

Can We Change?

When I first arrived in Heraklion, Crete, I found a pension owned by a wonderful woman named Helen. In those days, people with a room to rent would stand on the dock, waving little handwritten signs that said “rooms for rent,” as they waited for the daily boat from Athens to arrive with a fresh load of tourists. When I walked off the boat, I headed directly toward Helen, got in her car, and off we drove to her home. After going through the usual mechanics of renting a room, I put my traveling bag in a closet and walked down to the Mediterranean Sea, waiting below Helen’s home. Even though I was exhausted from a sleepless night, having opted for the cheapest ticket (simply a chair on the deck), I had this urge to walk back to the sea.

In some inexplicable way, arriving in Crete was a kind of coming home for me, and for whatever reason, home meant reconnecting to the sea. As I recall, I found a rather desolate area, quite a walk away from the bustling harbor. This was thirty-four years ago. I know I would not recognize it now.

My body was thirty-seven years old. How old was the psychological one who called himself Victor? At the time, I would have said that, emotionally, I was a teenager, maybe sixteen? In retrospect, I suspect I was much younger. And that is what I want to write about in this paper. How old are we psychologically, and is it possible for us as a people to change?

I found a large rock and sat down to ponder and embrace where I was. I had spent the night on the boat from Athens, reading *Report to Greco*, Nikos Kazantzakis’s autobiographical work that intermingles his life and El Greco’s. It is a wonderful book. Here I was on the island where they were both born, sitting by the same sea that nurtured the essence of who they were.

Sitting there on that rock was an amazing experience – I had been traveling for weeks: Rome, Florence, Venice, traveling by bus up the Adriatic coast of Croatia, stopping in Dubrovnik and finally Belgrade. From there I took a train to Athens. But here, sitting by the sea, something in me finally rested, and in some complete way I literally drank it all in. Not just the mind or intellect. Somehow the body was home, every cell was communing with the soul of Crete. I think I have never had a similar experience. Perhaps it is true that one can return home, truly return, only once in a lifetime.

The thought came to me, “Why am I getting to have this experience?” Perhaps that sounds strange, but that was the thought that came to me. Why did I get to experience this and not my dear brother Jim? Or my sister Sue? I knew that they would never get to have a moment like this, nor most of the friends whom I had left behind in New York City, where I had lived for the past decade. I knew that they would have wonderful experiences that I would not have, but there was something about this moment, this reconnecting to mystery, that was rare beyond all expression. And then another thought came that I have cherished ever since that day. I realized that I was sitting there, on that

rock, so far away from the safe shelter of home and the familiar, for the sake of some future Victor yet to be born. I knew that one day he would look back and remember this Victor who I was and be grateful to him for having the courage to leave his safe little world in America and come here to be utterly alone and afraid.

As I sat on that big rock, I spied a stray dog warily making his way toward me. He was skinny, shabby and utterly alone, and as he slowly ambled in my direction, I remembered immediately my own dog, Willy, my gorgeous, silly, fantastic Doberman Pincer. I gave him up in order to come to Crete, and it was the hardest thing I had ever done in my life. My eyes were wet with tears as that stray dog stood in front of me; I gently rubbed his head, and it seemed likely that he had never had someone touch him softly in his life. I can remember to this day the way he lifted his head and moved into the touch of my hand. Slowly and very carefully he touched my hand with his tongue, so rough and yet so loving. It was as if he knew that this was perhaps all he would ever get in his short life. I had no food to give him, no way to take care of him, I was exhausted, but not as exhausted with life as he must have been, and I had a long climb up the hill back to the pension. The thing is, he did not seem to want or expect anything from me. That was what was amazing. When I left that spot, he did not try to follow me – he just sat and watched me walk away. We parted having touched one another in the deepest part.

Until a few years ago, I always thought that psychological change, true psychological change, is only available to the wounded. Almost in an inverse relationship, the more profound the wound, the greater potential for real change. It is as if our psychic wounds are the very grains of sand that create the pearl of something new. Of course that sets up quite a paradox, since the more profound the psychological wound, the less likely one is to transcend that wound. I always suspected that there was a bit of narcissism in my theory; after all, I dragged my bundle of psychological wounds all the way from New York City to Heraklion. But the narcissism did not worry me as much as the pessimism inherent in that theory. What chance do we humans have to grow in awareness and love, to truly change, if the only ones who have a real possibility of true psychological change are the misfits, the ones who cannot find a comfortable nest where they can settle down and live out the patterns laid down so long ago?

