

PRACTICING WITHOUT GOALS:

Some Parallels Between Zen Practice And Psychotherapy

by Robert W. Genthner, Ph.D.

Psychotherapy and Zen practice have many parallels. In fact, more and more Western psychotherapists have been drawing on Eastern philosophy and technique to support, explain and supplement their practice of psychotherapy. For the past fifteen years I have been a practicing psychotherapist as well as a Zen student. I have noticed some convergences between the two, and some divergences. In the following article I will discuss some of these issues, which include goal orientation, intimacy, and why we practice. When using the term "psychotherapy," I primarily mean existentially oriented therapies.

For the most part, the reason that people begin to practice Zen and the reason they come for psychotherapy is the same. People come because their lives are not working, and they have faith that, by practicing Zen or by entering psychotherapy, things will change and that they will get some relief from their suffering. In my experience as a psychotherapist, I have observed that people come to psychotherapy with a major life question. They come uncomfortable and are plagued by their problems, looking for some relief. They have doubts about themselves and their lives. People want some way out of this suffering. In psychotherapy and Zen practice, the way is the same: through, not out.

The best psychotherapy perhaps is no therapy, but involves allowing the process of a rehabilitative relationship to unfold. The therapist develops a kind of witnessing, a being present for the other. Letting go of opinions, interpretations, and conclusions about the client, the therapist creates a circumstance that allows the other to attend to his or her own process.

I worked with a woman who had lost all of her hair after giving birth to a still-born baby. She came to me distraught and concerned about her baldness. Her goal for the psychotherapy was to get her hair back. I was simply interested in what was going on. It took several sessions before she was willing to give me her wig and reveal her bald head. When she finally exposed herself, there was a sense of relief for both of us. Not so much was hidden any more. She was quite beautiful bald and, with my Buddhist karma, I was a good therapist for her because I enjoyed her nun-like appearance.

After this session she was able to leave her wig off at home, something she was unable to do prior to the session. She was able to share her true condition with her husband. Until this time, her husband had not seen her bald. The results were better and more intimate communication with her husband and generally a better marriage. She did grow hair back, but this seemed secondary to the changes in her relationship that this crisis created. Thus, by my not aligning myself with her specific goal, the therapy process remained open and she was able to find a needed direction that differed from her initial reason for undergoing psychotherapy.

Milton Erickson, a famous hypnotherapist, once likened psychotherapy to waking up in the morning and discovering a strange horse in your front yard. There are no markings on the horse that help you identify it and you have no idea where the horse has come from. So the big question that arises for you is "What do I do with this horse?" Erickson offers that the best solution to this horse Kong An is to climb up on the back of the horse and ride it, and the horse will find its own way home. When it slows down by the side of the road and begins to eat grass, you do a little nudging, a little kicking, with no particular goal in mind—you just want to get it moving again.

And when the horse begins to get wild and run through fields and lose its direction, perhaps you pull in on the reins, slow it down, and let it gather itself, again without a goal and without a clear sense of the direction for the horse. You allow the horse its own direction, and your job as a psychotherapist is just to ride the horse until it finds its own home. The skill required is knowing when and how to kick and when to leave it alone.

In the same way, psychotherapy involves two people coming together with a strong intentionality, often without a prescribed goal. In fact, change in psychotherapy is often paradoxical. It does not occur from the direct efforts of influencing the unwanted behavior but rather occurs out of a questioning and a letting go. Often the harder we try to make a change, the more unwanted behavior or attitude persists. It is very much like what I have read about the art of Zen archery in which the archer's attitude should be not on the particular target but rather on his breath and how he is holding the bow. It is when we become goal directed

In psychotherapy there is a begging for joy, for anger, sorrow, sadness, frustration,

and dominated by some particular outcome that we lose aim and our mind interferes with the process.

As psychotherapists, if we have some goal, some want, some idea of what is best for the individual for whom we are working, this whole idea—opinion—gets in the way of the process. We lose the immediate experience of relationship, or intimacy of the moment, which is the essence of psychotherapy and the essence of an authentic life. Zen is also practiced without goals. The extent to which we let go of our goals and just sit, bow, and chant is the extent to which we express our true Zen mind.

