

WORKING WITH THE EGO - A VIEW FROM THE EAST

Recently, our sangha had an interesting discussion about the meaning of U Panditta's complaint that we Westerners, when we are doing Vipassana meditation, do not go deep into mindfulness. Instead we do therapy. In other words, we "psychologize." I should mention that it has been over fourteen years since I heard him say this, and it is entirely possible that he changed or modified his view of Western meditators over the years.

What slowly dawned on me during our discussion was that a number of us were not very clear about U Panditta's meaning. What did he mean when he said that we in the West do not go "deep into mindfulness," doing therapy instead? And might one not ask, just what is wrong with going into deep introspection, making psychological connections and insights while doing meditation?

That was my reaction on hearing his comment fourteen years ago, and "reaction" is probably the correct word. In retrospect (and with perhaps a little maturity) I can see that there is no reason to assume that he was criticizing us for our tendency to "do therapy" while meditating. He was stating a fact and perhaps suggesting that doing therapy is not the same as "doing mindfulness."

As a therapist working with clients, I actively encourage their learning how to "psychologize" and "hold" symbolically the psychic reality of an inner child, or the shadow side to our conscious ego. My shadow side will be ignored at enormous cost to my psychological health, and the shadow that I do not embrace will one day embrace me.

For example, when I am at work and have the feeling that I am being picked on or ignored, I psychologize that situation by bringing to mind the possibility that I may be transferring my family role as a child onto the work situation. I may be confusing my boss with my mother, wanting the nurturing that I missed growing up or needing to be seen and heard in ways that I was not as a child. Or I may be confusing my boss with my dad, and feel that he is trying to dominate me or put me down. It is a psychological fact that we are bound to recreate in the work-place the unresolved conflicts of our childhood.

So when I psychologize a situation, I step back from totally "buying" my feeling reaction as being THE reality, and I look for the tracks of the unconscious, acting out its old scripts. When I psychologize, I accept the reality of an unconscious part of me, and acknowledge that it is active in all my encounters. I am less comfortable with my "convictions"--the certitude that I am right--and I am open to the probability that when something gets under my skin, I am probably lost in a projection. I think that it is impossible to psychologize without a little humility!

We all know that psychotherapy is not meditation, but there is a danger in drawing too neat a line between the two. Why is it not appropriate at times for meditation to be useful in the therapists office--helping a client to step back from being totally lost in his content? And why would it not be appropriate at another time for the meditator to allow herself to go into the content of powerful emotions? Perhaps there are times when it takes far greater courage to stay with the content of our emotions than to sit on some safe limb of objectivity as a means of avoiding pain. But these thoughts need to be considered more fully later. For the present, let us return to U Panditta's meaning when he talks about going deep into mindfulness.

It is said that English is the perfect language for scientific thought. It is clear and precise. But in the "science" of religion the tables are turned and there is a kind of poverty in our language. In the world of spirit, the language par excellence is Sanskrit, the language of ancient India. Our use of the word "meditation" is a case in point. Essentially, when we Americans sit and close our eyes, we are meditating, plain and simple. And why not? It's the only word we have to describe what we are doing. We either pray or we are meditating. As Edgar Cayce once said--in prayer we talk to God, and in meditation we listen to God. There you have it.

But in the Sanskrit language, meditation describes a specific level of mental activity. At the beginning stages of practice, most of us are struggling to draw the attention inward, leaving the outside world. The word for this stage is pratyahara--restraining or controlling the sense doors (eyes, ears, sensation, thoughts). In other words, we try not to "fall out" of our eyes or ears.

Whether we are practicing Zen, Vipassana or a Tibetan form of visualization, most of us begin with pratyahara, the first stage of real inner work, thus gaining a handle on our incredibly out-of-control, careening train-brain. So what is wrong with calling it what it is? Pratyahara? We Westerners seem to think that our mind will be permanently damaged if we incorporate these alien (heathen) words into actual daily use. We would rather call it meditation and be done with it.

