AVOIDING THE VOID:
THE LACK OF SELF IN
PSYCHOTHERAPY AND BUDDHISM

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The drugs that people take for non-medical reasons do more than numb pain or enhance pleasure or induce perceptual distortions. They are a weapon against the void. In his book on opium, Jean Cocteau wrote that every human activity "takes place in an express train hurtling towards death." To take drugs, he proposed, is to get off that train. The potent illusion that drugs provide is called upon when the more commonplace illusions fail, and especially when life appears as nothing more than the conduit between birth and death (LUG Sante).

Sante's point provides a welcome balance to all the moralizing in "the war on drugs." It also suggests that if we seriously want to address the drug problem (preeminently alcohol, of course) we should consider not only how but why we run away from the void.

Cocteau sees our problem as death, an understanding consistent with much of the best recent work in psychotherapy. Existential psychologists such as Ernest Becker and Irvin Yalom believe that our primary repression is not sexual wishes, as Freud believed, but the awareness that we are going to die (Becker, 1973, 1975; Yalom, 1980). This paper, however, will offer an interpretation of Buddhism that makes a subtle yet significant distinction between fear of death and dread of the void: our worst problem is not death, a fear which still keeps the feared thing at a distance by projecting it into the future, but the more immediate and terrifying (because quite valid) suspicion each of us has that "I" amnotreal right now.

Sakyamuni Buddha did not use psychoanalytic terms, but in trying to understand the Buddhist claim about anatman, the denial of self, we can benefit from the concept of repression and the return of the repressed in symbolic form. If something (a mental wish, accord-

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The consequence of this perpetual failure is that the sense-of-self has, as its inescapable shadow, a sense-of-lack, which it always tries to escape. In deconstructive terms, the ineluctable trace of nothingness in our being, of death in our life, is a feeling of lack. The return of the repressed in the distorted form of a symptom shows us how to link this basic yet hopeless project with the symbolic ways we try to make ourselves real in the world. We experience this deep sense of lack as the feeling that "there is something wrong with me," but of course that feeling manifests, and we respond to it, in many different ways. In its "purer" forms lack appears as an ontological guiltor anxiety that becomes almost unbearable because it gnaws on one's very core. For that reason ontological guilt wants to become guilt for something, because we then know how to atone for it; and anxiety is eager to objectify into
fear of something, because we have ways to defend ourselves against feared things.

The problem with objectifications is that no object can ever satisfy if it's not really an object we want. When we do not understand what is actually motivating us—because what we think we want is only a symptom of something else (according to Buddhism, our desire to become real, which is essentially a spiritual yearning)—we end up compulsive. Then the neurotic's anguish and despair are not the result of his symptoms but their source; those symptoms are necessary to shield him from the tragedies that the rest of us are better at repressing: death, meaninglessness, groundlessness. "The irony of man's condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation; but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive" (Becker, 1973, pp. 181-82). From the Buddhist perspective, if the autonomy of self-consciousness is a delusion which can never quite shake off its shadow-feeling that "something is wrong with me," it will need to rationalize that sense of inadequacy somehow.

Such a critique shifts our focus from the terror of future annihilation to the anguish of a groundlessness experienced now. On this account, even fear of death and desire for immortality symbolize something else; they become symptomatic of our vague intuition that the ego-self is not a hard-core of consciousness but a mental construction, the axis of a web spun to hide the void. Those whose constructions are badly damaged, the mad, are uncomfortable to be with in part because they remind us of that fact.

This paper will argue for the above position in two ways. First we shall look at what psychotherapy has discovered about guilt, anxiety and projection, to see if they may be understood as different symptoms manifesting the same problem: a repressed sense-of-lack that is intrinsic to the sense-of-self.

This will be followed by a Buddhist interpretation of lack, which agrees with much of the psychotherapeutic understanding of our situation but offers a way to resolve our unhappy state. Buddhism traces human suffering (dukhka) back to desire and ignorance, and relates all of them to our lack of self. The sense-of-self is deconstructed into interacting mental and physical processes, whose relativity leads to post-structuralist conclusions: the supposedly simple self is an economy of forces. The Buddhist solution to its lack is simple although not easy: if it is nothingness we dread, then we should become no-thing. The dichotomy between being and nonbeing can be conflated by yielding to the side we have been rejecting. In ceasing to deny my groundlessness I discover, paradoxically, that utter groundlessness (nonbeing) is equivalent to full groundedness (being). This reveals that from the very beginning
there has never been any real lack, because there has never been any self-existing self apart from the world. The problem of desire is solved when the "bad infinity" of unsatisfiable lack transforms into a "good infinity" which needs nothing and therefore can freely become anything.

GUILT

Guilt has become an immense problem for modern man, and it seems to be getting worse. In Civilization and its Discontents (1930/1989, p. 97) Freud understands a heightening sense of guilt as the price we pay for advances in human culture, but the price is so high that guilt has now become "the most important problem in the development of civilization." Norman O. Brown (1961) sees social organization as a structure of shared guilt: the burden is so heavy it must be shared in order to be expiated collectively. According to Otto Rank (1958, p. 194) contemporary man is neurotic because he suffers from a consciousness of sin just as much as premodern man did, but without believing in the religious conception of sin, which leaves us without a means of expiation. In the rituals of archaic man a sense of indebtedness was balanced by the belief that the debt could be repaid; today we are oppressed by the realization that the burden of guilt is unpayable. Even the possibility of expiation is denied us when we are not aware that what is bothering us is guilt. Hence unconscious guilt accumulates individually and collectively, with consequences that periodically become disastrous. Is this the price of progress, or do we have a bad conscience about what we are doing to each other-and to the earth? Or should the source of our guilt be distinguished from the reasons we invent to rationalize it?

Freud traced guilt back to the biologically-transmitted memory of a prehistoric primal deed, sons banding together to kill their autocratic father. With each generation this process is internalized anew in the Oedipal complex; the same instinctive wishes recur and cannot be concealed from the superego, producing guilt. The child has death-wishes toward parents yet is also dependent upon their love. Freud saw a parallel between the libidinal development of an individual and the socializing process of civilization: both require the internalization of a superego, leading to inevitable conflict with instinctual urges.

It is fascinating to observe the primal deed reenacted with Freud as psychoanalytic father and Jung, Adler, etc. as the rebellious sons. Just as striking is that Freud, the secularized Jew, locates the beginnings of our "original sin" in a moral infringement against the Father which occurred at the beginning of history and has been passed down biologically since then. As in the Old Testament, we
are not personally at fault for the initial violation, yet we inherit the consequences. Likewise, we cannot help it that in infancy we develop death wishes toward our parents, but, given that such death wishes arise toward the ones who nurture us, guilt is an understandable reaction. Both myths explain the origin of guilt-feelings by giving us moral reasons which parallel the way guilt is believed to operate in everyday life: when we do (or want to do) something wrong, we feel bad about it. The mechanism is presumed to be the same. Original sin may be proto-historical, biologically inherited, pre-conscious, yet it is only a repressed version of what happens whenever we infringe against the natural order. In terms of the distinction that the next paragraph will make between neurotic and ontological guilt, all guilt is neurotic for Genesis and Freud because we have all sinned.

