

Embodying Your Realization: Psychological Work in the Service of Spiritual Development

By John Welwood

John Welwood coined the term “spiritual bypassing” to describe a psychological challenge that’s become an epidemic in recent years: using spiritual practices and ideas to bypass our emotions and rationalize our unconscious actions. I’ve included this article on the intentional presence website to help spiritual practitioners understand the importance of learning to work more consciously with inner experiences like emotions, needs and desires, instead of using spiritual teachings to unconsciously repress them. I’m thankful to John for coining the phrase “spiritual bypassing;” it helped me to become more conscious of one of many ways that I turn away from my emotions, instead of listening to their native wisdom and intelligence.

The article below appears with John’s permission.

– Rhonda Mattern

While many Eastern teachers are extremely warm, loving, and personal in their own way, they often do not have much to say about the specifically personal side of human life. Coming out of traditional Asian societies, they may have a hard time recognizing or assessing the personal, developmental challenges facing their Western students. They often do not understand the pervasive self-hatred, shame, and guilt, as well as the alienation and lack of confidence in these students. Still less do they detect the tendency toward spiritual bypassing—using spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep personal, emotional “unfinished business,” to shore up a shaky sense of self, or to belittle basic needs, feelings, and developmental tasks, all in the name of enlightenment. And so they often teach self-transcendence to students who first of all need to find some ground to stand on.

Spiritual Bypassing

Spiritual practice involves freeing consciousness from its entanglement in form, matter, emotions, personality, and social conditioning. In a society like ours, where the whole earthly foundation is weak to begin with, it is tempting to use spirituality as a way of trying to rise above this shaky ground. In this way, spirituality becomes just another way of rejecting one's experience. When people use spiritual practice to try to compensate for low self-esteem, social alienation, or emotional problems, they corrupt the true nature of spiritual practice. Instead of loosening the manipulative ego that tries to control its experience, they are further strengthening it.

Spiritual bypassing is a strong temptation in times like ours when achieving what were once ordinary developmental landmarks—earning a livelihood through dignified, meaningful work, raising a family, sustaining a long-term intimate relationship, belonging to a larger social community — has become increasingly difficult and elusive. Yet when people use spirituality to cover up their difficulties with functioning in the modern world, their spiritual practice remains in a separate

compartment, unintegrated with the rest of their life.

For example, one woman I know went to India at age seventeen to get away from a wealthy family that had provided her with little love or understanding, and no model of a meaningful life. She spent seven years studying and practicing with Tibetan teachers in India and Nepal, did many retreats, and had many powerful realizations. She experienced states of bliss and inner freedom lasting for long periods of time. Upon returning to Europe, however, she could barely function in the modern world. Nothing made any sense to her, and she did not know what to do with herself. She became involved with a charismatic man, and wound up having two children by him before she knew what had happened to her. In looking back at that time, she said, "This man was my shadow. He represented all the parts of myself I had run away from. I found him totally fascinating and became swept up in a course of events over which I had no control. Clearly, all my spiritual practice had not touched the rest of me—all the old fears, confusions, and unconscious patterns that hit me in the face when I returned to the West."

Using spirituality to make up for failures of individuation—psychologically separating from parents, cultivating self-respect, or trusting one's own intelligence as a source of guidance—also leads to many of the so-called "perils of the path": spiritual materialism (using spirituality to shore up one's shaky ego), grandiosity and self-inflation, "us vs. them" mentality, groupthink, blind faith in charismatic teachers, and loss of discrimination. Spiritual communities can become a kind of substitute family, where the teacher is regarded as the good parent, while the students are striving to be good boys or good girls, by toeing the party line, trying to please the teacher-as-parent, or driving themselves to climb the ladder of spiritual success. And spiritual practice becomes co-opted by unconscious identities and used to reinforce unconscious defenses.

For example, people who hide behind a schizoid defense (resorting to isolation and withdrawal because the interpersonal realm feels threatening) often use teachings about detachment and renunciation to rationalize their aloofness, impersonality, and disengagement, when what they really need is to become more fully embodied, more engaged with themselves, with others, and with life. Unfortunately, the Asian emphasis on impersonal realization makes it easy for alienated Western students to imagine that the personal is of little significance compared with the vastness of the great beyond. Such students are often attracted to teachings about selflessness and ultimate states, which seem to provide a rationale for not dealing with their own psychological wounding. In this way, they use Eastern teachings to cover up their incapacity in the personal and interpersonal realm.

