

PSYCHODYNAMICS OF MEDITATION: PITFALLS ON THE SPIRITUAL PATH

Mark Epstein
New York. New York

THE CENTRAL WAY

One of the things that initially attracted me to Buddhist thought and practices was the widespread description of Buddhism as the Middle Path or the Middle Way, denoting a central course between the extremes of asceticism and indulgence arrived at by the Buddha in his years of practice. Philosophically, I have also become increasingly impressed with the teachings of one of the major schools of Buddhist thought, known as the Madhyamika, or Central Way, originating in the efforts of Nagarjuna, around the second century A.D., to chart a conceptual course unafflicted by either absolutism or nihilism, two tendencies of human thought that are difficult to avoid. These two great poles, a belief in an abiding, absolute, unchanging, eternal principle (a godhead, a self or an ultimate beyond) on the one hand, and nihilistic rejection or skepticism on the other, represent the philosophical outgrowths of the human tendency to reify either the one or the zero, the Self or the no-Self, Being or Nothingness. As a way out of such limiting habits of thought, the Buddha taught that there was neither self, nor no-self (Murti, 1955, p. 7); his philosophy encouraged the de-reification (Thurman, 1984, p. 7) of both the absolute and the material. As developed by a succession of great Madhyamika scholars first in India and later in Tibet, the Central Way philosophy served essentially as a brake on the psychological tendencies of meditators at every stage of development to err on either the side of absolutism or nihilism.

*de-reification
and
absolutism
or
nihilism*

In discussing the psychological risks of the meditative path, I have found the diamond-like vision of the Central Way to be

Copyright © 1990 Transpersonal Institute

highly relevant in today's climate of the adoption of Buddhism as a kind of meta-therapy by many in our psychologically sophisticated Western culture. Today, in the West, Buddhist thought and practices are increasingly looked to for solutions to many of the unresolved issues within the field of psychotherapy. While this exploration is inherently interesting and fruitful, the discussion often has centered on the question of whether meditation is therapeutic or not. This tendency, to see meditation as either therapeutic or non-therapeutic, hinders our abilities to really appreciate the promise of the meditative path. It is to counter this tendency that the teachings of the Central Way remain relevant.

*any
realization
is
vulnerable
to
narcissistic
recruitment*

Those who see meditation as therapeutic have found it to be of use as an aid to relaxation, as an adjunct to psychotherapy, as a self-control strategy, in promoting regression in service of the ego, and in encouraging greater tolerance of emotional states, to name but a few of the most general findings. But such an adaptation attempts to fit the message of Buddhist thought into an alien cultural context, and inadvertently reveals a potential psychological pitfall on the meditative path. For, while meditation is not the same as psychotherapy, it clearly can, at times, appear to be therapeutic. At the same time, the extent to which the experiences associated with meditation can be used as a psychological defense can be significant. Any realization is vulnerable to narcissistic recruitment. It is precisely those areas that appear therapeutic that are, I would argue, potential obstacles to spiritual development for those of us who seek and set up a psychotherapeutic model for what is being sought.

On the other hand, there are those who endeavor to keep the two worlds, of psychotherapy and spiritual development, separate. They point out the potential dangers of meditation for those who have therapy work to do, the flooding from the unconscious that can be stimulated, the inappropriateness of meditation for those with problems maintaining a sense of identity. They propose a developmental schema in which ego development yields sequentially to transpersonal development, in which psychotherapy is the method of choice up to a certain point and is then replaced by meditation, which begins where therapy leaves off. This approach is best summed up in the phrase, "You have to be somebody before you can be nobody" (Engler, 1986), the assertion that the ego must first exist before it can be abandoned. I will return to this view at a later point, because it too can become a psychological pitfall, if it concretizes both the concepts of ego and egolessness. Of course, an assertion that spiritual work is only for those who have finished their psychological work, who have formed their

cohesive egos, worked through their oedipal, narcissistic or infantile issues, found their identities or achieved an adequate sense of self, would likely exclude most of us. Such a position also ignores the very compelling ways in which meditation practices engage *every* aspect of the psyche, most especially those narcissistic structures that *have* received so much attention from contemporary psychoanalysis.

So, with apologies to the great Madhyarnika scholars of the past (MUfti, 1955; Thurman, 1984), I would assert that meditation is neither therapeutic nor non-therapeutic, neither an Eastern variant of psychotherapy nor something apart from the ground or territory of the psyche as we know it. What I propose to do in this paper is to take the traditional model of the meditative path and explore psychodynamically those aspects of the psyche most affected at each stage, thereby showing what the common vulnerabilities and misunderstandings can be, and what the psychological consequences of such misunderstandings often are.