I have long been fascinated by my own and our sangha's deep resistance to incorporating "foreign" words into our vocabulary. We can go over the four foundations of mindfulness once or one hundred times, but the eyes still glaze over when we hear the word "sati," the Pali word for mindfulness. Our resistance is nothing short of astonishing and so pervasive one can only conclude that it is probably a racial and utterly conservative aspect of our brain function. We preserve our history not only by remembering our "story," but also by resisting at a deep level any opening to words and ideas that seem "alien."

Even the name of the great Indian master, Nisargadatta, can put one off, not to mention his relentless message that 'YOU are the absolute.' And he would surely look strange if we put him on Oprah. Dr. Phil seems so much more normal. Most of us can't move past a natural aversion to his strangeness to come close enough to appreciate the

clarity and brilliance of his enlightened teaching. So, not only is our language impoverished spiritually, but our conditioned brain reacts with suspicion to anything outside the comfort zone of its precise, scientific language.

After one has developed the ability to draw the attention inward, shutting off the more obvious obsessive tendencies of the mind (no small feat!), one begins to develop a more intense concentration on the object, like a steady flashlight beam directed toward the object of concentration. There may be some moments when attention slips into fantasy, planning or "zoning out" (the beam momentarily is directed elsewhere), but more or less the concentration remains a steady flow, and invariably the mind becomes calmer, more still, and perhaps somewhat blissful. Guess what? Even at this stage one is not "meditating" in the classical sense of Indian meditation. Rather, one is doing "dharana" or concentration, but nevertheless, drawing closer to the threshold of meditation.

It is at the next stage of the inner development that meditation begins and the word for it in Sanskrit is "dhyana." Actually, dhyana "morphed" into the word "ch'an" when Buddhism spread into China, and then "ch'an" morphed into the word "zen" when it spread to Japan. Dhyana describes a specific mental activity or development. Dhyana (meditation) occurs when one's concentration has become continuous; in other words, there is an unbroken stream or flow of attention directed toward the object of concentration. The mind has become absorbed in the object.

Nothing reminds me more of dhyana than the sight of a dog waiting outside a shop for its master. Its attention can not be diverted, neither a distracting sound nor a friendly passerby can pull its attention away from the doorway where its master or mistress disappeared. It will wait and it will wait some more, nervously pacing until that magic moment when all is again right with the world--its beloved master has returned. Let's call it 'dog dhyana.' It is magnificent to behold--an unbroken stream of concentrated moments on one object.

In human dhyana, the concentration has become so fully developed that the mind no longer slips into thinking or fantasy. Obviously, the energetic level or intensity is quite high, or to put it differently, the nervous system is operating at a much higher vibratory level. It takes tremendous energy to maintain a steady beam of concentration. It is also the case, by the way, that the nervous system has to have the capacity to receive that high input of current, which is a good argument for gradual development. Rare are the beings who have a nervous system strong enough to sustain the input of enlightenment experiences. Even dhyana is only the "threshold" level of meditation however. Beyond dhyana lie the deeper levels of consciousness (called samadhi) where insight and even transformation await those who enter and cross over.

In Buddhism these stages of inner development are somewhat altered from the classical Indian stages listed above. (It will not destroy our brain cells to know the difference). Although the word "dhyana" is used throughout Buddhist texts, the eighth step of the

eightfold path seems to call meditation "samadhi." And it gets even more confusing because in the Pali text, samadhi-the eightfold step-seems to be defined more or less as concentration (our classical word for concentration being "dharana"). But I think it is safe to think of "dhyana" as the word for meditation in Buddhism as well as the other Indian systems. And samadhi (the four Jhanas in Buddhism) remains the best term for those transcendental states that open beyond dhyana.

Vipassana dhyana (meditation) is a later (Buddhist) development, and it adds a further element to dhyana. According to U Panditta and other great Vipassana teachers, the threshold or doorway to dhyana (meditation) is not only a steady stream of continual concentration directed toward the object, but also a highly developed stream of sati (mindfulness) acting in tandem with this flow of concentration. It is this elevation of the faculty of sati (mindfulness) into an equal partner with concentration that makes Vipassana unique and which sheds light on U Panditta's remarks about all of us "psychologizing" Western meditators.

