD:* There are some people who, when you ask them to free associate, or to "tune in" on their feelings, just go right to it. There are others who just do not seem to get it, and you have to work differently.

#### USING PSYCHOTHERAPY TO AID MEDITATIVE DEVELOPMENT

*CIT:* Suppose a person sincerely seeking personal and spiritual growth was planning to spend a considerable amount of time doing insight meditation in one of the classical Eastern modes. Let us assume you were hired as a consultant, with the idea of adding some aspects of psychotherapy to the meditation practice or retreat to make it more "efficient." What would you do? What would you suggest? Assume for the moment that you have great resources available for this project, rather than worrying about practicalities.

*AJD:* Let us think about the kind of concentrated practice you would have in a retreat. What length of time are we considering?

*CIT:* Let us assume one to three months.

*AJD:* It would go something like this. Each person would have the opportunity, two or three times a week, to meet individually with a therapist to explore whatever issues were coming up in the context of their meditative practice. It should be the same therapist for each session for a given person.

Ideally psychotherapy should be long term, as this allows the rhythms of a client's life to bring up a variety of important material. On the other hand, here the therapeutic work would take advantage of the time frame of the retreat. If you have, say, a month, and you know that you are going to meet with someone eight to twelve times, you might work in a more focused way than if you felt it was a more open-ended situation.

*CIT:* In practical terms, you are calling for about one full-time therapist for every ten people or so. Suppose we have less ideal conditions, where, for example, you only had one therapist for every hundred people or so. How could a therapist delegate some of the work of therapy so that people could do various things themselves or in groups that do not require the presence of a therapist?

*AJD:* You can do a lot in group therapies, but then that addresses a different level of phenomenon, how people behave in groups. This can be quite useful for people, but it would take a fairly long time for the group process to begin to reveal the individual's psychological processes, unless it was one of these quasi-groups in which the therapist worked individually with a person in the group while the other people just watched, or something similar.

*a  
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But I do not think there is a substitute for the one-to-one relationship with the therapist. Therapy does not really consist of a bunch of separate techniques that you can farm out. There is a lot of art and a lot of mystery to the process. Books can tell you what to do, but not when to do it. This issue of timing and finding a way of working that meets the client's personality takes a while to develop. The answer to your question could be that one therapist cannot do it.

#### USING MEDITATION TO AID TRADITIONAL PSYCHOTHERAPY

*CTT:* Let us look at this issue from the opposite approach. Suppose you had a number of clients who were scheduled for psychotherapy, and I said, "What could you ask them to learn from a meditative tradition that you think could facilitate their psychotherapy?" You could have meditation teachers as consultants if you want or teach aspects of meditation, but what would you ask people to learn, to practice?

*AJD:* I am not sure. I have had a little experience with clients who were practicing meditation, and also with clients who, in the course of therapy, raised a question about taking up meditation.

In the latter case, I referred them to meditation teachers. I did not find that meditating was a significant help for my clients' psychotherapeutic issues. My own feeling is that the main power of meditation is in terms of spiritual development; however the knowledge of how to use such meditation and for which people and under what circumstances is not really within my ken. So I would not want to fool around in an area for which I am not really trained and for which I do not have the specific knowledge. I might even jeopardize or interfere with the potential use of the meditation for its intended spiritual purpose. If a client thought it might be useful, if they wanted to try it, I would refer them to a meditation teacher, but generally I would not "prescribe" meditation.

#### GOALS OF PSYCHOTHERAPY AND SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

*CIT:* How are you distinguishing growth in psychotherapy from spiritual development here?

*AJD:* I could characterize them both as having the goal of increased *realism*, but the realism with which psychotherapy is concerned is at a different level than the realism which the mystical techniques address.

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of  
increased  
realism*

I think it is important that therapists have an appreciation of the reality that the spiritual disciplines reflect because that will inform what the therapist does in an overall sense. It will affect how he or she views a human being and what outcomes the therapist can see as possible.

In psychotherapy, you are basically working to help the client clarify the motivations that underlie behavior that is frustrating and restricting him or her at the level of interpersonal relationships and also with regards to their work efficiency and creativity. Such limiting behaviors and experiences might include anxiety and depression, restrictions on intimacy, self-defeating behavior, and the like. Now all kinds of behaviors might be improved in the course of spiritual development, but only as a secondary by-product of something that really has a different focus. Indeed, spiritual development may require a certain degree of health to have things go well. Thus I could see psychotherapy as providing a very important foundation from which someone might gain access to larger dimensions of reality. But psychotherapy is not a spiritual discipline *per se*.

