PERSONALITY STRUCTURE:  
PATH OR PATHOLOGY?

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What is the role of personality in psychological and spiritual development? Is our personal identity an obstacle in the path of realizing the full range of our possibilities, and thus, in this ultimate sense, a form of pathology? Or could it be, as certain esoteric traditions suggest, that our personal patterns actually provide the stepping-stones on the path of our spiritual development? If it is true that enlightened qualities of being can be discovered in even our most neurotic states, then we would not have to get rid of our personality in order to reach some "higher" spiritual dimension or realm. Instead, working with the tight, constricted places in our personality would provide everything we need in order to realize our deepest human resources. Like sanding wood so that the true grain reveals itself, the journey of becoming more fully human would involve refining our personality so that the genuine underlying qualities of our being could shine through.

THERAPEUTIC AGGRESSION

To begin exploring these issues, let us consider the example of Tara, a client who suffered an extreme lack of nurturing and emotional contact in childhood. As a result, she formed a "tough" identity with the script-line: "I don't need anybody. I can take care of myself." This identity allowed her to survive the lack of nurturing in her home. Later in life, however, this exaggerated independence became dysfunctional, as all identities do at some point. It became a way of continuing to deprive herself, a major obstacle to getting what she needed, and a source of great pain.

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In her late twenties, Tara's pain motivated her to join a spiritual commune. This community's view was that people should get rid of all personal "trips" that stand in the way of spiritual growth. The community promoted a form of collective "spiritual bypassing" (Welwood, 1984), trying to substitute an ambitious "spiritual" identity among its members for their old personality structures. So this community took an aggressive bulldozer-like approach toward breaking down Tara's "independent" identity. She unfortunately went along with this attempt, convinced that her old personality patterns were not serving her. However, in stripping away her toughness, she also lost touch with her own strength and direction in life. It took years, after leaving this community, for her to recover her forward momentum.

In adopting a tough identity to survive a threatening situation, Tara had drawn on a basic quality that was available in her very being-strength. Another person might have reacted to the same childhood situation by becoming psychotic, whereas she was able to summon her resources to overcome great deprivation. Although her identity eventually became limiting and neurotic, nevertheless it contained at its very core her basic strength-one of her most striking qualities. So when she went along with the commune's attack on her independent stance, not understanding it as a distortion of a basic quality of her being, she lost touch with her strength as well.

Trying to induce change by waging an assault on the ego structure is a common mistake that various spiritual and therapeutic approaches make. Sometimes this kind of "therapeutic aggression" is quite blatant, as in Tara's case. And sometimes it takes more subtle forms of persuasion and confrontation which imply that one would be a better person if one were different from the way one is. Unfortunately, such attacks on the personality structure rob people of what it is they have to work with. This can leave them in a state of helplessness and dependency.

The case of Tara illustrates that personality structure tends toward pathology either when, having outlived its usefulness, it constricts possibilities, or when it becomes the object of relentless inner or outer attack. For personality to become path rather than pathology, we would have to work with ourselves as we are, without aggression or blame. Working with a given identity formation would involve recovering essential qualities of being that are locked up in it.

To work with her toughness as path, Tara needed to make greater contact with her independent stance, rather than...
negating it. When she did this in therapy, she realized that her toughness was a form of self-deprivation and self-attack. The commune's outer attack had mirrored her own inner attack. In the place where she felt deprived, she was extremely vulnerable and uncertain about what it meant to be taken care of. This discovery gave her a path: she could draw on her strength to begin to nurture herself, care for herself in her place of vulnerability, and thus give to herself in a whole new way.

IDENTITY FORMATION

We are all born with certain qualities of being that precede the formation of our identity. Different traditions talk about them in different ways. For example, certain yogic and alchemical systems describe these qualities in terms of elements such as earth, fire, water, and air. Mahayana Buddhism talks about certain quintessential human qualities that are already present in embryonic form, which can also be cultivated endlessly, such as generosity, patience, exertion, mindful presence, compassion, discriminating insight, discipline, power, or wisdom. Tibetan Buddhism speaks of five cosmic energies known as the buddha families (Casper, 1974). These are egoless human qualities which nobody owns, larger qualities of being which individuals have access to.