THE DUAL ORIENTATION OF NARCISSISM

The issues of absolutism and nihilism have their psychological counterparts in the psyches of most who approach the spiritual path. Both yearning for a state of narcissistic perfection and disturbing feelings of incompleteness, emptiness or unworthiness can remain prominent and influential in the minds of those who commence meditation. Such feelings may be associated with some of the most basic issues of infantile development but are nevertheless prominent even after those early stages have been successfully traversed. Margaret Mahler (1972) describes this struggle, against both fusion with an idealized other and isolation in emptiness, as reverberating "throughout the life cycle" (p. 333). Guntrip (1971) insists that "every personality" hovers "between two opposite fears, the fear of isolation in independence with loss of ego in a vacuum of experience, and the fear of bondage to, of imprisonment or absorption in the personality of whomever he rushes to for protection" (p. 291). These two poles, of grandiosity or omnipotence on the one hand, and emptiness or insufficiency on the other, represent what Lou Andreas-Salome (1962), one of Freud's great confidants, termed the "dual orientation of narcissism," that of the "*desire* for individuality" with its associated feelings of "a ghostlike facsimile of existence" (p. 7) versus the "contrary movement toward conjugation and fusion" that involves "identification with the totality" (pp. 4-5). Whether conceptualized as fears (of being either lost in the void or imprisoned by

*psychological
counterparts
of
absolutism
and
nihilism*

another), or desires (of either abandoning the struggle to maintain the self or merging with an idealized other), or beliefs (in the inherent emptiness or meaninglessness of one's being or in its self-sufficiency and inherent perfection), these two poles of emptiness and reification constitute the psychological matrix of the meditative experience, the distillation, in psychological form, of the human tendency to embrace either nihilism or absolutism.

*the
meditative
path
is not
without
obstacles*

The meditative path, through its experiences of terror and delight, of confrontation and bliss, of concentration, mindfulness and insight, seizes these psychic predispositions, engages them, and gradually works a process of understanding that obviates both extremes. Culminating in the appreciation of emptiness (*sunyata*) and egolessness (*annatta*), the meditative path is not without obstacles, generated in the most part by these two relatively intransigent and compelling notions of all or nothing.

INNER SPACE

Preliminary practices of meditation, just like beginning psychoanalysis, require the meditator to take his or her own experience as the object of awareness. In Buddhist terms, the attentional strategy is called "bare attention," while in psychoanalytic terms it is called "evenly suspended attention" or free association. Both require what Freud called the suspension of judgment and the giving of "impartial attention to everything there is to observe" (1909, p. 23). In Buddhist terms, bare attention is defined as "the clear and single-minded awareness of what actually happens to us and in us at the successive moments of perception" (Nyanaponika, 1973). In psychodynamic terms, this self-contemplation is defined as a therapeutic split (Engler, 1986) in the ego (Sterba, 1934), in which ego takes itself as object. As Freud commented in his *New Introductory Lectures*,

We wish to make the ego the object of our study, our own ego. But how can that be done? The ego is the subject, par excellence: how can it become the object? There is no doubt, however, that it can. The ego can take itself as object; it can treat itself like any other object, observe itself, criticize itself, do Heaven knows what besides with itself. . . . The ego can, then, be split; . . . The parts can later on join up again (Sterba, 1934, p. 80).

Now, talking of the ego like this is already asking for trouble—the word is used so often in both therapeutic and spiritual circles that its meaning has become quite diffuse (Epstein,

1988). Freud, himself, used the word "ego" in two distinct manners, without bothering to distinguish one form of usage from the other. On the one hand, he referred to the experiential "I," the phenomenological self, the part of oneself one means when one says "I" (Smith, 1988). On the other hand, he described a "theoretical entity" (Smith, 1988), a metapsychological structure, posited to bring together a number of functions. Hartmann (1950) separated out this second theoretical entity from the first, calling the theoretical structure "ego," and the "I" as it is experienced the "self-representation." Other theorists, dissecting the experience of I, have described not only self-representations, or images of the self, but self-feelings (non-conceptual self-experiences), and the "phenomenon of action" (Smith, 1988) to connote the sense of agency, intention or choice inherent in personhood. *These* separations have been generally accepted in psychodynamic thought, but have not necessarily filtered into spiritual or transpersonal discussion, where there is some confusion as to what is actually targeted on the path of meditation, whether it is the theoretical ego, the sense of I, neither or both.

The primary task of the preliminary practices of meditation is essentially one of "adaptation to the flow of inner experience" (Engler, 1986). This adaptation, which can be seen as requiring the aforementioned split in the ego, allows a kind of inner space (Stewart, 1985; Grotstein, 1978) to be created, a holding environment (Winnicott, 1967; Benjamin, 1988, pp. 126-31), a "transitional space" that "contains" all of the products of the psyche that are revealed through meditation. Such open space is a frequent metaphor in meditation literature; its safety permits the search for authorship or agency that culminates in advanced stages of practice.

