

PRINCIPLES OF INNER WORK: PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SPIRITUAL*

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As a psychotherapist and a practitioner of a spiritual path, I am continually faced with questions about the interface between psychological work and spiritual work in my own experience, as well as with clients, students, and friends. So I would like to share with you some questions and some directions that have come to me in exploring what is involved in inner work, the process of growing beyond limited views of self toward a greater vision and realization of what it is to be human.

My own interest in psychotherapy arose at the same time as my interest in the Eastern spiritual traditions. I was inspired to become a psychotherapist partly because I imagined that psychotherapy could be our Western version of a path of liberation. However, I soon found most traditional Western psychology quite limited because of its narrow views of human nature. When I started to actually practice therapy, I wondered how I could help anybody else if I didn't know who I was. I tended to get depressed by the suffering of my clients, taking it on myself as a burden.

*psychotherapy
as a
path of
liberation*

In looking for a way to work on myself and understand my life more fully, I was drawn more and more toward Buddhism. Eventually, through intensive study of Buddhist philosophy and meditation, especially in the Vajrayana tradition, I could begin to appreciate Western psychology more fully, perhaps for the first time. Once I no longer required it to give me the answers to my questions about the nature of life, I could see that it had an important place in the scheme of things. As long

*Adapted from a talk presented at a conference on "Psychology and the Spiritual Quest" at Omega Institute, Rhinebeck, New York, August, 1983.

as I recognized its limits, I could appreciate and respect the tremendous work that has been done in Western psychology. When we understand that it does not describe our ultimate nature, we can study it, use it, and play with it. It also includes a wonderful body of therapeutic work that can really help free people from negative childhood conditioning.

SPIRITUAL BYPASSING

*spiritual
practice
and the
avoidance
of human
needs*

As a result of coming back to appreciate Western psychology and doing a lot of personal work on myself over the past few years, as well as participating in a research project on spiritual groups (Welwood, 1983a), I started to pay more attention to a disturbing tendency among certain members of spiritual communities. Although many of these spiritual practitioners were doing very good work on themselves—which I bow to and respect as extremely important—still, some of them seemed to be using meditation or their spiritual involvements to bypass certain kinds of personal, emotional "unfinished business." There is a certain temptation, which I can observe in myself as well, to try to use spiritual practice to rise above the difficulties of unresolved personal problems and emotions. Perhaps this is connected with a movement in us, traditionally called "spirit," which seeks a certain release from the structures we feel caught in—the structures of karma, • conditioning, body, form, matter, personality. Insofar as we want to get away from difficult personal issues and emotions—all the sticky, messy things that keep us rooted right here—we may try to use spiritual practice to do that. I have come to call this tendency to try to avoid or prematurely transcend basic human needs, feelings, and developmental tasks. "spiritual bypassing."

Spiritual bypassing may be particularly tempting for individuals who are having difficulty making their way through life's basic developmental stages, especially at a time when what were once ordinary developmental landmarks—earning a livelihood through dignified work, raising a family, keeping a marriage together—have become increasingly difficult and elusive for large segments of the population. While struggling with becoming autonomous individuals, many people are introduced to spiritual teachings and practices which come from cultures that assume a person having already passed

..Karma is an Eastern term whose closest translation in Western psychological language might be 'conditioning.' However, it has a wider scope than the Western term, because it encompasses many different levels of cause and effect relationships. Karma refers to the past; it is the network of determinants we are given to work with in the present moment.

through the basic developmental stages. The result is that many people wind up trying to use spiritual practice to meet their personal needs or establish their identity, and this just doesn't work. Many of the so-called "perils of the path"-such as spiritual materialism, narcissism, inflation, groupthink-i-result from trying to use spirituality to make up for developmental deficiencies.

