

VULNERABILITY AND POWER IN THE THERAPEUTIC PROCESS: EXISTENTIAL AND BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVES*

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There is a central experience that I think we all have, essential to being human, which some of us have more frequently, or at different times of our lives, whether we're classified as "sane," "neurotic," "psychotic," "enlightened" or "unenlightened." This experience is at the core of both the existential and the Buddhist perspectives. For existentialism it is the source of existential anxiety. For Buddhism, it is the basis of the path toward what is known as "enlightenment," "awakening," "liberation."

The experience I am speaking of is one that nobody actually likes to talk about very much. It is also easy to ignore because we've developed a number of habits and routines to avoid facing it. There is no ready-made term for this experience that I can think of. So I am inventing one and calling it a "moment of world collapse."

*a moment
of
world
collapse*

I'm sure we're all familiar with these moments when the meanings on which we've been building our lives unexpectedly collapse. Suddenly they lack weight and substance, no longer influencing us or holding us up as they once did.

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Before, we may have been motivated for success-making money, providing for our family, or seeking to be loved. Now, suddenly, in this moment, if not for longer, we wonder why we're doing all of this, what it's all about. We may look around in vain for some absolute, unwavering reason for it all, some unshakable ground, yet all we see is the inexorable passing of time and our hopeless attempts to grasp on to something solid.

*existential
anxiety
as
ontological*

In the existential approach, the feeling that accompanies these moments is called "existential anxiety" or, in Kierkegaard's words, "dread (*angst*)."¹ It is seen as an ontological anxiety; that is, it arises from our very nature as human beings. And it comes in those moments when we perceive the intrinsic groundlessness of all our personal projects. Anxiety about death is one special case of this. Yet the feeling of groundlessness points beyond fear of just physical death toward what is called in Zen Buddhism, the "Great Death"-the falling away of all concern with personal success.

In existential thought, this kind of ontological anxiety is distinguished from neurotic anxiety which is self-manufactured and which comes out of our attempts to distract ourselves from this deeper anxiety. Worrying about what people think of us, or worrying about whether we are "getting somewhere" serves as a smokescreen that keeps us from having to face this larger existential dread. It sometimes seems that we are almost in love with our neurosis, because it occupies us and gives us something concrete to hold onto, unlike those moments of world collapse, where there seems to be nothing.

*creating
meaning
out of
individual
existence*

To go back over existential ground a bit, Sartre's notion of nausea, Camus's investigation of suicide, Kierkegaard's alienation from all the rational, philosophical and religious structures of his world, Nietzsche's attempt to establish a set of values based on life rather than fear-all grew out of a keen perception that the old meanings that served human life and society so well were no longer holding up. After the Industrial Revolution the old structures of the society that guided people's lives no longer worked. As Nietzsche said, "God is dead." Existentialism, failing to find any absolute, unshakable ground for justifying what we are doing with our lives, was an attempt to *create* meaning out of a person's own individual existence. This meant that the *only* source of meaning was your own individual action, which was a new perspective in the history of our culture. And this is wonderful in a certain way because it creates a heroic outlook on

life in which each person must find and create their own meaning in a meaningless world. One archetype of that effort is the myth of Sisyphus, as Camus talked about it, where, although the rock keeps rolling down the hill, Sisyphus rolls it up again and somehow finds heroic meaning in that. This is similar to what Irvin Yalom (1980) calls "resoluteness," a sense of "let's keep plugging," despite all the obstacles. In this approach, however, existential anxiety is a given; there's no way to finally overcome the sense of dread. After all, there is never any guarantee that the personal meanings you create for yourself are going to hold up for very long, especially in the face of impermanence and death. What's meaningful today is not necessarily meaningful tomorrow, and what's meaningful throughout your whole life may not be meaningful at the moment of your death. You may cast a look backward at the moment of your death and say, "What did I do?" So, from an existential point of view, since self-created meaning does not form any absolute ground, anxiety is inescapable.

