
BUDDANET BBS - The Buddhist Bulletin Board
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Buddha Dhamma Meditation Association Inc.
PO Box K1020 Haymarket NSW 2000 Australia

* PRESENT CENTRED AWARENESS *

A Path to Psychological Freedom

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Psychology 400-6 November, 1990

Dukkha often translates as "suffering", but it also means the quality of unsatisfactoriness and uncertainty related to change. According to Buddhists all the conditional states of life are dukkha. The alleviation or elimination of dukkha or the path to freedom is a very personal path which may include western psychotherapies and or spiritual practices. Generally, Western psychotherapies are directed at strengthening the sense of self while spiritual practices are directed at self transcendence. Present centred awareness may be one practice which engenders both self fortifying and self transcending aspects and helps facilitate freedom from dukkha. Present centred awareness is a practice and a technique where practitioners are present and aware for the experience of life. Present centred awareness has been used as a self regulatory mechanism and a self discovery process. Present centred awareness may facilitate peak experiences which can transform habitually detrimental tendencies. Present centred awareness may also be instrumental in resolving inner and interpersonal conflict and engendering love or nonjudgemental acceptance. Moreover, present centred awareness may diminish dukkha because it helps align ones perception of one's self in accordance with the way things are or the truth. According to Buddhists the nature of the self is empty and insight into its emptiness, with present centred awareness, is intrinsically liberating.

Introduction:

About fifteen years ago a Buddhist monk I met claimed that life for most people was dukkha. Dukkha, he explained, was a word from an ancient Indian language called Pali. He said that dukkha was roughly translated as suffering. However, this translation was, he claimed, inadequate because dukkha also signified the subtle qualities of unsatisfactoriness and uncertainty connected with change in life (Khantipalo, 1976). When I heard the word explained, I started to realise that my life and the lives of most beings around me, were characterised by dukkha. It was further indicated, however, that it was possible to seek a path to freedom (from dukkha) and hence out of suffering. The end result of this spiritual path is believed to be a total liberation which, ultimately, can only be directly experienced and any general conceptual descriptions deem inadequate and meaningless (Rahula, 1959). The alleviation of dukkha and the path to freedom are offered by numerous salvational philosophies and practices. On the secular side of the picture, Western psychotherapies offer relief from some aspects of psychological distress by strengthening the sense of selfhood with whom we identify our individuality. Spiritual paths, on the other hand, are directed at liberation by developing a level of experience beyond that which is centred on a personal self. Some of these (liberating) paths appear to take aspirants in opposite directions, but some authors have attempted to reconcile this

contradiction by offering paradigms which include both 'self fortifying' and 'self transcending' methodologies which, together, can eventually lead the practitioner to freedom (eg Wilber, 1981).

My own path towards liberation is characterised by a practice in which I try to attend to and live my direct moment to moment experience of life. This method, which I have adopted as my spiritual path, is called present centred awareness. In my personal experience, present centred awareness has been a way to heal the psychic wounds which I have accrued during this life (and perhaps others). Thus, present centred awareness can be powerful psychotherapeutic device. In addition, present centred awareness is considered to be intrinsically liberating because it engenders, in the practitioner, an insight into 'truth'. In the sections which follow, this essay will examine, in detail, the nature of the human existential bind (dukkha) and the path to psychological and spiritual liberation through the practice of present centred awareness.

Dukkha

According to Buddhist thought dukkha, which usually means suffering, is the truth of existence. However, many Pali scholars claim that the word often has been misinterpreted and misunderstood (Rahula, 1959). Though dukkha may mean suffering (as it is normally conceived) a more precise translation of dukkha is "unsatisfactoriness" (Rahula, 1959). Dukkha can properly be understood in three ways: 1) dukkha as ordinary suffering, 2) dukkha as produced by change, and 3) dukkha as a characteristic of being someone in a 'conditioned state' (Rahula, 1959; Sole-Leris, 1986). The first type of dukkha encompasses the pain, grief, lamentation and difficulties associated with old age, sickness and death. Also included in this first category is the inevitable fact that individuals often get what they do not want, do not get what they want, and soon are parted from what they like. This first type of dukkha also includes mental distress such as confusion, anguish, worry, fear, anxiety, depression, loneliness, and alienation (Rahula, 1959). The second type of dukkha involves the paradox of living in happy and pleasant states and yet knowing these beautiful moments are transient and must inevitably change and disappear. The last type of dukkha involves the suffering engendered from clinging to the belief that transitory manifestations of sensations, thoughts, feelings and emotions, are a solid and concrete self which is usually labelled, by each of, us as "I", "mine", or "myself" (Rahula, 1959). This last type of dukkha is, perhaps, the most difficult to comprehend, but it will be clarified later in this essay. According to the classical Buddhist texts, absolute freedom from dukkha only can be found in Nibbana (or Nirvana) which is an unconditional state beyond causal existence and hence suffering (Nanamoli, 1978). Conditional states, on the other hand, are characterised by dukkha (Rahula, 1959).