*CIT:* One of the ways I have compared Eastern and Western approaches to growth is that both agree that increasing mindfulness is good, but they have a different set of beliefs of what

human beings ultimately are and what their possibilities are. In this sense, Western psychotherapy has a very limited view of what a person can be, compared to the mystical traditions (both Eastern and Western).

*AJD:* Yes, absolutely. I think that limited view is a largely unrecognized problem in Western psychotherapy.

*CIT:* I recall that Freud said something to the effect that the best we can hope for as a result of growth is ordinary suffering, without added neurotic suffering, or something cheerful like that!

*most  
people  
can  
deal  
with  
ordinary  
suffering*

*AJD:* In my experience, most people can deal with ordinary suffering. It is the added neurotic suffering that breaks our back. Maybe that is what Freud meant.

#### FAITH AND SKEPTICISM

*CIT:* You mentioned skepticism. Let us follow this up. Obviously *science* is, in a sense, institutionalized doubt, and it has gotten us a long way....

*AJD:* Institutionalized doubt? I do not know what you mean.

*CIT:* **In** my understanding of the basic process of science (Tan, 1972; Tart, 1975, pp. 11-58) you do not simply accept things as they are, you ask why they are that way; you want to look behind the obvious. Someone may give you a plausible sounding explanation, but it is your job as a scientist to doubt it, because we know that just because something sounds plausible and rational does not guarantee that it really explains the state of affairs. The plausible explanations you create as a scientist-s-the theories-are always subject to test, as we can always rationalize any pattern of events in front of us. Your theory has to make verifiable predictions to be a good scientific theory and you have to test those predictions to see if they actually work out.

*AJD:* You really think that is what science is about?

*CIT:* That is an important aspect.

*AJD:* An aspect of it, yes.

*CIT:* A very important aspect of it. Now most spiritual traditions, in contrast, talk continuously about *faith*, not doubt; they advocate respecting and venerating the tradition and the teacher. Do you see a place for doubt in spiritual growth?

*AJD:* Yes. I think you frequently get distortions of the mystical tradition in which this veneration and faith are misunderstood. If you believe that sincerity is extremely important in the spiritual quest, then for a person to pretend to a faith, to pretend that he or she has complete faith when actually they have real questions or doubts, is a forced position of the mind that is not very sound. In Sufism and in Zen Buddhism, as well, if you look carefully at the talks or teaching materials *per se*, you will see that they take a dim view of someone who never has any doubts. Faith in the mystical sense probably has a much more profound meaning than we are accustomed to assign to it, so I do not know that doubt is at all incompatible with deep faith.

*CIT:* Let me press you a little on this. Take for instance, the Sufi teaching story (Shah, 1970b; pp. 84-85) about the learned Dervish who heard these hermits out on an island mispronouncing their sacred chant. He corrected them and told them the right way, then sailed away. As his ship drew away, he could hear them saying it correctly, but then they fumbled and went back to their old, incorrect way. But soon one of the hermits came out to him on his ship, walking on the water, to ask him how to pronounce correctly, as they could not remember! One reading of that is obviously that faith is what really matters, not technical skill *per se*. There are many teaching stories in many traditions with this theme.

*the  
learned  
Dervish*

*AJD:* I do not think that story illustrates faith so much as it does sincerity.

*CIT:* How can we distinguish faith and sincerity?

*AJD:* Sincerity is honesty of intention. Faith has to do with belief, especially a belief that may be challenged by ordinary experience. So really I think they are two different concepts. Someone's sincerity could be expressed in the fact that he or she does not believe. The seeker wants the truth. but he does not believe or does not trust the teacher or the teachings. Being honest and sincere enough to express those doubts would be more important than someone saying, "Oh, the teacher is just wonderful, and I have no doubts about him or his teaching."

#### SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT AS PSYCHOTHERAPY

*CIT:* Let us consider an earlier point in more depth. You made clear separation between what psychotherapy can do and what spiritual development is about. You agreed that psychotherapy might be a basis for more effective spiritual development, but it is not the same thing.

In many mystical traditions you can find a theory or description of the ordinary human condition that one can read as essentially calling for psychotherapy. These traditions basically claim that we all started out as pure, wonderful beings, but somehow we got distracted and lost touch with our real nature, and experienced a Fall. This idea is expressed in different ways, such as the hypothesis that our perception of our original purity became clouded over, or got attached, greedy, fearful, and consequently became stupid by being identified with our surface perceptions. We became mindless instead of *mindful*.