*resoluteness
despite
obstacles*

Before I relate the moment of world collapse to therapy, I would like to mention how I personally made the transition from that point-essentially that heroic attempt to create my own meaning-to Buddhism. During the early 1960's I went to Paris-when I was in my early 20's and extremely influenced by the existentialists. That was the place to soak up that existential feeling of the time. The existentialists were my personal heroes because the world that I had grown up in didn't make much sense to me, and these were people who were at least trying to create a sense of meaning for themselves and for the world, too. So I'd sit in the cafes that Sartre frequented, and I'd walk along the streets that Rilke wrote about. Even the stones, the streets and the walls in Paris had a certain existential quality. I would walk along the bridges over the Seine that I imagined Camus had thought about throwing himself off. It was wonderfully romantic and painful. But somehow it didn't feel satisfying just to accept the absurdity of the world and heroically struggle on from there. Fortunately at that time, just when I was starting to feel that I had rolled the rock up the hill a few too many times, I came across the writing of Alan Watts and D. T. Suzuki.

*absurdity
and the
heroic
struggle*

The one book that changed my world-view on the spot was Watts' *Psychotherapy East and West*. In one reading I suddenly saw a way out of the existential impasse. The real problem wasn't that human life was absurd or that there wasn't any absolute basis for unshakable meanings. Somehow the problem lay instead in the nature of the self that we

*a Buddhist
approach to
emptiness*

try to create. This understanding somehow made things workable in a new kind of way for me. Anxiety, meaninglessness, and that mood of despair did not have to be denied; they could even be a stepping stone to something else. I saw that existentialism tries its best to somehow fill up the void that opens up when the world collapses with new meaning. But I saw that Buddhism does not try to fill it up at all or overcome it in any way, but rather provides a way to go into that emptiness further. In fact, when I read the playful stories about Zen masters, it seemed that they were even enjoying that emptiness. That was really a radical shift in my perspective at the time. The moment of world collapse could be seen, in the Buddhist context, as one moment in a larger picture or journey, rather than as the final or ultimate one.

*a
search
for
meaning*

Like existentialism, Buddhism is also a response to moments of world collapse. The Buddha himself, as an Indian prince, was born into a world of complete meaning—his life was programmed for him by his society and his father. He was scheduled to inherit his father's kingdom, yet he found his life permanently altered by four moments of world collapse: when he saw an old person, a sick person, a dying person, and a wandering holy man. The shock of these encounters, undermining all the meaning that had supported his life until then, started him on his own personal search. He tried the various ascetic practices of his day, and finally decided to just sit in meditation and see if he could get to the bottom of the whole thing. What he discovered after six years, among other things, was the central fact I'd like to emphasize here—the illusory nature of the self. He saw that the self had no real solidity and no continuity. Ordinarily, the self that we know is constructed by identifying with objects of awareness that come and go—such as the occupations we perform, the things that we own, our personal history, with all its dramas and achievements, the intimate relationships we hold most dear. All these things we hold onto, as something to identify with, go to make up an identity. The word "identity" comes from a Latin word that means "the same." So having an identity literally means that we are trying to be the same from day to day. Our identity holds us together, and we use it, among other things, to avoid that experience of our world collapsing, which is so frightening.

*the self
as a
personal
identity*

Why do we need to identify so thoroughly with the things that come into our awareness? Here is where the Buddhist approach seems to go a little deeper than existentialism. The meditative experience upon which Buddhism is based

teaches us that the nature of consciousness itself is radically non-solid, open, receptive to the world. Now that sounds quite similar to what many of the existentialists have said as well. Sartre (1953), for example, speaks of the human being's nostalgia for the solidness of a rock and the definition of a tree (what he called the *en-sol*, the in-itselfness of things). The tree is just a tree. What is a human being? My father is my father; a tree is a tree. Who am I? We want to possess that same kind of solidity that we perceive in the Other. Yet, from a Buddhist point of view, the very fact that we can take things into us and let them touch us, or see Other as solid at all, means that we are not solid, but rather, empty like a *mirror*, open like space. Unfortunately, we tend to treat our spaciousness and non-solidity compared to Other as a lack, something that should be filled up and made solid. So, first we assume that what comes into us has an independent, solid existence in itself, and then we ask ourselves, "Well, what am I in comparison? Who am I?" In envying the seeming solidity of Other, we fail to appreciate that the nature of our consciousness is to provide a space in which things can stand out and be revealed. Here is where meditation practice can be extremely helpful in teaching us how to relate to our non-solidity in a different way.