*perils
of the
path'*

The basic purpose of spiritual practice is to help liberate us from attachment to an imprisoning self-structure. In order to reap the full benefits of such a practice, however, we have to have a stable self-structure. This means being grounded in earthly form. Yet all too often in an urban-technological culture we don't learn about how to live a grounded life. Moreover, with the breakdown of extended families and tight-knit communities, the psychological influence of parents on children in the nuclear family has greatly increased. The result is that many people today spend a good part of their lives freeing themselves from their parents' influence and establishing their own independent sense of themselves. This is psychological, not spiritual work. It means working with needs, scripts, hunger for love, fear of love, fear of loss of love, fear of receiving love, fear of giving love, and establishing a sense of self-respect which is not overwhelmed or crushed by other people's opinions.

OTHER OBSTACLES TO GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

In addition to the problem of spiritual bypassing, I would like to single out two other obstacles that block the full range of psychospiritual development. In doing psychological work on ourselves, there is a tendency to get overly fascinated and absorbed in our own personal process. It can be so fascinating to delve into our emotions, archetypes, dreams, or relationships that we can spend a lifetime examining and processing all that rich material. This can become a labyrinth to get trapped in. To treat this kind of self-examination as the ultimate journey is to risk becoming narcissistic, a kind of "emotional junky" who gets "hooked" on processing personal "stuff." There is also a third tendency, which is probably the most common of all in our society-to simply desensitize ourselves to both personal process and spiritual development. There is a part in most of us which would rather not feel things too strongly, but just take it easy, sink into some groove and get through life with as little effort or challenge as possible. These are three main traps we face: spiritual bypassing, narcissism, and desensitizing.

*narcissism
and
desensitizing*

HEAVEN, EARTH, AND MAN

*standing
on the
earth*

I would like to delineate three major principles of inner work that counteract these obstacles. These three principles come from a simple phenomenological understanding of what is involved in being human. "Phenomenology" in this sense means looking at the basic phenomena of experience and just seeing what is there, trying to discern the bare structures of our experience, without having to fit it into elaborate beliefs and ideologies. So, from a simple phenomenological point of view, what are we as human beings? Well, first of all we are beings who stand upright on the earth, with our feet on the ground and head raised up to the open sky. In that our feet are rooted to the ground, there is no other choice than to be right here. Things are very meaningful on this level and have to be taken seriously. We have to fully respect the world and ourselves on this horizontal plane, which spiritual bypassing fails to do.

*a
background
of
infinite
space*

At the same time, our head is oriented toward the open sky above and all around, where we see far-off things. We see horizons. We see stars and suns and planets, and the vast context of space surrounding the earth. As human beings we gaze in wonder and curiosity at the world around us, beyond our immediate self-interest and survival concerns. Though our earthly concerns seem meaningful and important, if we go up a hundred feet, what is going on down here begins to lose some of its import. If we go up even farther, as the astronauts did, all this becomes only a tiny speck. When we move vertically-and our consciousness can do this as well-it's endless space as far as we can go. Thus we understand that as human beings we are not just of this earth. Our lives stand out against the background of infinite space (Welwood, 1977): Our nature includes both earth and sky, form or structure, and space or emptiness. If we only focus on our immediate existential concerns, we tend to get bogged down, stuck in the mud, glued to the earth. However, if we don't take full enough account of our earthly nature, we get lost in the stars, with our head in the clouds.

*responding
to the
world
around us*

The essential human stance-as expressed for example in the meditation posture-is to be rooted firmly to the earth, with a straight back and upright head and shoulders. This posture allows for the development of a larger panoramic vision and awareness, exposing the whole front of the body to the world. Four-legged animals protect this vulnerable front of the body very carefully. The porcupine's quills keep others away from its soft stomach. But as human beings we walk around with our belly and our heart-our two main feeling centers-completely exposed to the world. To feel is to respond with the body to the

world around us. Basic feeling is happening all the time, whether or not we choose to pay attention to it. Because we sit or stand with our front exposed, between earth and sky, the world and other people can enter and touch our heart. So it's not surprising that we also develop character armor, as it's called, to protect our vulnerable feeling centers. Instead of the armadillo's shell or the porcupine's quills, we grow ego armor.