*spiritual  
development  
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analogously  
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Thus spiritual development can be presented analogously to psychotherapy, emphasizing removing the obscurations to clear consciousness (defenses), as curing a basic kind of neuroticism that distorts our perception of the reality of who we really are. I am sure you are familiar with some of these approaches.

Many other spiritual paths, indeed all to some extent, focus on the positive goals, like developing love and compassion or having mystical visions. But many focus on the idea that if you were to remove the obscurations, there is nothing else fundamental to do. Our pure nature will then shine through. *A Course in Miracles* (Anonymous, 1975; Volume 2, pp. 347), for example, says that "Those who seek the light are merely covering their eyes. The light is in them now. Enlightenment is but a recognition, not a change at all." From this kind of perspective how strongly do you want to make that division between psychotherapy and spiritual development?

*AJD:* My response to your description of the possibility of "spiritual psychotherapy" is "Yes, but can they do it?" It is fine to say that true spiritual training can remove the obscurations and solve all these problems. Terrific, but does that actually happen?

*CIT:* Don't we need to have some faith that it can happen? That otherwise the lack of faith means you do not really try, so it does not succeed, and we're caught in an endless regression?

*AJD:* I do not want to take this on faith; I want to have some basis in experience to decide this.

*CTT:* Are you questioning the goal and the practicality of attaining some sort of spiritual enlightenment, or simply questioning psychotherapy as a suitable analogy or training style for getting there?

*AJD:* No, I am questioning spiritual training achieving what psychotherapy can do. You speak of spiritual practice removing

the obscurations that give rise to neurosis and, therefore, liberating people from their neuroses. That is a theory, and there may be a very small number of people for whom that was true. But as a general rule, for a person who has the kind of conflicts I am talking about, I do not see the evidence that spiritual training will substitute for psychotherapy.

*CIT:* I did not mean that ordinary neuroses necessarily go away as a result of spiritual training. I meant that if the spiritually "fallen" human condition can be thought of as a kind of neurotic state, then in a sense removing these obscurations is what happens in spiritual development.

*AJD:* That is why I talk about *realism* rather than illness. I think the goal of psychotherapy is increased realism, as is the goal of spiritual development. The Fall that is talked about, whatever that symbol actually represents, would have to do with a constriction in our ability to perceive reality, a constriction in ourselves and others. Certainly the goal of spiritual development is to increase perception so that you see what is really going on, who we are, why we are, and so forth.

In psychotherapy, the increased realism pertains mainly to things having to do with your childhood inheritance, to your development. Each of us learned about ourselves and the world in terms of the imperfections of this world. Thus there are misconceptions and distortions that are bedeviling us within this range of ordinary life, let alone a larger sphere. Psychotherapy tries to give us more freedom within this ordinary range of relating to the world and people, to give us the breathing space to accomplish something in it. You cannot be drowning and study Sufi poetry too well.

So psychotherapy would have to say, "Let us see if you can learn to float, and then maybe you can learn to swim across the bay." Psychotherapy and spiritual development are two different levels of the same continuum, but they do not substitute for each other, as far I can tell. They work synergistically with each other.

*two  
different  
levels  
of the  
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For instance, in both the spiritual disciplines and psychotherapy, one of the important things that happens is that the student or the client takes in, incorporates, or identifies with the point of view of the teacher or therapist. This is an important kind of learning that can be very helpful. The student or client sees alternative ways of viewing things, ways that, hopefully, are more spiritually or psychologically mature.

An accomplished and mature therapist may express, in his or her behavior, attitudes and behaviors very much like those a spiritual

master would show. They may be at a different level or they may overlap. However, *the* focus of the two areas, spiritual learning and psychotherapy, continues to be different.

Whereas some people can jump right into psychotherapeutic exploration, others require *a* lot of preliminary work before they really can participate fully. They are not ready to go right to the deeper material. When these people come into a psychotherapy office, they are likely to be more focused on the therapist than on their problems. They are hoping the therapist will cure them as a surgeon might, or will supply the missing love they feel is the problem. I am sure the same thing is true for spiritual teachers. Some people come in and they want to crawl up into the teacher's lap; they want some magical power to be conveyed to them that will solve their problem. It is not that the wish is bad; it is just not realistic. It does not work that way.

Other people come in but are really troubled with existential questions and they may have a more realistic sense of what is needed. It is like the difference between saying, "Give me some money!" and "Teach me how to be rich." This kind of attitude problem comes up in both psychotherapy and spiritual disciplines. As a therapist I sometimes read statements by spiritual teachers about their students and say to myself, "Boy, I know what this guy is talking about."