Conditioned States and the Wheel of Birth and Death

The types of conditioned states are infinite. It is believed in Buddhist thought that every being creates his/her own reality, and the various dimensions of individual realities cross over to form a given realm or world. Western religions encompass the possibilities of experiential reality as falling within the tripartite concept of heaven, hell, and a mediating earthly plane. Like these other religions, Buddhist cosmology also has several realms of existence. In Buddhist thought, however, there are 31 such levels (Tambiah, 1970). Though Buddhist texts have classic descriptions of these

realms as places where beings abide (Kapleau, 1971), they are often understood as states of mind (Trungpa, 1973). As states of mind the realms can be understood as part of one's own personal experience and/or as part of the experience of those who live around us. The various realms of existence in Buddhist cosmology can be divided into six basic categories:

1) the hell realms, 2) the hungry ghost realms, 3) the animal realms, 4) the human realms, 5) the heaven realms, and 6) the demon or asura (jealous god) realms (Tamaiah, 1970).

The Hell Realms

Many people are unhappy. Angrily or desperately they struggle with existence yet find no relief. They may feel trapped, isolated and lonely. There is no one to trust as the world seems violent, miserable and frightening. Contracted defensively, they experience hell. In these realms one is collapsed into a total paranoia and defensiveness. Here we find insanity, despair and a sense that all is hopeless and lost. It is truly a hell on earth into which some of us slip occasionally, but some, less fortunate, become hopelessly enmeshed for life as the incurably insane.

The Ghost Realms

The preta or hungry ghost realm is experienced as a state of intense and insatiable desire, frustration and dissatisfaction. Feeling ever empty and lacking, pretas constantly search for something or someone to fill their hungry space. Pretas are never gratified. No matter how much they try, gratification is always just beyond reach. In Buddhist cosmology pretas are considered to be in a realm of misery (Tambiah, 1970). When caught in these experiential realms we seek food, sex, power, glory, and money with unending appetite but, nothing can satisfy.

The Animal Realms

From the Buddhist point of view, the animal realm is yet another realm of misery. However, those in animal realms are not cognisant of their misery because the animal realm is characterised by stupidity. Actions are performed without discriminating wisdom and dominated by sensual desires and hedonistic needs. Those in animal consciousness do not think intelligently and their lives are governed by conditioning, indoctrination and seeking personal gratification.

The Human Realm

The human realm is considered to be a realm of relative advantage. As a human, one has the ability to both seek and enjoy pleasure and happiness. However, the human experience is equally grounded in difficulty, and hardship. Human existence swings between pain and pleasure, loss and gain, and praise and blame. Nevertheless, the emotions are not too extreme and those with human consciousness have the ability and mental space to ponder their existence. The human realm is therefore one of discriminating intelligence and is characterised by the ability to choose. This realm is a particularly useful realm to seek liberation because the human realm is a realm where one can see a balanced view of existence (Trungpa, 1973).

The Heaven Realms

Heaven states of consciousness, are expanded states of consciousness where one feels joyous, happy, and blissful all the time. Relationships are always fulfilling and meaningful. No one fights and life is pleasure. Projects are successful and every thing is wonderful and beautiful. These states of consciousness are also characterised by moments of transcendental well being and peace. It is like we have made it, we have arrived and won the prize (Trungpa,1973).

The Jealous God Realms

The final possibility of conscious experiential reality is that of becoming one of the asuras or jealous Gods (Trungpa, 1973). Knowing that heaven is possible, asuras jealously struggle up the ladder to gain access to the divine state, alternatively, like a fallen angel, having tasted the bliss and joy of heaven, they want it to continue and strive to regain the lost prize. This realm is different from the preta realms in that the jealous Gods have power. Like some politicians or mega-millionaires they claw their way to the top and, ever vigilant, they are protective of what they have and struggle for yet more. Asuras have a consciousness that is obsessed with power and the need for engrandisement (Trungpa,1973).

The realms and the psychological states they represent are constantly changing. Unlike the Judeo-Christian dogma, neither heaven nor hell can last for ever and the nature of conditioned experience is ultimately always change. Thus, life has the potential for cyclic fluctuation between and within the realms of experiential reality. Some days we may be in heaven while other days feel like hell. The arising and passing of experience, moment to moment or life time to life time, is what Buddhists call the wheel of birth and death or samsara (Trungpa, 1976). Being enchanted by samsara is dukkha.

Enchantment

Possibly one of the most subtle forms of psychological suffering is what Roy-King (1986) calls enchantment. The word enchantment has positive connotations in modern speech, however, as in the world of folktales: "to be enchanted is to be lured to one's death by seductive voices, to be turned to stone, to be obsessed (as Sinbad was) with journeys to impossible places, to be asleep or forgetful." (Roy-King, 1986 p211) To be enchanted is, therefore, to become intoxicated with the realities we create and to believe that these realities will last forever. Buddhists consider that the conditioned states of the wheel of birth and death are essentially unsatisfactory, or dukkha, because nothing lasts (Sumedho, 1983). Even at the most refined levels of consciousness, when our lives have no anxiety, worry, fear or gross distress, there still may be a quality of uncertainty. This uncertainty is an awareness that even if we had every thing that we could ever want, it is still not lasting. Dukkha may be gross and obvious or dukkha may be subtle. Regardless of whether it is gross or subtle it is the awareness of dukkha that motivates individuals to seek the path to freedom (Sumedho, 1983).