If, however, the Oedipal project is the sense-of-self’s attempt to become self-grounding and to end its dependence on others by becoming autonomous (i.e., self-conscious), then the guilt that arises need not be traced back to ambivalent wishes, for it has a more primordial origin in the sense of lack inevitably deriving from the repressed intuition of self-consciousness that it does not self-exist. Such basic "guilt" is not neurotic but ontological. It is not a consequence of something I have done, but of the fact that I am-yet only "sort of." Ontological guilt arises from the contradiction between this socially-conditioned sense that I am and the suspicion that I am not. Their clash is the sense-of-lack, which generates the I should be. . . . The tragedy is that I "awaken" into being only to be confronted by my lack of being. Schizophrenics may feel guilty just for existing because this contradiction is less repressed for them.

The prehistories of Genesis and Freud’s primal deed mythologize the fact that this mode of awareness is not some natural way of experiencing the world but historically conditioned. According to Erich Neumann (1973), the full emergence of the ego abolishes the original paradisal situation; this "is experienced as guilt, and moreover as original guilt, a fall." The evolution of homo sapiens into self-consciousness alienated the human species from the rest of the world, which became objectified for us as we became subjects looking out at it. This original sin is passed down to every generation as the linguistically-conditioned and socially-maintained delusion that each of us is a consciousness existing separately from the world. Yet if this is a conditioning, it raises the possibility of a deconditioning, or a reconditioning.

Why do we need to feel guilty, and accept suffering, sickness and death as a suitable punishment? What role does that guilt play in determining the meaning of our Lives? The best answer may come not from Freud but from an existentialist: "Original sin: a new
sense has been invented for pain" (Nietzsche, 1956). Even the feeling of wrongdoing gives us some sense of control over our own destinies, because an explanation has been provided for our sense of lack. "The ultimate problem is not guilt but the incapacity to live. The illusion of guilt is necessary for an animal that cannot enjoy life, in order to organize a life of nonenjoyment" (Brown, 1961, p. 270). In The Genealogy of Morals, Nietzsche observes that man will suffer readily if he is given a reason for his suffering. Since nothing is more painful to endure than pure lack, we need to project it onto something, because only thus can we get a handle on it. If that object is found outside, we react with anger; if directed inside, it becomes guilt (introjected anger, according to psychoanalysis). In "Some Character Types Met with in Psycho-analytic Work," Freud (1916) describes "criminals from a sense of guilt" whose guilt feelings are so powerful that committing a misdeed actually brings relief—which makes sense, if what they crave is something specific to be able to atone for. "Guilt implies responsibility; and however painful guilt is, it may be preferable to helplessness" (Schmideberg, 1956, p. 476). We are all too familiar with collective examples of the other blaming system: racism, antisemitism, nationalism, etc. If social organization is a structure of shared guilt, what better solution to one's communal sense of lack than to project it onto a communal scapegoat? This is the ressentiment that Nietzsche (1968a; 1968b) detected in the soul of modern man:

The spirit of revenge: my friends, that, up to now, has been mankind's chief concern; and where there was suffering, there was always supposed to be punishment. As far as man has thought, he has introduced the bacillus of revenge in things. He has even made God ill with it, he has deprived existence in general of its innocence.

This reveals the problem of postulating an original sin as the ultimate cause of our suffering: instead of helping us end our sense-of-lack, it reifies our lack by providing it with a pedigree. It also maintains the institutions, religious and otherwise, that claim to have control over its absolution.

In contrast, Buddhism does not reify the sense of lack into an original sin, even though our problems with attachment and ignorance are historically conditioned. This is an important way nondualism, such as Buddhism, differs from theism. If you believe in an all-loving, all-powerful God, our suffering can be justified psychologically only by postulating a primal act of disobedience against Him. Sakyamuni Buddha declared that he was not interested in the metaphysical issue of origins, and emphasized that he had one thing only to teach: duhkha and the end of duhkha, our suffering now and the path to end that suffering. This means the
Buddhist path is nothing other than a way to resolve our sense of lack. Since there was no primeval offense and no expulsion from a paradise, our situation turns out to be paradoxical: the actual problem is our deeply-repressed fear that our groundlessness/thing-ness is a problem. When I stop trying to fill up that hole at my core by vindicating or realizing myself in some symbolic way, something happens to it and me.

This is easy to misunderstand, for the letting-go that is necessary is not directly accessible to consciousness. The ego cannot absolve its own lack because the ego is the other side of that lack. When ontological guilt is experienced more "purely"-as the unobjectified feeling that "something is wrong with me"-there seems to be no way to cope with it, so normally we become conscious of it as the neurotic guilt of "not being good enough" in this or that particular way. For Buddhism, the guilt expended in these situations should be converted back into ontological guilt, and that guilt must be endured without evasion; the method for doing this is simply nondual awareness, which meditation cultivates. The result is that one becomes profoundly guilty and feels completely worthless, not because of anything one has done but simply because one is. Letting-go of the mental devices that sustain my self-esteem, I stand alone and vulnerable. Such guilt, experienced in or rather as the core of one's being, cannot be resolved by the ego-self; there is nothing one can do with it except be conscious of it and bear it and let it burn itself out, like a fire that exhausts its fuel, which in this case is the sense-of-self. If we cultivate the ability to dwell as it, then ontological guilt, finding nothing else to be guilty for, consumes the sense-of-self and thereby itself too.

Anxiety

It can be no coincidence that everything just said about guilt must now be restated in terms of anxiety. The first seems to be a more limited case of the second. Even ontological guilt has an object: one's own sense of self, for it is the self that the self feels bad about. In anxiety, however, lack attains its originary form, which is formless. Cultivating such objectless anxiety is the most direct route to realizing our own formlessness.

Freud gradually realized that anxiety is at the heart of the humanization process. He first understood anxiety as a by-product of repression but soon reversed himself. "It was not the repression that created the anxiety; the anxiety was there earlier and created the repression." This makes ego rather than libido the locus of anxiety. Although Freud emphasized that his concept of the unconscious was derived from the theory of repression, he never sue-
anxiety as "cosmic"

ceeded in answering to his own satisfaction why there is repression in the first place. In neurotic phobias the symptom has been constructed in order to avoid an outbreak of anxiety, which traces neurosis and repression back to anxiety. But that just pushes the problem back a step:

We have once more come unawaresupon the riddle which has so often confronted us: whence does neurosis come—what is its ultimate, its own peculiar raison d'être? After tens of years of psycho-analytic labors, we are as much in the dark about this problems as we were at the start (Freud, 1923/1989).

In the next generation Harry Stack Sullivan had the most to say about anxiety, and he perceived an essential connection between it and the formation of the self. Anxiety originally arises out of the infant's apprehension of the disapproval of significant persons in his world. Like Freud, Sullivan viewed anxiety as "cosmic," something that invades us totally, and the self is formed out of the infant's necessity to deal with such anxiety-creating experiences, to defend against that anxiety. The self "comes into being as a dynamism to preserve the feeling of security." This pertains not only to behavior but to awareness itself:

The self comes to control awareness, to restrict one's consciousness of what is going on in one's situation very largely by the instrumentality of anxiety, with, as a result, a dissociation from personal awareness of those tendencies of the personality which are not included or incorporated in the approved structure of the self (Sullivan, in May, 1977, pp. 145-46).