People with a dependent personality structure, who try to please others in order to gain approval and security, often perform unstinting service for the teacher or community in order to feel worthwhile and needed. They confuse a codependent version of self-negation with true selflessness. Spiritual involvement is particularly tricky for people who hide behind a narcissistic defense, because they use

spirituality to make themselves feel special and important, while supposedly working on liberation from self.

Spiritual bypassing often adopts a rationale based on using absolute truth to deny or disparage relative truth. Absolute truth is what is eternally true, now and forever, beyond any particular viewpoint. When we tap into absolute truth, we can recognize the divine beauty or larger perfection operating in the whole of reality. From this larger perspective, the murders going on in Brooklyn at this moment, for instance, do not diminish this divine perfection, for the absolute encompasses the whole panorama of life and death, in which suns, galaxies, and planets are continually being born and dying. However, from a *relative* point of view—if you are the wife of the man murdered in Brooklyn tonight—you will probably not be moved by the truth of ultimate perfection. Instead you will be feeling human grief.

There are two ways of confusing absolute and relative truth. If you use the murder or your grief to deny or insult the higher law of the universe, you would be committing the relativist error. You would be trying to apply what is true on the horizontal plane of *becoming* to the vertical dimension of pure *being*. The spiritual bypasser makes the reverse category error, the absolutist error: He draws on absolute truth to disparage relative truth. His logic might lead to a conclusion like this: Since everything is ultimately perfect in the larger cosmic play, grieving the loss of someone you love is the sign of spiritual weakness.

Psychological realities represent relative truth. They are relative to particular individuals in particular circumstances. Even though one may know that no individual death is ultimately important on the absolute, trans-human level, one may still feel profound grief and regret about a friend's death—on the relative, human level. Because we live on both these levels, the opposite of whatever we assert is also true in some way. Jesus' advice, "Love thine enemies" and "Turn the other cheek," did not prevent him from expressing his anger toward the money changers in the Temple or the hypocritical Pharisees. Thus our everyday experiences may often appear to be at odds with the highest truth. This creates uncertainty and ambiguity. For many people, the disparity between these two levels of truth is confusing or disturbing. They think reality has to be all one way or the other. In trying to make everything conform to a single order, they become new age pollyannas or else bitter cynics.

Since we live on two levels as human beings, we can never reduce reality to a single dimension. We are not just this relative body-mind organism; we are also absolute being/awareness/presence, which is much larger than our bodily form or personal history. But we are also not *just* this larger, formless absolute; we are also incarnate as this particular individual. If we identify totally with form—our body-mind/personality—our life will remain confined to known, familiar structures. But if we try to live only as pure emptiness, or absolute being, we may have a hard time fully engaging with our humanity. At the level of absolute truth, the personal self is not ultimately real; at the relative level, it must be respected. If we use the truth of no-

self to avoid ever having to make personal statements such as, "I want to know you better" to someone we love, this would be a perversion.

A client of mine who was desperate about her marriage had gone to a spiritual teacher for advice. He advised her not to be so angry with her husband, but to be a compassionate friend instead. This was certainly sound spiritual advice. Compassion is a higher truth than anger; when we rest in the absolute nature of mind—pure open awareness—we discover compassion as the very core of our nature. From that perspective, feeling angry about being hurt only separates us from our true nature.

Yet the teacher who gave this woman this advice did not consider her *relative* situation—that she was someone who had swallowed her anger all her life. Her father had been abusive and would slap her and send her to her room whenever she showed any anger about the way he treated her. So she learned to suppress her anger, and always tried to please others and "be a good girl" instead.

When the teacher advised her to feel compassion rather than anger, she felt relieved because this fit right in with her defenses. Since anger was terrifying and threatening to her, she used the teaching on compassion for spiritual bypassing—for refusing to deal with her anger or the message it contained. Yet this only increased her sense of frustration and powerlessness in her marriage.

