ZEN MEDITATION: A PSYCHOANALYTIC CONCEPTUALIZATION

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INTRODUCTION

Zen and psychoanalysis are both powerful ways to understand the human condition and problems of everyday living. Both of these disciplines have been examined comparatively by several authors. Fromm, Suzuki, and DeMartino (1960) presented a classic attempt to relate both approaches to each other through a dialogue. More recently, Karen Horney's interest in comparing Zen and psychoanalysis has been described (DeMartino, 1991).

This paper takes a slightly different course by using the concepts of classical psychoanalysis, as presented by Freud, to illuminate the dynamics of Zen meditation. The question posed here is, what occurs in Zen meditation as understood psychoanalytically? In attempting to answer this, some practical implications will be considered.

THE PRACTICE OF ZEN

In the Zen tradition there are two major forms of practice which have come down to our time. These are the Soto and the Rinzai schools. The Soto way, founded by Dogen Zenji (1200-1253), stressed the practice of Zen as simply sitting in zazen (sitting meditation). In zazen one's consciousness is focused solely on the posture and breathing. Whenever thoughts or feelings arise, the mind just notes their emergence, allows them to come and go, and returns its attention to the posture and breathing (Suzuki, 1970). In this tradition, the goal is simply to allow the self to resume its original state. In Zen this is called one's true nature. Through

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regular zazen, the self gradually comes to not be as preoccupied with its daily round of worries and striving. Its true nature becomes more present, first in the act of zazen and later in every act of life. As Suzuki said, "Just remain on your cushion without expecting anything. Then eventually you will resume your own true nature. That is to say, your own true nature resumes itself" (p. 49).

What is our true nature? Suzuki was quite succinct about this, "True nature is watching water" (p. 134). In other words, our true nature is the functioning of the everyday observing mind. The everyday sense of observing, however, does not include the reflective egocentric function. Rather, "True mind is watching mind" (p. 134). Our true nature is not the self we reflect upon, nor is true mind the mind which reflects upon the self and its experiences. For Zen, our true nature or true mind, synonymous terms, signify the act of simply observing without objectifying that which is perceived. That is why, in Soto Zen, single-minded attention to one's posture and breathing, the simplest of activities, is itself the manifestation of our true nature.

As soon as we objectify our experiences of this activity, however, we become caught up in the self/world dichotomy with its usual egocentric focus. When that happens, the mind becomes attached to its own thinking and feeling. This leads to problems because the mind then tends to take its thoughts and feelings as the true reality of life. But this is subjective reality only, not the true nature of the reality of the world. For, as Suzuki said, "Reality cannot be caught by thinking or feeling" (p. 135). When we take our subjective reality for the reality of the world, we are likely to encounter problems of faulty assessments of what is real. To prevent this kind of confusion from developing in our lives, Zen suggests zazen as the best way to allow the true mind to resume its original position as that which simply observes.

In the Rinzai tradition, on the other hand, the emphasis was on a more expressive manifestation of one's true nature or, as Rinzai referred to it, one's true self. Rinzai Gigen (d. 866) was known for his force and directness in demanding that his monks work hard to attain a direct realization of the true self (Schloegl, 1975). He often tested the depth of their insight with obscure questions, a practice which became the koan approach to Zen. Koans are irrational questions which cannot be answered by any appeal to knowledge or accumulated experience. Their solution can be revealed only through demonstration. Since koans are always about one's true self, the solutions are demonstrations of the degree to which a person has realized the true self. Through this dynamic method, Sasaki (1974) said, "Zen is not just meditation or zazen, it is... practice or work to manifest self" (p. 50).
The true self is free from everything. Thus, to manifest oneself in a true way is to manifest as emptiness, that is, as empty of all content by which the ego typically identifies itself. Our usual tendency to name and categorize experience and the self is not at work in the manifestation of true self. When one realizes and demonstrates one's true self in this way, it can also be said that one then unifies all opposites such as good/bad and beauty/ugliness (Sasaki, 1974). Thus, the true self is able to fully engage in any situation in life since the empty self is not attached to any specific conditions in the world. At the same time, the true self unifies itself around the situation.

This true self, then, dwells in nothing while simultaneously dwelling in everything (Sasaki, 1974, p. 87). He goes on to say, "When you look at a flower, you give yourself to the flower. So there will be no thought, 'I'd like to have that flower. I'd like to pick that flower'" (p. 79). The same statement could be made regarding a man, a woman, a job, or a situation.