The Path to Freedom

When individuals become aware of their dukkha they either avoid it with distractions thereby perpetuating its manifestation (such as with drugs and alcohol) or they attempt to resolve it in a healthy manner. Psychotherapy and spiritual practices are two ways individuals may attempt to resolve the manifestations of dukkha constructively. Psychotherapy is essentially a

process designed to alleviate mental distress by initiating psychological change in a manner which is both personally meaningful and socially constructive (Muzika, 1990). Most Western psychotherapies are directed at the personality and usually work at strengthening the self to make it more able to bear pain and to experience pleasure (Muzika, 1990). Psycho-spiritual teachings and movements (both East and West), on the other hand, are directed at self transcendence. The term transcendence may have a number of meanings, but in current psychological paradigms the meaning of transcendence is transpersonal in the sense that it is a development or a transition "to a level of experience beyond that centred in the ego or the personal self" (Washburn, 1990, p85). Many of the major world religions consider transcendence to be the primary path to liberation. However, the interpretation of transcendence varies. For example, in the spiritual paths found in Christianity the concept of salvation is synonymous with freedom. With salvation the soul, having confronted its sins and having repented, is saved and reunites (in intimate relationship) with God (Washburn, 1990). This process, Washburn (1990) compares to the Jungian notion of regression and final integration with the archetype Self. The ego, being no longer separate from god, feels ultimate security, psychic wholeness and freedom from distress. Within Hinduism, the self has two aspects: Jiva, the individual soul, and Atman, its universal form. Thus, freedom from dukkha is the discovery of the soul's universal aspect (Muzika, 1990). In the Hindu tradition, spiritual development is a progressive letting go of various levels of the self, (such as the physical level, the sensory mind and the intuitive intellect) until one finally achieves a transcendental absolute oneness with Atman in "blissful undifferentiated illumination" (Washburn, 1990, p87). Buddhism, on the other hand, teaches that suffering is conditional on the belief in an abiding, existent self. Dukkha arises because of attachment, aversion and ignorance (to and of that self) and is a cyclic reaction energised by desire. With Buddhism the path to freedom is one of insight into the nature of the conditioning forces. With wisdom, the attachment to conditions is severed and Nibbana, as ultimate freedom, is realised (Sole-Leris, 1986).

At a superficial level, some of the paths designed to alleviate dukkha may seem contradictory. For example, Western psychotherapies are generally directed at strengthening the self while Eastern spiritual paths are concerned with its deconstruction (Wilber, 1981). Wilber attempts to reconcile these contradictions by offering a paradigm which includes both self fortifying and self transcending functions in the path to liberation. Wilber considers liberation to be an egoless state of mystical union with the universe that is beyond all division and duality. This state, called 'unity consciousness' he claims has no boundaries or limitations and is ultimate freedom. Suffering, on the other hand, he argues, results as the deluded mind creates self imposed boundaries and fantasy divisions between the 'self' and 'other'. The more contracted these existential boundaries are, the greater the alienation and subsequent suffering one experiences (Wilber, 1981).

Wilber (1981) claims that development towards "unity consciousness" occurs in several stages. Summarised, these stages are the prepersonal, personal, and transpersonal. Like other stage development paradigms (such as those of Kolberg, Freud and Piaget in Shaffer, 1985), each stage has its problems which must be resolved before an individual can move successfully on to the next (Muzika, 1990). Thus, Wilber (1981) claims that the different directions emphasised by the various liberation techniques and practices may be appropriate for different stages of development. At the prepersonal level, for example, in which individuals may be suffering from hurt, despair,

worthlessness and loss, therapies such as simple counselling and basic psychoanalysis may be useful. At the personal level, where individuals need direction and sense of meaning, Gestalt or Existential therapies may prove to be the appropriate vehicles. However, it is only when the ego is strong and has established a strong sense of meaning, argues Engler and Wilber (1986 in Muzika, 1990), that it is capable of dealing with the transpersonal processes that may be encountered in spiritual practices such as meditation. According to Engler "You have to be somebody before you can be nobody" (1986 cited in Epstein, 1990, p18). A perennial question regarding reality is: What is the truth and which path does one follow to find it and freedom? Some base their choice on emotional attractiveness, while others use intellectual reasoning to make their decision. Therefore, confidence in a path or a "faith" can be fuelled by emotional energy or by intellectual reasoning. Both kinds of faith are important and valuable in the process. However, it is the faith arising from our own personal experience of the truth which has the most impact on the direction one takes (Goldstein, 1976). I have confidence in the Buddha's teachings. This "faith" is fuelled by both emotional attraction and intellectual reasoning. However, more than these two driving factors is the power of my personal experience. I do not pretend to ultimately understand the unconditioned or Nibbana, but, personal experience of the conditioned states has confirmed for me much of what the Buddha has taught. On his dying bed the Buddha has been quoted as saying to Ananda, his personal servant: "Be lamps unto yourselves. Be refuges to yourselves. Take yourselves to no external refuge. Look not for refuge in anyone beside yourselves. And, those Ananda, who either now or after I am dead, shall be a lamp unto themselves, shall betake themselves to no refuge, but holding fast to the truth as their lamp, holding fast to the truth as their refuge, shall not look for refuge to anyone beside themselves, it is they who shall reach to the very topmost height." (Goldstein, 1976, p116). When I follow this advice and look to myself for the truth and the path, I realise that it only can be known in the context of present moment experience. "Yesterday is a memory. Tomorrow the unknown. Now is the knowing" (Sumedho, 1983). Thus, having both faith and experience in the reality of the moment as the truth and the path, I have come to believe that present centred awareness is an important way to heal a distressed psyche and facilitate freedom from dukkha.