#### DIFFERING STRATEGIES IN THE SPIRITUAL PATH

*differing  
strategies*

*CIT:* Given the difference in focus, what are some things a spiritual teacher might do that a psychotherapist would not, and vice versa?

*AJD:* Well, I think the sincerity that a teacher might require of someone for the spiritual path might be quite different from the sincerity you would require for someone to begin psychotherapy. I think the demands would be much less.

*CTT:* For psychotherapy?

*AJD:* Yes, because you are operating at a more basic level. So you might accept all kinds of attitudes that the spiritual teacher might feel made a person unsuitable for serious spiritual work. A teacher might tell an aspiring student to go to work in the garden for several years before offering formal teachings, for example, but we would not do that in psychotherapy.



*CIT:* Why is that effective with a spiritual teacher but not for psychotherapy?

*AID:* A spiritual seeker is, in a sense, presumably functioning decently in their ongoing life, so the spiritual goals he or she has require a challenge of a different order than a psychotherapy client needs. If three years go by, for example, and the aspiring student realizes that he is not actually interested in the truth after all, that is an important thing for him to have learned. If a person is severely depressed or behaving in a violently aggressive way, on the other hand, seeking spiritual truth is not useful or appropriate. He has more basic problems and needs that must be addressed immediately. So I would think the kind of development that the spiritual teacher is involved in has a different kind of time scale than the psychotherapeutic ones.

*CIT:* Can you create another example of the differences in focus?

*AJD:* Well, a spiritual teacher might prescribe certain exercises to induce particular altered states of consciousness. In the psychotherapeutic situation that might not be good at all. Some people cannot tolerate altered states; their psychological boundaries are too shaky.

#### STARTING LEVEL OF THE SPIRITUAL PATH

*CIT:* You are setting up a distinction or "admissions criterion" here which is interesting. Ideally, when a person wants to become a student of a real spiritual discipline, she should have handled all her normal developmental tasks for getting along well in the ordinary world. Practically, though, I think we would say, that is never completely true.

*"admissions  
criteria"*

*AJD:* Of course not.

*CIT:* All sorts of people who are doing reasonably well coping in the ordinary world would still have some significant neurotic kinds of problems, yet are sincerely interested in spiritual growth. How should a spiritual teacher deal with them? To what extent can a spiritual teacher concentrate on a totally different kind of development versus how much does she or he need to be aware of unresolved psychological issues in otherwise healthy people?

*AID:* The more aware a teacher is of these issues, the better he or she can deal with them as they come up. There is not an

expectation that people be perfect or fully analyzed. There is no such perfection for anyone in this world, including spiritual teachers, because this is a world of imperfection. But a teacher would want a person to have enough unrestricted attention to be able to proceed, to not have conflicts seriously interfere with the other training that is going on.

You might want the student to be meeting his or her work and social obligations reasonably well, so he or she was not attempting to use the spiritual discipline to by-pass achieving maturity in ordinary functioning. You want them to have enough inner security, in the sense of psychological stability, that they can let go a little. You do not want someone to be overwhelmed by various states and experiences. Also, you would not necessarily provide dramatic experiences to someone who just loves dramatic experiences.

*expectations  
from our  
training in  
formal  
religions*

The whole spiritual field is so confusing because of the expectations we have from our training in formal religions. There is an ingrained habit of approaching spiritual development in terms of religious fantasies of super-parents and the super family. We easily fall into that mode because of unresolved developmental issues. A good spiritual teacher must be aware of this psychological issue and not play into it. We all know of people who thought of themselves as spiritual teachers who were betrayed by their own psychological limitations in this area.

#### THE IMPERFECT TEACHER

*CIT:* We have discussed the unresolved issues and flaws in the client and student, but let us shift the focus to similar flaws in the spiritual teacher.

A person goes through some developmental experiences, and ends up as a spiritual teacher. I do not mean teacher in the sense of receiving a high sounding title in an organized religion, which may have lost much of its originating spiritual knowledge, but spiritual teacher in the sense of someone who has some genuine spiritual attainment. This does not mean that she is necessarily perfect, but she has at least some ability to teach some of this knowledge and attainment to other students.

Chances are that even if this person qualifies as a spiritual teacher, though, she is also an ordinary human being like the rest of us; she has some unresolved psychological flaws. The spiritual quest can take them into many unusual areas of consciousness

and functioning which, while the most important thing in the world for some people, are psychologically dangerous for others.