To understand how identity develops out of the basic qualities or "building blocks" of our being, we need to consider the situation of the young infant, who is completely vulnerable to the world and has a rather tenuous connection with existence. We face the question of existence vs nonexistence from the very first moment of our lives. Lack of love and caring convey a very powerful threat of nonexistence because they place the child's physical or psychological survival and integrity in question. And aside from possible emotional deprivation in our family, we all must face what is known in Buddhism as the "three marks of existence": the difficult realities of pain, impermanence, and the lack of a solid, graspable self. No matter what our childhood history, sooner or later we inevitably experience three universal lacks: lack of comfort and security, lack of permanence, and lack of a substantial self-nature.

Our nature is not simply given at birth in the same way that an animal's is. There is no fixed prescription for how to be human. Unlike other animals, our nature is not defined by a repetitive daily round of fixed action patterns and survival routines. As human beings we are the "unfinished animal," forever discovering what we can be and what we can do. Our nature is open-
ended, malleable, never fully defined. Because we cannot hold onto any solid, permanent self-nature, we can never have an unassailably secure sense of existence. Human consciousness forever teeters on the brink of the unknown. Because we can perceive our actual and potential nonexistence, human life is inevitably marked by existential anxiety.

In response to particular threats to survival or well-being in the family, as well as to this more universal existential anxiety, the child tries to protect and fortify itself by creating a permanent sense of self-existence. We do this by forming an identity-structure: a self-image along with a particular "script" or story that identifies who we are. Who am I? I am "me"-this collection of characteristics, habits, tendencies, likes and dislikes, and so on. Whether our script is positive or negative-"I'm special," or "I don't need anyone," or "I'm no good," or even "I'm nobody"-nonetheless we hold onto this self-identification for dear life. We will cling to a negative self-identity, even if it is choking us, because it gives us a sense of existence-"am something, rather than nothing."

Children show tremendous intelligence in turning threats to their existence into a solid identity that creates a sense of existence, and thus relieves anxiety. For example, one client, Dan, coped with severe deprivation and abuse in childhood by making an identity out of deprivation itself: he felt most fully "himself" when he felt empty, hungry, deprived. This was a brilliant strategy for maintaining sanity in a situation that threatened to overwhelm him. However, as an adult his addiction to feeling hungry made it hard to receive nourishment from other people. He felt uncomfortable with women who actively loved him because he would lose his sense of himself with them. And he felt uncomfortable with money because he could only feel his existence when he was impoverished. His identity had become neurotic; it was maintaining itself at the cost of his well-being.

In the same way, every personal identity is at first brilliant and eventually neurotic. In fashioning an identity, the child draws on the resources at hand-its native qualities of being. At first, our identity is a life raft that helps us navigate the vast sea of the unknown surrounding us on all sides. It gives us a sense of being somebody, actually existing, feeling like, "I am me" or "I am something." But eventually we outgrow this life boat because it blocks us from feeling and touching the larger currents of life, whose circulation through us is an essential principle of health and well-being (Welwood, 1985a). Our identity becomes a trap, a frozen mode of being-in-the-world.
that deprives us of the very things we most need—the fullness of our being, and the fullness of our relationship to all of what is.

However, even though Dan's personality structure had outlived its usefulness and was now working against him, it was helpful for him to appreciate the intelligence that had gone into its formation. In creating a sense of existence out of the feeling of nonexistence, he had literally been able to make something out of nothing. To accomplish this, he had drawn on a tremendous resourcefulness and creativity deep in his being. As an adult he manifested this same resourcefulness as an artist. Most of his drawings were quite spare, consisting of a few simple lines floating in a background of open, uncluttered space. His work was influenced by Zen and its aesthetic of emptiness. His intimate awareness of emptiness was a real strength, because it allowed him to make do with very little. However, it also had a neurotic twist. He mistakenly equated Zen emptiness with his own sense of inner deprivation and would use Buddhist logic to justify and perpetuate his own sense of inner impoverishment. Yet because he did have a keen, clear sense of the genuine quality of emptiness, he was also able to see the larger life beyond his identity structure fairly readily.

COEMERGENCE

In the Mahamudra tradition of Tantric Buddhism, neurosis and sanity, imprisonment and freedom, existence and nonexistence, pathology and path are said to "coemerge," arising woven together as two sides of one whole fabric. An image from this tradition vividly portrays the situation of coemergence: the silkworm binding itself in its own silk. The silk represents the beautiful, rich resources that we each have intrinsic to our being. We draw on these resources to form a structure that at first protects us from the vicissitudes of childhood and later incarcerates us.