From this simple phenomenological point of view, human nature spans earth and sky, and is characterized by the sensitivity of feeling-what we might call "heart"-which opens up between them. In the ancient Chinese system of thought, these three principles are called heaven, earth, and man. We can now look at three different ways of working on ourselves that correspond with them.

*spanning
earth
and
sky*

GROUNDING: THE EARTH PRINCIPLE

In both psychological and spiritual work, there is a need for grounding, movement downward, which corresponds to our earth nature. In the Oriental traditions, coming down to earth involves connecting with the center of gravity in the body below the navel, called *hara* in Japanese or *tan t'ien* in Chinese. Practices such as Aikido or Tai Chi Chuan ground a person in this way. The sitting posture in meditation is grounding (Welwood, 1980), as is the emphasis on work, precise attention to detail, and mindfulness of body in different spiritual traditions ("chopping wood, carrying water"). However, although grounding practices are often an important part of a complete spiritual path, they are not the main focus of spiritual work.

Grounding, or the earth principle of form and structure, is the very essence of psychological work, by contrast. Psychotherapy works to repair the damage done during childhood development to the formation of a workable self-sense. The process of psychotherapy involves what Robert Bly has called the "awful descent into the wound." The most common wound is the damage done to the sense of self by a relationship with parents who either withheld their love or dominated Jengulfed the child with it.

*grounding
as the
essence
of
psychological
work*

Different psychological approaches work differently with this process of grounding, and many systems share an understanding that real change happens as an energy shift in the body, not through talk or intellectual insight alone. In the Focusing method (Gendlin, 1979; Welwood, 1982), for instance, it is essential to come down out of the thinking mind

into the body, touch a bodily-felt sense of one's life situation, and let that body sense have a direct voice. Other approaches such as gestalt or bioenergetics also pattern the body to respond in new ways. "Soulwork," in the sense that Jung and Hillman (Hillman, 1976) use that term, can be another way of coming down to earth. "Soul" in this sense is not some ethereal force or entity, but rather a direction of inwardness, a deep individual feeling for life.

LETTING GO: THE HEAVEN PRINCIPLE

*letting go
as the
essence
of
spiritual
work*

If soulwork is about coming down to earth, the essence of spiritual work is learning to let go and surrender, specifically letting go of attachment to our ideas of who we are in order to realize that part of our nature which goes beyond form. We could be fully processed psychologically, having worked through all our personal neuroses and scripts and emotional tangles. We could be what humanistic psychologists have called "fully functioning" or "self-actualizing," but there is still a way in which we hold onto ourselves in subtler ways. It is hard to just let ourselves be, without holding onto some structure, some agenda, some goal or purpose. From a conventional earthbound perspective, we get very nervous when we face empty space, when there is a gap in a conversation, when we are sitting next to someone and don't know what to say, when we go into a doctor's waiting room and there are no magazines on the table. When we let ourselves open to that space, as in sitting practice, we get to see the subtlety and pervasiveness of how we hold onto this sense of "me, myself, and I." Spiritual work makes conscious and works with that universal clinging and grasping.

The heaven principle is also present in psychological growth, although it does not usually occupy the central place that it does in spiritual work. Letting go is an essential part of leaving old patterns and structures behind and developing new ways of being. In Focusing, these moments of letting go are known as "felt shifts." In most psychological work, however, such moments are not seen as an end in themselves, as they are in spiritual work. Rather, they are usually seen as subordinate to the goal of developing new structures.

WORKING WITH NEUROSIS

If psychotherapy is like pruning and fertilizing a tree so that it develops a nice shape and bears good fruit, spiritual practice is a more radical medicine. It goes to the roots, in this case the

root clinging to self. Buddhist practice for instance works with five universal neurotic tendencies beyond all our personal neurosis, called the root *kleshas* or poisons: grasping, aggression, ignorance, jealousy, and pride. No matter how much psychological work we have done on ourselves, these *kleshas* are still going to arise again and again because of the root-clinging to self, which sets up a basic tension between self and other (Welwood & Wilber, 1979).