*open
space
as a
metaphor*

Preliminary practices of meditation require the suspension of many conventional ego functions. No distinctions are encouraged between inner and outer, appropriate or inappropriate, acceptable or unacceptable. Censoring of any kind is discouraged; one is asked simply to note, without criticism or fancy, whatever arises in the mind or body. Multiple self-images, self-feelings, memories and self-concepts all surface, and only the synthetic ego function, or observing ego, is empowered. The danger here is of self-fragmentation, of a kind of "rupture of the self" (Benjamin, 1988, p. 61) brought on by the uncovering of defended material, the loosening of ego structure or the inability of the observing ego to "sit with" that which arises. Just as the not dissimilar psychoanalytic method has been known to encourage fragmentation, anxiety or even psychosis, so, too, can the preliminary practices of meditation prove

overpowering for some. Reports of psychotic or borderline crises in beginning students of meditation indicate, in most cases, a result of this process. Those who have the most difficulty seem to lack a sufficiently strong synthetic ego function from the beginning. Meditation is not necessarily contraindicated for such people, but meditation, as it is usually taught, is not structured enough for them. In fact, they would probably do better with what beginning practices of meditation offer, the development of the observing ego, but with the method adapted for their use.

a
fascination
with
psychological
material

On a somewhat subtler level, the dangers of this stage of meditation for those who can withstand the psychic pressures of the opening to the internal environment is the tendency to use such practices for the purpose of doing therapy (Walsh, 1981; Brown & Engler, 1986). Refusing to progress either on the path of concentration, by focusing the mind on a single object, or on the path of mindfulness, by moving from attention to content to attention to process, the meditator can be caught up in a fascination with psychological material without moving toward any resolution of conflict. Rorschach studies of experienced meditators showed no diminution of internal conflict, but only a marked "non-defensiveness in experiencing such conflicts" (Brown & Engler, 1986, p. 189), a rather paralyzing combination in someone who refuses either to seek therapeutic help in working through the conflict or to let go of the content of the conflict as demanded by the meditative path. Alternatively, there are those who find that meditation both reveals to them their need for therapeutic work and facilitates that work by decreasing their defensiveness.

At the stage of preliminary practices, where the experience is largely psychological, emptiness may be confused with incompleteness and the image of it fused with a primitive longing. The emptiness that is most accessible here is that which Winnicott saw as originating "not in trauma, but (in) nothing happening when something might profitably have happened" (1974, p. 106). Emptiness is most palpable here as the internalized remnant of "emotional sustenance" not given (Singer, 1977, p. 461), and meditation, at this stage, provides a "transitional realm" of "open space" and "safety" (Benjamin, 1988, pp. 41-42) that allows that initial emptiness to be assuaged (Epstein, 1989).

In keeping with the psychological nature of this beginning stage of practice, egolessness, or *anaua*, is often misunderstood here as being equivalent to paralysis of ego function. Confusion over what is meant by ego can arise here, with many mistaking

egolessness for abandonment of the theoretical/metapsychological/structural ego. Egolessness, in this case, is confused with the absence of repression, or with liberation from psychological defenses, a view which often encourages the release of buried sexual or aggressive longing. This can be thought of as a "primal scream" version of egolessness, perpetuated by insufficient conceptual preparation for meditation, and vulnerable to becoming a kind of self-righteous hedonism. The need for an appropriate conceptual framework at this stage is clear.

THE OCEANIC FEELING AND THE PATH OF CONCENTRATION

The path of concentration involves the stabilization and quiescence of the mind through the development of one-pointedness and absorption in a single object of meditation. Attention is repeatedly restricted, narrowed and focused until a kind of oneness or merger is achieved in a series of trance states known as the eight "jhanas" or realms of absorption. The experience is of progressively more sublime feelings of relaxation, tranquillity, contentment and bliss, culminating in "formless states" of infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness, and "neither perception nor non-perception" (Goleman, 1988). A certain degree of training in concentration, or "samadhi," is seen as indispensable in Buddhist meditation, but the development of *only* concentration is recognized as a temptation to be avoided because of the seductive and deceptive nature of these states.

The path of concentration on a single object remains the most familiar description of meditation for Western psychodynamic interpreters of the meditative experience. Analysts have tended to focus exclusively on the concentration practices, describing a process, in dynamic terms, of fusion of ego with ego-ideal, a merger with that aspect of the psyche that has continued to embody the lost perfection of the infantile state with which the person longs to reunite. This is grandiosity realized in full, absolutism par excellence. The self is cast off in favor of the "surround" (Wilber, 1984, p. 89), a progressively *more* ineffable other into which the meditator can dissolve. Some analysts have seen only narcissistic omnipotence shining through this oceanic feeling (Freud, 1930). Yet they understand a limitation that has always been clear to their Buddhist counterparts.

*the
most
familiar
description
of
meditation*

For the danger in the path of concentration is of misunderstanding emptiness as a real nothingness, of seeing egolessness as self-annihilation and of setting up an ineffable absolute as

something to be united with. These are popular notions in those who begin spiritual practice and achieve some degree of meditative stability. Reinforced by the dominant psychodynamic view of meditation that has equated meditation with relaxation, this view is also strengthened by the popularity of psychedelic experiences as meditative precursors. These experiences of loss of ego boundaries and merger with a cosmic void lead naturally to an affinity with the realm of the concentration practices, but the great Buddhist teachers warn repeatedly against exclusive reliance on such an approach. Says Tsong Khapa,

We should not be satisfied with merely that Quiescence wherein the mind, thought-free, stays where purposefully focused on a single object, even where we also have clarity free of dullness and the especially beneficial joyful bliss. We must cultivate Transcendent Insight by generating the wisdom that is unmistakably certain of the import of Thatness (Thurman, 1984, p, 130).

