FOCUSING APPLIED TO A CASE OF DISORIENTATION IN MEDITATION

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In a phenomenological study of the complementary effects of a Western psychotherapeutic method of focusing (Gendlin, 1978) and an Eastern meditation practice (vipassana insight), a range of subjective experiences and effects were reported by four female participants (Amodeo, 1981). One of these participants' reports was atypical in that she experienced temporary disorientation and fear during some of the forty-minute meditation sessions. During meditation this subject (P2) developed a strong tendency to dissociate from her current experience, which sometimes produced an intense fear. She would often experience a vague, diffuse state which led to a fear of going crazy. As she states it:

Meditation could drive me crazy. It was part of the fear I had and why I stopped meditating. I didn't want to play with this thing.... I felt like a baby bird who couldn't fly in the middle of the street and someone driving over it. It wasn't dead but it could have been dead. I felt like I didn't know how to fly and that I could be run over any time because I didn't know where I was. I have never experienced it and have no protection for it. It was very dangerous. I don't know how to be on a spiritual level.

What she describes as "being on a spiritual level" appears to be a premature entry into a level of experience which is disorienting. In light of the reported vagueness and fear of going crazy, it appears that meditation triggered a surge of energized, though diffused emotions. The disorienting aspect of this experience may have been due to an unfamiliarity with certain emotions which arose during meditation. This view is consistent with the prevalent observation that one of the functions of meditation is to reduce defensiveness. In this case, however, an excessive de-repression seemed to occur which accounts for the fear of being overwhelmed.
It may be instructive to compare some of the historical background of P2 with that of the other three subjects in this study. P2 had never engaged in a growth process which encouraged awareness of feelings and emotions. The other participants had either been in psychotherapy at some time or participated in a group process intended to experience and discuss feelings. Viewing this dynamic from the viewpoint of Assagioli (1965), it may be said that meditation encouraged P2 to disidentify from her experience before appropriately identifying or acknowledging her experience. From this perspective, the phenomenon of dissociation may be seen as a premature dis-identification from experience—one which occurs prior to the more necessary task of identifying and feeling one's immediate experience. Here, meditation appears to have prompted an unhealthy bypassing of a level of experience which Wilber (1977) has identified as ego-level related issues involving self-image, self-esteem, and emotional awareness. This tendency of P2 to bypass ego-level issues is borne out by subsequent sessions of her individual therapy in which it became apparent that confusion on the ego level was contaminating her view of spiritual growth, leading to an unrealistic notion of what it means to "be spiritual." More specifically, a tendency to hold high perfectionistic demands (a trait originally inculcated by her parents) was carrying over into meditation in terms of a drive for high achievement and an unrealistic notion of spiritual perfection. As a result, when an unpleasant emotion or questionable intention arose, she would either deny it, attempt to avoid it, or chastise herself for experiencing it. Her fear of going crazy, therefore, may at least in part be explained as a tendency toward over-control, which from the point of view of her psychic economy, was needed to preserve a powerfully infused spiritual self-image. The struggle to deny or avoid unpleasant emotions, however, is ultimately doomed to failure due to the insistent intensity of emotions and the inevitable intrusions of reality which will continually challenge such a person's unrealistic self-image. We may refer to this dynamic which attempts to preserve a perfectionistic self-image as the development of a spiritual super ego. This substitution may parallel the view of Trungpa Rinpoche in *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, in which he sees material values transferring intact to the spiritual realm (Trungpa, 1973). The phenomenon of feeling overwhelmed or disoriented as a result of spiritual practices may be symptomatic of inappropriate practice, especially for those individuals who are unconsciously defending a spiritual self-image deriving from a strong achievement mentality. It is here suggested that the treatment of choice for such individuals is a thorough explorat-
don on the level of ego, with particular emphasis upon facilitating insight into the dynamic of self-image and its relation to threatening emotions. The therapeutic goal would be to explore with the client the possibility of acknowledging and experiencing unpleasant emotions and including them in an enlarged self-image rather than repressing, denying, or projecting them onto others. This would assist in the function of integrating "the shadow" (ala Jung) into one's spiritual quest rather than avoiding unpleasant or painful emotions and projecting them onto others from a stance of self-righteousness. This projection phenomenon has been identified in the major spiritual traditions and has been variously referred to as hubris or spiritual pride, one of the seven deadly sins from the Christian point of view.

The inability of P2 to dis-identify from a limiting self-image must be viewed in relation to an appropriate dis-identification. Another way of viewing this issue is to ask, "For whom is meditation most appropriate?" This issue contains many diverse and significant variables. One of them is related to the amounts and quality of personal awareness of emotional processes. Such awareness may derive from individual psychotherapy, counseling, group process work, or experientially based courses in affective education, communication skills, and related work. Affective awareness is also partially determined by the home, school, and social environment, and the degree to which such awareness and expression are encouraged or inhibited.

Other variables relating to the appropriateness of meditation may be conceptualized as ego level factors. Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1954) offers a relevant model in this regard. In Maslow's view, one must appropriately satisfy "lower" more basic needs before rising along the hierarchy to more subtle, refined "higher" needs. One issue, for instance, is whether a person's basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter are provided. Are these needs being met or is there a hyper intention in meeting these demands? Does this person feel safe and relatively secure, or are real or imagined threats present in their environment? Are belongingness needs being met, or is the primary motivation for joining a spiritual group to meet the need for support and belongingness? Is this person respected and esteemed by others to a degree necessary to effect an inner sense of self-esteem, or is meditation being pursued from a stance of deep insecurity and poor self-image?