I think this is why my discovery of Buddhism was such a pivotal moment for me. From the Buddha's perspective, we are all misfits; we all carry this profound wound of delusion around, as we live our programmed lives robotically from year to year. You can see how this "pessimistic" view of reality, the Buddha's first noble truth of suffering, actually appeared to me as the best news possible. The grain of sand that causes us to suffer is universal! There is hope in that.

I count my arrival in Crete as the beginning of the second "incarnation" in my life. That period of change probably lasted from thirty seven to forty. After traveling for fourteen months, from Crete to Egypt, then by boat to Beirut, Lebanon, to Istanbul, to Teheran and to Kabul, I finally made it to India where I studied yoga. When I returned, there is no question that my felt sense was of someone a little older inside. Later, I would say that I felt I had somehow grown psychologically from sixteen to seventeen, or perhaps even an

eighteen year old. People looked a little strange when I said that, because they were looking at a thirty-nine year old body talking. But to me, even the possibility that this was true was a miracle.

For example, approximately one month after I had left Crete, I was on a bus from Istanbul to Teheran. We were crossing the plains, with Mt. Ararat in the distance; it was snowing and bitter cold. The bus had no heat, and there I sat, shivering with flip-flops on my feet, wearing cotton yoga pants and a tee shirt. No one told me it got bitterly cold in Turkey in the winter! And God knows it never once occurred to me to check. A good Samaritan, sitting across the aisle from me, was sharing his girlfriend's sleeping bag. He pulled another sleeping bag from the upper compartment and loaned it to me. Oh joy! I was warm! I was treated with kindness like this from country to country. Perhaps an hour later, as I was feeling warm and secure under that sleeping bag, I innocently asked people sitting near me, "Where do we get our visa into Iran?" Literally it felt as if the bus shuddered. "You didn't get your visa in Istanbul?" "He doesn't have a visa!" someone shouted to the bus driver. "Was I supposed to get it Istanbul?" I asked. The bus stopped at the border, where I was left standing in that bitter cold and snow. One could not obtain a visa at the border; this was in the time of the Shah of Iran. He was overthrown only a few months later.

I cannot count the number of times I was in similar, harrowing situations, riding on the back of a truck because I discovered there was no bus service from the last town in Iran to the border of Afghanistan. I was advised to crouch down so that I did not attract highway robbers! And there is the unforgettable moment in Lahore, Pakistan, of standing behind a communal bathroom and suddenly realizing that I was literally sinking in a pile of human excrement. I had to figure out how to wash my shoes, take off my wet socks, and get back on the bus. On and on these disasters occurred and always there was someone to help me out. Disaster after disaster. I was forced by sheer inertia to experience the total inability of a child to function intelligently for fourteen long months across some twenty countries. At some point, something in me, some quiet place that sees things as they are (the same thing that is in you as well as me), knew that this had to change. In some way, this seems to me to be the absolute key to psychological change. We have to stay in it, in our situation, stay present to it rather than run away from it. We have to stay with it long enough, with sufficient energy and attention, to see that we simply have no choice other than to change.

One story I must share before moving on. I mentioned reading *Report to Greco* on the boat from Athens to Heraklion. I continued to read it each night after coming back to my room at Helen's pension, until I neared the end of the book. Saving the end, like some delicious piece of candy, I went to sleep. The next day, I found a little coffee shop where I could sit, have coffee and read. I started reading the last chapters, and, as I came to the end of the book, I felt compelled to take a walk. I left the shop and walked along the street with book in hand. I had no idea where I was headed because I was totally engrossed in reading the last few pages, but I realized that I was walking up a winding street, toward the top of a hill.

As I came to the last page, I realized that I was in a small park on top of the hill. I sat down near a cross and saw that I was sitting at the memorial for Kazantzakis. The epitaph read: "I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. I am free."

Even the move back to New York, after I returned from India, was part of a continuing process of change. I had decided to move to Paris, and give my musical career one last, final shot. Many times I had heard people say that my piano/singing style was "European." God knows it wasn't American. So, shortly after arriving back in America in 1978 – I decided to move to Paris. But life had a huge change in direction in store for me, totally unexpected, and just after the New Year in 1979, I moved back to New York and began a new life.

My friend Marion, an opera singer who lived in Monte Carlo, came to visit me shortly after my 40th birthday. That Sunday, she came with me to the little Episcopal church in Harlem where I was the organist choir director, and Marion shared with us her glorious voice. At our choir rehearsal that morning, she interrupted the rehearsal to ask the choir to pray for me, because I was going through a terrible time! I nearly fainted, appearances being the very basis of life to a Southerner. I was furious with her for "exposing" the fact that I felt as if I was dying inside (which I had shared with her) to my little choir. As we walked home after the service, I screamed at her with the same fury that all my friends endured at one time or other. She just stood there on the street, like a sturdy ship all battened down, totally prepared for a fierce and terrible storm. Amazingly, Marion is still in my life 30 years later!