*mistaking
nothingness
for
emptiness,
or
remaining
stuck in
blissful
states*

The realism of the jhanas, no matter how sublime, are seen as temporary and "imaginatively constructed" (Thurman, 1984, p. 133), no different from the rest of samsara. The experience of nothingness, achievable in the seventh jhana, is clearly distinguished from that of emptiness, which can be realized only through Transcendent Insight. The danger here is in mistaking nothingness for emptiness, of remaining stuck in blissful states without penetrating their relativity,

The intimate relationship between concentration and the ego ideal becomes quite vivid when group behavior within spiritual circles is examined. For what sometimes happens is what the analysts predict: the individual members of the group replace their individual ego ideals with the same object (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1975, p. 79) and identify with each other while focusing on a charismatic leader. This is not just a theoretical reconstruction. Individuals within spiritual groups actually *are* focusing their minds on the same objects, often symbolized in human form by the guru, teacher or incarnation that is the object of devotion. It is inevitable that such a teacher will tend to become a repository for the projections of lost perfection from each of the devotees. United as they are by the pointedness of their practice, such groups are vulnerable to a collective regression in which the "primitive narcissistic gratification of greatness and power" (Kernberg, 1984, p. 15) becomes intoxicating. The psychic pressures can be overwhelming, on both students and teachers, and the activation of sexual longings as a means of literally consummating the irresistible urge to merge is virtually inevitable. The casualties

of such a process among otherwise respected teachers have been reported publically.

SURRENDER AND THE PATH OF MINDFULNESS

The path of mindfulness involves moment-to-moment attention to changing objects of perception. Rather than fixing the mind on a single object, as in the concentration practices, the emphasis here is on precise and complete attention to whatever is happening in the present moment within the field of experience. The experience is of thoughts, feelings, sensations, images, perceptions and even consciousness, arising and passing away in the endless flux that characterizes the mind/body process. Requiring a fair amount of concentration, to allow the mind to remain in the present moment, *the* mindfulness practices, nevertheless, do not lead to the states of trance or absorption that complete the path of samadhi. The task here is rather "dispelling the illusion of compactness" (Engler, 1986), breaking down the conventional notions of a solid, intact self, dissecting that which we have heretofore taken for granted.

The teaching vehicle of the path of mindfulness is the traditional Buddhist psychology of mind, the Abhidhamma, an elaborate categorization of all of the psychophysiological elements that pattern together to form the fabric of our psychic realities. At the heart of this system lies the notion of the five "skandhas," or aggregates, which, when incorrectly apprehended, create the illusion of an enduring self. Taken together, the five aggregates of matter, sensations, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness constitute the ground out of which we construct a sense of ourselves as something fixed, solid, knowable and real. This certainty is illusion, says Buddhist psychology; egolessness is instead a realization of the "nonabsolute ness" (Cleary, 1986) of things.

*certainty
is
illusion*

Training in mindfulness is traditionally accomplished through what are called the Four Foundations of Mindfulness: attention to the body (or material aggregate), feelings, mental formations and states of mind. Special emphasis is given to what are called the "afflictive" or "unwholesome" mental factors, of greed, anger, envy, conceit and so forth, in an effort to expose the ways in which such thoughts and emotions form the bases for our identifications.

As mindfulness develops, the experience of meditation becomes an increasingly effortless surrender to the flow of

experience. Things may be changing very fast, but mindfulness, which, in dynamic terms has assumed the synthetic function of the ego (Epstein, 1988), is able to center upon the moment to moment process. As this ability becomes firmly established, the usual separation of subject and object tends to come undone; the "watcher" dissolves into the dynamic flow. This experience is best described as loss of "self-consciousness without loss of awareness" (Benjamin, 1988, p. 29), as increased permeability of ego boundaries in contradistinction to the complete loss of ego boundaries that prevails in the merger of the concentration practices. In symbolic terms, developed mindfulness is best compared to states of erotic union in which experiences of "distinctness and union are reconciled" (Benjamin, 1988, p. 29) through the combination of heightened awareness and loss of self-consciousness.

"pseudo-Nirvana"

Indeed, the culmination of the path of mindfulness is a charged state in which heightened awareness, sublime happiness, effortless energy, the vision of a brilliant light or luminous form, rapturous and devotional feelings, and profound tranquillity and peace of mind all arise together (Goleman & Epstein, 1983). An obvious tendency would be to mistake this state for some kind of ultimate, to misinterpret the loss of self-consciousness as true egolessness. In fact, this stage of meditative development is traditionally called "pseudo-Nirvana" precisely because of this pitfall. As satisfying as these experiences are, they have little to do with a correct analytical appreciation of emptiness—they represent one of the more subtle variations on a kind of "grandiosity" to be found in the human realm.

