

ZEN PRACTICE AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

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The division of self in the condition of self-consciousness is the bane of Zen practice, and of mental health. It takes its extreme form in the case of the paranoid-schizophrenic, who cannot respond to the simple question, "How are you?" out of paralyzing fear and doubt. Even "normal" people may find that their self-consciousness creates an intensive, internal monologue which binds them to themselves and to much of what is going on around them. Recognizing this, they may feel trapped in a constricting personal sphere, and will seek to banish that condition by any available means. Such efforts will inevitably fail, however, except quite temporarily, unless they are directed at the very root of the problem-self's holding apart from self. This dualistic and antagonistic consciousness serves as a model for all the delusions delineated in classical Buddhism—concepts of inner and outer, subject and object, enlightened and ignorant, and so on *tc]. Prajna Pdramitd Hridaya Sutra* Suzuki, 1950).

*the
division
of
self*

As a layman in psychological matters, I would view good therapy as that directed toward enabling the individual to release himself or herself from preoccupation with personal condition. If therapy reinforces such preoccupation in the long run, then it is inducing a permanent division of the self between observed and observer, and surely this is no good.

*a
view
of
good
therapy*

I myself was in conventional therapy more than twenty-five years ago for a period of eighteen months, but only the last six months of it were beneficial. I spent an hour a week of that time with a psychiatrist who kept asking, "Okay, so what's wrong with that?" After six months, there was noth-

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ing left for me to say. Techniques may differ, but if the end result is relief from strong preoccupation, as it was in my case, then conventional therapy can certainly be very worthwhile.

*purpose
of
Zen
practice*

My own Zen teacher, Yamada Koun Roshi (abbot of the Sanun Zendo, Kamakura, Japan), often says, "The purpose of Zen practice is the perfection of character." While this should be taken in the context of the deep resolution of questions relating to personal identity and place in the universe which Zen training offers, still it clearly leaves room for cross-disciplinary understanding between Zen and psychology.

HOW ZEN IS NOT THERAPY

*a
"winking
out"*

Zen is not therapy in at least two important respects. First, it does not make the individual simply better. Whereas, during those six months of therapy with a good psychiatrist, I became less self-conscious, I did not go through an experience of change. On the other hand, in Zen, body and mind falling away is a winking out, a death, a disappearance, however brief. During that interval, the act itself does the action. Thereafter, the training in *koan* study is a clarification and a reinforcement of that experience, with perhaps more such experiences along the way. The result is adjustment, certainly, but this includes the dimension of freedom in a relative world, and clear discernment of how the relative world may be seen as essential nature. Full exploration of this additional dimension cannot be made outside of Zen practice itself, and its conceptual discussion would require a separate article.

*existential
questioning*

Second, the approach to Zen is usually, but not always, different from the approach to therapy. It is existential questioning which commonly brings the new student to Zen practice. The triple question, "*D'ou venons nous/ Que sommes nous/Ou allons nous*" ("Whence do we come/ What are we/Where do we go"), which Paul Gauguin painted into one of his last compositions, sums up pretty well the spirit of the usual inquirer at the entrance to our training centers. It is existential anxiety that drives the Zen student.

Some inquirers, however, express their anxiety more personally, as "I'm a hopeless case! I'm greedy and ego-centric and can't control myself!" This attitude may grow out of lofty idealism and a desire to do well by the world, but if it is accompanied by a high level of internal chatter, it may be that *zazen* is not an appropriate path, at least for the present.

Some people cannot avoid using the quiet time of a Zen training hall in ways which reinforce their problems. They cannot handle the pressure of inner material that demands to be heard, and unwholesome fantasy may take over. This is a qualitatively different condition from the usual one of wandering thoughts, where the beginning student concentrates on a theme for a while, then wanders off mentally, resumes concentration, and then wanders off again. The people who cannot bring themselves to concentrate at all, and who find their fantasy level heightened and intensified by the periods of meditation should seek help from a counselor, *andlor* work with their hands in an activity such as gardening or pottery. When the noise-level in their *minds* subsides to the point that they may begin to concentrate, they may then resume Zen practice. Therapy and Zen practice may be attempted concurrently, in some cases. However, Shibayama Zenkei Roshi, late abbot of Nanzen Monastery in Kyoto, once said to me, "Zen is for people in excellent mental health."