The following case vignettes illustrate how neurosis and sanity are intertwined in the phenomenon of coemergence:

1. A man develops the identity of a psychological "crippler," whose script-line is "I can't do it, I'm not capable." This identity was a way of deflecting attacks from his mother, who would not allow him to develop his own independent direction. In therapy, just as he would get close to important material, a "fog" would arise in his mind, and he would say, "I can't do this ... there must be something wrong with me." He took a crucial step forward when he started to see the brilliance...
underlying this strategy. Since his fog never arose randomly, but only at those moments when he was on the verge of getting in touch with something important that might allow him to move beyond his "cripple" identity, he realized that it was not a sign of his stupidity. His masquerade was a brilliant one that had kept him and everyone else fooled.

2. A physician had developed a strategy of "winning" as a way of gaining the love of his parents. As an adult, he was unable to enjoy anything because he converted everything into a task, a performance he had to succeed at. It didn't work for him to reject this tendency, because he would only wind up collapsing, eating chocolate, and giving up on himself. He needed to be able to connect with the positive quality in his winning strategy, and then he could sort out the distortion in it. The distortion was, "I have to get to the top to impress people." The sanity in it was a capacity for tremendous exertion and concern for excellence. He really wanted to do something significant with his life. But he could not fully realize that quality of his being as long as the need to win continued to distort it.

3. A woman who had developed a pervasive habit of "lying" had a hard time believing in herself; her identity contained a large element of fraud. She had begun to lie in childhood as a way of making herself look good and thus protecting herself from her parents' critical attacks. Her lying was a way of saying to herself and them: "I am basically a good person." As a central ingredient in her identity structure, her lying had gotten out of hand, yet at bottom it contained an affirmation of life and her own basic goodness.

4. A woman whose personality style was heavy and lethargic suffered from depression because she saw herself as a miserable failure. Her basic quality of being was earthy, like a mountain. But she refused to relate with that, trying instead to be a butterfly. Her depression was her path because it was pointing her in the direction she needed to move: down, out of her flights of fancy, into her body, her truth, her ground.

IDENTITY CRISIS AND EXISTENTIAL CHOICE

In such cases, the loss of the essentially sane, powerful qualities of our being becomes so painful that we become motivated to take a conscious look at what we are doing to ourselves. We wake up one day in the middle of an identity crisis, realizing that we are caught in a web of our own making. We feel cut off from all that is not-me: not only the world and other people, but the great "other" within as well, the larger spectrum of our
being that we do not yet recognize as "me." Identity crisis often marks the beginning of the path of recovering our true, genuine qualities of being.

How we negotiate these identity crises will determine the nature of our path in this lifetime. Some people go through a period of intense upheaval, perhaps in adolescence or in their college years, find no solutions, then seal over and forget this existential crisis for the rest of their lives. Others realize the importance of addressing their questions about who they are and what they are doing, perhaps seeking out help from a psychotherapist or a spiritual teacher.

People usually enter psychotherapy motivated by the pain of feeling trapped and not knowing what to do. Often they are facing an immediate life problem, which may be resolved in the first weeks or months of therapy. After the acute problem subsides, they must decide whether they want to work on the underlying structure that has led to the crisis.

However, the old identity structure has a certain inertia because we have invested so much psychic energy in it. The more we glimpse the possibility of freedom from it, the more strongly our identity tries to reassert its existence. Insofar as our identity is originally built as a defense against nonexistence, the prospect of letting it go faces us with our primal fear of death and the unknown. The path of life's forward movement always leads from the known, familiar place that we presently inhabit into a larger unknown that lies ahead of us. The goal in psychotherapy is to expand and loosen the identity structure by opening up to larger qualities of being; the goal of most spiritual work is to let go of identity altogether (Welwood, 1980). Yet in any process of growth, psychological or spiritual, we always reach this existential choice point, where we must decide whether we really want to go ahead. "If I give up my old ways, who will I be, what will I become? What is on the other side of this unknown!"

Feeling both the pain of remaining stuck in our old ways and our resistance to moving forward puts us through an important healing crisis. Fundamentally, this crisis is an opportunity to heal our relationship to nonexistence, or, in other words, to death. There are three main choices at this point. The first two tend to reinforce pathology, while the third gives us a path:

1. We could decide not to rock the boat, not to move forward into unknown territory even though our old identity pattern has outlived its usefulness. Often a client in therapy will start to rationalize his neurotic pattern—"Well, things are not really all
that bad. Myoid pattern may hurt, but at least it is a known quantity." If we choose to turn back from a larger freedom we have glimpsed, we usually become more tightly woven into our old web. In this case, our identity becomes more pathological, because we are now deliberately using it to hide from our larger being.