The path of mindfulness is a difficult one, with potential pitfalls that can require careful guidance to avoid. At the beginning of such practice, the tendency is often to strain too tightly in an obsessive way to achieve moment-to-moment awareness. The Tibetans recognize a specific mental disorder, called "sok-rlung" (a disorder of the "life-bearing wind that supports the mind") that can arise as a consequence (Epstein & Topgay, 1989). Consisting of a paradoxical increase in anxiety and agitation, it can also have somatic symptoms of muscular tension and pain that can arise as a direct consequence of meditation. The obsessive nature of mindfulness practice can have further effects as well. The emphasis on breaking up apparent objects into their component parts, labeling them and disidentifying from them has obvious appeal for the obsessive character, who is also prone to fascination with the "interminable lists and classifications" (Mufli, 1955, p. 67) of the Abhidharma. Reinforcing character traits of rigidity, intel-

lectualization and fastidiousness, such systems of classification historically have contributed to the ossification of Buddhist teachings and, in Buddhist India, ultimately yielded to the teachings of the Central Way. The danger for the obsessive character is an over-valuation of the discrete elements of the Abhidhamma, a substitution of the reality of the mental factors, of the skandhas, for the self that has been dissected. The correct relationship of the self to the aggregates is often confused at this stage, with the need to define or explain the self remaining paramount. Yet, as Tsong Khapa is said to have realized at the moment of his enlightenment, ". . . it is an imperative consequence that the self is not the same as the aggregates, and the self is not different from the aggregates." The "authentic view," he found, "was precisely the opposite from what he had expected" (Thurman, 1984, p.85).

On the path of mindfulness, emptiness is often misunderstood as a quiet or empty mind, a realm free of thoughts or mental defilements, the state of peace that comes when the discursive mind is tamed. Thoughts are in some way judged as unwholesome, the intellect is seen as the equivalent of the ego and renounced, and emptiness is confused with the vast open space that appears in the mind when thoughts diminish. There is often a search for a "pure experience' free of concepts" without the understanding that the "conceptual aggregate is always operative" (Thurman, 1984, p. 7). In this misunderstanding, "One just refutes all views, dismisses the meaningfulness of language, and presumes that as long as one remains devoid of any conviction, holding no *views*, knowing nothing, and achieving the forgetting of all learning, then one is solidly in the central way, in the 'silence of the sages' ... " (Thurman, 1984, p, 68). But this is, again, isolation in psychological emptiness, not a real appreciation of sunyata, It is predicated on the rejection of intellect while at the same time it remains, at base, a fixed view. The point of meditation is not to dissociate oneself from an intrinsic aspect of mental functioning and substitute yet another concept. Yet this is precisely the trap that often ensnares meditators with a fair amount of experience. By holding to the view of emptiness as a thing in itself, created by an absence of intellectual functioning, the meditator is, in fact, reinforcing the substratum of narcissistic emptiness that often drew him or her to meditation in the first place. This is an emptiness derived from the comparison of "this" with "that;" it prompts an attitude of renunciation, of disavowal and of repudiation in which the predominant self-feeling is insufficiency or unworthiness.

*the
conceptual
aggregate
is
always
operative*

In the path of mindfulness, egolessness is often confused with self-abnegation, in which it is imagined that something real, the ego or the self, is given up. Consistent with the metaphor of erotic union, the predominant view at this stage is that egolessness results from an act of surrender, a relinquishment of the hard-won ego. This is somewhat different from the view on the path of concentration, in which the ego is seen as abolished, annihilated or extinguished. Under the spell of mindfulness practice, the operative dynamic is disavowal; the meditator feels pressure to "give it up" or "let it go." Indeed, these phrases become second nature to those on the spiritual path—the error is not in learning how to surrender or how to let go but in the reification of the "it," as in "let *it* go" or "give *it* up." The tendency to set up aspects of the self as the enemy and then distance oneself from them, be it intellect, ego, aggression or desire, is very strong at this stage of spiritual practice. Yet this is not the correct view of egolessness. "Selflessness is not a case of something that existed in the past becoming non-existent," stresses the Dalai Lama, "rather, this sort of 'self' is something that never did exist. What is needed is to identify as non-existent something that always was non-existent . . ." (Gyatso, 1984, p. 40). This becomes the crucial task for the path of insight.