As her therapist, taking account of her relative psychology, my aim was to help her acknowledge her anger and relate to it more fully. As a spiritual practitioner, I was also mindful that anger is ultimately empty—a wave arising in the ocean of consciousness, without any solidity or inherent meaning. Yet while that understanding may be true in the absolute sense, and be valuable for helping dissolve attachment to anger, it was not useful for this woman at this time. Instead, she needed to learn to pay more attention to her anger in order to move beyond a habitual pattern of self-suppression, to discover her inner strength and power, and to relate to her husband in a more active, assertive way.

Given that compassion is a finer and nobler feeling than anger, how do we arrive at genuine compassion? Spiritual bypassing involves imposing on oneself higher truths that lie far beyond one's immediate existential condition. My client's attempts at compassion were not entirely genuine because they were based on rejecting her own anger. Spiritual teachers often exhort us to be loving and compassionate, or to give up selfishness and aggression, but how can we do this if our habitual tendencies arise out of a whole system of psychological dynamics that we have never clearly seen or faced, much less worked with? People often have to feel, acknowledge, and come to terms with their anger before they can arrive at genuine forgiveness or compassion. That is relative truth.

Psychological inquiry starts there, with relative truth—with whatever we are experiencing right now. It involves opening to that experience and exploring the

meaning of that experience, letting it unfold, step by step, without judging it according to preconceived ideas. As a therapist, I find that allowing whatever arises to be there as it is and gently inquiring into it leads naturally in the direction of deeper truth. This is what I call psychological work in the service of spiritual development.

Many people who seek out my services have done spiritual practice for many years. They do not suffer from traditional clinical syndromes, but from some impasse in their lives that their spiritual practice has failed to penetrate: They cannot maintain a long-term relationship, feel real joy, work productively or creatively, treat themselves with compassion, or understand why they continue to indulge in certain destructive behaviors.

I have often been struck by the huge gap between the sophistication of their spiritual practice and the level of their personal development. Some of them have spent years doing what were once considered the most advanced, esoteric practices, reserved only for the select few in traditional Asia, without developing the most rudimentary forms of self-love or interpersonal sensitivity. One woman who had undergone the rigors of a Tibetan-style three-year retreat had little ability to love herself. The rigorous training she had been through only seemed to reinforce an inner discontent that drove her to pursue high spiritual ideals, without showing any kindness toward herself or her own limitations.

Another woman had let an older teacher cruelly manipulate her. She had a habitual tendency from childhood to disregard her own needs and feelings, which, using "dharma logic," she lumped in the category of samsaric hindrances. In another community the head teacher had to step down because he had begun to feel like a fraud. In our work together he came to see that all his spiritual ambitions were infested with narcissistic motivation. They had been a way of avoiding his psychological wounding and achieving a position where others would see him as special and important, rather than the helpless person he felt like on the inside.

Spiritual Superego

In addition to spiritual bypassing, another major problem for Western seekers is their susceptibility to the "spiritual superego," a harsh inner voice that acts as relentless critic and judge telling them that nothing they do is ever quite good enough: "You should meditate more and practice harder. You're too self-centered. You don't have enough devotion." This critical voice keeps track of every failure to practice or live up to the teachings, so that practice becomes more oriented toward propitiating this judgmental part of themselves than opening unconditionally to life. They may subtly regard the saints and enlightened ones as father figures who are keeping a watchful eye on all the ways they are failing to live up to their commitments. So they strive to be "dharmically correct," attempting to be more detached, compassionate, or devoted than they really are. In trying to live up to high spiritual ideals, they deny their real feelings, becoming cut off from their bodily vitality, the truth of their own experience, and their ability to find their own

authentic direction.

Spiritual seekers who try to be more impartial, unemotional, unselfish, and compassionate than they really are often secretly hate themselves for the ways they fail to live up to their high ideals. This makes their spirituality cold and solemn. Their self-hatred was not created by the spiritual teaching; it already existed. But by pursuing spirituality in a way that widens the gap between how they are and how they think they should be, they wind up turning exquisite spiritual teachings on compassion and awakening into further fuel for self-hatred and inner bondage.