*wandering
thoughts*

ZAZEN FOR THE PURPOSE OF MENTAL HEALTH

People who begin *zazen* in an effort to improve mental condition *per se* may be preoccupied with symptoms rather than with causes of disease, but such motivation, along with the related one of improving physical coordination or condition, is widely accepted by Zen teachers as quite legitimate, at least at the beginning of training. Indeed, these goals are incorporated as the second option in a generalized four-point scale of purposes in beginning *zazen* in the teaching tradition of Harada Daiun Roshi and his successors, which I follow. This scale may be rendered:

*a
scale
of
purposes*

1. I don't know why I am here (at the Zen training center).
2. I am here to strengthen my concentration; or, I am here to gain serenity; or, I am here to cure my asthma; *etc.*
3. I am here to deepen my devotion.
4. I am here to realize my true nature.

Kapleau, 1965

I used to hand over this scale of purposes to my students when they had completed their orientation, so that they could knowledgeably settle upon a particular aspiration and present it to me. I would assure them that if their aspiration were a combination of two or three of the purposes, then they could reasonably indicate the highest of the choices. Now with experience in dealing with many new students, I find that the scale offers a set of categories that seems too rigid for newcomers. However, it continues to be useful to me as I listen to replies to my question, "Why are you

here?" I depend strongly upon this expression of purpose in my decision about the form of meditation I will assign in the individual case. Of course, the purpose and, thereby, the form of meditation may change as the student gets further along in the practice (Aitken, 1982).

The second option is at least an auxiliary motivation for everyone commencing Zen practice, but I wish to take up here the situation of the person whose motivation is limited to that category. I ask such people to count their breaths in sequences from one to ten, inhalation and exhalation, during the course of the meditation period. This is an excellent device for developing concentration if the student learns to unite with each point in the sequence—just one, just two, and so on.

*purpose
of
instruction*

This instruction runs contrary to that of some quite eminent Zen teachers, whose practice is to assign "following the breaths" or *shikantaza* (pure sitting, attention with no object) to such students. It is my experience, however, that these methods are best suited to the purpose of deepening one's devotion, a purpose that is usually accompanied by a fairly quiet mind. Students who are anxious about their inner noise-level will quickly fall into preoccupation with "how I am doing" if assigned the simpler methods, as improvement on that score is their purpose anyway. Such methods lack sufficient handle for the student who is concerned about condition, and the almost inevitable result seems to be a neglect of the practice and a stewing around in worry about lack of progress.

*purpose
of
breath-
counting*

Breath-counting is much easier to grasp, and will help break self-centered preoccupation by helping the student to forget it, at least temporarily. Just as we can never become enlightened if we dwell upon the thought of enlightenment, so we can never develop concentration or serenity if we are preoccupied with them. But if students can take up "one," "two," "three," and so on, in a vivid manner, focussing attention minutely upon each point in the sequence as the syllable-interval of their own thought, then not a bit of attention will be left over for dwelling upon condition, and the mind will gradually quiet down, and the body will slowly relax.

Also, by practicing steadfastly in this manner over a period of time, students come to recognize that one's condition always is changing—now toxic, now healthy, now sad, now happy, now cloudy, now clear—and that there is never a time when one is not in a certain condition. The end result of

this practice is that students may be better able to function in the world, with a freedom, in some measure, from self-concern.

Often, the person who practices sincerely within the second option, the option of improving mental and physical well-being, eventually will want to move along to the third or fourth option—to the purpose of deepening devotion or of realizing essential nature. One factor here may be that the Zen training center is programmed around these latter goals, and that the way of attaining them most often provides the subject matter of the teacher's talks and interviews. More important, and perhaps related, is the deepening of purpose which seems to develop with the quieting of mind of one who is progressing with the practice.

*deepening
of
purpose*

EGO AND GROWTH

Even students who come to religious search out of the deepest kind of questioning are sometimes confused by simplistic analyses of the ego, and think that the true way is the ascetic path and the true goal one of getting rid of the self altogether. This is a concept that is found among serious young people quite generally today, and I sometimes try to poke a hole in it by suggesting that Sakyamuni Buddha had a very strong ego!

*simplistic
analyses
of ego*

Years ago, my wife and I were teachers at a school in California. This is a school that was founded by friends of Krishnamurti, and its faculty was divided when we were there between those taking Krishnamurti's ideas on education literally and those taking the same ideas sensibly. (We were on the sensible side; we thought so then, and still think so now!) The literalists wanted, for example, to refuse all recognition to students, on the grounds that recognition strengthens the ego. The sensible people insisted that recognition is essential in education, and that children's egos need strengthening.

In other words, we differed over the meaning of "ego," and the distinction between the positions is crucial. Our group said that children must have a clear idea of themselves as persons of worth to others; otherwise, what would be the point in learning to communicate? Children must have a sense that the world is friendly to them; otherwise, how could they dare to venture into it? Our point was that ego, *as confidence*, is maturity itself.