Present Centred Awareness

It has been argued that being in the moment may be an important factor in the development of emotional well-being (Roy-King, 1986). Being aware and present centred may be one simple technique which has self fortifying (Wilber's prepersonal), self clarifying (Wilber's personal) and self transcending (Wilber's transpersonal) functions. Present centred awareness is the act of being fully aware of and attending to experience. The focus of this awareness may be directed introspectively towards the 'self' or, on the other hand, it may be directed at the world around us. However, as life is experienced through the mechanisms of our humanness (the senses, thoughts, and emotions), present centred awareness is usually directed at aspects of the experiencing 'self'. Present centred awareness has come to subsume a number of other terms such as; bare attention (Goldstein, 1976), listening to oneself (Rogers, 1961), living in the moment (Perls, 1970) or just being here now (Dass, 1972). Present centred awareness has been utilised in many psychotherapies and is central to Gestalt therapy as well as Buddhist spiritual practice. All of these psychological approaches offer numerous techniques which help to centre a person's awareness on

the present. However, it is Buddhism which offers the clearest explanation of the nature of present centred awareness and the most complete description of how it may be successfully practiced.

In the Buddhist Theravadin schools (where I have had my most comprehensive experience), present centred awareness is referred to as 'satipatthana' or, simply, mindfulness (Goleman, 1975). The word satipatthana has its origins in Pali which was spoken by Gotauma Buddha (Nanamoli, 1978). "Sati" means awareness and "patthana" means keeping present (Nyanapondika Thera, 1962). Satipatthana is "The accurate, continuous registering at the conscious level of all events occurring in the six sensory modes: seeing, hearing, touching, smelling and thinking, without qualitative judgment, evaluation, mental comment or behavioural act." (Deatherage, 1982, p 19) Similarly "Bare attention means observing things as they are without choosing, without comparing, without evaluating, without laying our projections and expectations on to what is happening, initiating instead choiceless and non-interfering awareness." (Goldstein, 1976, p20) Satipatthana is a way of being and a meditation practice. The role of satipatthana is to clearly perceive, in an objective (but not disassociated) manner, the arising and passing of all conditions of mind and body (Nyanapondika Thera, 1962). As a practice its aim is to gain insight into the nature of the self, inner peace and psychological freedom. The theme behind mindfulness is to honestly relate with what ever arises as it arises.

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In traditional Buddhist teachings there are four foundations or areas of mindfulness. These are mindfulness of body, feelings, mind states and mind objects (Nyanapodika Thera, 1962). Mindfulness of body includes, among other aspects, being aware of postures, somatic sensations and the breath. Mindfulness of feelings is not regarded as mindfulness of the emotions as such, but more being attentive to the qualities of pleasantness, unpleasantness and neutrality which arise in the mind with relationship to physical sensations or mental processes. Mindfulness of feelings is considered as important because "feelings" are primary factors in conditioning clinging (attachment) and condemnation (aversion), two root causes of suffering (dukkha) (Goldstein, 1976).

Mindfulness of mind states refers to being aware of the states of mind that may colour the mind such as a distracted mind, an angry mind, a happy mind, a guilty mind and so on. Mindfulness of mental objects refers to being aware of the content of mind such as thoughts, and, in addition, being aware of how they condition both physical and mental processes (Nyanapondika Thera, 1962). As a meditation practice, a practitioner of satipatthana chooses a primary object of attention and focuses upon that object. Theravadin Buddhist meditation teachers usually recommend choosing primary objects of meditation that are physical in nature. They recommend physical objects, such as sensations or sounds, because they are tangible, easy to focus on, and less illusive than mental objects (Nyanasamvara,1974).It should be noted, however, that meditation teachers claim that all objects of self, physical or mental, are essentially similar in nature. Thus, if insight is gained into one object of self, then insight is gained into them all. Primary objects of satipatthana meditation vary, but one of the most commonly used objects is that of the breath. As one breaths, attention may be directed to sensations at the tip of the nose or at the abdomen as it rises and falls (Nyanasamvara,1974). As a meditation practice satipatthana is not limited to sitting in a meditation posture, but can carry over into other activities, such as walking. In walking meditation the prime object of attention may be the sensations in

the legs, or the general posture of walking.

Ideally, when one meditates, one's attention remains with the primary object. In reality, though, many people's minds do not stay focussed on the primary object. There may be, for example, thoughts of the past or future, distracting aches and pains, sounds and so on. When the mind becomes distracted from the primary object the distraction is acknowledged and the meditator returns his or her attention to the object. If the distraction becomes overwhelming or predominant, this "distraction" may then become the object of meditation and of non-intellectual investigation. Like changing gears on a car one may shift from object to object and from mindfulness of body to mindfulness of mind states, feelings or mental objects. For example, if a jackhammer started up outside one's meditation room, the vibrations of the sound (a physical object) could become the object of meditation (mindfulness of physical objects or body). One could also choose to be attentive to the unpleasantness of the sounds (mindfulness of feelings) or the thoughts that arise in regard to the sounds (mindfulness of mind objects). Alternatively, one could direct attention to the quality of anger that may arise (mindfulness of mind states) (Nyanaponika Thera, 1962).