2. We could get stuck in attacking ourselves, as our "inner critic" punishes us for what we have become. Not valuing ourselves, we might engage in a form of therapy or spiritual practice in which we try to force change. However, trying to live up to some ideal of how we should be only diminishes our trust in our own being. Often this aggressive approach to change contains great self-deception because it masquerades as a path to a "higher, better, or more spiritual" way of being. However, it is not a path at all, for it does not lead into the unknown, but rather tries to substitute another limiting identity for the old one.

3. The third possibility is choosing to move forward by facing and working with ourselves as we are. In order to do this, we have to start by making friends with ourselves, rather than taking an aggressive stand of trying to make ourselves different. Working with what we have involves: a) learning to let ourselves be, allowing our being to unfold and flower, as well as b) learning to convert obstacles in our personality into stepping-stones on the path of our unfolding.

BEFRIENDING OURSELVES AS WE ARE

What is involved in the process of converting obstacles into stepping-stones? First of all, before we can make any kind of change, we have to see what is. Although seeing what is going on may be simple enough, it is not necessarily easy. For we usually see our own version of reality instead of what is actually happening. We are blinded by our hopes and fears, conditioned patterns of feeling and perception, cherished beliefs and opinions. So the first step in using our personal neurosis as path is to develop a commitment to see what is, no matter how much we might fear the consequences. For this work, it is most helpful to have some kind of awareness practice, such as meditation or focusing, to help us discern what is (Welwood, 1980).

Mindfulness meditation, for example, provides a basic model for how we can let ourselves be. By simply sitting with ourselves, we discover that we are constantly trying to hold on to our identity, that our thoughts are a kind of glue that
continually holds our identity structure together. If we continue to sit with our minds, without judgment or blame, our sustained awareness acts as a gentle solvent that begins to dissolve the glue. As our identity starts to loosen up, we can taste the nourishing qualities of our being that have been locked up in it and start to relax into a more fundamental quality of sustaining presence. In so doing, we experience a basic goodness in ourselves that we can really trust, beyond any identity structure (Trungpa, 1983; Welwood, 1985b).

Once we begin to see what is, we often don't like what we see. We soon come up against what the Eastern traditions call our personal "karma" - a tangled pattern of actions and reactions that has grown out of accumulated conditioning, habit, unconsciousness, automatic reactions, deceit, greed, pettiness, fear, and so on. Having seen what is, we doubt whether we can handle it.

So it is not enough just to acknowledge what is; we also have to be willing to make a relationship with it. This means opening ourselves to the situation and feeling it, facing it squarely and letting it affect us, letting it touch us. At this point, it is essential to be extremely gentle with ourselves. We have to create a friendly space in which we can actively open to our experience, without blame or attack. This does not mean that we have to like what we find. If we find parts of ourselves intolerable, we must also acknowledge this dislike as part of what is. If we're afraid of it, we can make space for our fear as well. Whatever arises, we can simply let it be as it is.

Letting ourselves feel the pain of being stuck in our patterns, sitting in that impasse with full awareness, helps activate a desire and will, from a deeper place in our being, to move forward at any cost. Befriending our experience-by making space for what is, along with all our feelings about it-facilitates that movement. For it allows the desire for change to arise as a natural expression of caring for ourselves, rather than as a crusade against our failings.

When we open ourselves to everything in our experience, without bias or blame, we begin to contact our heart, that "place" in us where we feel the tenderness of being human, our vulnerability to life and other people. As a forward-moving path our life needs to draw on the capacity of the human heart to expand, to provide an open, compassionate space that allows us to unlock and draw on the energy and intelligence contained in our neurotic patterns (Welwood, 1983, 1986). If our heart is a flame, our karmic debris is the fuel that allows the flame to burn. In order to grow larger and stronger, the flame

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actually needs this fuel. And as it consumes the fuel, we regain access to the basic openness of our being that has been bound and imprisoned within our personality structure.

Furthermore, by connecting with our openness and vulnerability in a straightforward and gentle way, we can start to heal our problematic relationship with nonexistence, which gave rise to our identity in the first place. The heart is where we experience the intersection of existence and nonexistence. There we are most full and empty at the same time: full of life and empty of self. There we most vividly feel the ground of our being, underlying both existence and nonexistence. To be able to let go of the security of our identity, we need to develop real trust in this larger ground.