We could not ask for a clearer formulation: it is not merely that something is denied, for that denial is what constitutes the self. So much for the nobility of Cartesian ego-consciousness: the sense-of-self is reduced from the locus of rationality to a pattern of evasions. No wonder it feels so uncomfortable, for coping with discomfort is its role; and no wonder it is so difficult to realize who or what we are, for such a consciousness has no being, only a function. This makes the sense-of-self into a double lack: an ungrounded awareness whose task is to repress anxiety.

Just as ontological guilt "wants" to become a more specific fault, so that I can deal with what is wrong with me, anxiety wants to become fear. Freud distinguished between anxiety (in which there is no object threat) and fear (in which there is), but psychoanalysts since him have found that distinction difficult to maintain in practice. According to Rollo May, "anxiety is the basic underlying reaction ... and fear is the expression of the same capacity in its specific, objectivated form." Anxiety "is objectless because it strikes at that basis of the psychological structure on which the
perception of one's self as distinct from the world of objects occurs" (1977, pp. 198, 182). According to my Buddhist interpretation, such pure anxiety accompanies the ego-self's intuition of its own unreality; how reassuring, then, to project this outside as the threat posed by an external object. If the self is constituted by the denial of anxiety, as Sullivan seems to say, to objectify anxiety into fear will also subjectify the sense-of-self as that which copes with the fear-and as that which needs to be protected from the threat.

If so, then ending anxiety (if that is possible) also implies ending the sense-of-self as something autonomous and self-grounding. Freud said that what the ego fears in anxiety "is in the nature of an overthrow or extinction." Rollo May adds that in anxiety "the security base of the individual is threatened, and since it is in terms of this security base that the individual has been able to experience himself as a self in relation to objects, the distinction between subject and object also breaks down" (May, 1977, p. 183). No Buddhist could express it better. For psychoanalysis, such breakdown is a definition of psychosis. For Buddhism, it may describe enlightenment:

Where there is an object there is a subject, but not where there is no object. The absence of an object results in the absence also of a subject, and not merely in that of grasping. It is thus that there arises the cognition which is homogeneous without object, indiscriminate and supermundane. The tendencies to treat object and subject as distinct and real entities are forsaken, and thought is established in just the true nature of one's thought (Vasubandhu, 1964).

The issue becomes whether the subject-object distinction can break down in different ways: why the mystic can swim in the same sea that drowns the psychotic.

In sum, the Buddhist critique of ego-self implies that anxiety is essential to the ego because it is the ego's response to its own groundlessness, something more immediately threatening than fear of death sometime in the future. This theme is familiar in existential philosophy as well but it is uncommon in psychoanalysis. In Existential Psychotherapy, Irvin Yalom discusses what he calls the "ur-anxiety" of groundlessness yet concludes that, unlike death anxiety (to which he devotes almost half his book), anxiety about groundlessness is not evident in our daily experience (Yalom, 1980, pp. 221-22). Is such anxiety hard to recognize because it is so rare—i.e., confined, perhaps, to abstract philosophers—or because it is so w#l repressed?

In an influential essay "Life Fear and Death Fear," Otto Rank divided anxiety into two opposed but complementary fears. Life fear is anxiety in the face of standing out from nature and becoming
an individual, thereby losing connection with a greater whole. Death fear is anxiety in the face of extinction, of losing individuality and dissolving back into the whole. "Between these two fear possibilities, the individual is thrown back and forth all his life" (Rank, in Yalom, 1980, pp. 141-42). In Existential Psychotherapy, Yalom develops this into his own dual paradigm of death-denial through individuation or fusion. The psychological defense of specialness is trying to become different and better than everyone else, thus deserving of a better fate. The defense of fusion is hiding in the group, which includes expecting to be taken care of by others. Yalom employs these defenses against death to explain the behavior of many of his clients, despite the fact that many of them display little if any obvious death anxiety.

My point is that Yalom's paradigm need not be limited to the use Yalom finds for it, for specialness and fusion can work even better as defenses against a sense of ontological lack. If I am driven by an unacknowledged intuition of my groundlessness, I can try to compensate for that by becoming someone special who stands out from the crowd and thereby hope to become real by being acknowledged by the crowd. Conversely, I may try to resolve my sense of lack by fusing with others, in order to be no different from them: "there's nothing wrong with me; I'm just like everyone else." In the first case I compensate by striving to become more real than others; in the second I reassure myself by becoming no less real than others seem to be.

Until recently the emphasis has been on a more communal version of the latter. Society may well be a structure of shared guilt, as Brown says, but it is more obviously a structure of shared anxiety. Today our problem with anxiety is greater for at least two reasons: a more individualistic society produces people with a stronger sense-of-self, therefore with stronger anxiety, and it provides fewer effective ways to cope with that anxiety. Religion is the traditional consolation because it reassures me that my anxiety will be put to rest, my lack filled in, my groundlessness grounded in God or nirvana. If this is our deepest need, the death of God will only result in the search for an equivalent. The more individuated can try to deify their own egos, but it is difficult to become one's own sun. Most people require a more collective, more objectified deity. Herein lies much of the appeal of nationalism, and socialism's claim to embody "the will of the people." "If modernization can be described as a spreading condition of homelessness, then socialism can be understood as the promise of a new home" (Berger, Berger & Kellner, 1973).

Herein, too, is a key to understanding many of the horrors of the twentieth century.
Totalitarianism is a cultural neurotic symptom of the need for community—a symptom in the respect that it is grasped as a means of allaying anxiety resulting from the feelings of powerlessness and helplessness of the isolated, alienated individuals produced in a society in which complete individualism has been the dominant goal. Totalitarianism is the substitution of collectivism for community, as Tillich has pointed out (May, 1977, p. 212).

In the passage from which this quotation is taken, May looks no further than the need for community; he does not consider what that need might express. This is no minor issue if our rapidly-evolving "global village" means there is no return to the small towns that sustained almost all of us until a few generations ago. Nostalgia may mythologize those communities, but they provided the security of a common worldview and the hope of redemption in one symbolic form or another. Without that possibility, the question becomes whether there is another alternative to mass collectivism, a different type of community, in which individuals are able to take more personal responsibility for coping with increased anxiety and resolving their own ontological lack.

That brings us back to the possibility of ending anxiety. Again, most of what was said earlier about ending guilt also applies here, transposed from a minor to a major key. But what is more noticeable in terms of anxiety is the almost unanimous agreement among existentialists and psychoanalysts that anxiety cannot be eliminated, only reduced and kept in its proper place. Many psychologists doubt that anxiety should be eliminated, viewing it as a spur to, or a necessary by-product of, heightened awareness. Liddell notes that "anxiety accompanies intellectual activity as its shadow" (quoted in May, 1977, p. 46).

For a different view we must turn again to religion, which confronts us with the task of demythologizing transformation from consolation, of distinguishing possibility from wishful thinking. For the role of anxiety in the religious life, I can find no better account than the short chapter which concludes Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety*. In a few unforgettable pages Kierkegaard delineates the paradox that, if there is to be an end to anxiety, it can be found only through anxiety. Understood and experienced in the right way (one who misunderstands this anxiety is lost, he says), anxiety is a school which roots out everything finite and petty in us, and only then takes us wherever we want to go. As with guilt, the path of integration is an awareness that does not flee anxiety but endures it, in order to recuperate those parts of the psyche which split off and returned to haunt us in projected, symbolic form. If the way to integrate guilt is to be profoundly guilty, the way to integrate anxiety is to become completely anxious: to let formless, unprojected anxiety gnaw on all those "finite ends" I have at-
tempted to secure myself with; so that, by devouring these attachments, anxiety devours me too and, like the parasite that kills its host, consumes itself (see Kierkegaard, 1957, pp. 155-62).