What she was witnessing really was a kind of dying in me. It felt as if I was dying. It felt as if I had stumbled into some dark world where I could see no light. I think this was the final stages of a psychological rebirth that began that day when I sat by the Cretan sea, experiencing some deep return home.

The first psychological change occurred when I was finally able to detach from my family in Tennessee. I stayed in college for seven years. Seven years! The College-Conservatory of Music in Cincinnati, an undergraduate psychology degree at the University of Tennessee, Law School at the University of Tennessee, Graduate English at the University of Tennessee. Like the child that I was, I walked away in the middle of writing the thesis for the Masters in English (something about Mary Queen of Scots in Spenser's *Faerie Queen*), really with not a hint of regret, and started playing the piano in a bar in Atlanta, Georgia. My poor parents! They had supported my continual morphing from one academic goal to another for seven long years. Finally, I could no longer muster the energy to convince them once again that at last I truly had found my real profession. It was all a ruse, an elaborate charade helping me hide in college, because I was terrified of being "in the world." In short, I gave my loving parents a break.

After I moved to New York, I was singing a song in a club, and introduced it by saying that people come to live in New York City for many different reasons. Some people move to New York as the crowning achievement of their lives. Others start out there, say at Columbia, and become writers and artists, lawyers and musicians. But I belonged in a

third category: those who come to New York because they have run out of places to run. New York has always been a harbor for misfits. I knew that I could never run back home if I could not survive in New York. It was Custer's last stand. So I moved to NYC at age 29, entering the crucible of my first psychological chapter. How long did that process last? Certainly a few years. I remember lying down to sleep one night, perhaps when I was 33 years old, Willy lying on the floor nearby. At last I had a little life. Not something one would write a book about, but a little life. I lay down to sleep and discovered tears in my eyes, as the thought came, "I will be alright." I had never had that thought once in my life. I got up and wrote:

Goodnight my soul.
You seem to live on nothing.
Tonight I say sweet dreams, my soul.
I seem.
You are.

Three years later, shortly after July the fourth, I was walking down a street in Los Angeles, California. I was visiting friends, singers and actresses, who had moved there from New York. It would take many pages to set up the circumstances that created this moment, so I will trust in your ability to skip to this moment with me. All my life, I had found safety and identity through many friendships. The Beatles song "I get by with a little help from my friends" was my theme song. Events had occurred with every one of my friends that forced me see how I had hidden in these friendships, just as I had hidden in college for seven years. In that pivotal moment, as I stood alone on a street in Los Angeles, I realized that I was a child. It was shocking beyond expression. I stood there, looking at my reflection in a plate glass mirror, I presume looking for all the world like a fairly normal man of thirty-six. But what looked out from those eyes was a child. In that moment, I knew, without any doubt, that I could not bear to be that same child at forty. I knew it. I would rather die than be that same child at forty.

I have never understood how I knew that. To this day it is hard to believe that I truly knew that. So many times in later years I have longed for clients to see that about themselves, just as I did. I knew that I was not even remotely a grown up person and I could not bear it. I started to weep, there on the street. And my mind opened to the absolutely reality of my circumstances. I understood exactly why I had not been able to grow up, but that certainly was no solace in that seminal moment.

What to do? I considered the possibility of therapy. And again, as I write this, it amazes me how much wisdom was present in that moment. I knew that there was no way on earth that I could enter into a true relationship with a therapist. In short, I knew that I was too immature even to begin psychotherapy. What to do? I wept. And then it came to me. What would one do if they absolutely had to grow up, at least a little? I knew that the only chance I had was to literally rip open my secure little nest in New York, and give up all the crutches on which I relied. If change was possible, I had to enter a world totally beyond my ability to control. In that moment, I knew that I had to travel to far away countries. Even then I knew I would have to give up my precious Willy. I came

back to New York City, and started to give away my plants, my furniture, pots, pans and dishes, and my rent controlled apartment. I moved into a sublet for the time remaining before I left New York. The last thing I gave up, of course, was my dog. I first found a home for him in Tennessee, with some children who adored him. I left him at their home to see if they got along, and as I drove away, I saw him in the rear view mirror, running after me as fast as he could fly, down the road with his long, black, uncut ears flopping in the wind. I stopped the car and in he jumped. That was our first outing. But in the end I found him a place on a farm, where he could run free, and bite off the tops of tomato plants, and hide when he spied children in Halloween costumes or jump in the bathtub when it thundered. His new parents loved him, as had I, and in the end he forgot me. That was what I most wanted for him.