TRANSMUTING NEUROSIS

As we unlock the larger power of our being, certain peripheral aspects of our personality often just fall away. More central aspects, however, still have too much psychic energy invested in them to disappear that easily. If we try to stamp them out, they often fight back all the harder. What is called for here is not destruction, but transmutation. The example of Padmasambhava, who brought Buddhism to Tibet, provides a suggestion about how to proceed. Instead of declaring war on the old demons of the shamanistic pre-Buddhist culture, he converted them into protectors of the Dharma. In a similar vein, a useful therapeutic device is to help a client find a new use for the energy tied up in an old identity. By retraining it, giving it something new to do, the client can more easily remove it from the place where it is blocking new growth from happening.

For example, one male client found it hard to overcome an old negative identity, even though it had outlived its usefulness. The script-line of his basic oppositional stance to the world was "I don't want to and you can't make me." As a child, this strategy originally had survival value as a defense against a mother who was devouring and invasive in her love. His basic "no" contained intelligence in it: it was his way of refusing to be consumed by a domineering mother.

He had tried in vain for many years to get rid of his negativity and "think positively." The problem with that approach was that he felt most alive when he was saying "no," so that in suppressing his "no," he also lost his vitality. When he imaged this part of him, he saw a monster in his guts (where he felt most tight) whose main concern was to turn down the valves of his "inner plumbing" so that he never had to feel overwhelmed by
"other" - that is, by emotional stimulation, love, and nourishment from the world. He could not simply get rid of this monster, because he felt most "himself" when he was in touch with its powerful energy.

By making friends with the monster, he found that he did not want to just kick it out. In fact, the monster had a very earnest, fatherly quality that was trying to protect him. Through dialogue with it, he found he could "promote" the monster to a much better job. Instead of guarding him against the threat of being overwhelmed, by keeping the valves turned down, the monster could be retrained to guard against inner blockages and obstacles that threatened to interfere with his emerging sense of aliveness and openness to love. He found that he could transmute his basic "no" from a "no" to the world to a "no" to anything that got in the way of the free movement of his life energy. After all, the original "no" formed to protect him, and he could protect himself better now by saying "no" to obstacles in his path. He was able to draw on the fierce energy in his "no" to confront situations head-on, so that he would not feel so overwhelmed by them. In so doing, he discovered that the discriminating intelligence in his "no" was actually a gift that he could offer to himself and to others. As he got in touch with the genuine, life-affirming energy in his "no," he also began to have freer access to his genuine, life-affirming "yes" as well.

This client's discoveries illustrate how the very things inside us that seem most terrible or unworkable often contain some of the best of what we have to offer other people and ourselves. When we attack them, we cut off our access to the potential strength and vitality contained in them, and actually impoverish ourselves further. Whatever we are struggling with, whatever seems most neurotic, can become an important stepping-stone on our path. Whatever problem, question or confusion we have, whatever seems impossible in our lives, if we go toward it, see it, feel it, make a relationship with it, use it as a stepping-stone on our path.

It is easy to get discouraged by the human condition, to ask "Why is it so difficult to be human, why do we have to go through all this, why aren't we more enlightened?" What we fail to appreciate when we feel this way is the path quality of human evolution. Enlightenment is not a goal—an ideal state of mind, a spiritual realm high above to arrive at, but a path on this earth. It is the process of waking up to the totality of what is and making a complete relationship with that. Only the pain of imprisonment can provide the inspiration for liberation. When we appreciate whatever problem we have as something that can help us wake up to our powerful innate resources as a human
allowing the "snake" to unwind

being, we can overcome feeling burdened and desperate about our karma and our conditioned personality.

A Tantric metaphor that suggests how we can work with neurosis is that of a snake uncoiling in mid-air. The coils of our neurosis have raw, wild energy tangled up in them. To straighten out these tangles, we do not have to get rid of the snake, or even "sublimate" its energy into more socially-approved forms. Instead, by simply allowing it to unwind, we can draw on its power and aliveness. What allows it to unwind is awareness and gentleness. Gentleness does not mean suppressing the snake's wildness, but rather using the energies tied up in our neuroses to propel us forward on our path. And this path of liberating the qualities of our being, appreciating them, proclaiming and celebrating them, and using them to help ourselves and other people—is endless.

REFERENCES


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