Now, there are two broad paths that people of this sort go on. One is that they work as "independents," outside an organized tradition. Each teacher tends to work in isolation with just his or her students. I and many others have observed that the risk an independent runs is of his or her unresolved psychological flaws being incredibly inflated by the projections of students and other factors, so the teacher may end up doing more harm than good.

The other path that the human, imperfect teacher may travel on is working within an institutional structure. There we have a historical tradition and official colleagues who put some dampers on the manifestation of the teacher's unresolved psychological issues. This may range from collegial advice to censure from the hierarchical power structure, including the threat of being thrown out of the institution.

#### CAN WESTERN KNOWLEDGE HELP SPIRITUAL TEACHERS?

What kind of advice can Western psychotherapy give to either of these two broad categories of spiritual teachers about seeing what their own character flaws are, so they might resolve them or at least control them sufficiently so the teacher does not inflict them on his or her students erroneously thinking they are a spiritual manifestation? How do we help a spiritual teacher maintain basic human sanity? I think this issue is very important, because we all know of cases where certain teachers who probably started out teaching from a basis of real spiritual insight and accomplishment ended up in states we would describe as neurotic or just plain crazy, hurting themselves and a lot of their followers in the process. What can Western psychotherapists do to help people like that?

*what  
advice  
can  
Western  
psychotherapy  
give to  
spiritual  
teachers?*

*AJD:* I think there is a difference between the teacher whose character problems are flaws that can hinder his or her own spiritual development and the teacher who ends up exploiting students. I would question the spiritual development of anyone who exploits others. I would not necessarily accept the premise that they initially had real insight, that they were enlightened or something like that and then these unfortunate events happened ....

*CTT:* Yes, that is certainly a category of people among those called "teachers." They did not have genuine spiritual develop-

ment; they were deluded about that. But do you accept that there is this category of people who have genuine spiritual development but still have character flaws?

*AJD:* Oh sure!

*CTT:* It is these people I am concerned about now.

*AJD:* Such people do not have to be perfect in order to function as spiritual teachers. provided they maintain what Freud would have called a condition of abstinence, that is, that you do things for the benefit of the student, not at the expense of the student for the benefit of yourself. You do not have to be perfect to do that.

*CIT.:* How about cases where the teacher's distorted psychological function blinds them? They do not realize they are not acting for the benefit of the student.

*AJD:* I think they know it but push the knowledge away.

#### ETHICAL STANDARDS FOR TEACHERS

*certain  
functional  
requirements  
for  
teachers*

As you know from some material I have written (Deikman, 1983), I think the mystical traditions set up certain functional requirements for teachers that are at odds with exploitation. Likewise in psychotherapy. There is a lot of training devoted to countertransference in psychotherapy training, and there are also certain rules and barriers that are not supposed to be violated. Some people do violate them. I think the fact that they are violating them does not indicate that they do not understand something about psychodynamics, but that his or her training, his or her personality has significant flaws. That probably means that his or her ability to do psychotherapy is quite constricted, also.

I think that if someone's spiritual development has gone to the point where his or her intuitive perception has been developed, it should preclude gross violations of ethics and trust.

As to the kind of people you are thinking of, who have manipulated and abused students, I see no reason to assume that these people actually reached a high state of development and then for some reason degenerated. Apart from the possibility of brain tumors or something like that, I think it is safer to assume that these people developed certain mind powers, not enlightenment. Once you have such mind powers, it is no trick at all to collect a thousand people around you and play such games. So I think there is a certain incompatibility between exploitation and develop-

ment, and I think that is true at every level. Maturity does not include this kind of behavior.

*CIT:* I want to address a less extreme model. Suppose a person of genuine good will has an important spiritual experience and has some ability to teach about at least some aspects of what he or she has learned from the experience. The person is certainly not perfectly enlightened, if there is such a thing as "perfect" enlightenment, but he or she has something worthwhile to teach people and has some skill in teaching. Then it is not so much that he or she becomes exploitative of people but that some unresolved psychological flaws make him or her a less effective teacher. The person might, for instance, set up teaching techniques which do work for some people but set unnecessary barriers for some other people.

This could be manifested as the common problem in adapting a spiritual tradition to another culture, where the teacher brings along a lot of what we think of as "cultural baggage." The teacher may see these truly irrelevant cultural customs as an essential part of the training technique because it was in that context that he or she had their own realizations.