To learn how to be anxious is to learn the ultimate, says Kierkegaard. The school of anxiety is the path to true freedom, which is what remains after we have been purged of all the comforting hiding places we automatically flee to whenever we feel insecure. Only such anxiety is "absolutely educative, because it consumes all finite ends and discovers all their deceptiveness." The curriculum of this school is possibility, "the weightiest of all categories." No matter what tragedies actually befall us, they are always far lighter than what could happen. When a person "graduates from the school of possibility,... he knows better than a child knows his ABCs that he can demand absolutely nothing of life and that the terrible, perdition, and annihilation live next door to every man." It is an exercise in awareness: dredging up all the psychic securities we have hedged around us and then "forgotten," until we found ourselves in a safe but constricted little world. Consciousness of what could happen at any moment deconstructs this comfortable cocoon by reminding us, at every moment, of our mortality; in psychotherapeutic terms, this demolishes one's unconscious power linkages or supports. "He who sank in possibility... sank absolutely, but then in turn he emerged from the depth of the abyss lighter than all the troublesome and terrible things in life." Such a person no longer fears fate, "because the anxiety within him has already fashioned fate and has taken away from him absolutely all that any fate could take away." This spiritual discipline stands in striking contrast to the sense of divine protection that is usually taken to be a secular benefit of religious faith. Kierkegaard is no less interested in faith, yet for him it does not come so cheaply. Authentic faith is not a refuge from anxiety but its fruit.

If the ego-self is a mental construction whose function is to preserve a feeling of security (as Sullivan puts it), then such an exercise in deconstructing security should eliminate that sense-of-self. Usually much of our mental activity is structured by the need to have reassuring hide-outs, where we can flee when our self-esteem is threatened. A trivial example: when I lose a chess game to an opponent with a much lower rating, I automatically compensate: official ratings show that I am really the better player. Fixed by repetition, the web of such automatizations constitutes my character and therefore my unfreedom: all the ways I habitually run away from open encounter with the world. For Buddhism as well as Kierkegaard, I must let go of these thought-props, which is to suffer. Without these defenses to self-esteem, I die a thousand little ego-deaths-c-or walk on the edge of a thousand swords, to use the Zen metaphor. In Kierkegaard's terms, such thought-props are the
finitudes which must be rooted out to reveal the infinitude that is our true ground.

**Projection**

Our discussions of guilt and anxiety need to be supplemented by some reference to their objectifications: projection and transference. The apparently-objective world is unconsciously structured by the ways we seek to secure ourselves within it. We meet again the unfortunate paradox that precisely this attempt to ground myself in the world is what separates me from it.

In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud observes that the dynamically unconscious repressed is not capable of becoming conscious in the ordinary way, and suggests that "anything arising from within that seeks to become conscious must try to transform itself into external perceptions" (Freud, 1923/1989, pp. 12-13). That insight is now taken for granted, yet the way Freud expresses it also takes for granted our commonsense bifurcation between subject and object even as the phenomena he refers to—projection and transference—challenge it. Such formulations assume that the locus of the unconscious is some place within me and that the objective world is what it appears to be, something external to me. Like most of us all the time and perhaps all of us most of the time, Freud takes for granted the objectivity of the world—yet this is a dangerous assumption, given Kant's Copernican Revolution and the more recent discoveries of quantum physics and cognitive psychology. It is also a difficult assumption to become aware of, if we constitute the world in a manner which conceals the fact that we have constituted it:

Perhaps the most potent defense of all [against death-anxiety] is simply reality as it is experienced—that is, the appearance of things... appearances enter the service of denial: we constitute the world in such a way that it appears independent of our constitution. To constitute the world as an empirical world means to constitute it as something independent of ourselves (Yalom, 1980, p. 222).

Why is this such a potent defense against anxiety? Why do we forget that we (for it is a social construction: we learn to perceive the world the way others do) have constituted the world? Yalom relates this to a repressed fear of groundlessness, which makes us try to secure ourselves by stabilizing the world we are in. We need a world of dependable, self-existing things, fixable in objective time and space and interacting in ways we can learn to manipulate. Once a predictable world has been automatized, we can concentrate on achieving our ends within that world. However, there is another reason for "forgetting" if the sense-of-self which is in that world is itself constituted at the same time: in that case these acts of
constitution cannot be accessible to self-consciousness because they are also the foundations of self-consciousness. *Then to repress the fact that my objective world is constituted is also to repress the fact that I am constituted.*

The implication of this for projection and transference is that unconscious phenomena need not be sought in some undetermined mental place within me but are to be found embodied in my world. Then, if I want to find my unconscious, I should look at the structures of my world, and if we want to locate our collective unconscious we must look to the shared structures of our social world.

What really happens [in transference] is not that the neurotic patient "transfers" feelings he had toward mother or father to wife or therapist. Rather, the neurotic is one who in certain areas never developed beyond the limited and restricted forms of experience characteristic of the infant. Hence in later years he perceives wife or therapist through the same restricted, distorted "spectacles" as he perceived father or mother. The problem is to be understood in terms of perception and relatedness to the world (May, 1983, p. 154).

However, this does not mean that developing into the less restricted forms of experience characteristic of most adults is a satisfactory solution. The "pathology of normalcy" (Fromm) or the "psychopathology of the average" (Maslow) are no answer insofar as the child is father to the man and we remain children "blown up by age." The difference is that the infant's world is determined by his parents', but as we grow up our need for security becomes invested in wider social structures, which emphasize competing for socially-agreed security and status symbols: wealth, prizes, power and so forth.

Jung described projection as leading to a dream-like experience of the world:

The effect of projection is to isolate the subject from his environment, since instead of a real relation to it there is now only an illusory one. Projections change the world into the replica of one's unknown face. In the last analysis, therefore, they lead to an auto-erotic or autistic condition in which one dreams a world whose reality remains forever unattainable (Jung, 1958, p. 8).

Jung also noted that people in the process of individuation take their projections back into themselves."To understand better the principles involved in such de-projection, we can benefit from the fifth part of Spinoza's *Ethics* (1677/1982), "Of the Power of the Intellect, or of Human Freedom," which discusses how human freedom may be realized. Proposition three is: "An emotion which is a passion ceases to be a passion as soon as we form a clear and
distinct idea of it." Do we passively suffer from the way our minds work or are we "self-determined" because we understand how they function? Proposition two makes it more evident that, in psychotherapeutic terms, this is the difference between an unconscious transference/projection and the awareness of what we are doing to ourselves: "If we remove a disturbance of the mind or an emotion away from the thought of an external cause, and join it to other thoughts, then love or hatred towards the external cause, as well as waverings of the mind which originate from these emotions, are destroyed."