This raises the question of how much we can benefit from a spiritual teaching as a set of ideals, no matter how noble those ideals are. Often the striving after a spiritual ideal only serves to reinforce the critical superego—that inner voice that tells us we are never good enough, never honest enough, never loving enough. In a culture permeated by guilt and ambition, where people are desperately trying to rise above their shaky earthly foundation, the spiritual superego exerts a pervasive unconscious influence that calls for special attention and work. This requires an understanding of psychological dynamics that traditional spiritual teachings and teachers often lack.

Overcoming Praise and Blame: A Case Study

I would like to present a case study that illustrates both how spiritual teaching and practice can be used to reinforce psychological defenses, and how psychological work can be a useful aid to embodying spirituality in a more integrated way. Paul had been a dedicated Buddhist practitioner for more than two decades. He was a husband, father, and successful businessman who had recently been promoted to a position that involved public speaking. At first, he took this as an interesting challenge, but after a few experiences in front of large audiences, he started feeling overwhelmed by anxiety, worry, tension, sleeplessness, and other physical symptoms. At first, he tried to deal with his distress by meditating more. While these periods of practice would help him regain some equilibrium, the same symptoms would start to recur when he was about to face an audience again. After a few months of this, he gave me a call.

From the Buddhist teachings, Paul knew the importance of not being attached to praise and blame, two of the eight worldly concerns—along with loss and gain, pleasure and pain, success and failure—that keep us chained to the wheel of suffering. Yet it was not until his fear of public speaking brought up intense anxiety about praise and blame that he realized just how concerned he was about how people saw him. Recognizing this was extremely upsetting for him.

At first Paul waxed nostalgic about his periods of retreat, when he felt detached from such concerns, and we discussed how living in the world often brings up unresolved psychological issues that spiritual practice is not designed to address. As our work progressed, he realized that he used detachment as a defense, to deny a deeper, underlying fear about how other people saw him.

He had developed this defense in childhood as a way to cope with not feeling seen by his parents. His mother had lived in a state of permanent tension and anxiety, and regarded him as her potential savior, rather than as a separate being with his own feelings and life apart from her. To shield himself from her pain and intrusiveness, Paul had developed a defensive stance of not feeling his need for her, and by extension, for other people in his life.

Having tried all his life not to care about how people regarded him, he was particularly attracted to the Buddhist teachings of no-self when he first encountered them. After all, in the light of absolute truth there is nobody to be seen, nobody to be praised, nobody to be blamed—and Paul found great comfort in this. Yet on the relative level he carried within himself a denied and frustrated need to be seen and loved. In denying this need, Paul was practicing defensiveness, not true detachment. And he was using spiritual teachings as a rationale for remaining stuck in an old defensive posture.

How could Paul be truly detached from praise and blame as long as he had a buried wish to be loved and appreciated, which he couldn't admit because it felt too threatening? Before he could truly overcome his anxieties about praise and blame, he would first have to acknowledge this wish—which was frightening and risky. Along with his conflicted feelings about being seen, Paul also had a fair share of buried self-hatred. As his mother's appointed savior, he had desperately wanted her to be happy, and felt guilty about failing to save her. In fact, he was stuck in many of the ways his mother was stuck. His guilt and self-blame about this made him hypersensitive to blame from others.

So Paul was doubly trapped. As long as he could not acknowledge the part of him that felt, "Yes, I want to be seen and appreciated," his frustrated need for love kept him tied in knots, secretly on the lookout for others' praise and confirmation. And his inability to say, "No, I don't exist for your benefit," kept him susceptible to potential blame whenever he failed to please others.

Yes and *no* are expressions of desire and aggression—two life energies that philosophers, saints, and psychologists, from Plato and Buddha to Freud, have considered particularly problematic. Unfortunately, many spiritual teachers simply criticize passion and aggression instead of teaching people to unlock the potential intelligence hidden within them.