*spaciousness
and
non-solidity*

What you discover in mindfulness meditation is that a stream of thoughts, feelings, and perceptions keep coming into awareness and pass away, moment to moment. The mind tries to grasp them, hold on to them and identify with them, but this never really works. You can't hold on to anything. You keep trying to come to some conclusion about things, but every position the mind takes is succeeded by another one a few moments later. This provides a very direct experience of impermanence and lack of solidity of self. Yet this need not lead to existential terror. If you stay with the process of meditation, you often find that you start to relax a little bit into the spaces between the successive moments of trying to grasp on to something, that you can't just keep grasping. You have to let go for a little bit before you can grasp again, and *let go* and grasp again. When a thought comes, you grasp and try to do something with it, either identify with it or disidentify with it, fight it or own it or disown it-but then there's this moment of letting go in between each grasping where something happens that is not grasping. In these cracks between each successive grasp, there is a sense of something different. And as you practice. relaxing into these open spaces, you discover some kind of emptiness there, a larger background in which the grasping is taking place, which we could call the "open ground" of our experience. This discovery points toward a different

*mindfulness
meditation*

*the
open ground
of
experience*

kind of Liberation than the existential freedom to make meaningful choices. It is the beginning of a path beyond existential despair.

I think many of us know that life is continuously changing, that the nature of life is to move forward, and that we can't move forward unless we let go *of* where we have already been. In other words, freedom requires leaving old structures behind. We know this rationally, yet how hard it is to let go, and how painful it is when old structures collapse on their own.

Meditation provides a way of learning how to let go. As we sit, the self that we've been trying to construct and make into a nice, neat package continues to unravel. Then we can clearly see how we are constructing it, how we are trying to maintain it, and how we only cause more pain and discomfort by continuing to pump it up.

*the
illusory
nature
of the
continuous
self*

The illusory nature of the continuous self is not an idea unique to Buddhism. We find it in the Western tradition as well, though it comes out of an essentially philosophical analysis. Hume, for example, said, "For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other" (1888, p. 252). Here he is saying nearly the same thing: what we are mainly aware of are the objects of consciousness. "I never catch myself;" he says. William James also came to the same conclusion. He found that the continuous self was a belief constructed out of the endless sequence of thoughts which overlap and, in the process, pass along an illusion of ownership, "like the log carried first by William and Henry, then by William, Henry and John, then by John and Peter, and so on. All real units of experience *overlap*" (1967, p. 296). "Each thought dies away and is replaced by another, saying, 'Thou art mine and part of the same self with me' " (1890, p. 339). It's this trick that each thought has of immediately taking up the preceding expiring thought and adopting it which creates the illusion of a continuous self. This sounds very Buddhist. Sartre also talked about the illusion of selfhood when he said, "The essential role of ego is to mask from consciousness its very spontaneity. Everything happens as if consciousness were hypnotized by this ego which it has established, which it has constructed, becoming absorbed in it as if to make the ego its guardian and law" (1957, p. 100-01).

But without a path that helps us discover a larger sense of what we are, we might wonder, "So what if the self is a

construction-we are still left with existential anxiety." Since the meanings on which we build our identity are continually changing and passing away, this means we will continually be going through a series of identity crises. Especially in an era of future shock, when meanings the culture holds valuable change more and more rapidly, the identity crises will escalate at a comparable rate. So, having discovered the insubstantiality of the self, we still seem to need some path, somewhere to go from there.

This seems even more essential for our clients in therapy. Helping them understand that the self is a fiction does not in itself relieve their suffering. In therapy there is often a crucial moment when many clients start to see through the old self. As a meditator, I'm keenly aware of these moments when a client realizes, "I don't know who I am." It can be a wonderful moment actually, but many therapists and clients would rather not face this. It often comes at a point in the therapy when the old structures have unravelled and started to collapse and before some new direction has emerged. It's an in-between place.