I am inclined to say that Vipassana is a kind of synthesis of two separate lines of inner work. When the Buddha speaks of the four foundations of mindfulness, there is no indication that he is implying that we should be "meditating" (in the sense of dhyana) while bringing sati to the body, feelings, mind states, or the Dharma. Indeed, he clearly indicates that in the fourth foundation of mindfulness, one is contemplating the great insight of suffering, or the five hindrances or other aspects of the Dharma. One can not contemplate when the mind is in noble silence (dhyana). So Vipassana is an interplay of sati, contemplation and dhyana.

When I say that I am "meditating," am I saying that I meditate in the sense of pratyahara, dharana or dhayna? Or, am I trying to meditate in the sense of Vipassana, which requires sati as an equal partner to dhyana--and here is the killer--or am I unconsciously adding my Western pattern of psychologization into the mix? Indeed, how on earth does a psychological creature who has developed along these lines for well over 2500 years do a practice that is essentially "non psychological," or dare one even say, anti-psychological (whatever that means)?

It would be too much of a digression to head down that road in this discussion, but surely this is the crux of the reason that Buddhist meditation is changing as it adapts to the Western milieu. We are neither Chinese nor Indians. So, when we try to shed our psychologizing as we meditate, are we trying to imitate the Eastern mind, deleting something that is part of our fundamental psychic equipment, our very nature? Is there such a thing as a "Western psyche," a way of processing that is fundamentally different from the Eastern psyche?

This question becomes extremely vital when one considers the possibility that U Panditta may have been approaching the Western mind (fourteen years ago) from a misunderstanding of very real difference. Is it possible that U Panditta could not "go deep" into therapy if his life depended on it? Not because of some superior state of mental development (which undoubtedly he did possess), but because the Eastern mind

simply does not psychologize – at least not in the Western sense? Is it unfair to point out that while the Burmese may be able to go "deep into mindfulness," they do not seem to have a clue as to how to organize a decent government, one that is fair to its citizens? There is a famous story of how the Dalai Lama expressed astonishment as he learned how pervasive are our feelings of low self esteem in the West. I was astounded at his astonishment. His reaction seemed both touching and sad. Were we to believe that there was no low self esteem among the hundreds of thousands of women living in poverty and subjection in the Tibet of his youth? With respect, I would suggest that his remarks were those of an Eastern mind.

Recently, I heard someone speaking about a famous American spiritual leader who used to sit in his chair each morning and "meditate on divine ideas." A few years ago that would have set my teeth on edge because I was convinced that meditation was only meditation if it was strictly dhyana. "He was not meditating, he was contemplating," would be my high-toned thought. Perhaps I still tend to think that way, but in the context of this discussion, one might say that the speaker was merely using the word "meditating" in a sort of Eastern-Western mix.

In the same vein, this morning I heard a stock broker on a business channel say that we need to be mindful of the recent downturn in the economy. Mindful? Was he referring to "sati," the seventh step of the eightfold path? As the words mindfulness and Vipassana insight have come more in vogue in the past decade, one hears the expression "I was mindful of it" quite frequently. Again, we may be using the word "mindfulness" from a Western definition rather than the "mindfulness" of Vipassana meditation. To us, "mindfulness" seems to indicate a level of being careful about or attending to something, but this does not really capture the Eastern meaning of mindfulness (sati).

Even as students of Vipassana, we tend to think of being mindful as sending attention to the object of our awareness, but what the Buddha was suggesting was that mindfulness is directed toward the "who" not the "what." Mindfulness is more or less the self-remembering of Gurdjieff, Nisargadatta and Ramana Mararshi. It is a constant flow of attention directed toward the subject of the activity, as concentration maintains a constant flow of attention toward the object.

Our confusion with the meaning of mindfulness (and our tendency to "dumb it down") would be eliminated were we able to use the correct word, "sati," when referring to the seventh step of the eightfold path, reserving the English word "mindfulness" for English usage. But heaven forbid that we incorporate an alien word into our vocabulary. We might get contaminated!