*dissociating
from
that
which is
unwholesome*

Clinically, many of the meditators whom I have seen in psychotherapy suffer from this tendency to dissociate themselves from that which is seen as unwholesome in themselves, be it aggression, sexual longings or rationality. Because they are seen as impediments in the realm of the ego, and because the way to egolessness is felt to be via surrender, such qualities are often repudiated, rather than noted, as fast as they arise, resulting in the rejection of vital ego functions. At the same time, the equation of egolessness with self-abnegation and the view of emptiness as a kind of beyond creates a powerful yearning in such people to be "released into abandon by a powerful other" (Benjamin, 1988, p. 131). Dissociating themselves from their own capacity for *activity*, while maintaining the view of egolessness as a state to be released *into*, creates an unending reliance on the power of another to bestow the needed state of grace. The result is often submission, either in interpersonal relationships or in large spiritual groups. Because the aggression, or desire, is, in fact, still present but is being dealt with defensively, such people often find themselves irresistibly attracted to powerful others who come to contain essential ego functions that are otherwise disavowed. Couched in a defensive gentleness and indecisiveness, such people often present themselves as ephemeral or transparent, while at the same time they depend on those who encompass just what they

have forsworn to complete their worlds. The "spiritual" person who submits to an abusive spouse or a charismatic leader exemplifies this dynamic. Clearly, this is a perversion of the basic teaching of mindfulness, which *is* about the capacity to surrender to the moment, but is not, in its pure form, about surrendering unwanted qualities or about throwing anything away.

EMPTINESS/RELATIVITY AND THE PATH OF INSIGHT

When mindfulness is pursued without distortion, it matures inexorably, through the careful investigation of each object of perception, into the path of insight. While matter, feelings, mental formations, mental states and even consciousness become objects of the path of mindfulness, the *skandha* of perceptions is penetrated only by transcendent insight (*prajna*). "Insofar as apparent objects are perceived, they are the basis for sickness," said Vimalakirti (Thurman, 1976, p. 46). "In perceiving objects, we unconsciously assent to their apparent, self-sufficient, ultimate existence and thereby are confirmed in our innate phenomenal egoism," comments Robert Thurman (1976, p. 124). The *skandha* of perception involves the way in which we define our experience cognitively, identifying or naming objects and thereby no longer experiencing them just as they are. This conceptual overlay or superimposition of construct is inevitable. What is not inevitable, but is nevertheless the rule in the ignorant mind, is the mistaking of the construct for the truth. Understanding the relativity of perceptions is the essence of the realization of "signlessness" (Thurman, 1976, p. 164), in which the sign is no longer mistaken for that which is signified.

*mistaking
the
construct
for
the
truth*

Preliminary experiences on the path of insight are often ones of dissolution and terror that serve to illuminate the insubstantiality and representational nature of experience (Epstein, 1986). The meditator actually experiences each formation breaking up. As a consequence, "the unconscious assumption of 'reality,' 'massiveness,' 'absoluteness,' 'facticity,' 'objectivity: and so on, that we habitually impose on our perceptions'" (Thurman, 1984, p. 94) are dealt a heavy blow. The meditator is said to then "perceive by way of non-perception" (p. 168), to immediately and simultaneously understand the representational nature of that which is being experienced.

The implications of such understanding for the experience of self is direct, and is best understood by reference to the work of Jacques Lacan. Lacan concerned himself primarily with the

manner in which the developing infant "assumes an image" (1966, p, 2) of himself from the mirror, allowing that image to symbolize the "mental permanence of the I" This objectification of the I becomes established as an ideal that is unconsciously adhered to and which inevitably is compared with actual experience. The conception of "I" is therefore rooted in an illusory image that is unconsciously mistaken for something real. "This form," says Lacan, "situates the agency of the ego . . . in a fictional direction" (p, 2), causing the "assumption of the armour of an alienating identity" (p. 4) and creating the "illusion of autonomy" (p. 6).

When the self is investigated on the path of insight, it is this image of self, what the psychoanalysts call the "self-representation as agent," that is uncovered *as an image*. Its representational nature is comprehended in a manner that allows the continued use of such constructs, but with full understanding of their relative nature. As the Tibetan descriptions of the "aftermath dreamlike wisdom" make clear,

. . . there is no reification or romanticization of any state of dissolution, there is no artificial goal set for the philosopher-yogi, such as that he must "attain ego-loss," wipe out his naughty "I," and so forth. Rather he is encouraged to accept as incontrovertible the everyday conventional sense of "I," while attaining simultaneously the rational certitude of its intrinsic nonreality {Thurman, 1984, p, 146}.

a
strong
urge
to glorify
emptiness

The primary danger on the path of insight is a kind of self-deception in which the experiences of dissolution and voidness are seen as indicative of a higher truth that obviates the relative nature of things. There remains a strong urge to glorify emptiness as a thing in itself, to understand egolessness as an *absence* of self-representations. Here, the need to identify *something* as existing in its own right continues to manifest, and the belief in the ego as concretely existent is, in some sense, transferred to the belief in egolessness as concretely existent. In so doing, the meditator continues to subtly disparage the everyday world while looking elsewhere for release. Whether this release is seen as an attainment or a non-attainment is of no consequence; the error is the same. In the words of Huang Po, the ninth-century Chinese Zen teacher, "Why this talk of attaining and not attaining? The matter is thus-by thinking of something you create an entity and by thinking of nothing you create another. Let such erroneous thinking perish utterly, and then nothing will remain for you to go seeking!" (Blofeld, 1958, p. 86). Egolessness is not a separate state; it is only found in relationship to a belief in concrete existence.