*five
universal
neurotic
tendencies*

A traditional Tibetan analogy describes three ways in which spiritual practice can work with these root *kleshas*, which it compares to a poisonous plant. Some traditions work with these poisonous tendencies by trying to eliminate them, get rid of them, and replace them with virtuous tendencies. This is like pulling up the plant. The problem with this approach is that you may also lose the grounding of earth in which the plant is rooted. This could lead to spiritual bypassing, trying to deny negative feelings and emotions in the name of heavenly highs, moving up and away, into the wide blue yonder.

*eliminating
the
poison*

A second kind of practice does not uproot the plant, but develops instead an antidote to the poison. For instance, in Mahayana Buddhism, the antidote to the poisonous activity of the *kleshas* is the discovery of *sunyata*, or emptiness, that larger sense of space which lends a larger perspective to the things of the world we get so attached to. The third way, according to this analogy, is to eat the leaves of the plant and develop immunity to the poison. This is the way of Vajrayana Buddhism, which transmutes the poisons into *amrita*, or what we might call the juice of life, the juice of humanness. Of course, a great deal of training and preparation have to precede this kind of transmutation, so that you can actually assimilate the poison—this is the function served by the basic mind training of meditation practice. This third way allows you to maintain your connection with the earth and ordinary life. You feel the energies of the *kleshas*, but you are no longer poisoned by them. Since you do not cut yourself off from them, you also have more compassion for how they affect others, and you can work more directly and skillfully with others in their suffering.

*developing
an
antidote*

*developing
an
immunity*

AWAKENING THE HEART: THE MAN PRINCIPLE

The joining of heaven and earth, letting go and grounding, can open up a third principle of inner work—awakening the heart—which corresponds in Chinese thought to the man (human) principle. "Heart" in this sense refers to the way we are open and exposed to the world; it is that "part" of us where we can be most deeply touched. Heart is like a swinging door that

*courage
and the
awakened
heart*

opens in both directions, letting others in and going out to them. As we say, "I took her into my heart," or "My heart went out to him." Awakening the heart involves cutting through our character armor to let others in as well as appreciate them as they are. This is like oiling the door so that it can open in both directions without getting stuck. An open heart is also the source of courage, a word which derives from the French word for heart, *coeur*. Courage involves facing the world squarely and letting your heart be touched, opening to others come what may.

Psychological work in my experience can go a long way toward opening the heart (Welwood, 1983b), but fully awakening the heart seems to require the more intensive Jetting-go practice of a spiritual discipline. Without that sense of space of the heaven principle we might be able to let others in, but then not be able to let them go or let them be. Letting go also means developing a greater sense of humor, which arises from being able to step out of being stuck in a structure. When we laugh, we have just stepped out of a structure. Without this sense of space, humor, and letting go, heart could become too syrupy, sentimental, or attached.

*the
development
of
compassion*

Awakening the heart also requires groundedness, because without earth, there would be no compassion. If we are only able to let go, if our only concern is with space or spirit, then we may not be very committed to other sentient beings. We could get carried away with our own liberation and fail to develop compassion for how stuck people are in their karmic patterns. We might try to bypass all the deep pain involved in working through this karma. Compassion develops out of our involvement in the world of form, as well as our sense of the possibility of transcending its limitations. If we are only oriented toward spirit, we tend to get impatient with other people's stuckness.

WORKING WITH OTHERS

A complete spiritual path, in short, involves all three principles -grounding, letting go, and awakening the heart-which counteract the obstacles of spiritual bypassing, narcissism, and desensitization. The core of such a path is some kind of awareness practice such as meditation, which helps develop all three principles. In my experience as a psychotherapist as well, in order to really help people change and grow, I find that I need a sense of heaven, earth, and heart. Meditation has been one of the best kinds of training I could have possibly had for bringing these principles into my therapy practice.