Earlier in the Ethics Spinoza defines love and hatred as pleasure and pain, respectively, accompanied by the idea of an external cause. In a similar fashion, fear might be defined as "anxiety accompanied by the idea of an external cause" and guilt as "anxiety accompanied by the idea of an internal cause (i.e., oneself)." The solutions are similar in each case: to break the association between the emotion and its supposedly external (or introjected, in the case of guilt) cause, which is what my argument has been recommending in order to experience pure ontological guilt and anxiety, unrelieved by any projection or introjection.

If something about a person particularly bothers me, the psychotherapeutic approach is to use that as an opportunity to learn something about myself, by inquiring into why that affects me. Spinoza is also pointing out that if I suffer psychologically, it is because my own ways of thinking, alienated and projected, have put me in a bind. Efforts to real-ize myself symbolically mean I give power over myself to those persons and situations which can grant or refuse the symbolic reality that I hope will fill up my lack.

Spinoza, like Buddhism, believes that genuine freedom can be actualized by becoming aware of the repressed mental events we have projected. If, for example, I want to be respected by certain philosophers, whom I look upon as eminent (usually because others look upon them as eminent), this will naturally affect the nature of my world and the way I feel compelled to act within it. Spinoza shows me how to realize that the opinions of these philosophers do not have power over my state of mind, but that I give these people power over me by my ways of thinking about their states of mind. In gaining a "clear and distinct idea" of my desire for their approbation-by becoming aware of it rather than just being motivated by it-I can distinguish my desire from my idea of those people ("the thought of an external cause") and notice instead the connections between that desire and other ideas of mine, such as my desire to become a famous thinker ("join it to other thoughts"). In this way I can free myself from the "waverings of the mind" arising from fear of their evaluation and need to be esteemed ("loved") by them. This does not mean I should become indifferent
to the opinions of others, but it allows me to respond in a more self-determined way, informed rather than affected by their views.

**BUDDHIST DUHKHA**

A monk whose mind is thus released cannot be followed and tracked out even by the gods ... Even in this actual life, monks, I say that a released person is not to be thoroughly known. Though I thus say and thus preach, some ascetics and Brahmans accuse me wrongly and baselessly, saying that "the ascetic Gotama is a nihilist and preaches the annihilation, destruction and non-existence of an existent being." That is what I am not and do not affirm. Both previously and now I preach duhkha and the cessation of duhkha (Sakyamuni Buddha, Majjhima Nikaya L135).

I am not aware of any precise Buddhist equivalent for the psychoanalytic concepts of repression and the return of the repressed as a symptom. Yet we have already noticed that Buddhism does have a term which corresponds to the sense-of-lack as I have been using it, and by no coincidence it is probably the most important concept of all: duhkha. The Buddha repeatedly summarized his teachings into four truths: duhkha, the cause of duhkha, the end of duhkha, and how to end duhkha. What makes this an equivalent for lack is that Buddhism sees an integral relationship between our duhkha and our delusive sense-of-self, in order to end duhkha, the sense-of-self must be deconstructed.

*Duhkha* is a Sanskrit term meaning suffering, pain, discomfort, frustration, etc. The first truth defines *homo sapiens* as the dissatisfied animal. Without confronting the ultimate source of our duhkha, any amelioration in one aspect of life will only shift the emphasis to another: from physical pain to psychological stress, for example. That is because, like psychoanalytic anxiety, duhkha is not something we have but something we are.

The early commentarial tradition distinguishes three kinds of duhkha. What we usually think of as suffering and discomfort is all included in the first, which incorporates the trauma of birth, illness, worry, decrepitude, death-fear; to be bound to what one dislikes; to be separated from what one loves, etc. When momentarily free of such suffering we are able to contemplate the second type of duhkha, that caused by anitya, impermanence. "Such is the state of life, that none are happy but by the anticipation of change: the change is nothing; when we have made it, the next wish is to change again" (Dr. Johnson). As long as there is lack, real life is always elsewhere. Modernity has aggravated this problem:

On the one hand, modern identity is open-ended, transitory, liable to ongoing change. On the other hand, a subjective realm of identity is the
individual's main foothold in reality. Something that is constantly changing is supposed to be the *ens realissimum*. Consequently it should not be a surprise that modern man is afflicted with a *permanent identity crisis*, a condition conducive to considerable nervousness.

...The final consequence of all this can be put very simply (though the simplicity is deceptive): *modern man has suffered from a deepening condition of "homelessness."* The correlate of the migratory character of his experience of society and of self has been what might be called a metaphysical loss of "home." It goes without saying that this condition is psychologically hard to bear (Berger, Berger & Kellner, 1973, pp. 74, 77).

The special contribution of Buddhism is how it relates these first two types of *duhkha-dis-ease* and impermanence to the structure of the sense-of-self: the third kind of *duhkha* is that due to the "conditioned states," the physical and mental factors whose interaction constitutes the ego-self. *Samadhi*, meditative absorption, enables us to end our sense-of-lee by cultivating the ability to forget oneself, whereby the sense-of-self lets go of itself. The rest of this paper discusses this Buddhist deconstruction. The following section presents the ontological and epistemological deconstruction of the self according to Buddhist doctrine. The final section looks at that deconstruction more phenomenologically, according to Buddhist *praxis*, in order to understand how it solves the problem of our *lack*.

**Buddhist Deconstruction of the Self**

Buddhism deconstructs the sense of self in two ways: synchronically into the five *skandhas*, literally "heaps," and diachronically into *pratitya-samutpadā* dependent origination." These doctrines explain how the illusion of self is constituted and how it functions. They also imply how it may be ended.

The five *skandhas* are the physical and mental factors that compose the psychophysical personality. They are usually translated as: form, which includes the material body with its sense-organs; feelings and sensations; perceptions; mental formations (or volitional tendencies) including habits and dispositions; and consciousness, understood here as the six sense-consciousnesses (including mental consciousness of mental events). These are also called "the five groups of grasping." All experiences associated with the sense of self can be analyzed into these five "heaps," with no remainder outside them. There is no persisting self or transcendent soul to be found over and above their functioning. The Buddha emphasized that these five do not constitute the self; their interaction creates the illusion of self. The recommended attitude is to regard each *skandha" with proper wisdom, according to reality,
twelve links of the chain thus: "These are not mine, this I am not, this is not my self." As a result, the "well-instructed noble disciple, understanding this, wearies of them, becomes passion-free, and is thereby emancipated" (Anatta-Lakkhana Sutra, "On the No-Self Characteristic," Samyutta Nikaya XXII,54).

Yet the skandha deconstruction of self has been overshadowed by and even subsumed into pratitya-samutpada (dependent-originiation), by far the most important doctrine in Buddhism. The Buddha emphasized that someone who understands pratitya-samutpada understands his teaching, and vice-versa. Dependent-originiation explains our experience by locating all phenomena within a set of twelve factors, each conditioned by and conditioning all the others. The twelve links of this chain (a later doctrinal construct which integrates shorter chains that the Buddha elaborated on different occasions) are traditionally understood as follows.