The intelligent impulse contained in the *yes* of desire is the longing to expand, to meet and connect more fully with life. The intelligence contained in *no* is the capacity to discriminate, differentiate, and protect oneself and others from harmful forces. The energy of the *genuine, powerful no* can be a doorway to strength and power, allowing us to separate from aspects of our conditioning we need to outgrow. Our capacity to express the basic power of *yes* and *no* often becomes damaged in childhood. And this incapacity becomes installed in our psychological

makeup as a tendency to oscillate between compliance and defiance, as Paul exemplified in his attitude toward others—secretly wanting to please them, yet secretly hating them for this at the same time.

As long as Paul failed to address his unconscious dynamic of compliance and defiance, his spiritual practice could not help him stabilize true equanimity, free from anxiety about praise and blame. Although he could experience freedom from praise and blame during periods of solitary spiritual practice, these realizations remained compartmentalized, and failed to carry over into his everyday functioning. I want to describe two defining moments in our work together, in which Paul connected with his genuine yes and no. These two moments are also of interest in highlighting the difference between psychological and spiritual work.

Before Paul could find and express his genuine yes—to himself, to others, to life—he had to say no to the internalized mother whose influence remained alive within him: "No, I don't exist to make you happy, to be your savior, to give your life meaning." But it was not easy for him to acknowledge his anger and hatred toward his mother for the ways he had become an object of her own narcissistic needs. Quoting spiritual doctrine, Paul believed it was wrong to hate. Yet in never letting himself feel the hatred he carried unconsciously in his body, he wound up expressing it in covert, self-sabotaging ways. I did not try to push past his inner taboo against this feeling, but only invited him to acknowledge his hatred when it was apparent in his speech or demeanor. When Paul could finally let himself feel his hatred directly, instead of judging or denying it, he came alive in a whole new way. He sat up straight and broke into laughter, the laughter of an awakening vitality and power.

Articulating his genuine no, the no of protection—"I won't let you take advantage of me"—also freed him to acknowledge his hidden desire, his dormant yes—"Yes, I want to be seen for who I am, the being I am in my own right, apart from what I do for you." The second defining moment happened as Paul acknowledged this need to be seen and loved for who he was—which triggered a surge of energy coursing through him, filling his whole body. Yet this was also scary for him, for it felt as though he were becoming inflated. And for Paul, with his refined Buddhist sensibilities, self-inflation was the greatest sin of all—a symptom of a bloated ego, the way of the narcissist who is full of himself.

Seeing his resistance, I encouraged him to explore, if only for a few moments, what it would be like to let himself become inflated, to feel full of himself, and to stay present with that experience. As he let himself fill up and inflate, he experienced himself as large, rich, and radiant. He felt like a sun-king, receiving energy from the gods above and below, radiating light in all directions. He realized that he had always wanted to feel this way, but had never allowed himself to expand like this before! Yet now he was letting himself be infused by the fullness that had been missing in his life—the fullness of his own being. To his surprise, he found it a tremendous relief and release to allow this expansion at last.

As Paul got over his surprise, he laughed and said: "Who would have thought that letting myself become inflated could be so liberating?" Of course, he wasn't acting out a state of ego-inflation, but rather feeling what it was like to let the energy of desire, fullness, and spontaneous self-valuing flow through his body. In this moment, since he was according himself the recognition he had secretly sought from others, he did not care about how others saw him. Nor was there any desire to lord his newfound strength over anyone. He was enjoying the pure radiation of his inner richness and warmth—let others respond as they may.

Many spiritual seekers who suffer, like Paul, from a deflated sense of self interpret spiritual teachings about selflessness to mean that they should keep a lid on themselves and not let themselves shine. Yet instead of overzealously guarding against ego-inflation, Paul needed to let his genie out of the bottle before he could clearly distinguish between genuine expressions of being such as power, joy, or celebration, and ego-distortions such as grandiosity and conceit.

Since *need* was such a dirty word in Paul's worldview, he had used his spiritual practice as a way to overcome it. However, trying to leap directly from denial of his need for love to a state of needlessness was only spiritual bypassing—using spiritual teachings to support an unconscious defense. When he stopped fighting his need, he was able to connect with a deeper force within it—a *genuine, powerful yes to life and love*—which lessened his fixation on outer praise and blame. Paul discovered that this essential yes was quite different from attachment and clinging; it contained a *holy longing* to give birth to himself in a new way. Indeed, as Paul discovered his inner fire, value, and power through unlocking his genuine yes and no, he became less defensive, more open to others and to the flow of love.