What I am going to suggest as a fault line that divides "psychologizing" from "meditating" may sound rather radical, but it is more or less true. There is no doubt that the fundamental agreement from Vedanta to Vipassana is that the root of human suffering is the ego's identification with the body, thoughts and feelings, and its deluded sense that it is a separate entity living inside a body. The traditional Eastern view would

be that the ego, living as it does in a terminally leaking canoe, runs from its own "reality," ironically writing, then fleeing from its own script, aggressively trying to acquire everything within its grasp as a distraction and way to self-soothe and ward off fears of annihilation.

The "seers," or rishis as they were called in ancient days, are said to have seen this truth. They did not "figure it out" as Freud and Jung might have done through courageous introspection and psychologization. Nor did their sight come to them as revelation from above, as with God's visitation to Moses. The rishis "saw" the truth through the eyes of profound mind states developed through meditation. What they saw is described differently from one discipline to another, but there is a common thread that runs throughout all the descriptions. If we take them at their word, we must assume that they were able to see outside, or beyond the lens of the ego. In other words, the brain has a supra-intelligent mode of seeing, a mode that has been tapped by some humans throughout human history.

So here is the bad news. No matter how you shape it or shake it, Vipassana meditation has something to do with going beyond the ego, which is more or less what anatta (no self) is. It really is the bad news to those of us who cling to our egos. (That would be you and me). In Vipassana, we are working to develop mindfulness, but the development of mindfulness requires, by definition, a "loosening" of the ego knot. To see from the higher vantage point of mindfulness that our ego is not (nor ever was) really in charge, is to be changed by that sight. It is the core meaning of the verse in St. John, "You shall see the truth and the truth shall set you free." The ego loses its sense of being "boss," and at least it can relax a little.

So when U Panditta says that we Westerners do not go deep into mindfulness, he is saying that we are unwilling to let go of seeing something through the lens of the ego (thinking, conceptualizing, understanding, analyzing, processing, and yes, feeling). If you listen to each of us sharing what we were thinking about during a sit, you hear the same thing from all of us: "I was thinking about my career; I was upset because I . . ." There is always that self-reference in each and every sentence: "I thought this. I felt that. I was sleepy. I was bored. I was interested in..." The common thread is the word "I," a constant flow of "I, I, I."

It is no sin to admit to having an ego. But if we admit that meditation in all Eastern traditions is about loosening the ego's tight grip on the steering wheel, don't we need to keep this fact on the front burner as we sit together and as we talk together? And if we are not interested in meditation from this strict Eastern perspective, don't we need to acknowledge that fact, if not openly, at least to ourselves? It is perfectly valid to think of meditating as a means of improving your psychological functioning.

From the Eastern perspective, when I say that "I was mindful," I have made a nonsensical statement, at least as I understand the ancient meaning of sati. How can "I" declare that "I" was being mindful? It is absurd on its face. There is no way "I" can be mindful because in order to be mindful, this little "I" called Victor has to momentarily

surrender control of the steering wheel, or to continue the analogy, at least let go of his death grip on the wheel. Mindfulness requires a sacrifice of the little "me." Rather than saying "I was being mindful," if the student says to the meditation teacher, "there was mindfulness present," at least there is a hint of the ego having temporarily surrendered control, acknowledging the mysterious presence of some other far-greater force.

But the ego is so incredibly subtle! I am certainly clever enough to get the right tone of humility in my voice, and with eyes downcast say to my teacher, "there was mindfulness present." Indeed, the only time the ego needs to worry about being "seen," in the sense of exposed, is when it is in the presence of a teacher who goes "deep into mindfulness"!

The ego (my name is Victor) is aware. It can watch its own activity and can quiet itself and self-soothe, and it can learn. My God, but it can learn. It can acquire extraordinary amounts of knowledge, it can journal. It can love and it can hate. It can think very deep thoughts. It dreams (and day dreams) and it tries to give us what it thinks we want from the world.

But here is the kicker. The ego can not go "deep into mindfulness." So who says "I went deep into mindfulness"? Ramakrishna had a favorite story that he loved to tell over and over. It was about a little salt doll that takes a swim in the ocean. The salt doll dives into the water, but who comes back, he would ask? It had dissolved completely. Our ego is that salt doll, and when it steps into the ocean of deep mindfulness it dissolves. Unlike the salt doll, however, our little ego has an uncanny ability to reconstitute itself. So as it steps out of that vast ocean and opens its eyes, it says, "I was mindful!"