The presupposition of the whole process is (I) ignorance or ignorance, because something about experience is overlooked in our usual eagerness to gratify desires. Due to this ignorance, the other factors function, including (2) volitional tendencies (the fourth of the skandhas) from a person's previous lifetime which survive physical death and tend to cause a new birth. The original Sanskrit term samskarah refers to the influence that previous mental activities have on our conative acts. The persistence of these volitional tendencies explains how rebirth occurs without a permanent self: the samskaras survive physical death to affect the new (3) consciousness that arises when a fertilized egg is conceived. Conception causes (4) mind-body, the fetus, to grow, which develops (5) the sense-organs which allow (6) contact between each organ and its respective sense-object, giving rise to (7) sensation that leads to (8) craving for that sensation. Craving causes (9) grasping or attachment to life in general. Such clinging is traditionally classified into four types: clinging to pleasure, to views, to morality or external observances, and to belief in a soul or self. This classification is striking because it ignores any difference in kind between physical sense grasping and mental attachment; evidently the same problematic tendency manifests in all four. Grasping leads to (10) becoming, the tendency after physical death to be reborn, causing (11) another birth and therefore (12) "decay and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair." And so the cycle continues.

The first factor mentioned, ignorance, is not understood as a "first cause" that initiated the whole process in some distant past. Each of the twelve factors conditions all the others, and there is no reference in Buddhism to some pristine time before this cycle began operating. Even (8) craving, which the second Noble Truth gives as the cause of duhkha, is here explained as conditioned by (7) sensation, which in turn is conditioned by (6) contact, and so forth.
In response to the problem of how rebirth can occur without a permanent soul or self that is reborn, rebirth is explained as a series of impersonal processes which occur without any self that is doing or experiencing them. In one Pali sutra, a monk asks the Buddha to whom belong, and for whom occur, the phenomena described in *pratitya-samutpada*. The Buddha rejects that question as misguided; from each factor as its preconditions arises another factor; that is all. The karmic results of action are experienced without there being anyone who created the karma or anyone who receives its fruit, although there is a causal connection between the action and its result.

A chain is only as strong as its weakest link, which points to the Buddhist solution to this cycle of suffering. "Through the entire fading away and extinction of this ignorance [the first factor], however, the *samskarah* [second factor] become extinguished," an extinction which in turn affects the third factor, and so forth until all twelve factors have been extinguished. "Thus takes place the extinction of this whole mass of suffering." This formulation has encouraged many Buddhist as well as most Western commentators to understand Buddhism as nihilistic, yet Sakyamuni Buddha himself denied this, for it misunderstands the significance of the fact that there has never been any self to be annihilated.

This exposition of basic doctrines may seem a digression from our earlier discussions of lack and the return of the repressed. It is necessary to keep in mind, therefore, the connection between such theoretical constructs and the *praxis* they underpin. All Buddhist doctrines may be viewed as heuristic, because they all refer back to the essential matter of resolving our *duhkha*. We need to understand how the chain that leads to *duhkha* functions in order to learn how to end it. We must realize how certain, largely automatized and unconscious, ways of understanding ourselves in the world perpetuate both our sense-of-self and the objectified world we find ourselves in; and that what has thereby been constructed may also be deconstructed.

From this point of view, the important issue is not whether the five *skandhas* are the only synchronous way to analyze the sense-of-self, nor whether the Buddhist doctrines of *karma* and rebirth are valid, but the integral connection between *duhkha* and the sense-of-self. Our discussion of that relationship is not yet complete, because the Buddhist understanding of *pratitya-samutpada* changed radically with the development of Mahayana. Nagarjuna's interpretation of *pratitya-samutpada* constituted a "Copernican revolution" within Buddhism, and the *locus classicus* of this revolution is in his *Mulamadhyamikakarikas* (hereafter "MMK," Candrakirti, 1979). Let us see what the MMK says about *sunnata* and *nirvana*.
The first verse of the MMK proclaims its thoroughgoing critique of being: "No things whatsoever exist, at any time or place, having risen by themselves, from another, from both or without cause."? Paralleling the poststructuralist radicalization of structuralist claims about language, Nagarjuna’s argument merely brings out more fully the implications of pratitya-samutpada. Dependent origination is not a doctrine about causal relations between entities, because the mutual interdependence of these twelve factors means they are not really entities. None of the twelve phenomena—which are understood to encompass everything—is self-existent because each is infected with the traces of all the others. That none self-exists is the meaning of sunya and its substantive sunyata, terms notoriously difficult to translate but usually rendered as "empty" and "emptiness." Nagarjuna was careful to warn that sunyata is a heuristic concept: "Sunyata is a guiding, not a cognitive, notion, presupposing the everyday" (MMK, XXIV: 18). It presupposes the everyday because it is parasitic on the notion of things, which it refutes, thereby refuting itself at the same time. Nagarjuna warned that sunyata was a snake which, if grasped at the wrong end, could be fatal: "The spiritual conquerors have proclaimed sunyata to be the exhaustion of all theories and views; those for whom sunyata is itself a theory, they declared to be incurable" (MMK XXIV:II).

The point of sunyata is to deconstruct the self-existence of things. Nagarjuna addresses the main philosophical theories of his day, yet his real target is that unconscious, automatized metaphysics disguised as the world we live in. If philosophy were merely a preoccupation of academics one could ignore it, but we have no choice in the matter because we are all philosophers. The fundamental categories of everydayness for us are self-existing/self-present things which originate, change, and eventually cease to be; in order to explain the relations among these things, the categories of space, time and causality must also be employed. The most important and problematical of these supposedly self-existing things is, of course, the self: the Buddhist notion of interdependent factors is thus diametrically opposed to the Cartesian notion of an autonomous, self-grounded consciousness. And the vehicle of this commonsense metaphysics, creating and sustaining it, is language, which presents us with a set of nouns (self-existing things) that have temporal and causal predicates (arise, change, and cease).

Can our duhkha be explained in terms of sunyata and pratitya-samutpada? The ego-self is delusive because, like everything else, it is a temporary manifestation arising out of the interconditionality of the twelve factors, yet it feels separate from that chain and from the rest of the world. The basic difficulty is that insofar as I feel separate (i.e., an autonomous, self-existing consciousness) I also feel uncomfortable, because an illusory sense of separateness is inevitably insecure. It is the ineluctable trace of nothingness in my
"empty" (because not really self-existing) sense-of-self that is experienced as a sense-of-lack. In reaction, the sense-of-self becomes preoccupied with trying to make itself self-existing, in one or another symbolic fashion. The tragic irony is that the ways we attempt to do this cannot succeed, for a sense-of-self can never expel the trace of lack that constitutes it insofar as it is illusory; while in the most important sense we are already self-existing, because the infinite set of differential traces that constitutes each of us is the whole universe. "The self-existence of a Buddha is the self-existence of this very cosmos. The Buddha is without a self-existent nature; the cosmos too is without a self-existent nature" (MMK XXII: 16). What Nagarjuna says here about the Buddha is equally true for each of us and, indeed, everything; the only difference is that a Buddha knows it.

Yet insofar as we strive to become a Buddha, we misunderstand the Buddha's teaching. Instead, the serenity we seek is "the coming-to-rest of all ways of taking things, the repose of named things" (sarvopalambhopasamaprapancopasamah) (MMK XXV: 24). Nagarjuna's most important commentator, Candrakirti, glosses this verse: "the very coming to rest, the non-functioning, of perceptions as signs of all named things, is itself nirvana. ... When verbal assertions cease, named things are in repose; and the ceasing to function of discursive thought is ultimate serenity" (Candrakirti, 1979, p. 262). The problem is not merely that language acts as a filter, obscuring the nature of things. Rather, names are used to objectify appearances into the self-existing things we perceive as books, tables, trees, you and me. In other words, the objective world of material things, which interact causally in space and time, is metaphysical through-and-through. It is this metaphysics, disguised as commonsense reality, which makes me suffer, especially insofar as I understand myself to be one such self-existing being in time that will nonetheless die.

