

Zen & Psychotherapy

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Yale University



Q: An issue rather than a question has come up lately in discussions about Zen meditation practice and psychotherapy which seems to be a different way of getting at the same things. Do I just sit with something and let it dissolve or is it better to sit and talk about it in a psychotherapy situation?

A: People have often asked me this question. Sometimes in the middle of a retreat, this question has come up. I wondered at first if they were asking just because I'm a psychotherapist. Were they just indulging their intellectual curiosity in the middle of a retreat? It felt counterproductive to me if that was the reason. But I began to realize later on that the question really, in some cases, was: What is the place of my emotional life in Zen practice? Or, is there any place for my emotional life in Zen practice? Of course, practice may have different kinds of leanings or attitudes connected to it. For instance, there is a fierce approach in Zen practice which is about stripping something away and having the courage to have the props knocked out from under you in order to face certain things. This is to fiercely face the rawness of things without any props. On the other hand, some people approach Zen practice from the viewpoint of acceptance, melting, letting go, warm embracing, and appreciation. That has a different flavor and attitude. The direction of the practice is the same in either case, but the nuance is stated differently.

If someone does not have enough confidence in their direction, and in what they need and how they should proceed, they are influenced by messages such as fierceness or openness or warmth. One teacher may say, "Take hold of the big question fiercely and hold it as if your life depended on it. There is nothing more important than this one big question, 'What am I?' or 'Who am I?' Grab hold of that and do not let go." That is the samurai-like attitude of fierceness. On the other hand, another teacher might say, "As soon as you raise the question, already that is enlightened mind." Just let yourself be. What am I? Don't know. That is it!

Zen practice can be therapeutic, but it is not the same as therapy. A lot of therapies deal with shifting around attitudes, whereas Zen practice primarily heads toward wiping everything clean and seeing what is. Sometimes, people need the help of a therapist to talk things out. If what they are holding is very subtle and specific to a "set-up," a specific limiting way of being in the world, then they might need someone fairly skilled in spotting "set-ups" and in helping someone to let go at a pace that is workable and reasonably comfortable. They might

also need help in facing why they even feel the need for that set-up! That is what psychotherapy is about. There are many kinds of psychotherapy just as there are many different strains of Zen practice.

Q: In the Kwan Um School of Zen, we emphasize that Zen is everyday mind, nothing special. But there seems to be a style of Zen that tries to encourage profound enlightenment. Could you comment on the difference?

A: What is profound enlightenment?

Q: I don't know but other schools seem to emphasize finding enlightenment. That I do not understand. Can you comment on it?

A: When you get out of bed and put your foot on the floor, that is the first moment of enlightenment. Then you go to the bathroom, and you look at yourself in the mirror. That is the second moment of enlightenment. (That is what you call a "rude awakening"!) Then there is the brushing your teeth moment of enlightenment. That is, be careful, and polish, polish, polish. At my age the samadhi of tooth brushing becomes very important! But that is no more important than the next step which becomes the samadhi of putting the tea kettle on. I heard that the poet Gary Snyder wanted to visit Japan during the Korean War, and the Japanese officials gave him a hard time. They wanted him to prove that he was an American poet, so he sat down and wrote a poem for the immigration officer:

*Making a cup of green tea
I stop the war.*

I believe that this poem served as his passport into Japan. So, the samadhi of putting the kettle on is also very important!

We emphasize the moment of profound enlightenment, but every experience is an opportunity for profound enlightenment. If every experience is profound enlightenment, then why use the word "profound" anymore? That is like adding a head on top of your head, or, as the old Chinese Zen Masters used to say, it's like painting feet on a snake. Even though you may think that a snake looks as though it might need feet, it does not! Likewise, the word "profound" originally is not necessary. It is extra.

The Lotus Sutra stresses the point of skillful lying. Throughout its three hundred or more pages, there are several parables in which the main character tells a lie, or tricks the people into doing something that they would not ordinarily do. There is a parable of the skillful physician whose sons took some of his powerful medicine when he was away. When he returned, they were all rolling on the floor poisoned, and he made a remedy. Some of them took the remedy quite readily and returned to normal. His other children refused to take it. "I don't like the smell of it. I don't like the color of it." They are in delusional toxicity! They

think that it is important that it smells bad or that they do not like the color! He told them, "Children, I am going to die soon. I am leaving. I have some last business to finish. I leave the remedy here with you." He went away and sent a messenger back who told the children, "Your father has died." He was not dead. So that was a lie and he was breaking one of the five precepts. Hearing this lie about their father's death, they were shocked and in anguish. They felt that they should take the medicine of their father. So, they took it, and then he returned. Likewise, the phrase "profound enlightenment" or "satori" or "kensho," or any of these phrases are big lies. But they are skillful lies. If people are stubborn as a mule, you have to beat them and then they practice! Or if others like candy, candy is offered. "Enlightenment" is only a teaching word. "Enlightenment," that's bull shit. "Profound enlightenment," that's elephant shit! "Deep, profound enlightenment," that's rhinoceros shit! But it helps some people, so it is medicine. The problem is that if you get too attached to the notion of it, or think that practice has to always be fierce and hard and difficult in order to get some moment of profound breakthrough, then that stands in your way like a big iron gate.

In the Zen tradition there are sayings like, "A golden chain still binds," or "Gold dust in the eyes, still blinds you." If you pick up dust off the floor and rub it in your eyes, it will blind you. The same with gold dust; but it's worth a lot of money! The Buddha in our Providence Zen Center is gold leafed. That means that it has gold dust all over it. Someone decided that the Buddha needed to be cleaned and they started to rub it. Some of the gold dust came off. They had to replace it and it was quite expensive. Expensive enlightenment! So gold dust is more valuable than floor dust, but get either of them in your eyes and you still cannot see. If you become too attached to some notion of enlightenment, then that also blinds you.

Sometimes hard training practice is the correct medicine. Sometimes easy does it, or just let it be is the correct medicine. Sometimes not talking about it at all is the correct medicine. Just making a cup of tea to stop the war is the correct medicine. Talk about profound enlightenment is a particular technique. So is telling someone that they have to sit down and dig into the kong-an and experience it. While you may gain something valuable from it, it is a mistake to think that that is the only true way of practice. That can become deeply problematic.

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TALKS BY ZEN MASTER WULIHWANG