The ego is the part that remembers itself over and over. It remembers its special story--the story that makes it unlike anyone else. "I was born in Tennessee. I have a brother and I have a sister." Already I have defined myself into a more narrow definition. Not that many people were born in Tennessee who have one brother and one sister. But I am also a musician. It's narrowed down some more and I am getting more and more "special" as I go along. I remember yesterday and last year and a decade ago. No matter how sad or boring my the story may be, I get a sense of relief, even comfort from knowing "that was me." I was here yesterday and so this "I" must be the same person here today. There is comfort in that sense of continuity.

Ladies and Gentleman of Vipassana, here is a sober fact to ponder: THE EGO CAN NOTE. It can sit and count the breath from one to ten without getting lost. It can develop powers of concentration. I am hearing a noise and I am feeling irritated. I note it as irritation. I am feeling sleepy and note the sensations of sleepiness--heavy lids, drooping head. I note it as sleepiness. Hey! I even realize that it is one of the five hindrances--sloth and torpor! Now I'm cooking. This means that I am contemplating the fourth foundation of mindfulness.

Friends, this does not indicate that mindfulness was present, only that intelligence was present (which is surely a good thing) and that the intellect is honing its skills. To repeat, the ego is perfectly capable of hearing Vipassana or zen instruction, learning how to note or solve a koan and getting really good at it. And that is a good thing.

Carl Jung made this observation about Western meditators, trying to learn Eastern techniques, and it is an insight that I never let myself forget. He said that we in the West relentlessly turn any and all discipline or technique that we acquire into ever greater ego control. In other words, we use everything we learn as a means of enlarging our ego "territory" and gaining even greater control over our environment, inside as well as outside. Jung was profoundly suspicious of our "aping" Eastern practices, and was roundly criticized for this conservatism by more than one prominent Western meditator.

So, is it possible that we use Vipassana not as a means of "loosening" the ego's grasp on the mind, but as a way of solidifying its sense of control? In the sense of a very fragile ego, that might not be bad at all. But Jung's fear was that we would take Eastern practices and "swallow" them up, ironically creating an even greater divide between our conscious and the unconscious it so fears. This divide, to Jung, is our great Western wound. He once said that we, in the West, will not rest until we have turned the East into a copy of our own greed. I have pondered his warning for many years.

Post Script

In a subsequent discussion, our "dhyana-sati group" (!) seemed to come to some clarity with U Panditta's meaning. "R" spoke of a life changing experience at a Vipassana retreat when she experienced "waves of grief" that lasted for a number of days during the retreat. She made connections to her relationship with her father and felt that the insights had caused a significant and positive shift in her relationships with men in general. In our group discussion, she acknowledged that she had assumed that her experience was still in the realm of "doing" Vipassana meditation, but my suggestion to her was that she was in fact doing therapy according to U Panditta's meaning. Had she stayed with the process of Vipassana, like the salt doll diving into the ocean of mindfulness, she would, by definition, have had to "deconstruct" the personal story, investigating pain and grief as impersonal phenomena rising and falling.

Her recounting her experience helped us to see the difference in doing therapy while meditating, as opposed to going deep into mindfulness. It was quite valuable. Perhaps if she had "recycled" her feelings into investigation as opposed to psychologizing, she would have had an insight into impermanence or anatta, but who is to say that her psychological insights were not precisely what she needed at that moment?

A second insight that came from our group discussion was the awareness that most of us thought of the word "psychologize" in a pejorative sense. This was a complete surprise to me. The consensus of our sangha seemed to be that psychologizing is synonymous with intellectualizing, or being in the head rather than in the experience.

But as presented here, I suggested that our capacity to psychologize is a kind of flowering of our Western psyche. I would hope that we do not forget that, like those in the East, we are part of an evolving process, and that our unique Western experiment of consciousness experiencing itself, is no less valuable, nor vital.

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