Differentiated and Undifferentiated Being

This case example illustrates how unconscious psychological issues can distort someone's understanding of spiritual teachings and interfere with truly embodying them. In addition, Paul's ambivalence, self-denial, and self-blame cut off his access to deeper capacities such as strength, confidence, and the ability to connect with others in a genuinely open way. We could call these capacities *differentiated expressions of being or qualities of presence*. If the absolute side of our nature—undifferentiated being—is like clear light, the relative side—or differentiated being—is like a rainbow spectrum of colors contained within that light. *While realizing undifferentiated being is the path of liberation, embodying qualities of differentiated being is the path of individuation* in its deepest sense: the unfolding of our intrinsic human resources, which exist as seed potentials within us, but which are often blocked by psychological conflicts.

While realization can happen at any moment, it does not necessarily lead, as we have seen, to actualization. Although I may have access to the transparency of pure being, I may still not have access to the human capacities that will enable me to *actualize that realization* in the world. I may not be able to access my generosity, for

instance, in situations that require it, if it is obstructed by unconscious beliefs that reinforce an identity of impoverishment and deficiency. If these subconscious beliefs are not brought to light and worked with, generosity is unlikely to manifest in a full and genuine way.

In the Buddhist tradition, differentiated being is often described in terms of "the qualities of a buddha"—wisdom, great clarity, compassion, patience, strength, or generosity. Although some lineages do not emphasize these qualities, others, such as Tibetan Vajrayana, have developed a wide range of transformational practices designed to cultivate various aspects of them.

Since these deeper capacities are often blocked by unresolved psychological issues, working with these conflicts directly can provide another way, particularly suited to Westerners, to gain access to these differentiated qualities of presence and integrate them into our character and functioning. After all, most problems in living are the result of losing access to those capacities—power, love, flexibility, confidence, or trust—that allow us to respond creatively to the challenging situations at hand. In the process of recognizing and working through our psychological conflicts, these missing capacities often become unveiled.

Because Western seekers generally suffer from a painful split between being and functioning, they need careful, specific guidance in bridging the gap between the radical openness of pure being and being in the world. Unfortunately, even in spiritual traditions that emphasize the importance of integrating realization into daily life, special instructions about how to accomplish this integration are often not very fully elaborated. Or else it is not clear how the instructions, formulated for simpler times and a simpler world, apply to handling the complexities of our fast-paced world, navigating the perils of Western-style intimate relationships, or overcoming the apparent gap many people feel between realizing impersonal being and embodying it in personal functioning. By helping people work through specific emotional conflicts that obscure their deeper capacities, psychological work can also help them bring these capacities more fully into their lives. This kind of work is like cultivating the soil in which the seeds of spiritual realization can take root and blossom.

Through cultivating the full range of human qualities latent in our absolute true nature we develop a fuller, richer quality of *personal presence*—we begin to embody our true nature in an individuated way. This type of individuation goes far beyond the secular, humanistic ideal of developing one's uniqueness, being a creative innovator, or living out one's dreams. Instead, it involves forging a vessel—our capacity for personal presence, nourished by its rootedness in a full spectrum of human qualities—through which we can bring absolute true nature into form—the "form" of our person.

By *person* I do not mean some fixed structure or entity, but the way in which true nature can manifest and express itself in a uniquely personal way, as the ineffable

suchness or "youness" of you. How fully the suchness of *you* shines through—in your face, your speech, your actions, your particular quality of presence—is partly grace, but also partly a result of how much you have worked on polishing your vessel, so that it becomes transparent. Thus individuation, which involves clarifying the psychological dynamics that obscure our capacity to fully shine through, is not opposed to spiritual realization. It is, instead, a way of becoming a more transparent vessel—an *authentic person who can bring through what is beyond the person in a uniquely personal way*.

In the secular humanistic perspective, individual development is an end in itself. In the view I am proposing here, individuation is not an end, but a path or means that can help us *give birth to our true form*, by clearing up the distortions of our old false self. As we learn to be true to our deepest individual imperatives, rather than enslaved to past conditioning, our character structure no longer poses such an obstacle to recognizing absolute true nature or embodying it. Our individuated nature becomes a window opening onto all that is beyond and greater than ourselves.