Now you know the first two psychological changes in my life. The third psychological change began at some point in my analytical work with Dr. Edward C. Whitmont, in my mid 40's. Finally, I was old enough to enter therapy. Dr. Whitmont was one of the great Jungian analysts of the past century. My almost three years of work with him led me to a subsequent three years of intense meditation at Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. One night before the next day's session with Dr. Whitmont, I had this dream:

I was sitting in a large theater filled with people listening in rapt attention to a woman on the stage delivering a tremendously inspiring speech. The woman was a earth mother type, she stood in bare feet, unkempt hair, long flowing dress and had an amazing necklace around her neck. Rocks, twigs, perhaps some bones. She reminded me of Ruth Denison, the pioneering Buddhist teacher from Germany. (I had already done a number of meditation retreats with her.)

At some point, Dr. Whitmont appeared on the stage, and the woman figure disappeared. Dr. Whitmont began to talk, and it was equally inspiring. We in the audience were completely engaged. Suddenly, from the audience, a deranged looking man stood up and started shouting at Dr. Whitmont. Everyone froze as the man staggered toward the stage wielding what looked like a ceremonial dagger. Dr. Whitmont seemed to be paralyzed as the man approached him, dagger held high in the air, ready to plunge. I leaped to the stage and stood in front of Dr. Whitmont, protecting him from the crazy man. It was as if my action released the audience, which had been frozen, and they moved toward the deranged man as one unit. In fact, they had become a mob intending to kill him. The deranged man dropped his dagger, absolutely terrified, and reached toward me for protection, as the mob drew near. I put my arms around him as he leaned tightly against my body. I felt the cold dampness as he urinated in his pants.

The mob backed away – and I whispered to this insane man, “Don't worry. You just have not learned that there is something called “process.” It is the miracle.”

You may have realized that this wild man was none other than my own shadow. This, in a nutshell, is what I had learned from Dr. Whitmont. “Learned” is not the correct word, of course. I got it, not in the head or intellect, but from the heart or even the gut: We humans have an extraordinary capacity to change. It is the only real miracle. We change through the mystery of something called process. It is our greatest hope.

So, at age 47, I left my work with Dr. Whitmont and spent the next three years in intensive meditation practice at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. At the end of those three years, I had this sense of two roads diverging in Robert Frost’s magical wood: Should I become a monk and remain in the wonderful silence I had found through meditation, or should I return to a world I had never quite learned how to inhabit? A few weeks before I left Barre, I had this dream:

I was at a picnic, in a lovely countryside. It was like one of the church picnics I attended as a child growing up in Tennessee. Long tables filled with bowls of potato salad, baked beans, fried chicken, hot dogs with onions and mustard – chocolate pies, lemon pies, banana crème pies. I had been on a fairly spartan, vegetarian diet for a long time so the food was especially delightful. In the dream, I stood there looking at all that luscious food and was filled with anticipation. Soon we eat!

Suddenly, a plane flew over. At first sight, there was nothing strange about it, until I began to realize that the plane was flying incredibly low, and I could see the faces of the passengers looking out the window at us standing below. We all stood transfixed at the sight, as the plane flew over us, lower and lower, until it passed beyond a small hill and we heard the loud explosion of a crash beyond our sight.

Everyone started running toward the disaster, except me. I stood there for a moment thinking about those delicious hotdogs. I hadn’t had one in a year. Oh! And the chocolate pie! Surely no one would notice that I was having a bite to eat, and if they did notice, who cared? They had their hands full with whatever was on the other side of the hill.

Reluctantly, I put my desire for food aside and joined the crowd as we climbed the small hill. On the other side was a terrible scene. As we all ran toward the huge wreckage of the broken airplane, the reality changed, and it was as if the plane were still in the sky; it had not yet crashed. Then the plane changed into what looked like a space ship. I think at that moment I saw the word “Challenger” on the side, and sure enough it exploded in the sky above us, breaking into huge pieces.