Currently, Buddhist meditation retreats are gaining popularity in the West (Goldstein, 1976). The activity in these retreats is very different from one's normal life style and the session may last anywhere from weekend to months. On these retreats, much time is spent sitting in meditation posture while attempting to focus upon a primary object such as the breath. At the end of a sitting period one arises and does something else such as eating or walking. As the retreat progresses, the delineating line between meditation and non-meditation dissolve, so no matter what one is doing, mindfulness monitors. Moment after moment, attention is drawn to whatever is happening in that moment and to whatever one is doing which then becomes the primary object of meditation. Thus, when one brushes one's teeth, attention is directed to teeth brushing and (perhaps) the way the brush feels on one's gums, or the jerking action of the arms. When one eats, one eats with mindfulness of tastes and/or chewing actions or mindfulness of thoughts related to eating. When one visits the toilet, one is aware and present for the process of defecating and so on.

Meditation retreats and the practice of satipatthana are not always easy. It must be emphasised that meditation retreats, for many people, are often characterised by periods of losing mindfulness and becoming enmeshed and lost in thought. Nevertheless, for most practitioners, it becomes clear that the process of mindfulness is in itself enlightening. That is, it illumines one's situation and lightens one's emotional burden or mental distress. As time passes, practitioners may realise that satipatthana can be practiced anywhere at any time. "In one sense mindfulness refers to a clear, lucid, quality of awareness to the everyday experiences of life." (Tart, 1990, p83).

For many, therefore, present centred awareness may become a way of being with life and dealing with day to day activities. For example, Thich Nhat Hanh, a well known Vietnamese Buddhist monk, once wrote "when washing the dishes one should only be washing the dishes, which means that while] washing the dishes one should be completely aware that one is washing the dishes. The fact that I am standing here washing these bowls is a wondrous reality. I'm being completely myself" (Hanh, 1975, p3).

Being present centred and aware can generate a sense of freedom and alleviate dukkha in a number of ways. For example, present centred awareness can be used

as a 'therapy' which helps us deal with distressing 'gross' forms of emotional suffering such as anxiety, depression, obsessions and fear. Being present centred may facilitate peak experiences, which can alter one's sense of reality thereby causing a radical change in perspective and, hence, new awareness which may have a healing effect.

Present centred awareness also may help us to deal with inner as well as interpersonal conflicts. However, more than any of the above change processes which may obviate detrimental life habits, present centred awareness is intrinsically liberating because it engenders a radical and awakening alignment in consciousness. Present centred awareness is intrinsically liberating because it draws one's consciousness into accord with the way things are and, thus, in line with the most basic existential truth.

"The prescription of living in the now is the consequence of the fact that we are living in the now; this is something that the sane person knows, but the neurotic does not realise while enmeshed in a dreamlike pseudo-existence." (Naranjo, 1970, p67).

Present centred awareness as a prescription for life is a means to an end, where the end is the means. The different ways present centred awareness may facilitate a sense of freedom work in essentially similar ways. However, to clarify and elaborate the liberating nature of present centred awareness, four angles will be delineated in the reference to my personal experience.

Present Centred Awareness as a 'Therapy'

In our efforts to manifest self-actualisation, Rogers describes the goal of life as "discovering the self one truly is" by "learning to listen to oneself... to experience what is going on within oneself" (Rogers, 1961, p169). Self awareness is thought to increase a person's knowledge about his/her behaviour and "the more one knows about their behaviour the more likely he/she is in a position to do something about it" (Pyke and Sanborn, 1975 cited in Gibbons et al. 1985, p662).

Present centred awareness is, therefore, a therapeutic tool which is used in a number of psychotherapeutic programs. It can serve both as a self regulation mechanism and as a process of self discovery. For example, Psychoanalytic processes use the technique of 'free association' as a means of increasing awareness and uncovering repressed memories and emotions. Like satipatthana, Freud's free association technique increases attention to the processes and content of mind, without censorship and criticism of what arises (Speeth, 1982). Free association is thought to be therapeutic because it helps resolve the debilitating effects of repressed traumas by bringing them into the light of awareness thereby freeing the mind from restrictions imposed by self-suppression (Muzika, 1990).

With Gestalt therapy, awareness is directed at how an individual thinks, feels, moves, and interacts in a present moment context (Naranjo, 1970). Some techniques used with Gestalt therapy involve dialogue between a therapist and a client. With dialogue, the therapist constantly reminds the client to relate to the present moment and issues which may have normally been avoided are explored. The expression of internal states acts as a tool to centre and clarify the client's experience while simultaneously providing a witness which enhances the attention and meaningfulness of the experience (Naranjo, 1970). Other Gestalt processes

involve sensory awareness processes. Physical sensations that are normally avoided are explored and this can awaken a series of unresolved memories and traumas. Once recovered, these issues are explored, accepted and reintegrated into the client's life. Using the process of being brought back into the now, an individual is empowered to discover how he/she blocks and interrupts his/her functioning (Kepner and Brien, 1970). The insights gained from increased awareness are thought to be sufficient to alleviate numerous psychological problems including anxiety (Davison and Neale, 1982).