Conscious and Subconscious Identity

Spiritual traditions generally explain the cause of suffering in global, *epistemological* terms—as the result of ignorance, misperception, or sin—or in *ontological* terms—as a disconnection from our essential being. Buddhism, for instance, traces suffering to the mind's tendency to grasp and fixate—on thoughts, self-images, egocentric feelings, and distorted perceptions—as well as to ignore the deeper source of our experience—the luminous, expansive, and creative power of awareness itself.

Western psychology, by contrast, offers a more specific *developmental* understanding. It shows how suffering stems from childhood conditioning; in particular, from frozen, distorted images of self and other (object relations) that we carry with us from the past. Since it understands these distorting identities as relational—formed in and through our relationships with others—psychotherapy explores these self-other structures in a relational context—in the healing environment of the client-therapist relationship.

Since spiritual traditions do not generally recognize how the ego-identity forms out of interpersonal relationships, they are unable to address these interpersonal structures directly. Instead, they offer practices—prayer, meditation, mantra, service, devotion to God or guru—that shift the attention to the universal ground of being in which the individual psyche moves, like a wave on the ocean. Thus it becomes possible to enter luminous states of trans-personal awakening, beyond personal conflicts and limitations, without having to address or work through specific psychological issues and conflicts. Yet while this kind of realization can certainly provide access to greater wisdom and compassion, it often does not touch or alter impaired relational patterns, which, because they pervade everyday functioning, interfere with integrating this realization into the fabric of daily life.

Spiritual practice exerts a powerful global effect on the psyche by undermining the central linchpin of the ego—the identification with a fixed self-concept, which I call the *conscious identity*. The conscious identity is a self-image whose function is to allow us to imagine that are something solid and substantial. From a Buddhist or ontological perspective, this egoic identity functions as a defense against the threat of emptiness—the open dimension of being, with all its uncertainty, impermanence, and insubstantiality—which the ego interprets as a threat to its existence. Yet if we look at it psychologically, we can see that the conscious identity also a compensatory identity. It is a way of trying to compensate for an underlying sense of threat or deficiency, which we originally felt in childhood in response to lack of love, connection, or acceptance. Even though our conscious identity is designed to compensate for this sense of deficiency, inadequacy, or unworthiness, we nonetheless tend to identify subconsciously with the very lack we are trying to overcome. This deeply embedded sense of deficiency—originating in our childhood helplessness in the face of primal fear, anxiety, or pain—is what I call the *subconscious (or deficient) identity*.

Because subconscious deficient identities are more hidden and threatening than conscious, compensatory ones, they are also much harder to acknowledge, dislodge, and transform. If we are to liberate ourselves from the whole compensatory/deficient ego structure, it seems necessary to address the interpersonal dynamics that are embedded in its fabric. The relational context of psychotherapy can often provide a direct, focused, and precise method of working through the subconscious dynamics that keep this whole identity structure intact. Paul, for example, had developed a compensatory identity based on being in control of his life and "not caring what people think." This defensive control structure was a way of defending against an underlying sense of deficiency that caused him to feel overwhelmed in interpersonal relations. His spiritual practice had begun to undermine this conscious identity by providing direct access to his larger being. But since he also used spiritual practice as a way to bypass, or not deal with, his subconscious identity—his deeper sense of deficiency, stemming from childhood—it could not totally free him from the grip of his identity structure.

Since Paul did not like to feel his deficient identity and its associated feelings of anxiety, frustration, and tension, he was happy to practice spiritual methods that helped him move beyond, and thus avoid, this aspect of his ego structure. Indeed, it was much easier for him to be present with the open, spacious dimension of being than with his anxiety and helplessness when they were triggered. Since his capacity for presence did not extend into the totality of his psyche, it was not of much use to him when he was up against his worst demons.