The difficulty for those on the path of insight is to not let habitual modes of thinking corrupt the actual experience of insight and emptiness. It is easier to see ego as something that must either be transcended, through a leap into the "Beyond," or repudiated, through a rejection of intellect or "Reason," than it is to embrace the meditative path as lying *through* ego, through illumination of the representational and relative nature of that which appears to us as inherently existent. The two great poles of reification and emptiness, of absolutism and nihilism, persist in their influence even at this most subtle level of mind.

The Centrist philosopher himself, the student of the Central Way, continually experiences *little* misapprehensions of emptiness as a sort of termination of everything, repeatedly confusing it with nothingness, even though he clearly knows intellectually that it is something different from nothingness. This is because the instinctual habit of reifying intrinsic reality in persons and things is so deeply engrained in our thoughts and perceptions. *We feel* intrinsic reality is "there," in ourselves and in things, and each time analytic investigation finds it to be absent, we automatically reify that absence into a little real disappearance, as if something solid had vanished before us ... (Thurman, 1984, p. 158).

It is one thing to grasp the true meaning of emptiness, it is another to maintain it in the face of the onslaught of our psyches. As the Zen master Seung Sahn wrote to one of his students after a long correspondence, "Now you understand just-like-this. Understanding just-like-this is very easy; keeping just-like-this is very difficult" (1982, p. 173). The culmination of the path of insight is a constant and direct appreciation of the representational and relative nature of *this* reality. It is not a refutation of it nor is it a substitution of something in its place. Nowhere is this more visible than in discussions of ego and egolessness, Neither rejection of ego functions nor substitution of transcendent realities are sufficient for realization of egolessness, This realization must come instead through ego functions, themselves, through the kind of transformative insight that penetrates the belief in inherent existence but does not obliterate the relative.

*maintaining
in the
face of
the onslaught
a/our
psyches*

The path of insight, at its best, does not seek to destroy the ego or to merge it with the ineffable surround-it seeks instead to illuminate ego for what it actually is. Recognizing the utility of various ego functions, it employs them to accomplish the liberation of ego from all of the misconceptions we have heaped upon it. The true understanding of emptiness allows the person to realize experientially what the psychoanalysts have only postulated. To quote one prominent theorist,

... there can be no "the" about ego, for ego is not a unity, an irreducible agency, a fixed and homogenous entity that engages in action. Ego refers rather to certain kinds of action or action in a certain mode. . . . "The ego" . . . is inherently a reified or personified concept (Yet). . . all strict theoretical definitions of the ego specify that it is an abstract term we use to subsume or refer to a number of functions that resemble each other in certain respects (Shaffer, 1973, p. 261).

Buddhist insight leaves the theoretical ego alone, other than to reinforce its actual theoreticalness. But through deliberate examination of the phenomenological I, of both self-representations and self-feelings, the "agent" is found to be indeterminate. This insight is in accordance with the latest psychoanalytic view, in which, "the ego is seen as the seat ... of indeterminacy" (Smith, 1988, p. 403), the dynamic equivalent of the relativity of Buddhist philosophy. From this perspective, the plea to all of those on the spiritual path is this, "Let ego be ego;" do not fall victim to either reification or repudiation, to either the emptiness or the grandiosity of the illusion of narcissism.

*"Let
ego
be
ego"*

TABLE I
DYNAMICS OF THE MEDITATIVE PATH

Preliminary practices: inner space Dynamically: Paralysis of ego functions other than observing ego Danger is self-fragmentation Emptiness misunderstood as incompleteness Egolessness misunderstood as loss of psychodynamic ego
Concentration: oceanic feeling Dynamically: Merger of ego and ego-ideal Danger is self-annihilation Emptiness misunderstood as a real nothingness, Egolessness misunderstood as loss of ego boundaries, abolition of the self
Mindfulness: surrender Dynamically: Loss of self-consciousness without loss of awareness Danger is self-abnegation Emptiness misunderstood as a quiet mind free of thoughts Egolessness misunderstood as relinquishment of the ego or repudiation of the self
Insight; emptiness relativity Dynamically: Understanding the representational nature of experience Danger is self-deception Emptiness misunderstood as a real disappearance Egolessness misunderstood as the absence of self-representations

This same argument was made much more lyrically and persuasively six hundred years ago by the great Tibetan teacher Tseng Khapa, who, on the morning of his enlightenment in 1398 composed an extended "salutation" to the Buddha. What follows is but a short excerpt.

Your position is that, when one perceives
Voidness as the fact of relativity,
Voidness of reality does not preclude
The viability of activity.

Whereas when one perceives the opposite,
Action is impossible in voidness,
Voidness is lost during activity;
One falls into anxiety's abyss.