*identity
crisis
in
therapy*

There is not much in Western psychology to prepare people for how to deal with such moments. Most of our therapies are guided by a *personality* theory. And most of us usually think we *should* know who we are. After all, others seem to walk around knowing who *they* are. But if we look inside ourselves and find nothing that we can hold onto, this scares us. What we may not realize is that no one *really* knows who they are, that this is the nature of our being, and that if we have a true self at all, it somehow lies in the heart of the unknowingness that we face when we start to look inside ourselves. And if we can "hang out" on the edge of this unknown, we may discover how to let ourselves be, without having to be something

As the old maladaptive structures start to break down, the client often looks at the void opening and asks, "What now?" What do we as therapists do at that point? Do we try to substitute new structures? Do we let the client dangle there in space on the edge of the abyss?

For me, meditation provides some context for working with those moments. I had a strong sense of this personally during a three-month retreat with my meditation teacher. About six weeks into it I found my world radically collapsing at a level of intensity that matched the old existential days, perhaps even magnified a few degrees. I found I didn't really believe in the self that I was constructing and holding

onto for dear life, even though I thought it was a better self than I'd ever had before. And yet, if I let go of that, what then? I knew I would fall, and I didn't know where I would land.

Yet there was something about working with that fear in a practice environment that helped a great deal. I found that I *could* let myself collapse. The atmosphere of the practice environment encouraged that in a friendly kind of way—other people were also practicing, and the whole purpose of being there was to let your world collapse, to keep going, and to find something of importance in doing that. I don't want to say it was "meaningful" because I didn't necessarily find some new meaning there, to be used as a basis for constructing a new and better self-structure. And yet neither did I fall back into that sense of meaninglessness that existentialism had provided relief from.

*the basic
ground
of our
consciousness*

Letting go of the need to be something, to be some *thing*, giving up that struggle for meaning, if only briefly, is like clearing something out, reducing mental clutter. This allows us to discover what is called in the Buddhist tradition "basic intelligence" or "buddha nature"—that clarity and openness we talked about as the ground of our consciousness. It's not just the neutral openness that appears in existentialism, or a scary emptiness, but it has a brightness and sharpness that cuts through fog, cuts through obscurity. It's like a light that doesn't allow anything to block it. And the more you sit and practice meditation over time, the more it starts to come through and cut through all of the fog that you are creating, all the things you are trying to hold onto which block that light. It seems to have its own energy which shines right through all of the rationalizations and other tricks that we play on ourselves.

*basic
vulnerability*

At the same time, we usually feel a certain inner rawness when an old structure falls away and we don't have a new one to replace it. That kind of tenderness and nakedness is an ontological quality of our humanness which we are usually masking. Yet when an outer shell or facade or mask falls away, we get to touch that rawness again. We feel our *basic vulnerability*. That kind of experience, which I have come to know quite intimately through meditation practice, has sensitized me to a different context in which to do therapy.

Therapists often try to deal with the content of clients' problems and steer around that underlying sense of utter vulnerability, of clients not knowing who they are, of not having anything ultimately to identify with. Yet I see this

vulnerability as the essence of human nature and of consciousness. As humans, we are the animals that stand up erect with a soft front, fully exposing our front to the world. By doing that, we also take the world fully into us, all through the front of our body. To have sensitive skin means that it can be easily punctured. This literal softness and tenderness is reflected in our psychological make-up as a basic sensitivity, where we often feel quite raw, beneath all our problems and concerns. In touching this vulnerability, a client may connect with a basic aliveness that can shift the way in which he holds his problems. This is a different approach than giving the problems primary importance, although problems can be a vehicle for helping us contact this sensitivity. In my work I don't actually try to make someone feel that vulnerability-it seems to come up at some point on its own.