*the
meaning
of ego*

*ego
as
confidence*

Our literalist colleagues had no concept of ego-as-confidence, and thought that somehow recognition would reinforce the students in ego-centricity, which militates against growth. The ego-centered person cannot accept help and cannot learn from others, except as a neurotic device for gaining approval. Of course, none of us on the staff wanted to reinforce this kind of character development, but our literalist colleagues could not see beyond it to what is really its opposite, even its antidote, the cultivation of the confidence which frees one from self-preoccupation.

EGO IN ZAZEN

*falling-
away
of ego*

In teaching *zazen*, I have found that these same general rules of ego apply. Unless the Zen student's ego-as-confidence is fairly strong and comfortable, there is little chance of letting go, little chance of ego-as-self-consciousness falling away. So I stress the fact that you have the same number of ears and nostrils as Sakyamuni Buddha did. He was able to realize his true nature, and so can you-he to his highest potential, and you to yours.

Wholehearted participation in a group is an essential factor in permitting the body and mind to fall away. The emphasis in Zen Buddhism upon the unity of *sangha* (fellowship) proceeds from this. Whereas the isolated person tends to be self-absorbed, brooding, and overly concerned with the way "1" do things, the group member who is dressed the same as everyone else, who keeps the same schedule, and who is at home in the group situation in general can much more easily come to forget.

Of course, the encouragement to melt into a group can be a manipulative device, one which we see in many cults today, and which Adolf Hitler used for his own ends two generations ago. One has to be careful about the selection of the group and of the teacher, and about continuing at intervals to assess the direction of the group after joining. But if the group is right, it is in the context of unified practice that one is in the best position to forget oneself and to take that existential step.

OBSERVER TECHNIQUES

Observer techniques, taught in Tibetan Yoga, in Theravada Buddhism, and to some degree in Indian Yoga, seem to run counter to Zen practice. In this teaching, one is instructed to

think, "Now I am walking down the hall; now I am entering the meditation room; now I am bowing before Buddha;" and so on. The super-ego is reinforced in this method, and there is no falling away of the self there at all.

This kind of mindfulness seems to have been elaborated out of earliest Buddhist methods to censor the 'monkey mind,' but as a technique of mega-self-consciousness, it seems to be a relatively modern device (Pande, 1957). It is used in the various yogas and in Theravada Buddhism only as a temporary expedient to bring body, mind, and spirit together. The simile often employed to explain the use of this technique is that of a raft: when you have crossed the river, you no longer need it. The student moves from this beginning practice to another (Soma, 1967).

*super-
ego
reinforcement*

I understand that observer techniques are also used in conventional therapy. Unless the clients can become aware of what they are doing to themselves, they cannot begin to correct their failings. But here again, I suspect that this method is employed simply as a starter.

OBSERVATION AND ATTENTION

In Zen practice, self-awareness comes naturally in the early days of meditation. I recall a graduate student of the University of Hawaii remarking to me after her first twenty-five minutes of *zazen*, "I had no idea that I lived so much in the dimension of my thoughts." No special device is necessary to bring that realization to the surface of the mind of the student in meditation. The teacher will simply nod with a smile, and encourage the student then to regard each of those thoughts during meditation as units of distraction, reminders to return to the *koan*,

*self-
awareness
comes
naturally*

Attention is emphasized in Zen practice, and this is quite different from the technique of observing. In an essay intended as his last words to his students, the monk Nyogen Senzaki of Los Angeles included the admonition, "Moment after moment, watch your steps carefully" (from an unpublished manuscript). He did not mean, "You should think, 'Now I am walking down the hall,' " and he did not mean, "Touch the heel, ball of your foot, and toes consciously to the floor while walking," as is taught by Burmese teachers of the observer technique. He meant, "Don't let yourself stray from the act of walking down the hall," or really, as his intention was more general, "Don't stray, whether you are taken up with thought, sensation, or motor activity."

Not straying is a matter of not being divided from the matter at hand, whatever it may be. To think about walking down the hall as one does so is to be divided from that act in a very basic way. The way of Zen is to unite with the matter at hand, without any interference of mind. This is pure attention, and achieving it is a matter of practice, both on the cushions and off.

Of course, the very heart of Zen training lies in *zazen*, the time of formal meditation. During *zazen*, all distractions are minimized so that we may sink deeply into our practice, cutting off the mind-road, as Mumon advises us to do in his commentary on Case 1 of the *Mumonkan* (Yamada, 1979). This is not a matter of blocking the thoughts which arise naturally in the brain, but rather of letting all those thoughts, recollections, and so forth serve us, for the time being, simply as reminders to attend to our practice. In this way, distractions die down of themselves, and the habit of uniting with the matter at hand is learned and reinforced.

zazen
as
a
model

Our *zazen* is a model for time spent otherwise. When not at formal meditation, we cheerfully and wholeheartedly invest ourselves, as appropriate, in problem-solving, recollection, or most anything else. If distraction arises, we recognize it as such and return to what we are doing. If something urgent requires our attention, then we drop what we are doing and freely move to the other activity. If other occupations slack and there is a leisure moment, we can slip into informal meditation.