One aspect of this no-goal psychotherapy can be compared to a kind of begging, like Zen monks in Asia. There is an emotional begging where the therapist is asking for the stuff that the client is holding. Anything held is asked for without preconception. In other cultures, begging is a spiritual practice, with cultural forms clear and agreed on. The beggar chants and solicits in a specific way under specific conditions with a specific intention—not out of greed, or control, or even necessity, but out of a hope for some spiritual exchange. The beggar has no goal, just the offering of an opportunity to give. The giver gives freely at times, perhaps niggardly at other times, but has come to recognize the value of the exchange for himself and, in the highest sense, for all other people.



whatever. The therapist solicits an expression, the giving of things held pent-up. There is a lot of half-giving at times, but there is also the gift of giving, the trying, the effort, the intention, and the depth is not always that important. Clearly, as in the begging of the Zen monks, the conditions and the cultural expectations are well spelled out. Once given, things are often lighter, more open, brighter. Perhaps they become how they truly were before they had become encumbered by the conditional mind.

To illustrate the begging aspect of psy-

"If you're so liberated, why are your legs crossed?"

Fritz Perls

chotherapy, I offer the following. I was working with a Catholic priest, who was very loose and free-wheeling. He was filled with anger and frustration and he had the appropriate circumstances in his life to support these feelings. As a priest, he could not express them, at least not openly. While we were working at a weekend retreat, he had his legs crossed, so that when I leaned forward his foot was right there in front of me, and he was barefoot. I reached out and held his foot in my hands and asked him to give me these angry feelings, to send them down his foot and right into me. In a sense I was begging for his feelings. I had no goal for him, no expectation of outcome. I was just offering the possibility of an exchange as an experiment.

He hesitated at first and then said, "What the hell." There was no explosion, no Reichian knashing of teeth, just a subtle exchange, and everything shifted. Then for a few moments there was some true meeting and everyone in the room felt it, was nourished by it. I am sure that I did not solve this man's life Kong An in this simple exchange. But that was not my intent. At that moment there was a sanity, a peace, a letting go that was enough, not a cure, no analysis, no long-term guarantee, but something real, alive, and palpable in the moment.

A major problem that most people bring to the consulting room is a failure at intimacy. Most of us are unable to be fully with or abandon ourselves to what we are doing. Aitken Roshi offers that the Chinese calligraphy character for Kensho can also be

interpreted as intimacy. He explains that the opposite of intimacy is self-consciousness. Truly, most people who come to psychotherapy suffer the disease of self-consciousness. Soen Sa Nim calls this self-consciousness "checking mind." There is a fear of loss of self. Avoiding pain, seeking pleasure, the mind constantly divides its experience into **me** and **them**, and suffering and conflict arise. The psychotherapist's job is to use this dualistic view and turn it back onto the patient, not forcibly, not deliberately, but by not being trapped by the client's habituation. To the extent that psychotherapy helps an individual to live in the moment, it performs a similar task to that of Zen practice. To the extent that it leads away from the present into the mind of analysis and conjecture, it becomes the work of illusion. Thus the therapist expresses and the patient learns what Soen Sa Nim calls a "Just Do It" approach to life. And this "Just Do It" is "intimacy."

How often we hear as Zen students, "When you are driving, just drive; when you are eating, just eat; when you are thinking, just think." We are encouraged by our teachers to be intimate with what we are doing—to be fully present in the moment—and the rest of our life will take care of itself. In psychotherapy the client is also encouraged to be intimate, to live fully in the moment. As therapists, we want our people to let go of their habitual and chronic worrying, their fears about the future and regrets about the past. When they open fully to this moment, all concern and neuroses fall away. Thus, therapy can be an interpersonal training ground for being in a relationship that is immediate, alive and not encumbered by the mind. It is an opportunity to realize that interpersonal relationships do not have to be tainted by one's habitual ways of responding.

Most people relate to me in psychotherapy as if I were someone else, often someone in their past (father, mother, brother). It is this "as if" attitude that devalues our relationship. This living with distortions is not limited to psychotherapy patients. We all tend to distort our relationships, relating to older people as if they were our parents, competing with peers as if they were siblings or school friends, and parenting children more quickly than necessary. Through Zen practice we can quiet these distortions and learn to see clearly to what and to whom we are relating.

I think one of the most important things that a therapy relationship can give to an individual is the belief in one's true self—and that is the belief that any situation is workable. This is accomplished interpersonally when one individual can fully embrace the moment and say what is going on clearly and without distortion. With this momentary expression of what is going on, true

compassion and wisdom flow.