Some therapists have used traditional Buddhist satipatthana tools in clinical situations to deal with manifestations of anxiety depression and obsessive behaviour (eg Wertz, 1982; Deatherage, 1982). One traditional method which has been used to enhance the effect of satipatthana is that of labelling an object of attention or mindfulness with a name (Nyanaponidika, 1962). Like the expression of feelings and thoughts used in Gestalt therapy, 'noting' serves to concentrate the mind as well as clarify and objectify the condition. For example, attention to the rising and falling in the abdomen while breathing can be labelled "rising, falling", thoughts of the past can be labelled "remembering", the future, "planning". Simple emotional tendencies can be labelled appropriately such as "anger", "worrying", "fear", "sadness" etc. Actions also can be labelled accordingly such as "brushing" for brushing one's teeth, "pissing" for urinating etc. Another satipatthana tool which can be developed is what Deatherage (1982) calls "the watcher self". "The watcher self can see the remembering of some painful event and label it objectively without becoming involved in its melodrama. The watcher can therefore put psychological distance between the 'me' who experiences the painful event and the 'me' who is presently remembering it." (Deatherage, 1982, p22) The "watcher self" is not used to strengthen the self concept but: "The watcher self is used only as a tool for grounding some of the patient's mental energy in the present, providing a temporary, psychological stable centre for them to operate from and providing a perspective from which their own psychological functioning can be objectively observed." (Deatherage, 1982, p25).

Both "noting" and developing the "watcher self" can be very useful. If one can say to oneself, for example, "anger" when one is experiencing rage, then the "noting" allows the space to choose one's reactions instead being dominated by blind action. This space which noting and satipatthana promote can be therapeutic. In one case study, a divorced woman who was having bouts of depression, anxiety and unwanted memories of her ex-husband's bizarre sexual demands, was trained to label the thoughts as "remembering, remembering". Within a few days she could see the causal relationship between the thoughts and the anxiety and depression which proved to be quite therapeutic (Deatherage, 1982). Another woman, who was hospitalised for manic-depression and schizophrenia, was instructed to watch the second hand of a clock and, when her mind went off the clock, to name the distraction. She soon realised that most of her distractions were related to the past. She was then instructed to label them "remembering, remembering". With this technique "she learned to identify herself with the objective watcher of her disturbed thoughts instead of the depressed thinker" (Deatherage, 1982, p24). She was able to gain insight into the nature of her illness from this process and it was not long before she was released from hospital. Another woman who was hospitalised for anxiety, depression and inability to function adequately, rebelled against any suggestion of introspection, and owing to the fact that she was a Mormon the word "Buddhist" or "meditation" was not mentioned. As the therapists interacted with her it

became evident that much of her day was spent fantasising and imagining to avoid the anxiety of her life. The habit of fantasising was discussed with her and she was then asked to undertake a "psychological procedure". To her surprise she was asked to bake a cake. However, she had to do it extremely mindfully with minute attention to every detail. When her persistent fantasies would arise, she was instructed to just observe them. After a time she found that she could intentionally return to the present moment and so function more adequately. With mindfulness and other therapy she eventually gained insight into her anxiety and depression and was released from hospital (Deatherage, 1982).

I have been using meditation practices for nearly fifteen years, but began using satipatthana meditation techniques about 7 years ago. I have attended numerous meditation retreats and have noticed a "therapeutic" effect of mindfulness in these retreats and in my daily life. When I first started employing the satipatthana methods, I began experiencing a pain in my heart area. At times it would feel as if a knife had been inserted and was being twisted. At other times, it just ached. When I meditated the pains would intensify and distract me from the primary object of the meditation, so one day I decided to make the pain the object of my meditation. Although the pain was dominant in my consciousness, I found that when I tried to direct attention to the sensation my focus would 'deflect'. It was as if my mind wanted to avoid touching that area. I experimented with methods which would enhance exploration and slowly I learned that if I could generate a quality of total acceptance and gentle love, then the pain would allow my mind inside.

As I ventured inside the pain, I was flooded with memories. I discovered feelings of rejection, fear and loneliness which went far back into my childhood. These feelings also related to my adult life and as I meditated images of past interactions and associated emotional feelings of inadequacy and frustration would emerge. The images and feelings arose concomitantly with the pain in my heart. The pains lasted on and off for a period of about two years. I meditated upon them whenever they arose, and slowly I gained acceptance of the pains and the past that they represented. Like the integrative processes of Gestalt therapy, I found that the more I could accept the pain, the more I could accept myself as a whole. This acceptance was also reflected in the way I communicated with other people. I could relate with less fear and more openness and honesty. In addition, the pains became a useful tool. Particularly, when I interacted with people, (such as threatening individuals) the heart pain served as a warning signal that communication was difficult. With the mindfulness training, I could be attentive to the difficulty and allow myself to be open to those individuals (and the pain) finding acceptance rather than closing down with resistance, rejection and fear. The mindfulness process related to my heart area was therapeutic and healing in many areas of my life. Slowly and gradually the pains vanished.