Those huge chunks of the ship hurled toward us as we stood transfixed. I realized that many of us were going to be smashed by the falling objects, and I began to shout to everyone, “Stand still! Don’t run from the object, but stand still and carefully watch it as it falls. Wait till the last moment and then leap away when

you can see where it's going to hit." People did this and were avoiding being crushed. One small group rushed toward a little shack for safety and I hollered, "Don't hide there!" They ran from the shack, and sure enough it was demolished by a huge piece of the spacecraft, just as they escaped to safety. I cannot express how vivid this dream was, or how frightening it was to watch a tiny object in the sky, almost like a pin point, falling faster and faster and growing increasingly large as it neared the earth. And our having to stand there directly underneath it, waiting until the last moment, then leaping to safety.

At last fewer objects fell from the sky. As I stood there, I saw one more object falling directly toward where I was standing. Again, I stood still and waited, and at the last possible moment I leaped to safety. After the huge piece of wreckage crashed to the ground, I walked toward it and realized that there was a pilot's chair (with instruments and dials) in the wreckage, and strapped to the chair was some kind of being. All of it, the chair and the being, radiated a silver glow. I rushed toward him/her and realized that I was in the presence of an extraordinary being from another planet. The person was incredibly beautiful; it was clearly human-like but so intelligent, and kind. It was grievously wounded, and I desperately wanted someone to come quickly to help save it. But no one was there to help, and I realized in that moment that there I stood, the one who wanted stay at the picnic, the one who wanted a hot dog, the one who had absolutely no skill in medicine, or even basic first aid, and yet if this beautiful being was to live, only I was there to save it. As I moved toward that being, determined to do whatever I could to help him live, the morning bells were ringing at IMS, and I awoke.

Soon after that, I moved to California, and at age 50 began the third chapter of my life.

Now in my 70th year, a fourth psychological incarnation seeks to be born. I am astonished! When did it begin? I cannot say, but it is certainly unexpected. I had completely forgotten what this feels like. I experienced my 70th birthday in March, at the Forest Refuge, where I sat for one month. As I thought about returning to Long Beach, I thought about tending to our little meditation center, Long Beach Meditation. I had already announced my intention to remain as guiding teacher until age 75. Five more years! It seemed very possible, neat, comfortable. I had learned to live in the world in the previous twenty years, bought a condo, and established a large psychotherapy practice, after gaining a Masters and Doctors degree in clinical psychology. Who would have thought it possible? Not I.

But above all, I became the guiding teacher for Long Beach Meditation. Now, recent events since returning from the Forest Refuge, have caused a kind of underground explosion, and I have begun to see that the over the years I have finally succeeded in creating a nice little nest for myself. I discover to my dismay that I have not facilitated a growing up process in our meditation group, the individuation process that any loving parent must nurture in the child. The baby that is our meditation group must learn how to

grow without me. I have slipped into a kind of psychological stagnation. The rest of this story is not written, and it is not important to the question in this paper.

Recently, I have been spending a lot of time in Ojai, California, going back and forth between experiencing solitude in Ojai and coming back to lead the sits at Long Beach Meditation. In Ojai, I have reconnected to the teaching of Krishnamurti, a teacher who has had tremendous influence in my life. This leads me back to the question I posed in the title of this paper: Can we change? It is one of the questions Krishnamurti grappled with throughout his teaching career, and the central question in the book *Can Humanity Change?* Of course there have always been people who have experienced profound change, but were their experiences merely an aberration, a mutation of nature, of little use in a discussion that asks if we as a people can grow? Krishnamurti changed profoundly in his early twenties, and if you have read his biography, you know that his circumstances were absolutely extraordinary. But, at least in his hundreds of public dialogues and in his books, he never refers to the circumstances that elicited his transformation. Krishnamurti's followers suggested this question of the possibility of real change on numerous occasions. Over the decades that he taught, many people came to hear him year after year. In fact, some people who returned to listen to his teaching over decades asked him, "After all these years, why have I not changed?"

Can we change? I posed this question at our most recent Sunday meditation. Can the human race change psychologically? Not change that occurs in one person, such as Krishnamurti or the Buddha, or Paul, who changed in an instant on the road to Damascus. Perhaps these are isolated instances, "wild card" aberrations, religious transformations. But the human race? Can it change? Krishnamurti pondered the question frequently. Over the course of many thousands of years, have we actually changed? Are we less violent than our ancestors? Are we more loving and kind than our ancestors? We have all heard the litany that begins with the Holocaust. In fact, who needs to hear another word about violence or cruelty after one mentions the word Holocaust? Can one imagine a more unspeakable crime? Millions of Jews exterminated like animals, as well as homosexuals and gypsies. And yet in this very world today, in this very moment there are millions of Muslims who may well believe that the Jews deserved to be destroyed. The President of Iran recently announced that there is no place for Israel in the Palestinian homeland. Exactly what are those implications? Millions of innocents were exterminated in the killing fields of Cambodia. I have read the figure of twenty million who died in the Soviet Gulag. Someone confessed to me in 2001 his secret admiration for the cleverness of the plan to fly airplanes into the World Trade Center. I was speechless.