Finally, the Rinzai school demanded that we make a continual effort to live free of our usual egocentric preoccupation.

We all have personal consciousness which looks at things as objects. You have yourself who looks at a pine tree ... as object. That's why you are not perfect. To have perfect consciousness, you have to throw your personal consciousness away. Where do you throw it? When you are looking at a pine tree, the pine tree is the only place where you can throw away your personal consciousness. Throw your whole self into that tree. In that moment, the pine tree is not the pine tree that you are observing as object, but a pine tree which contains yourself (Sasaki, 1974, p. 88).

To summarize, the common goal of both the Soto and the Rinzai schools of Zen is realization, of one's true nature or true self. The main feature of the true self is that it transcends the usual subject-object dichotomies of consciousness. In doing so, the true self is able to live with equal attention to whatever situation life brings, because its true nature is to simply watch and observe. It is equally free of all limitations it places on itself in terms of identity and preferences, including all subjective realities formed by thoughts and feelings.

The method for each school appears to differ, however. Dagen most clearly placed the emphasis on zazen alone.

The most important point in the study of the Way is zazen. Although the old Masters urged both the reading of the scriptures and the practice of zazen, they clearly emphasized zazen. Some gained enlightenment through the koan, but the merit that brought enlightenment came from zazen (Masunaga, 1971, p. 96-97).
A PSYCHOANALYTIC ACCOUNT OF ZAZEN

Freud (1960) said that "in each individual there is a coherent organization of mental processes; and we call this the ego. It is to this ego that consciousness is attached" (p. 7). In the same work he said, "The ego represents what may be called reason and common sense ... " (p. 15). In a later writing, he said that "[the ego] has the task of self-preservation" (Freud, 1949, p. 15). It seems accurate to say, then, that the ego's primary function is to order and structure its life in such a way as would be best for its own continued well-being in the world.

It does this by mediating or moderating the expressions of the id in the world. Since the ego "is that part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world ... " (Freud, 1960, p. 15), the ego always remains partially grounded in the id. It "seeks to bring the influence of the external world to bear upon the id and its tendencies ... " (p. 15), thereby attempting to control the id by "transforming the id's will into action as if it were its [ego's] own" (p. 15). This is the general way in which the ego serves its own interest of self-preservation.

A more detailed account of how this task is accomplished issues from the way in which the ego transforms the id's will. According to Freud (1949), the id is that which "contains everything that is inherited, that is present at birth, that is fixed in the constitution—above all, therefore, the instincts" (p. 14). He named the two basic instincts as Eros and the destructive instinct and went on to give the name of "libido" to the "available energy of Eros" (pp. 21-22). This libido originally seeks discharge in the world and thus needs objects with which to attach or cathect. But since the ego is originally a part of the id, a portion of libido stays with the ego as it is differentiated from the id. Thus, where the id's will is to cathect to libidinal-erotic) objects in the world, the ego transforms this object-choice into ego-objects to better serve the ego's self-preservation. Freud (1960) pointed out that this "transformation of an
erotic object-choice into an alteration of the ego is a ... method by which the ego can obtain control over the id and deepen its relations with it ... (p, 20). Thus, there appears to be two sources of libido, both of which seek objects but each of which has a different need of the object. Where the libidinal-object is sought for the purpose of (erotic) gratification, the ego-object is sought as a source of ego-identification, the primary basis for self-preservation.

In Zen meditation there is a deliberate attempt to suspend the activities of the ego in both its rational, ordering function and in its function of mediating or moderating the libidinal expressions in the world. In relation to the latter function, the ego also suspends its own object-seeking. All these functions are suspended by the Zen injunction to just sit and attend only to very simple and immediate bodily activities, the posture and the breathing. Through this practice, the ego-functions have little opportunity to emerge, and when they do, the Zen student is advised to not dwell on the ego's activities, with the one exception of the observing ego-function. This function, the attention, is to always be brought back to the posture and the breathing. Furthermore, the practitioner is not to attach to any thoughts or feelings as they arise. Finally, if the koan is used, the ego is further frustrated in its rational function.