Mindfulness thus can open up and facilitate a resolution of undermining influences in our lives. The detached (but not disassociated) attitude of present centred awareness also allows for a space to occur between life's events and the ego's reactions to those events, thus preventing our lives from being overwhelmed by unwise obsessions and actions. Mindfulness, for example, can catch a thought of anger before that anger is converted into a fist in someone's face or it can catch a worrying thought before the thought explodes into full blown anxiety. The regular practice of present

centred awareness, can gradually alter habitual and crippling reactions to disturbing thoughts and feelings. However, another even more potent and rapid method for effecting change in habitual tendencies and promoting well-being is to experience a radical alteration of consciousness or a peak experience.

Peak experiences

A moment is only a short segment of time, yet in moments the human experience of reality can be deepened, challenged, explored and transformed (Roy-King, 1986). Carlos Casteneda, is an American writer who has authored a series of books about experiences he supposedly had with a Mexican shaman named Don Juan Matus. Over the course of their many discussions, Don Juan often attempted to get Carlos to attend more fully to the moment. He believed that this type of attention had in it great power to transform one's experiential world. "Do you know a moment can be an eternity?....This is not a riddle its a fact, but only when you mount that moment and use it to take the totality of yourself forever in any direction" (Casteneda, 1974,p8).

Being in the moment can facilitate what have been called 'peak experiences' and facilitate the opening of realities previously unexplored. Maslow (1968) described peak experiences as moments of intense joy and fulfilment that may occur when individuals are present for life. A mystical experience is one type of peak experience (Maslow, 1968). Mystical experiences may occur after intense spiritual practices, encounters with death, or spontaneously when a persons attention is focused, in the present (Happold, 1963; Grey, 1985; Goleman, 1975). The mystical experience is a subjective phenomenon which is not susceptible to scientific scrutiny or verification. Despite materialistic scepticism and explanation, the mystical experience is very real to those who perceive them (Grey, 1985). According to Happold (1963) mystical states are beyond description by discursive intellect. They are states of knowing that have elements such as 'timelessness', 'peace', and 'oneness with the universe' which create a feeling that the phenomenal ego is dissolved into some greater entity or presence. Gopi Krishna, in reference to his mystical experience described "sensation of light....an overwhelming sense of wonder and awe.... unshakeable conviction of the reality of the situation...an encounter with an inexpressible all knowing intelligence of an omniscient divine being... love and adoration." (Grey, 1985, p149) Another description is that of a school boy who spontaneously experienced a "timeless moment" Suddenly and without warning, something invisible seemed to be drawn across the sky, transforming the world about me into a kind of tent of concentrated and enchanted significance. What was merely an outside became an inside. The objective was somehow transformed into a completely subjective fact, which was experienced as 'mine', but on another level the word had no meaning; for 'I' was no longer the familiar ego." (Happold, 1963, p 130)

Peak experiences have numerous dimensions, and manifestations. They can be cosmic shifts in consciousness (such as the mystic variety) or they can be less spectacular moments of happiness and fulfilment (such as falling in love, watching a new born child, moments of intellectual insights, or moments of athletic achievement). Maslow (1968) claimed that these experiences were therapeutic. They could alter a person's view of himself and others, and significantly alter the relationship with the world. In addition, these experiences are capable of releasing a person's energies for greater creativity, spontaneity, idiosyncrasy, and expressiveness. Maslow went on to claim that some mystical or oceanic experiences have been "so profound as to remove certain neurotic symptoms forever after" (Maslow, 1968, p101).

Of the few studies related to the after effect of mystical experiences, those concerning the near death experience (NDE) are gaining increasing interest. Numerous studies (according to Ring, 1980; Grey, 1985; and Flynn, 1982) have indicated that NDEs, which have mystical elements have changed those who have experienced these states in a number of ways: "Experiencers resume life by living it more fully, loving more openly and fearing death less, if at all. Their life seems more grounded in a sense of purpose and is more consciously shaped by the spiritual values of love and acceptance." (Ring, 1980, p202)

After conducting a survey on NDE experiences Flynn (1982) argued that the effect of the mystical states on moral consciousness and belief structures was profound. He found that those who had experienced the mystical states associated with NDEs were likely to operate from a high stage of moral development. Many of those who have experienced mystical states have been called saints (Happold, 1963). Thus, peak experiences are not only pleasant, they can be profoundly transforming. They may uproot detrimental conditioned responses that cause suffering and awaken individuals to self actualising principles (Maslow, 1968). It appears, the more refined or transcendental the experience, the stronger is its effect.

States of concentration called 'Jhanas' can produce very refined states of consciousness which may contribute to the onset of a mystical experience (Goleman, 1975). Buddhist texts (Buddhagosa, 1976) offer detailed taxonomies, organisation, and general explanations of how to achieve these states at will. Basically the greater the level of concentration the more refined is the experience. At initial levels of activation (such as being in love), the body feels light and expansive and the mind is happy. As the states become more refined there are feelings of bliss, rapture, followed by consciousness of infinite space, oneness with the universe, awareness of no-thing-ness and eventually neither perception nor non-perception culminating in feelings of indescribable peace (Goleman, 1975).

Mystical states form a major component of Wilber's (1981) notion of a path to freedom and "unity consciousness" which, according to him, is the ultimate state of freedom. Like Maslow (1968) Wilber (1981) argues that peak experiences of this type have the power to eliminate neurotic habits and tendencies and they may even alter one's perception of the world, the self and give a sense of incredible peace.

