

## psychotherapy and zen

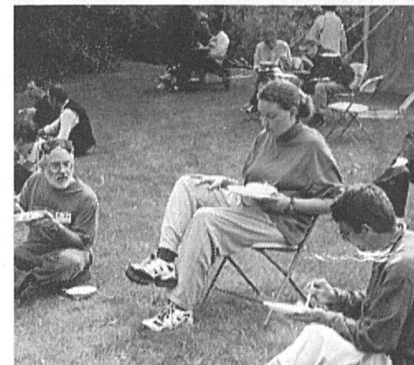
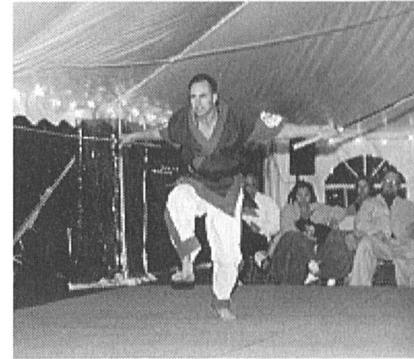
*Jeff Kitzes JDPSN, Empty Gate Zen Center  
excerpted from a workshop at the Whole World is a Single Flower Conference*

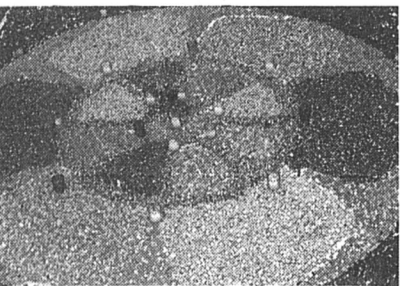
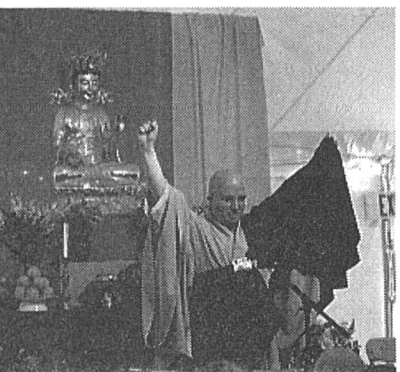
This is the workshop on Zen and psychotherapy. First of all, be aware that this is about Zen and psychotherapy, it's not about Zen and psychology. There is a difference. I'm not approaching this from a perspective of human psychology. I would like to look at the process of psychotherapy and its relationship to Zen. The question is how Zen impacts the process of looking at and working with your karma. Zen and psychotherapy are both about this process, so in a sense they are not very different. If you are a Zen student, everything you do is Zen. So, we can look at this question from two perspectives: how does a Zen practitioner who is a therapist use their Zen practice in their therapy? And, as a psychotherapy client, how do you use your practice to deepen your psychotherapy?

As a therapist, you have to stay present and in the moment. You need to be able to get out of the way to let the process happen. I think the most important perspective which relates Zen to psychotherapy is to view the person you're working with as the Buddha himself. That implies not sticking someone into some narrow classification, but looking to see who the person really is. You can use diagnosis as a tool, but always be careful not to box the client into some idea of who she or he is. When people ask me what my technique is I say, "what I do best is listen well." I try to listen deeply for who the person truly is.

Everyone who comes into therapy has some problem or some situation that they want to talk about. The first thing you do is to find out what that situation or problem is. The more you explore, the more you find out what got hurt and what needs to heal for a more natural expression of true nature. In a sense, psychotherapy is about untying the knot of karma and finding the more natural self, finding authenticity.

Zen teaches us that attachment to our thinking is the root of our suffering. Much of our lives we are stuck in and act out of rigid and repeating patterns of thoughts and feelings. So, to find simple ways to interrupt these patterns, even for a moment, can be very helpful. Most people aren't even aware of what their minds are doing. I usually start off a session with five minutes of meditation. Sometimes that seems to be the most important thing that happens during the whole hour, especially for someone who doesn't have a regular sitting practice. Just teaching clients a little meditation and giving them a feeling for what goes on in their minds can be an incredible eye-opener for them. I can't tell you how many people say to me, "I love this five minutes of meditation we do here."





As a client, you have to find a way to express yourself and to get to know yourself better. If you're a Zen student and you're a client in psychotherapy, an important tool you have to find out about yourself is practice. Mindfulness and breath are wonderful tools for calming the mind and working with a problem. I often suggest to people I'm working with to watch their breath as a way of returning to the present. I'll suggest that they do walking meditation when they go from their desk at work to the bathroom or the water cooler. We all have our breath to return to when we get overwhelmed; just breathe in, just breathe out, just feel your body for ten breaths. Breath can help contain feelings which seem out of control. If we can return to the breath, we may not need to react so fast; there's some space. That's also part of what we're learning when we're sitting in the dharma room. Thoughts and feelings come up but we don't have to do anything about them—we can contain them with the breath. The breath can cut the chain of thinking.

**Student:** I find that the stronger my psychotherapy or analysis got, the weaker my Zen practice became. The one replaced the other... like it wasn't necessary because the therapeutic process was so strong.

**Kitzes PSN:** OK, I can't argue with your experience. It seems to me, though, the more you stay with your practice while in psychotherapy the deeper the psychotherapy becomes. Practice can give you access to so much more than just thinking. If you just stay in a "psychotherapeutic mind set," you may get attached to your ideas. The process of breathing and witnessing allows you to see your attachments. This will increase what you can do within a therapeutic framework. Remember, in Zen meditation we're not really trying to explore something, we're working with don't know mind and letting everything be. Psychotherapeutically, you're looking to explore something—so, they're two different things.

**Student:** I'm in a psychology program that emphasizes not knowing as a therapist, but what then differentiates good therapy from bad therapy?

**KPSN:** Keep a don't know mind and you'll find out! If you have an idea about it, you'll never find out. I remember last week I had a session with somebody that was terrible—I was off... I just didn't feel connected. But, when they came back the next week they raved about what a great session we had had the previous week. You just don't know! There are all sorts of processes going on that I may not be aware of. This is also true for the client. They may realize something important that happened in a session many days later.

I don't think you have to worry too much about whether you're doing good therapy. As a therapist, your job is to be present and authentic and then let the process take care of itself. Give the client that you're working with the space to go where they need to go. You may say, "I think we need to look at this," but once you start looking at it, give them enough room to find out what's true for them. Suzuki Roshi said, and I'm paraphrasing here, "A really good shepherd gives his sheep as big a pasture as possible, and then he watches. If you don't watch, you're a lousy shepherd because you will lose your sheep. But if you pay attention you will let them be and you won't lose them." You don't try to control the situation, you let the situation teach you. Thank you very much for your attention and good questions.