*sensing
our
vulnerability*

It's interesting to note that the word "vulnerability" usually has a pejorative meaning in our culture. I think that's because we identify vulnerability with a loss of power. If we say that someone is vulnerable, it usually means he is weak, overly sensitive, and easily hurt. I distinguish what I call basic human vulnerability from another kind of vulnerability-the fragility of the ego, the shell that we construct around this soft receptive center where we take the world into us. Because we feel so sensitive and raw, we usually try to protect our tenderness with a facade or a mask that gives us some distance from the world. But this shell is fragile and always susceptible to being punctured, if not demolished (in moments of world collapse). Other people can usually see through our facades; death or other circumstances inevitably break open this shell. Having to maintain and patch ourselves up creates a certain brittleness-and this is the vulnerability that we usually think of in our culture as something weak. In fact it *is* weak because that kind of fragility puts us at the mercy of things that continually threaten to puncture our shell. We have to try to control situations so we do not feel threatened. On the other hand, getting in touch with our more basic human tenderness and vulnerability can be a source of real power.

I would like to illustrate what I am talking about here through a case example. A client in his mid-thirties, call him Ray, came to see me with the presenting problems of exhibitionism and alcoholism, as well as fear of homosexuality and severe problems relating to women, despite a basically heterosexual orientation. His mother had abandoned him at about age six and he'd been adopted by an uncle. The uncle was a "macho" type of person who was not able to be

*a case
example*

intimate and tender with him. Nonetheless, he came to identify very strongly with the uncle, a man who could not express his softness.

I've chosen this client to discuss because all his symptoms kept pointing back to this issue of vulnerability in one way or another. For example, his exhibitionism was one of those strangely appropriate symptoms that are symbolically perfect. It was a way of exposing his vulnerability, while also maintaining some kind of control and power. His fear of being homosexual was connected with the fear of his softness. His alcoholism-getting drunk and "busting loose" -was a way in which the child in him could get out from under his heavy control, so that he could be spontaneous and feel his aliveness fully. And finally his coldness toward women was clearly related to a fear of being at their mercy and being in a vulnerable position again.

*always
being
"on edge"*

Oddly enough, Ray's experience of being a man was a sense of being "on edge" all the time. Those were his words- "always on edge." One image he had of this was of driving a car on the freeway and being held back by people who were driving too slowly. This symbolized the way he was actually driving himself. He came to discover that what he got out of being on edge like that was that it allowed him to feel his "strength," to feel like a man.

What I did with Ray was to "hang out" with him in those raw places which came up as we worked together. I never introduced the word "vulnerability"-that came from him. But it was clear that that part of him wanted to be recognized and included in his life. What seemed to be important for him was to discover that vulnerable didn't mean victimized. One day he said, "It's okay to be hurt. That doesn't mean that I'm unloveable." He started to see how he created anger and struggle with women in order to feel strong rather than soft.

Ray had another fitting image for being on edge, which he generally felt as a tightness in his upper torso. He saw himself hanging on the side of a cliff. We came back to that often, that experience of being on the edge of the cliff, and what he could do there. One time he explored climbing to higher ground. Other times he explored letting go and falling. Another image he had was of being out on a limb. Being in love was like being on a limb for him. This is not an uncommon feeling, actually. But if the love wasn't fully returned, or if his lover left him, he would fall into the abyss again, with all those dreaded feelings of terror, emptiness,

groundlessness. In one session when he felt he was out on a limb, I asked him to shift his attention from his panic to the feeling of "nothing there if she leaves me." He found that something warm happened inside him as he let his attention go into that void that was opening beneath him, which surprised him. He actually saw it as red and yellow. This experience started to break the set in his mind that vulnerable equals victimized.

In some ways Ray was in a classic "macho" bind—he had to hold on to himself tightly, which kept him always on edge. And yet an occasional helpless look in his eyes, his childlike need to get drunk and bust loose, as well as his willingness to keep coming and working on his problems, told me that the tenderness in him was longing to find some outlet or expression.