We can add Native Americans to the list. We can add an untold number of black slaves who were murdered in the South. It is an endless litany. Armenians? Kurds? Palestinians? Who wants to hear this tale of human violence or ponder its meaning? Of course we do not. Better not to think about that stuff! The question is, have we grown psychologically, even one tiny inch, in the past three thousand years? The answer is so obvious it makes one wonder why we are so stupid. Perhaps the question is even more

disturbing: Have we regressed, as a people, since the time of the Buddha, Socrates or Lao Tzu?

We have these amazing juxtapositions: Theravada Buddhism flourishing in Burma, coexisting for hundreds of years with the most repressive regimes on earth. The Dalai Lama was king of a completely feudal, repressive, superstitious Tibet. Buddhism has flourished for two thousand and five hundred years on this earth. Thousands of humans have supposedly experienced enlightenment. In the Golden Age of Ch'an in China, Buddhists reached the most extraordinary levels of awakening. Did it change the Chinese consciousness? Preachers preach to the flock every Sunday in every community in America. God is love. Jesus died for your sins. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. And has humanity changed? Mullahs preach, dharma teachers give dharma talks, Rabbis teach, poets write, Mozart composes, and what difference has it made? What is going on with this human race?

The first key to what is going on was pointed out by Krishnamurti over eighty years ago. He said: "Truth is a pathless land." No religion, no Church, no Synagogue, no Mosque, no Temple, no Vipassana meditation, no Zen meditation, no Dalai Lama, no technique, no path, no guru from India, no enlightened teacher, (no Krishnamurti), no brilliant psychotherapist, no philosophy, no political belief in capitalism or socialism or communism, or liberalism or conservatism, or witchcraft, nothing outside our own mind can lead us to any real change. Nothing! I wonder how many of us can manage to get beyond his first statement? Truth is a pathless land. I think very few of us can.

And where to go from his first sentence? Perhaps his second sentence might be that freedom, above all, is freedom from thought. But let us back away from that impossible sentence to one we may be able to hold. He says that we confuse biological change with psychological change. Yes indeed. Of course we see physical change everywhere. A baby grows into a toddler, a child into a teenager, a teenager into a young adult. A tree grows; a flower blooms. Mountains sink as they age. New islands pop out of the ocean from deep volcanic eruptions; other islands sink and disappear. We have made a fundamental error in observation. We assume a psychological analogy to physical or biological change. This is possibly the most disastrous distortion we humans have made in our entire history. If you look fifty years old, you must be fifty years old! Never mind that a twelve year old lives inside your head. A twelve year old that when pushed to his or her limits, is capable of the most extreme behavior.

After a few excerpts from the Sunday dharma talk were printed in our newsletter the next day, I received a response from a psychiatrist who only read the excerpts, not having been at the sit. He had the impression that I had said (and teach) that psychological change is not possible. I was surprised at his reaction, a very kind reaction by the way. Here is my response:

Thank you for this. I have really given you the wrong impression about change. Let me state this in the clearest terms possible: I believe with all my heart that psychological growth is possible. By the way, I said

yesterday that we confuse "change" with "improvement of function." This is precisely what you mean by symptom reduction. And isn't symptom reduction actually Western psychology's goal? In order to talk about true change, we have to look at what that word means.

In truth I believe that the potential for psychological change is what makes us human. The vast potential of the human brain is beyond imagination. But we live in this delusion that we can change by merely wanting it. Or by some intellectual process that seeks to change through thinking. This was the point of my talk yesterday. Biological change is no template for psychological change. The physical body changes from day one to the day it dies. We make this assumption that we grow psychologically in the same way - but of course that is not so - as you see with your patients.

Psychologically, we fixate at some point in the developmental process, and most humans remain stuck at that level the rest of their lives. Obviously a client with a personality disorder is fixated at a very early stage. But what of our "normal" development stages? Most of the clients I have sat with "feel" to me like teenagers. The surface appearance might be an adult, but if you strip that away, you soon discover someone with a base line psychological structure of high school. Changing that would involve exactly what you say about your own struggle to change:

“However it is very slow. Psychological change seems to happen in my life, but it requires dramatic effort. Mostly of the ascetic type. I have to strip away all diversions and concentrate on being alone and aware of myself. Even that is painstakingly slow.”