Through the psychological work we did together, Paul was able to acknowledge his underlying sense of lack and open to the feelings of vulnerability and helplessness associated with it. Always before, when overwhelmed by obsessive thoughts of praise and blame, he would try to let go of these thoughts as he would in meditation, and this was certainly of value in its own way. But our work together also gave him a

new way to work with this situation. He learned to bring his attention into his belly, feel into the sense of deficiency directly, and bring attention to the subconscious belief at its core: "I can't handle this." In this way, he began to work directly with his identity-structure when it became activated, instead of just trying to move beyond it. In conjunction with his meditative practice, this kind of psychological work helped Paul learn to relax in situations that triggered his deepest fears.

Of course, some might argue that Paul's problem was that he failed to truly understand or apply the spiritual practices and teachings he had received. That may well be. But I don't believe his spiritual practice was a failure. It served him well in many ways. It also brought him to the point where his most primitive, unresolved psychological issues were fully exposed and ready to be worked with. Yet he needed another set of tools to address these issues directly, to penetrate the unconscious roots of his tendency to distort and compartmentalize the spiritual teachings he had received, and to become a more integrated human being.

In the end, Paul felt that his psychological and spiritual work were both of great benefit, in complementary ways. The psychological work also had a clarifying effect on his spiritual practice, by helping him make an important distinction between absolute emptiness—the ultimate reality beyond self—and relative, psychological emptiness—his inner sense of lack and deficiency. Because he had previously conflated these two types of emptiness, his spiritual practice had often served to reinforce his subconscious sense of unworthiness.

Toward a Further Dialogue between East and West

The essential difference between Western and Eastern psychology is their differing emphasis on the personal and the impersonal. Unfortunately, contemporary interpretations of the Eastern spiritual teachings often make *personal* a synonym for *egoic*, with the result that the capacity for richly expressive personal presence becomes lost. Although personal presence may not be as vast and boundless as impersonal presence, it has a mystery and beauty all its own. Martin Buber saw this "personal making-present" (*personale vergegenwaertigung*) as an integral part of what he considered the primary unit of human experience: the I-Thou relationship.

Indeed, to appreciate the power and meaning of personal presence, we only need to look into the face of someone we love. As the Irish priest John O'Donohue once remarked, "In the human face infinity becomes personal." While impersonal presence is the source of an equal concern and compassion for all beings (*agape*, in Western terms), personal presence is the source of *eros*—the intimate resonance between oneself, as this particular person, and another, whose particular suchness we respond to in a very particular way.

We in the West have been exposed to the most profound non-dual teachings and practices of the East for only a few short decades. Now that we have begun to digest and assimilate them, it is time for a deeper level of dialogue between East and West, in order to develop greater understanding about the relationship between the

impersonal absolute and the human, personal dimension. Indeed, expressing absolute true nature in a thoroughly personal, human form may be one of the most important evolutionary potentials of the cross-fertilization of East and West, of contemplative and psychological understanding. Bringing these two approaches into closer dialogue may help us discover how to transform our personality in a more complete way—developing it into an instrument of higher purposes—thus redeeming the whole personal realm, instead of just seeking liberation from it.

Buddhism for one has always grown by absorbing methods and understandings indigenous to the cultures to which it spread. If psychotherapy is our modern way of dealing with the psyche and its demons, analogous to the early Tibetan shamanic practices that Vajrayana Buddhism integrated into its larger framework, then the meditative traditions may only find a firmer footing in our culture if they recognize and relate to Western psychology more fully. A more open and penetrating dialogue between practitioners of meditative and psychological disciplines could help the ancient spiritual traditions find new and more powerful ways of addressing the Western situation and thus have a greater impact on the direction our world is taking.

In sum, we need a new framework of understanding that can help us appreciate how psychological and spiritual work might be mutually supportive allies in the liberation and complete embodiment of the human spirit. We need to revision both spiritual and psychological work for our time, so that psychological work can function in the service of spiritual development, while spiritual work can also take account of psychological development. These two convergent streams would then recognize each other as two vitally important limbs of an evolving humanity that is still moving toward realizing its potential as:

—the being that can open, and know itself as belonging to the universal mystery and presence that surrounds and inhabits all things, and

—the being that can embody that larger openness as human presence in the world, through its capacity to manifest all the deeper resources implicit in its nature, thus serving as a crucial link between heaven and earth.