Thus, experience of relativity
Is most recommended in your Teaching,
And not that of absolute nothingness,
Nor that of intrinsically real existence .

. . .Dauntless in the assemblies of the wise,
You clearly proclaimed in your lion's roar,
"Let there be freedom from identity!"
Who would ever presume to challenge this?

(Thurman, 1984, pp.

REFERENCES

- ANDREAS-SALOMÉ, (1962). The dual orientation of narcissism. *Psychoanal. Quarterly*, 31, 1-30.
- BENJAMIN, J. (1988). *The bonds of love*. New York: Pantheon.
- BLOFELD, J. (1958). *The Zen teaching of Huang Po*. New York: Grove Press.
- BROWN, D. & ENGLER, J. (1986). The states of mindfulness meditation: A validation study. In K. Wilber, J. Engler & D. Brown, *Transformations of consciousness*. Boston: New Science Lib.
- CUASSEGUE, S. (1975). *The ego ideal*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- CLEARY, T. (1986). *Shobogenzo: Zen essays by Dogen*. Honolulu: U. of Hawaii Press.
- ENGLER, J. (1986). Therapeutic aims in psychotherapy and meditation. In K. Wilber, J. Engler & D. Brown, *Transformations of consciousness*. Boston: New Science Lib.
- EPSTEIN, M. (1986). Meditative transformations of narcissism. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 18(2), 143-58.
- EPSTEIN, M. (1988). The deconstruction of the self: Ego and "egolessness" in Buddhist insight meditation. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 20(1), 61-69.
- EPSTEIN, M. (1989). Forms of emptiness: Psychodynamic, meditative and clinical perspectives. *J. Transpersonal Psychology*, 21(1), 61-71.

- EpSTEIN, M. & LORSANG RAPGA Y (1989). Mind, disease and health in Tibetan medicine. In A. Sheikh & K. Sheikh, *Eastern and Western approaches to healing*. New York: J. Wiley & Sons.
- FRIUD, S. (1909 [1955]). Analysis of a phobia in a five-year-old boy. *Standard Ed. 10*. London: Hogarth Press.
- FREUD, S. (1930 [1961]). *Civilization and its discontents*. Second Ed. London: Hogarth Press.
- GOLEMAN, D. (1988). *The meditative mind*. Los Angeles: J. Tarcher.
- GOLEMAN, D. & EpSTEIN, M. (1983). Meditation and well-being: An Eastern model of psychological health. In R. Walsh & D. Shapiro, *Beyond health and normality*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.
- GROTSTEIN, J. (1978). Inner space: Its dimensions and its coordinates. *Im, J. Psycho-Anal.* 59, 55-61.
- GUNTRIP, H. (1971). *SChizoid phenomena, object relations and the self*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gy ATSO, T. (1984). *Kindness. clarity and insight*. Ithaca: Snow Lion.
- HARTMANN, H. (1950). Comments on the psychoanalytic theory of the ego. *Psycho-Anal. Study Child*, 5: 74-96.
- KERNBERG, O. (1984). The couch at sea: Psychoanalytic studies of group and organizational leadership. *Int. J. Group Psychother.* 34(1), 5-23-
- LACAN, J. (1966). *Ecrits, a selection*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- MAHLER, M. (1972). On the first three subphases of the separation-individuation process. *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 53, 333-38.
- MURTI, T.R.V. (1955). *The central philosophy of Buddhism*. London: Unwin Hyman.
- SAHN, SEUNG. (1982). *Only don't know*. San Francisco: Four Seasons.
- SCHAFFER, R. (1973). The idea of resistance. *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 54, 259-85.
- SINGH, M. (1977). The experience of emptiness in narcissistic and borderline states: I. Deficiency and ego defect versus dynamic-defensive models. *Int. Ref Psycho-Anal;* 4. 459-69.
- SMITH, D. (1988). The ego (and its superego) reconsidered. *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.* 69, 401-07.
- STERBA, R.V. (1934). The fate of the ego in analytic therapy. *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 15, 117-26.
- STEWART, H. (1985). Changes of inner space. *Int. J. Psycho-Anal;* 66, 225-63.
- THURMAN, R.A.F. (1976). *The holy teaching of Vimalakirti*. University Park & London: Penn. State U. Press.
- THURMAN, R. A.F. (1984). *Tsang Khapa's speech of gold in the essence of true eloquence*. Princeton: Princeton U. Press.
- WALSH, R. (1988). Speedy Western minds slow slowly. *Rei/ision.* 4, 75-77.
- WILBER, K. (1984). The developmental spectrum and psychopathology: Part I, Stages and types of pathology. *J. Transpersonal Psychology*, 16(1), 75-118.
- WILCOX, D. W. (1967). The location of cultural experience. In *Playing and reality*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1974.
- WINNICOTT, D. W. (1914). Fear of breakdown. *Int. Rev. Psycho-Anal.*, 1, 103-01.

Requests for reprints to: Mark Epstein, 52 White Street, New York, NY 10113.