In this formulation it may be hypothesized that to the degree these basic needs are met, a person may be ready to meet the
need for self-transcendence (Maslow, 1971) through pursuing a path such as meditation. To the degree that such basic needs are not adequately met, appropriate interventions could be taken, including ego level therapies when appropriate, either prior to or simultaneous with the practice of meditation. Otherwise, meditation may only serve to increase defensiveness rather than lead to freedom, especially in such cases where self-esteem is low and secondary gains for pursuing meditation are high, i.e., inflating the self-image as compensation for deep-seated insecurity and fear of emotions.

There may be an additional danger which applies particularly to the practice of concentration-type meditations. Practicing "absorption into the primary object of meditation" leads to a strengthening of the concentrative powers of mind which, when combined with unacknowledged defenses, may strengthen those defenses and the self-protective functions they serve. For example, through reaction formation, one may begin to insist that his or her spiritual practice is the superior or only way, and that those pursuing other approaches are deluded or inferior, if not heretical. This kind of dynamic could be verified by research determining whether or not individuals (such as identified schizophrenics) who have obvious defense mechanisms exhibit greater defensiveness as a result of practicing meditation. A corollary might be that the specific reaction formation defense may strengthen while other defense mechanisms lessen. Such an outcome could point to a limited though significant value of meditation to reduce certain defenses such as intellectualization, withdrawal, rationalization, and projection. Withdrawal might be reduced through practicing group meditation with the hope that group intimacy would develop through a practice which encourages ontological security. Hostility may be reduced by the meditative practice of withdrawing projections and noticing them within one's own experience.

The mindfulness (or insight) methods of meditation appear less likely than the concentration type methods to strengthen defenses because they encourage an awareness of the full range of human experience, including a non-judgmental, non-evaluative awareness of whatever thoughts, feelings or emotions happen to arise in any given moment. Given such a guideline, it is reasonable to expect that the mindfulness meditators would be free of significant dangers due to a built-in to allow any and all content to arise, including the fear of being overwhelmed. In P2's case she may have not received clear instruction from her meditation instructor. A more likely explanation, however, is that she exercised selec-
tive attention, selecting out those aspects of the meditation instruction which appeared threatening, in favor of those parts which were experienced as pleasant. The possibility of unpleasant experiences arising is explained and included in the instructions for insight meditation, but either a preconceived notion or selective forgetting precludes the unpleasant experiences only until they can no longer be avoided. In addition, a well-defended person may not have a clear experiential referent for the painful or unpleasant experiences referred to by the meditation instructor, and so they may be glossed over. This avoidance could be exacerbated by a desire on the part of the meditation instructor not to emphasize the possibility of unpleasant experiences for fear of discouraging or alienating prospective students. There might also be a concern on the part of the instructor not to encourage such experiences, through suggestion, to students who may be particularly vulnerable.

In any case, it may be helpful for meditation teachers instructing Western students to inform them of the range of experiences which are possible; otherwise students may seek solely pleasant experiences and become disoriented and confused when negative ones arise, particularly if the teacher is not immediately available or easily accessible, or if the student is afraid or embarrassed to approach the teacher with such experiences. As P2 discovered, "It is dangerous to think that the spiritual level is just feeling high all the time."

The practice of meditation appears to foster a relaxed environment wherein particular emotions or experiences of which the meditator may not be aware may rise to conscious awareness. The implications of this occurrence suggest the advisability of carefully determining the amount and type of meditation for particular individuals, along with close monitoring of idiosyncratic responses in cases where awareness on the level of ego seems inadequate or lacking. However, traditional teaching methods in certain cases may not be adequate for the idiosyncratic needs of individuals living in a Western culture. Experienced meditation teachers may in certain instances attend to students' ego-level and psychological problems according to traditional teachings and in the light of their own experience in meditation practice. This can require shifting the student's attention to tasks which are per se non-meditative. This may include physical activity, change in diet, advising a change of social context, and other methods. In the case we have been discussing, the subject's fear and dissociation were favorably affected by the use of focusing (Amodeo, 1981). This is a research-based psychotherapeutic technique in which a trained guide asks questions to lead the client systematically to...
an awareness of a bodily-felt sense which, if successful, results
in a felt-shift in the client's perception of his or her most
pressing problem, conflict or life concern. The step-by-step
procedure, if successful, results in insight and significant ther-
apeutic change (Gendlin, 1978).

Meditation and focusing have both similarities and differences
which bear on how, when and under what conditions they are
appropriate (Welwood, 1980). Here, focusing appears to have
the effect on P2 of "grounding" her experience of meditation.
As she noted, "In the meditation, I wasn't concentrating on
my body, not my feelings, not my thoughts. I
would just be and that's all-just breath. The focusing is com-
ing back to something-back to my body, and that's what it
would bring to the meditation. Instead of floating it would be,
'What's in the way of feeling good?'" The specificity of re-
turning to bodily awareness appears to help her with the vague
"floating" which she reports in meditation, and which consti-
tutes a vulnerability associated with her fear of going crazy.
Focusing, like other methods of directing the attention toward
bodily-based experience, may be a helpful complement for
those who tend to experience a diffuseness or floating while
trying to meditate. The dynamic appears to be that of effecting
a transition from an impersonal, dissociated experience to a
more personal, concrete experience which is grounded in the
body, feelings and relevant life issues.

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