*"cultural  
baggage"*

Being heavily conditioned by a particular culture can also lead to more extreme problems when a teacher comes to another culture. as their (partial) enlightenment was and is supported by specific and limited culture specific behaviors. We can think of some teachers who came from India, for instance. They seemed to have reached relatively high spiritual levels in that culture where celibacy is part of that particular spiritual tradition. They come here to our relatively uninhibited sexual culture and ended up involved in scandalous sexual exploitation. You could argue that there was no need for them to work on that part of their personality structures in Indian culture as there was little temptation. These unresolved flaws that did not manifest in the other culture are important here and become important barriers.

*AJD:* I do not agree.

*CIT:* What do you think happens instead?

*AJD:* I do not think they had that much development in India, or that exploitation is excused by cultural background differences *per se*. You could be trained in lots of things, know the Vedas, know the Upanishads upside-down, have all that material, meditate, have visions, be pious and have powers, but in terms of real maturity, in terms of the surrender of the ego self to the larger Self, there has not necessarily been that development.

**CIT:** If I understand you correctly, you operate from a model here that there are certain basic standards of human decency that are universal, cross-cultural. I share that model too. I guess I am allowing for the cases where psychological problems can obscure your perception of what is exploitation and what is teaching. I am also thinking in terms of a Buddhist model here that allows that one can become one-sidedly accomplished in a genuine spiritual sense. You can become fantastically skilled at concentrative meditation, experiencing various bliss states, but without developing insight and compassion. You are very enlightened in a way, but it is built on a lopsided foundation that does not involve full understanding of your real spiritual identity, namely our Oneness with all life.

**AJD:** I think we are unduly respectful of people who speak some other language than ourselves, wear strange clothing, and say mysterious sounding things.

**CIT:** And charge us heavily to hear them!

**AJD:** Right! If you stop and think about it, why should that mean a damn thing? There are technologies that we have and technologies that can be developed through mind power, but in terms of maturation, in terms of that development in which a person experiences a larger identity through serving a larger task or role, those physical or mental technologies are irrelevant, and possibly misleading. A person does not need *to* do any of *that* stuff.

*we  
have  
too  
much  
misplaced  
respect*

We have too much misplaced respect. The fact that something is written in Sanskrit makes people think that this must be really profound spiritual stuff, but perhaps it is just academic speculation in Sanskrit, There is one scale of profundity of meditation, for example, where it says something like, "And then you lose awareness of this and then you lose awareness of that, on and on," and finally there is no "awareness of awareness." All I could think of when I read that was how did they know the experience happened in that case? Is this an example of some compulsive academic needing to finish the logical series?

**CIT:** There has always been a place for obsessive compulsive thinkers!

**AJD:** It is the same problem for us. It comes up over and over again, the problem of discriminating the container and the content, Outer appearance does not mean very much. We pick friends on a different basis than that. But it is hard to remember the

difference and discriminate when we deal with exotic spiritual traditions.

It may be a mistake for Westerners, at least Americans, to be involved in spiritual disciplines where they have to wear clothing other than what they would normally wear. Anytime someone puts on a robe, they are apt to feel like Snoopy in a Peanuts cartoon: "Here's the World War I flying ace.... " In this case it is something like "Here's the Zen monk walking in the garden." It can be a terrible burden.

CTT: Let us cap this discussion by coming back to the central theme. We Westerners have a lot of knowledge about mindfulness and the lack of it, particularly in the form of mindlessness we call psychopathology. What is our unique contribution to the general, transcultural development of mindfulness? What have we got to contribute that is not coming out of the traditional approaches to training mindfulness? Can you give me a summary statement on that?

*our  
contribution  
to the  
general,  
transcultural  
development  
of  
mindfulness*

AJD: Suppose you showed up at a traditional Eastern monastery seeking spiritual instruction and were told to sit outside the gate for a week, but you were not willing to do that. Your refusal could be good or bad, but let us say that you were not able to pass this entrance test for reason of neurotic conflict with authority, or fears of passivity, or feeling of rejection, or what not. Western psychotherapy has some means for dealing with these kinds of problems other than dismissing a person as the Eastern traditions would do. That is one definite contribution: psychotherapy says there is a basis for these feelings and shortcomings and it is possible to free oneself from them by uncovering their origin in the person's earlier life experience. This is different from most spiritual disciplines. It also is different from meditation, but is likely to prove much more effective in dealing with problems stemming from an individual's personal history. In this respect, Western psychotherapy can help set the stage for a much broader advance in spiritual development than has been possible in the past.

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