I wonder what the "base line" of human psychology actually is? Sixteen? We live in war and hatred and inhumanity, we are basically mindless, and one could argue that we have devolved psychologically since the days of the Buddha or Socrates as opposed to growing say from 16 to 17 or even 18.

This I do not know. But I definitely believe that the vast improvement in technology, medicine, etc. in no way posits an argument that we are less brutal than was man 1000 years ago. Indeed, who could have imagined Nazi Germany or the Soviet Gulag?

My only point yesterday was to emphasize that change - true change - comes from enormous intention - and a willingness to stay in the reality of who and what we are rather than constantly escaping from it through every distraction possible from drugs to sex to philosophy (or even psychology and religion). Change implies a serious intention that was lost to most of us by the time we were in college.

Subsequently, I received this response:

“I am baffled by man's behavior. Anyone with power seems to want to use it for violence. Anyone with a resource seems to want to hoard it for themselves. I think the baseline psychological age of humanity on average for the whole 6 billion is around 8. If you use Erickson's stages, I would pick "Competence: Industry vs. Inferiority (Childhood, 6 to 12 years)" for most of the world, and for America I would pick "Fidelity: Identity vs. Role Confusion (Adolescence, 12 to 18 years)."

I did not ask him why he was baffled by man's behavior. Perhaps I should.

It may be true that nature has created a psychological analogy to biological change. Perhaps there is a natural urge to grow psychologically just as we grow physically. Jung certainly believed this. But our dreadful and stupid mistake is to assume that it occurs naturally, as does physical change. We cannot stop our body from decaying, at best we can only prolong the process by healthy living. But psychologically, we fixate or freeze at every psychological trauma. And unless there is some extraordinary event to unfreeze us, we are stuck at that place for the remainder of our lives. So much for natural evolving. In fact, psychological change is revolutionary, not evolutionary.

I received another email from someone in our sangha. She wrote:

“It seems as if everyone in America has been or is in therapy. Why would you go if you didn't want to grow? If you reflect on your life and connect the dots – how can you not change?”

How can we not change? Oh my. I reminded her of a truth that has been stated by enlightened beings stretching from Krishnamurti back to the Buddha, and, by the way, certainly including Christ: True change is a dying to the old. We must be born again to enter the kingdom of God. In other words, it hurts.

At the Sunday sit, I read W.H. Auden's poem again. I think I read it to our sangha every six months! For me, his few words capture our dilemma with such precision, it is uncanny:

We would rather be ruined than changed.
We would rather die in our dread
Than climb the cross of the moment
And let our illusions die.

So we humans have invented a second option to climbing the cross of the moment. We climb the cross of “improvement.” (It definitely hurts less.) It is the theme song of Western psychology: Improvement in relationship, improvement in our ability to work well, improvement in our sex life, improvement in our meditation practice, improvement

in our negative self-talk, improvement in yoga, improvement in getting that stomach tight and sexy. As my friend wrote in his email, we go for symptom reduction, not change.

This then is the bottom line. Do we sit in Vipassana meditation to improve or to change? And if improvement is our goal, is that bad? Should I be ashamed if I do not aspire to change? It is not an easy question to answer. And beyond that question is a far more compelling question, one that has profound implications, as posited by Krishnamurti: Can humanity really change? Can it grow from its psychological base line of an eight year old to something even a little older, a little less reactive?

Krishnamurti suggested that change can only occur when we have the energy and courage to stay with the problem. Over and over, his listeners would ask, “How?” “How do I get from here to there?” “How can I change?” “What must I do?” One wonders how he felt as he heard the same questions over and over for sixty years. Sometimes he was not so patient! His response never varied. “Don’t ask “how.” That is nothing but thought moving away from the problem. “How can I change?” is not staying with the problem, it is avoiding the problem. The problem is “me.” It is nothing other than the relentless thought machine churning out “me.” This is the problem we relentlessly avoid. We don’t say, as I once said in complete and utter dismay, “Good Lord! I am a little boy inside. What can I do?” We say, “I have a problem, how can I change it.” Notice that “it” is the problem that “I” want to change. Does anyone reading this paper believe that Barack Obama believes he is the problem? Does anyone reading this paper believe that Sarah Palin believes that she is the problem? If you happen to be reading this a few decades from now, just substitute the names. The problem is always Big Business: They are corrupt and greedy and only interested in maintaining their power and domination. Big Unions: They are corrupt and greedy and only interested in maintaining their power and domination. Rich people who are greedy, etc. Poor people, who are greedy for what rich people have. People who don’t believe in global warming. People who believe in global warming. Whites (particularly those red necks in the ignorant South). Blacks (so lazy and stupid). Racists, Jews, Palestinians, Russians, Chinese, Europe, Chavez in Venezuela, the Tea Party, Born Again Christians, The New York Times. Good God! The problem is never me. Even if I go to a therapist, I am not the problem. I have a problem. I have low self esteem, or negative thoughts, or I have anxiety. I never am anxiety. I have anxiety.