Most psychotherapy techniques are designed to heighten and increase intimacy—to sharpen the focus, to bear down on the issue at hand, to expose all sides of the process. While, with the right intentions many techniques do just this, there are also dangers. Sometimes the technique becomes an end in itself and ignores its original purpose. It becomes a power trip for the therapist, a tool for domination and control. I imagine this is the same for Kong An practice. Kong An is a way of relating, of exposing the "Fundamental Matter"; for teacher and student these can become a vehicle for intimacy, but misused they become one-upmanship: "I know something that you don't know."

An example of a therapy technique that heightens intimacy and yet also gets misused is the "empty chair" technique employed by the Gestaltists. This is a technique where the client puts a person he has a conflict with in an empty chair opposite him. The client develops a dialogue with the chair, moving back and forth playing himself and playing the other. As an emotion-heightening, intimacy-building technique, this can be very powerful. People experience strong emotion quickly and oftentimes tears and anguish flow. One hopes that bringing about heightened awareness of unacknowledged parts of the individual will result in some integration, that some disclosure and awareness will lead to a rebalancing of energy. A danger is that this technique places a tremendous focus on an individual and his process, and

this focus is often underlined by a great display of emotion.

Thus, an important point in psychotherapy and Zen training is, Why do we do it? Why practice or why become more aware of one's own process? One of the criticisms of the "encounter group movement" was that it became like a drug. People were getting off on their own emotions and going from group to group for a new hit, a new fix. In Zen training, people get off on their own personal Samadhi also. Practicing Zen for the experience itself, a kind of satori sickness develops.

In both therapy and Zen practice the "spiritual friend" can play a critical role in preserving the link between practice for self and practice for others. Our spiritual friend, therapist, teacher, can shake us and nudge us back on the path of compassion when we get too self-involved.

There is a famous story I have heard about Fritz Perls, the Bodhidharma-like founder of Gestalt therapy. Once in an ongoing group that Perls was running there was a large cross-section of people. Two particular people who had difficulty with each other were a partially liberated actress and a conservative businessman. One session, while waiting for Perls, the actress got up and stripped off her clothes in front of the businessman as to confront him with his own conservatism. He became more uptight and she, self-satisfied and naked, went back to her chair and sat down. Perls, who came into the room in time to catch the performance, glanced over at her and incisively quipped, "If you're so liberated, why do you have your legs crossed?" Perls was able to confront the narcissism and self-serving quality of this woman's quasi-liberation. Without him, her misuse of things apparently gained in psychotherapy would have gone unchecked, allowing this woman to believe in her ability to confront someone in such a self-serving way as a sign of health and clarity.

While the psychotherapist should serve as a link between self and other, this is often a point of divergence between practicing Zen and undergoing psychotherapy. People come to psychotherapy to become more aware, stronger, more self-confident, and thus they become better parents, lovers, wives, husbands, teachers, grocers. But often people come in some personal pain, want relief, get some, and head back out into the world again without making that next step, without making the step that translates their personal work into a gift for all people. Zen practice, in contrast, while not offering as immediate a relief, does encourage this translation of personal work into work for others. Without this step in psychotherapy, people end up suffering, trapped in their own personal cycle of pleasure and pain. In my experience personally and with clients in therapy, a daily practice is essential for keeping one's work alive. Without a daily practice, one's personal karma returns and begins to dominate one's life.

In conclusion, psychotherapy is best when it is just giving and just taking. When the therapist is giving, the client is taking, and when the client is giving, the therapist is taking. True therapy is supported by the context in which the psychotherapy is offered. Is the therapy offered out of emptiness or Universal Self? Or, is the therapy an analytic attempt to control and conclude, to wrap things up in a neat package? Does the therapist allow a free flowing open exchange without conclusion, a true existential or Dharma contact? Or does the therapist's own discomfort with ambiguity and doubt restrict him to trying to cure his client, fix him so he fits in with society? My own Zen practice has helped give me the courage to sit with this doubt, even nourish it, and clearly offer, not with embarrassment but with generosity, a sense of not knowing. Perhaps the greatest gift we can offer our clients is an example of trusting not knowing and thus a willingness to live our lives fully without meddling at every turn with our search for meaning. □

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