What I most remember from the time we spent together is that sense of being there together, hanging out on the edge of that cliff—exploring what it was like to hold on and what it was like to let go and fall, I suspect that somehow being there together like that made it okay for him to feel vulnerable. He realized it didn't have to mean annihilation, disgrace, humiliation, dishonor, or abandonment. Within the past year Ray has married and stopped drinking, and he's still working with his vulnerability on a deeper level, especially now that he's married. But he is definitely starting to get in touch with some gentle strength inside himself, which is very nice to see.

Perhaps someone might object, "Well, maybe it's all right for someone who has an intact ego to discover his vulnerability, but what about people whose world is collapsing all the time, and who cannot get themselves together?" I would work with clients who have an inadequate protective shell differently from those who have an intact set of defenses. If their roof is *always* caving in, then my focus might be on building firmer supports. In that case, I would put greater emphasis on a person's grounded interaction with the world, so that he could develop ordinary self-confidence and self-respect. If the belief in self is ultimately a fiction in *absolute* terms, still there may be *relative* usefulness in this belief, especially for those who have never developed any sense of groundedness or confidence. Even someone who has poor defenses or who splashes his emotions all over his environment has still probably not made a friendly relationship with this tender, soft place inside. Establishing this kind of friendliness and trust is an important step even with highly-disturbed clients, so that their vulnerability is not a source of panic.

*clients
with
inadequate
groundedness*

The more therapists fear this place of vulnerability in themselves, the more likely they are to think, "If we let people go near this existential void, this state of basic raw vulnerability, what will happen? They might go over the edge!" In fact Ray had that experience earlier in his life when he was high on drugs. He felt his whole world falling apart and checked into a mental hospital for several weeks afterwards. That reinforced his feeling of, "I can't go near that scary place in myself again. It's out of bounds." But I think that the so-called "freak-out" that happens is not because of that void. Rather, it is an extreme reaction to that void. It is getting frozen into a panic about it. So it is *how* we relate to the emptiness which is important. And this is where meditation can be of value, especially for therapists, in giving them some kind of experience and confidence in working with their own vulnerability, so that they do not panic about the possibility of their clients going over the edge.

*power
and
inner
strength*

To conclude, I want to say something about power and strength, in the sense of inner strength, groundedness, as the ability to act effectively in the world. I don't think we can have real power without this sense of real vulnerability. The other kind of power, the one that Ray was holding onto, has no strength. It is an attempt to have power *over*, and so becomes top-heavy and easily toppled. Trying to maintain control in this way makes us very vulnerable in the weak sense, the ego sense. Because our attempts to control things are easily threatened, we have to guard ourselves more tightly. Tying up our energy in this kind of defense system drains us of our strength. The power and strength that comes from relaxing into our nature and feeling-out the most raw and tender places inside ourselves is quite different. It's like the Taoist image of water as the most vulnerable and soft of the elements. Anything can penetrate it; it does anything you want it to do. And yet, for wearing away what is hard and tough, nothing surpasses it. The bridge from basic vulnerability to this real human power is gentleness. Gentleness can cut through the panic which surrounds our vulnerability. In fact, gentleness is often a very natural response to vulnerability. When you see a newborn child, or a young animal, or a friend who is in pain, the natural response is gentleness. Not so, usually, with ourselves—strangely enough. We have to somehow *learn* to be gentle with ourselves.

gentleness

Meditation, which involves the practice of letting our world collapse, and of staying with ourselves through that, teaches us how to be gentle with ourselves. And if we start to develop that gentleness with ourselves, we can also be gen-

tie with others in that same kind of way, which helps them relate to their own vulnerability. Buddhism describes this basic vulnerability as the seed of enlightenment already in us. It is said that when this "tender heart" is fully developed, it becomes very powerful and can cut through all of the barriers that we human beings seem to create. In its fully enlightened form tender heart becomes transformed into "awakened heart," *bodhicitta*.

*developing
a tender
heart*

Thus the mutual vulnerability between client and therapist-as in any important relationship in our lives-seems to be a crucial factor in how two people can affect each other. If we look at the god and goddess of love in Greek mythology, we see that Aphrodite was associated with instruments of war and Cupid was armed with arrows. This suggests that to connect, to be able to love means being able to let yourself be wounded. We could say that vulnerable means "able to connect." This implies that, as therapists, we can't really connect with a client unless we can somehow be vulnerable *with* that person.