It is possible to end our duhkhā because the coming-to-rest of using names to take perceptions as self-existing objects can deconstruct the automatized inside-outside dualism between our sense-of-self and the "objective" everyday world. Since that world is as differential, as full of traces, as the textual discourse Derrida analyzes, the Buddhist approach is to use those differences/deferrals to deconstruct that objectified world-including ourselves, since we subjects are the first to be objectified. If there are only traces of traces, what happens if we stop trying to arrest those elusive traces into self-present things? "When there is clinging perception (upadane), the perceiver generates being. When there is no clinging perception, he will be freed and there will be no being" (MMK XXVI: 7).

This explains how Buddhist doctrine deconstructs the self-existence of things, but this is not sufficient for understanding how that
deconstructs our sense-of-lack. The last section will address that deconstruction by considering how the most fundamental dualism of all-that between my ungrounded sense of being and the nonbeing or no-thing-ness that threatens it-may be conflated.

Letting the Mind Come Forth

By now it has become clear that, from the Buddhist perspective, our most problematic duality is not life against death but self versus nonself, or our being versus nonbeing. In psychological terms, our primal repression is not fear of death-which still holds the feared thing at arm's length by projecting it into the future-but the sense-of-self repressing its suspected nothingness right now, which, I have argued, we become aware of as a sense-of-lack that shadows our sense-of-self. This particular bipolarity infects much of our thinking. A good example is Paul Tillich's *The Courage to Be* (1952). According to Tillich, ontological anxiety is anxiety about one's ultimate non-being, about not being able to preserve one's own being. Since he believes this anxiety cannot be eliminated, his theological solution is for us to be accepted by the Power of Being, which gives us the courage to affirm being despite the threat of nonbeing. God is "the self-affirmation of Being itself which prevails against nonbeing."

Perhaps it is reassuring to learn that God is not on the side of nonbeing-which is presumably why nonbeing does not rate a capital letter—but the Buddhist approach is different: as the seventh century Ch'an master Hsuan Chueh of Yung Chia put it, "Being is not being. Non-being is not non-being. Miss this rule by a hair and you are off by a thousand miles" (Aitken, unpublished). Such conceptual paradoxes may not seem very relevant to our lives, yet the speculations of theologians and metaphysicians are only the most abstract version of a game which touches our core, if the basic issue turns out to be the groundedness or groundlessness of that core. Like the matter and anti-matter of quantum physics, nonbeing (experienced as lack) turns out to be the shadow of being (self). They arise together, in relation to each other, and therefore they should be able to disappear together by collapsing back into each other-Which cannot leave the nothingness we dread (for that is one of the two poles), but ... what?

In the *Samyutta Nikaya* Sakyamuni declares that "the world is nothing in itself and for itself, ... therefore it is said the world is nothing." What is this nothing? He says that it is the six organs of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind, their six sense-objects, and the six corresponding types of sense-consciousness. Yet the Buddha also describes these same eighteen *indriyas* as the *all*: "Whosoever, 0 monks, should say: 'Reject this all, I will proclaim
another all’-it would be mere talk on his part. ... Why so? Because it is beyond his scope to do so.’ The Buddha then provides "a teaching for the abandonment of the all": "The eye must be abandoned, visual-objects must be abandoned, eye-consciousness must be abandoned, eye-contact must be abandoned. That enjoyment or suffering or neutral state experienced which arises according to eye contact-that also must be abandoned." And so forth for all the other senses (Samyutta Nikaya XXXV, 23-26). Since the Buddha has just said that these eighteen indriyas encompass everything, such a teaching seems odd: there is nothing else to become, nowhere else to turn. The solution is so obvious that we are liable to overlook it: it is simply to realize something about the sunya "empty" nature of these phenomena, an approach that Mahayana developed.

As in psychotherapy, the Buddhist response to bipolar dualisms involves recognizing the side that has been denied. If death is what the sense-of-self fears, the solution is for the sense-of-self to die. If it is no-thing-ness (i.e., the repressed intuition that, rather than being autonomous and self-existent, the "I" is a construct) I am afraid of, the best way to resolve that fear is to become nothing. The twelfth-century Japanese Zen master, Dogen, sums up this process: "Forgetting" ourselves is how we lose our sense of separation and realize that we are not other than the world. Meditation is learning how to become nothing by learning to forget the sense-of-self, which happens when I become absorbed into my meditation-exercise. If the sense-of-self is a result of consciousness attempting to reflect back upon itself in order to grasp itself, such meditation practice makes sense as an exercise in de-reflection. Consciousness unlearns trying to grasp itself, realize itself, objectify itself. Enlightenment occurs in Buddhism when the usually-automatized reflexivity of consciousness ceases, which is experienced as a letting-go and falling into the void and being wiped out of existence. "Men are afraid to forget their minds, fearing to fall through the Void with nothing to stay their fall. They do not know that the Void is not really void, but the realm of the real Dharma" (Huang-po, in Blofeld, 1958, p. 41). Then, when I no longer strive to make myself real through things, I find myself "actualized" by them, says Dogen. This process implies that what we fear as nothingness is not really nothingness, for that is the perspective of a sense-of-self anxious about losing its grip on itself. According to Buddhism,
letting-go of myself and merging with that no-thing-ness leads to something else: when consciousness stops trying to catch its own tail, I become no-thing, and discover that I am everything—or, more precisely, that I can be anything.

An example of Zen meditation may be helpful here. In the Zen lineage that I am familiar with, a first koan such as Joshu's Mu is treated more or less like an mantra. Putting all one's mental energy into "muuu ... " (repeated mentally during breath exhalations) undermines the sense-of-self by letting-go of the mental processes which sustain it. At the beginning of such practice, one attempts to concentrate on "muuu ... " but is distracted by other thoughts, feelings, memories, desires, etc., that arise. A later, more focussed stage is when one can concentrate on "muuu ... " without losing it: "muuu ... " effectively keeps other thoughts, etc., away. The stage when "both inside and outside naturally fuse" occurs when there is no longer the sense of an 'I' that is repeating an objective sound; there is only "muuu " This stage is sometimes described by saying that now "muuu " is doing "muuu ... ": it is "muuu ... " that sits, walks, eats, and so forth.

Sometimes this practice leads to a condition that has been described as hanging over a precipice. "Except for occasional feelings of uneasiness and despair, it is like death itself' (Hakuin, in Suzuki, 1956, p. 148). The solution is to throw oneself completely into "muuu ... ":

Bravely let go on the edge of the cliff.
Throw yourself into the abyss with decision and courage.
You only revive after death! (Po-shan, in Chang, 1959).

At this point the teacher may help by cutting the last thread: an unexpected action, such as a blow or shout or even a few quiet words, may startle the student into letting-go. "All of a sudden he finds his mind and body wiped out of existence, together with the koan. This is what is known as 'letting go your hold' "(Hakuin, in Suzuki, 1956, p. 148). One classical Zen story tells how a student was enlightened by the sound of a pebble striking bamboo. When the practice is ripe, the shock of an unexpected sensation can help it to penetrate to the very core of one's illusory sense of being-that is, it is experienced nondually.