If the observer technique is continued beyond the most preliminary phase of practice, it will surely inhibit the individual by blocking healthy mental and physical functions. It would be impossible to plan or to recollect if one were saying, "Now I am planning," or "Now I am recollecting." Similarly, self-monitoring ties our hands and feet; the self-conscious athlete or musician inevitably performs badly, for example.

It may be argued that use of the observer technique is confined to meditation, but I think that its effects will be carried over into everyday life without fail. It is a method that divides the observed from the observer and perpetuates the dualistic scheme we are trying to see through. If such self-monitoring practice is taught even as a beginning method, it will have to be unlearned, and I think that, except in unusual cases, it is probably better not to take it up in the first place.

One other point about observer techniques relates to eclectic, psycho-religious systems which have developed in the past decade. I have not explored these in depth, but I sense in them a strong emphasis upon consciousness. Consciousness is the gate to human maturity, whatever the method, but from the Zen point of view, the scale of low consciousness to high consciousness must be transcended. From earliest times, Zen teachers have urged their students to take a step even beyond emptiness. This is the "step from the top of the hundred-foot pole." Only with that act do body and mind truly fall away and thus "manifest in the ten directions" (Yamada, 1979).

*transcending
consciousness*

The mercy of Kanzeon (Kwan-yin) comes of the practice of falling away, because such experience is inevitably accompanied by a welling-up of compassion. This is a mystery which may be explained only inadequately as the very energy that is released from self-concern. It enables us to devote the love in our hearts naturally according to the discrete requirements of people, animals, and things. Whereas the more usual kind of person is one whose environment generally points to himself or herself, the person of fallen away body and mind reverses this pattern of absorption and action in a healthy preoccupation with the world.

*a
welling-up
of
compassion*

The mind as understood in Zen practice is not confined to the human being, but is also the mind of mountains, animals, plants, clouds, stars, and all that lies between and beyond. One experiences this mind, and so the practice of attention must be open, with all the sounds, smells, and other sense objects in the universe allowed freely to pass through. Relative quiet is sought for Zen practice, but it is not sensory deprivation, and in the traditional Zen hall, the windows are open to cold or heat, birdsong or mosquitos. The point is just that bite. Ouch! That's it! No self-consciousness at all!

*no
self-
consciousness
at
all!*

CONCLUSION

Mental health ranges in quality from pathology to the broad and free consciousness of Kanzeon, and all of us fall somewhere between the two. Even Sakyamuni Buddha could not equal Kanzeon, because Kanzeon is an archetype, and Sakyamuni was a human being and, as such, was probably subject to an occasional wandering thought. For Zen students, Kanzeon is the light on the Way, guiding them from self-concern to the strength to forget the self and personify the ideal of coping creatively with the environment.

Each of the thousands of Zen stories which make up the major part of Zen literature is an expression of what it is to live with a fallen-away body and mind. I've chosen to conclude this paper with a case from the *Mumonkan* that centers upon Isan (Wei-shan), a Chinese monk of the 9th century:

When Isan was cook at the monastery of Hyakujo (Paichang), a distinguished visitor informed Hyakujo that a certain mountain would be ideal for a new monastery, and suggested that Hyakujo send someone there to establish it. So Hyakujo held a contest. He set up a water-bottle, and told his monks, "You may not call *this* a water-bottle. What *do you* call it?"

The head monk said, "It cannot be called a stump."

*the
totally
forgotten
self*

Hyakujo turned to Isan and asked his opinion. Isan stepped to the bottle and tipped it over with his foot.

Hyakujo laughed, and said, "The head monk loses." And Isan became founder of the new monastery (Yamada, 1979).

Yamada Koun Roshi says that the head monk's answer is not bad, but that he was still tied up with words. Isan broke all the constructs of words and concepts that bind people to themselves, and tipped over the water-bottle with his foot.

Mumon Osha, compiler of the *Mumonkan*, says in his poem in praise of Isan, "Thousands of Buddhas come forth from his toes" (Yamada, 1979). Thousands of very healthy and unself-conscious Buddhas, I may say. Only the fallen-away body and mind, only the totally forgotten self could step forward with such comfortable confidence to tip over the water-bottle.

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