*mutual
vulnerability
of client
and
therapist*

DISCUSSION

Aud.: What do you mean by "meaning?" Does meditation provide a way of finding new meaning?

J. W.: Most psychotherapy attempts to find meaning where there apparently was none before. I see meaning as structure, as form that we create or discover through our interaction with the world. I haven't talked about that here, but that is largely what I do with clients-we discover and unfold new meaning together (Welwood, 1980; 1982).

The interplay of meaning and meaninglessness is a dialectical process. We develop meaning-structures as a child to help us make sense out of the world and navigate through it. But there is often a period around adolescence or early adulthood when we start to question those meanings. And this may lead to the sense of meaninglessness that the existentialists talk about. Existential therapy helps people unfold the implicit meaning in their lived experience, which is much deeper and wider than the preconceived meanings that they try to impose on their experience. I do not want to denigrate the search for meaning, because it is powerful and important to find the organic meaning in our lived experience. Beyond the search for meaning, another step we could take is to discover some kind of meaning-free-ness (rather than meaninglessness in the existential sense), where we are

*meaning-
free-ness*

free of the struggle to find meaning. The open ground is meaning-free. We create meaning and structure out of it. But these structures can get too dense and thick unless we can let them dissolve back into the meaning-free open ground. Zen *koan* practice is designed to break down our attempts to find meaning. If you struggle to find the meaning of a *koan*, it doesn't work. Giving up that attempt to find the meaning of the *koan* opens up another kind of awareness.

Aud.: Is it your role as a therapist to speed up the disintegration of old structures? Do you bring meditation into your therapy practice?

J. W.: No, I don't try to speed anything up, but try to go with whatever the client's process seems to want to do. If the therapist is with the client's process fully, and the client is working from his own moment-to-moment process, that in itself furthers forward movement. If I were trying to make something happen faster, that would not be the kind of gentleness that is called for.

*therapy
helpful
to develop
groundedness*

Therapy is about form-people finding new meaning and building more adaptive structures for living. The realization of no-self only leads toward greater sanity and well-being if we already have a grounded bodily sense of being-in-the-world. If we have this grounded sense of our existence, we will be able to bounce back from a period of world collapse and probably be the stronger for it. Schizophrenic and borderline people, lacking this relative ground, only get swept away by perceptions of groundlessness. Therefore it is appropriate to help those who lack this relative ground develop form and structure to guide them in ordinary living.

*meditation
helpful
to explore
emptiness*

What I have emphasized here is not form, but the emptiness that surrounds the forms we create, like the vast reaches of space surrounding our planet. Meditation is the discipline par excellence for learning how to appreciate and function in that space. I feel that meditation practice has its own integrity and context that needs to be respected. It has its own form-sitting with a straight posture-which grounds us and helps us "keep our seat" when opening to the greater emptiness that surrounds our lives. I don't try to mix it with therapy, which is more of a vehicle for developing meaning and healthy structure.

Aud.: If you deny that we have a continuous self, who is it that is witnessing and experiencing all of this?

J. W.: To answer this fully would require a much more lengthy philosophical discussion than we could get into

here. To put it briefly, our awareness is both active and receptive. "I" is a convenient way to refer to the active part of this process. "I" as an active awareness has no form that can be grasped. At the same time, there is a set of habits, patterns, and structures that I can observe in my life, *post facto*. This is the "me" that the "I" observes. These structures tend to continue and repeat (this is what is meant by *karma* in the Buddhist tradition). "I" can observe these patterns and infer from them the existence of a solid, continuous self. But "I" can never directly experience that self. Moreover, no one has ever been able to find out who owns this active awareness. This was what the Buddha discovered through six years of meditation—there is no Wizard of Oz behind the whole show. Assuming that there is an "I" that owns this awareness creates unnecessary complications.

*active
and
receptive
awareness*

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