Krishnamurti taught this above all: “Me” is the creation of thought. Thought is the inevitable movement of the past moving through the present and becoming the future, the relentless movement of psychological time. It is an entirely mechanical process. This is the core of our dilemma. Change can never come from mechanical action. His teaching is remarkably similar to the Buddha’s profound insight into the mechanical action of the Twelve Nidanas. In short, “me” is a mechanical process. The conclusion of Krishnamurti’s teaching is stark and simple (perhaps Truth is always simple?): Change can only occur when there is freedom from thought.

Can we change? Surely, we have all read the stories of remarkable people who changed. I began this paper, somewhat reluctantly, by sharing my own personal story. Not that I

was remarkable. I spent most of my life desperately trying to be “normal,” until at some point it I saw that there was no glory in being normal. Look what mess normal people have made of it! Nor I did share my personal history with the idea of suggesting that we can change as a people. But is it possible that the experience of change in certain individuals points us toward that potential as a people? This is how I understand the significance of Krishnamurti’s teaching, which he pointed out with such intensity: You are the world. You are humanity. Surely it must follow that if you can change, and you are the world, all humans can change.

But it is hard to believe that we can change as a people. Where is the evidence? After the dharma talk on Sunday, I looked at one of our most experienced meditators, and saw that his face was covered in shades of curiosity, perplexity and perhaps a hint of pessimism. I asked him, “Was my talk was too pessimistic?” He said, “Well, it really is hard to accept the idea that we have not changed at all.” And with some humor at the corners of his mouth he asked, “What about the Age of Aquarius?” I smiled and responded, “What about it?”

I have often wondered how I can manage to maintain such opposite attitudes: a complete optimism about our human potential and a doubt that we are going to survive as a species. And, as I have been writing this, the dream about the space ship keeps hovering in my mind. Jung taught that all the characters in your dream are aspects of your psyche. That aspect of the dream is obvious. There was the guy who would rather eat a hot dog than rush over the hill to help people in distress. (I know him very well!) His only concern was that people would judge him harshly if he stayed behind. There was the guy who spontaneously knew how to dodge those falling objects, and help others do so. There was the guy who stood before that beautiful, grievously wounded, shining creature, admitting to himself that he had not learned the skills of true healing. And there was that creature waiting patiently, even kindly, to be saved.

Krishnamurti would say to his listeners, if you see something dangerous like a snake, you don’t need to think about it, you jump out of its way. Many times he would ponder the question of why we never jump away from the danger that resides squarely between our ears. The Ch’an teachers said it over and over, your conditioned mind is not your friend, it is a thief. Why do we not see the inherent danger in our incessant, mechanical thinking?

Finally, it occurs to me that the dream about the space ship clearly depicts the danger of living robotically, and points out the way to change. If the people in the dream had run from the falling objects, they would have been destroyed. Don’t we live our lives mostly in distraction, running away? If, instead, the people stood there paralyzed in fear, they would have been destroyed. If they sought shelter in a flimsy structure (a nest), they would have been destroyed. There was only one solution to the problem, and, it is precisely what Krishnamurti taught for over sixty years: The people in the dream had to stand there completely vulnerable. They had to stand perfectly still, but very alive, with alertness and attention to the falling objects. At the last moment, when they jumped to safety, they did not *think* about jumping. “Should I or shouldn’t I?” They would never

have made it to safety had they thought about it. They saw and they acted. And perhaps most importantly, they did not stop and rest on their laurels when they had avoided disaster. The objects kept falling! What was the point of the people saving themselves? Was it for the sake of mere survival? We have done that for thousands of years.

Jung also believed that a dream can represent something far greater than the sum of our parts, it can point to the mystery of change yet to be born. As I write in this moment, I continue to remember K's teaching that we are the world, and it occurs to me that the creature waiting to be saved represents us all. For me, the meaning of the dream rests in its ending, and it rings with the purity of a temple bell: In the midst of that all that wreckage and destruction, lay a new being waiting patiently to be saved, waiting to incarnate on this earth.