When the ego is frustrated in fulfilling its natural functioning, it can be assumed that it will regress. Freud (1949) indicated that regression is one of the ego's defenses against a task which it is prevented from performing. The ego regresses to a former, i.e., more primordial, way of being. This results in the diminishment of the ego's goal of obtaining ego-objects as it approaches its original state of an undifferentiated id-ego. At the same time, the libido's goal of seeking its objects rises to primary status. But something happens to the eroticized nature of libido as the result of losing the ego's involvement with libidinal energy. The libidinal force becomes desexualized and functions as pure Eros, or life-energy. The libido, then, no longer has any need to remain cathected to any one object, as was the case when the ego was involved. For, in seeking objects with which to identify, the ego's influence on the libidinal cathexis of objects was to fix it on certain object-choices. Libido, however, by itself is non-discriminatory and equated with life itself (Freud, 1961). Libido, thus, forms the core of our being (Freud, 1949), and in seeking objects with which to cathect, without becoming fixated on them, it seems equivalent to the Zen state of "watching water" and of "dwelling in everything."

This notion implies that there is a degree of consciousness which is not attached to the ego. Freud (1960) suggested this when he said that the "ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a
surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface" (p. 16). This statement was elaborated in a footnote: "The ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body" (p. 16, n. 1). Prior to that, he stated: "All perceptions which are received from without (sense-perceptions) and from within-what we call sensations and feelings-are conscious from the start" (p. 9). Here Freud is implying that the body is the true seat of consciousness and that its sense organs, especially of sight and hearing, are the body's modes of consciousness. When this is compared to statements made by the Zen Master Bankel (1622-1693), there is an apparent similarity.

When the ego has regressed through its inactivity in Zen meditation, it resumes its original nature in and as the id. This means also in and as the body. In this state, the libido is strictly life-affirming, for in this undifferentiated state, the destructive impulses are neutralized by the libido (Freud, 1949). Its fixation in the erotogenic zones is removed as it resumes its seat in the bodily senses in general. Thus, seeing and hearing become as much a way of libidinal cathexis with objects as were the more sexualized forms coming from the oral, anal, and genital regions. In fact, a case could be made for the primacy of sight and hearing cathexes over the erotogenic ones where the preservation of the organism is concerned. For, after all, we make our way through the world, organismically speaking, more by means of sight and hearing than by our sexuality.

CONCLUSION

The libido appears to be that psychical function through which we are connected to the world. It is into the libido that the ego regresses from its more conscious concern with the self-preservation of the organism. However, just as the ego-libido rejoins object-libido in the regression, so too does the consciousness which belonged to the ego become a part of the consciousness which resides in the senses.

It may be helpful at this point to describe this dynamic in phenomenological and existential terms to see some of the practical implications. The libido's function of connecting the organism to the world through the consciousness of the senses is similar to the
existential concept of consciousness per se. The function of conc­
sciousness is to help the individual survive in the world by provid­
ing it with the awareness of the world as the place in which it lives. Thus, through consciousness, the world as a field of objects is presented to the individual, thereby giving the individual organism the existential grounding in the world. Through being grounded in the world, the organism is simultaneously in direct connection with the world through the senses.

At the same time as consciousness highlights the world’s objects to the individual, the individual becomes aware of itself as an individual being. It is through the awareness of the object that the individual becomes aware of itself as a subject, that is, as a self. Consciousness then can look upon the self in the same way as it looks upon the world’s objects, and the self appears to be separate and in opposition to the world.

Thus, in relation to consciousness, the self and the object have a different status. The object is revealed in consciousness as "out there," while the self appears to be that which is within consciousness. In this way, though the object of consciousness changes with its intentionality, the self which looks out through consciousness remains the same. The self which resides in consciousness is not equated with consciousness since it itself can be an object of consciousness. This description is similar in dynamics to the ego which returns to reside in the libido from where it emerged in the first place.

Existential consciousness and the self residing in it can legitimately replace the concept of libido and ego respectively, both in their structural relation to each other and in their dynamic functioning. This reframing may be useful in application of these concepts to counseling, psychotherapy, and other human services. To see these dynamic functions expressed in more existential terms may help to bring a clearer focus in such applications. Where libido and ego were at best coexisting with each other, in the existential understanding there is a self which is at best trying to coexist with the world. Consciousness is the tool which this self uses. Self is seen as unified from the start but initially attempting to find itself in the world. The conflict is not internal, as it is with the id-ego dichotomy within the psyche. It is, rather, a conflict which has from the beginning been an attempt of the self to see itself reflected by the world. Only after the self has come to the point of realizing that it is not, and never really has been, in the world, does it use the tool of consciousness to look within for its true nature.

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REFERENCES


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