Is this being or nothingness? groundlessness or groundedness? If each link of pratitya-samutpadās conditioned by all the others, then to become completely groundless is also to become completely grounded, not in some particular, but in the whole network of interdependent relations that constitutes the world. The supreme irony of my struggle to ground myself is that it cannot succeed because I am already grounded in the totality. Buddhism implies
that I am groundless and ungroundable insofar as delusively feeling myself to be separate from the world; I have always been fully grounded insofar as the world is me and I am the world. With that conflation, the no-thing at my core is transformed from sense-of-lack into a serenity that is imperturbable because nothing is there to be perturbed. "When neither existence nor non-existence again is presented to the mind, then, through the lack of any other possibility, that which is without support becomes tranquil" (Santideva).

How does this solve the problem of desire, our alternation between frustration and boredom? A consciousness that seeks to ground itself by fixating on something dooms itself to perpetual dissatisfaction, for the impermanence of all things means no such perch can be found. But since it is our lack that compels us to seek such a perch, the end of lack allows a change of perspective. The solution is a different way of experiencing the problem: in Hegelian terms, this is the "free-ranging variable" which always has some finite determination but is not bound to any particular one. The bad infinite of lack transforms into the good infinite of a variable that needs nothing. In Buddhist terms, this transforms the alienation of a reflexive sense-of-self always trying to fixate itself into the freedom of an "empty" mind that can become anything because it does not need to become something.

The AstasahasrikaPrajnapararnitduua begins by describing this "good infinity":

No wisdom can we get hold of, no highest perfection,
No Bodhisattva, no thought of enlightenment either.
When told of this, if not bewildered and in no way anxious,
A Bodhisattva courses in the Tathagata's wisdom.
In form, in feeling, will, perception and awareness [the five skandhas]
Nowhere in them they find a place to rest on.
Without a home they wander, dharmas never hold them,
Nor do they grasp at them (Conze, 1973, 1: 5-7. p. 9)

For Buddhism the problem of desire is solved when, without the craving-for-being that compels me to take hold of something and try to settle down in it, I am free to become it. The Buddhist solution to the problem of life is thus very simple: the "bong!" of a temple bell, the "tack!" of pebble against bamboo, the flowers on a tree in springtime, to cite some Zen examples. Of course, becoming an object is precisely what we have been trying to do all along, yet in a self-defeating way, compulsively seizing on our own objectifications in order to stabilize ourselves. But I cannot become something by grasping at it. That merely reinforces the delusive sense of separation between that-which-is-grasped and that-which-grasps-at-it. The only way I can become a phenomenon is to realize I have always been it, according to Buddhism. When nothing is needed
from the object to fill up my lack, it can be just what it is—the reverberating temple bell, etc., now no longer frustrating because there is no longer anything lacking in me that I need to experience as something lacking in my world.

I am the object, however, it no longer makes sense to understand it as an object. When there is no sense-of-self that is inside, there can be no outside. In the "Sokushinzebutsu" fascicle of the Shobogenzo, Dagen quotes the Chinese Ch'an master Yang-shan: mind is "mountains, rivers, earth, the sun, the moon and the stars." This mind is not some transcendental Absolute. It is nothing other than your mind and my mind, when it is realized to be a free-ranging variable not bound to any particular determination. Such a mind is ab-solute in the original sense of the term, unconditioned. Meditative techniques decondition the mind from its tendency to secure itself by circling in familiar ruts, thus enabling its freedom to become anything. The most-quoted line from the best-known of all Mahayana sutras, the Diamond Sutra, encapsulates all this in one phrase: "Let your mind come forth without fixing it anywhere."

Conclusion

We have seen how Buddhism anticipated the reluctant conclusions of modern psychology: guilt and anxiety are not adventitious but intrinsic to the ego. According to my interpretation of Buddhism, our dissatisfaction with life derives from a repression even more immediate than death-terror: the suspicion that "I" am not real. The sense-of-self is not self-existing but a mental construction which experiences its own groundlessness as a lack. This sense-of-lack is consistent with what psychotherapy has discovered about ontological guilt and basic anxiety. We usually cope with this lack by objectifying it in various ways and try to resolve it through projects which cannot succeed because they do not address the fundamental issue.

So our most problematic dualism is not life fearing death but a fragile sense-of-self dreading its own groundlessness. By accepting and yielding to that groundlessness, I can discover that I have always been grounded, not as a self-contained being but as one manifestation of a web of relationships which encompasses everything. This solves the problem of desire by transforming it. As long as we are driven by lack, every desire becomes a sticky attachment that tries to fill up a bottomless pit. Without lack, the serenity of our no-thing-ness, i.e., the absence of any fixed nature, grants the freedom to become anything.

2For Becker, facing the truth of the human condition without psychological defenses leads to mental paralysis, partial (neurosis) or severe (psychosis); yet to bide from this fact is to find security in a world of projections and transferences (Becker, 1973, chs. 2-4 and passim).

3’Sin’ ... constituted the greatest event in the entire history of the sick soul, the most dangerous sleight-of-hand of the religious interpretation” (Nietzsche, 1956, p. 277).

4Existential Psychotherapy 221-2. Yet Yalom cites some evidence for it. For example, Adah Maurer and Max Stern have separately conducted research into the night terrors of very young children. Stern concluded that the child is terrified of nothingness; according to Maurer, the infant’s first task is to differentiate between self (being) and environment (nonbeing), and during a night terror the infant may be experiencing “awareness of nonbeing” (p. 89).

5Without such a psychoanalytic understanding, sociological explanations like Hannah Arendt’s “the banality of evil” are incomplete. (See her Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil [New York: Viking, 1964], p. 276 and passim.)

6 A similar realization—that the ego not only represses, but represses the fact that it represses—was a turning point in Freud’s career, redirecting his investigations from the nature of the repressed to the nature of repressing.

7Por an example of how our socially-agreed and apparently-objective temporal schema can be deconstructed back into an eternal now, see Loy, D., “What’s Wrong with Being and Time: A Buddhist Critique of Heidegger,” Time and Society (1992), vol. 1 no. 2.

SPora scholarly examination of pratitya-samutpada in early Buddhist literature, see Govind Chandra Pande, Studies in the Origins of Buddhism (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 2nd ed., 1983), 407-42. “Apart from the central idea ... the formulation has grown through accretions, fusions, and analyses. In its full grown form, consequently, it has about it an aura of vagueness, and in the details, even of inconsistency” (441).

"The translation used in this paper is Mervyn Sprung’s in his edition of Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way (Boulder, CO: Prajna Press, 1979), Candrakirti’s classic commentary on the MMK. Mervyn Sprung translates sunyata as “the absence of being in things.”

1QPM Derrida’s textual deconstruction, see, e.g., Positions (1981) and Margins of Philosophy (1982), both published by University of Chicago Press.

UFor more on this process, see Yasutani-Roshi’s Commentary on the Koan Mu in P. Kapleau, ed., The Three Pillars of Zen (Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1966), 71-82.

12Bodhicaryal’ara 35. Cf. MMK VII.16: “Anything which exists by virtue of dependent origination is quiescence in itself.”

REFERENCES


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