In the therapy situation, the client's problems or emotions are like the thoughts that arise when you are sitting. You, the listener, provide the space which coming back to the breath allows in meditation. You have to fully respect and bow to form-the client's real problem-listen to it and take it in. If you don't do that, there isn't a connection between the two of you that can effect healing. And yet, if you only focus on form, on the problems, then you lose a sense of the larger context of open mind, open heart, open space in which all these problems are arising. Psychotherapy then becomes too literal-minded and serious, and you may find yourself losing your creative spark as a therapist. That was what happened to me when I started doing therapy right after graduate school. I had too small a vision of what a human being is, and took the content of the problems too seriously. In developing a larger sense of open space through meditation, I found that I did not get burned out or bogged down as easily by my client's problems.

What many traditional therapists do is to maintain a certain clinical distance in order to keep from getting caught in "counter-transference"-emotional reactions to the client. But with training in meditation, you can begin to let your clients' reality penetrate you more deeply; you can really let them in and let them touch you. If you find yourself getting stuck in some interpretation of or reaction to the client, this provides an opportunity to practice meditation in action: acknowledging where you're stuck while bringing your larger awareness back to the situation so that you can begin to unhook from the stuckness,

*larger
awareness
and the
practice
of
psychotherapy*

In the context of meditation, I have discovered a delight in the work of therapy, even in the midst of great pain and suffering. For pain and neurosis also contain their own colors and energies which wake us up. This dance of phenomena, this play of the mind, has its own kind of beauty. I start to appreciate the beauty and intelligence that exists at the very heart of neurosis. I can begin to appreciate someone's character armor, how it serves to protect him, and what a skillful creation it is in its own way, just like the porcupine's quills or the armadillo's shell. As some of this appreciation is communicated to the client, he can perhaps start to make friends with himself in a new way, developing warmth and caring toward his fear and pain and stuckness.

The process of transformation that happens between two people in therapy is similar to what may take place inside a single person in meditation. In mindfulness practice, as painful thoughts and emotions arise, we note them, bow to them,

acknowledge them, then let them go and come back to the breath, which is a concrete manifestation of open space. This process of going into and out of form in meditation is what allows transformation to take place. Some people think that meditation means getting rid of thoughts and feelings, but that is a limited notion. The real practice is in letting thoughts arise and also letting them go. This allows us to eat the poisons of confused mind and also transmute them.

If transformation occurs in the intersection of heaven and earth, space and form, spirit and soul, then the great challenge of working on oneself is in bringing our larger open awareness to bear on our frozen karmic structures. Our larger awareness usually gets buried or stuck in problems, emotions, reactions, or else it may try to detach and flyaway into the sky. But a third alternative is to stay with our frozen structures and transform them. That is the core of practice, I believe, in both psychotherapy and meditation.

*an
image of
structure
and
openness*

There is an image that is helpful in reminding me that I can step out of my solidified states of thought and feeling at any moment. I have a sense of being in a large tent, like one of those circus tents with a high roof. There is life going on inside the tent, lots of activities and energy. And I can feel that I am this life inside the tent, as well as the structure that contains it--the poles and awning and the high ceiling. This structure is necessary to keep out the rain, to protect the life' within. Therapy and grounding are like getting this tent to stand up firmly and also fixing the leaks. And yet the sides of the tent remain open, so that the fresh air and breezes can keep blowing through. So though I am this structure that is tied to the earth, I can still expand out all around. This seems to be the nature of our awareness as human beings-e-we need earthly structures and frameworks in which to live, yet we are also permeated and surrounded by vast reaches of openness. And, whether or not we practice a spiritual discipline, it is those breezes from the open space surrounding our structures that allow change to happen so that our lives can keep flowing endlessly forward.

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