However, peak experiences are still part of paradoxical life situation and the wheel of birth and death discussed earlier in this essay. The catch is, no matter how sublime and subtle the experience is, like heaven, peak experiences are impermanent. Certain individuals can encounter peak moments, benefit from them and then let them go. Most however, like fallen angels, strive for the continued experience of expanded states of consciousness and this can become a terrible trap. Meditation teachers caution of the dangers of developing the Jhanas because of their seductive power and deceptive nature (we can easily believe we have 'arrived' at ultimate liberation when, in fact, we are still caught on the wheel). If attachment is developed to an impermanent experience, then the attachment may condition wanting (like a Hungry Ghost) which eventually leads to misery (Epstein, 1988).

Thus, ironically, being present centred may facilitate peak experiences,

but if one's mindfulness is not strong enough, attachment to the peak experience can engender further suffering. When I was twenty one years old, being aware of my dukkha, I decided that the most important thing to do in life was to "get" enlightened. Keen and enthusiastic to make "it" or die, I travelled to Thailand and was ordained as a Buddhist monk. At that stage I didn't know much about satipatthana, but used a variety of contemplation meditations to centre my mind. After a short period of searching, I found a meditation monastery in the forests of NE Thailand and stayed there. The climate and surroundings were harsh and there were no other English speaking monks. Life was difficult, yet I appreciated the rich spiritual life that being ordained and living in a Buddhist community offered. During my stay I contracted, dysentery, malaria and then later hepatitis, so the prospect of dying in the forests of NE Thailand was no mere fantasy.

When I contemplated what or who dies, my mind became peaceful, consequently death contemplation meditation became one of my primary practices. After about 15 months of intensive practice, which was compounded by severe illness, my reality began to break apart. My world and the experience of myself began to alter radically. Wherever I looked, I couldn't find a "me" that died, and my ego seemed to be dissolved into "something greater". There were many different experiences of expanded consciousness which followed and they were characterised by a sense that "I" was just a drop in the ocean of the universe. Everything seemed as if it was a dream, but the dream seemed more "real" than anything I had ever encountered. Strange but "perfect" events occurred as if they were following a divine plan. The "me" I had always identified as my essential self seemed of little consequence within this new perspective and everything appeared to be dominated by a very tangible omniscient intelligence. All "I" could do was surrender to it. This surrender was terrifying, but, at the same time it felt incredibly secure, spacious, peaceful and liberating. For a period of about 4 months my world was turned upside down, and my concepts of reality and existence were completely transformed.

For reasons primarily related to health I eventually disrobed, I left the order of monks and returned to secular life. Two weeks later, as a result of a complex set of circumstances, beyond the scope of this paper to describe, I married a Thai woman, returning to Australia with her two months later. Having nowhere to live, we moved in with my mother at Turrumurra, an upper middle-class suburb of Sydney. Within a month my wife was pregnant. The contrast between my expanded world of spiritual security and spacious liberation and my new married life was horrific and my world felt as though it had come crashing down. I felt completely trapped.

Back in Australia, my freedom lost, I experienced great conflict. I reminisced about my experiences in Thailand, like flicking through postcards of a wonderful holiday (holy days). I suffered intense inner conflict over my role as a husband and parent while feeling great spiritual isolation in my new, materialistic surroundings. I desperately wanted to be back in Thailand and not where I was. My feelings of misery continued for quite some time. Eventually, I let go of my conflict and got on with life as it presented itself, but I had learned some important lessons. The most important of these lessons was that attachment to peak experiences can cause misery and suffering as powerfully as these experiences can give feelings of peace and joy.

The Thailand experience had drastically altered my understanding of life and the universe. However, it was just an experience and, as an experience, it was just another conditioned moment on the wheel of birth and death. The Buddha taught that one of the primary root causes of misery was attachment (Nanamoli, 1978). Intellectually, I realised that attachment may eventually lead to suffering, but habits are strong and I still attach myself to concepts, views and objects. It is difficult to sever attachment. Nonetheless, as I grow older, present centred awareness has become like a refuge or home base. Sometimes I wander from it, suffer, but eventually return. Life is a constant process of enchantment and letting go. When I experience conflict and the dukkha of enchantment, present centred awareness is my most important ally in dealing with that conflict.

Present Centred Awareness, Desire, Inner and Interpersonal Conflict and Peace.

Conflict seems to arise when we feel that we should be somewhere else doing something other than what we are presently doing. Amongst other things, it is the feeling that conditions or circumstances 'should' be other than what they are and, in this state of mind, the past and future appear to be more in accordance with our wishes and ideals. Conflict of this type, whether inner or interpersonal, may be resolved with the application of present centred awareness. Rogers (1980) seemed to be referring to the use of present centred awareness in psychological healing when he described a process he called becoming "congruent". "By this I mean that when my experience of this moment is present in my awareness and when what is present in my awareness is present in my communications, then each of these three levels matches or is congruent. At such moments I am integrated or whole, I am completely in one piece." (Rogers, 1980, p15).

When people desire something and that desire is not satisfied, distress or conflict may arise. Even the desire for peace and psychic freedom, though it may be well motivated, is still 'desire' and therefore has the potential to give rise to conflict. By being present for the experience of life as it naturally arises, it is possible to transcend the pull of desire and the conflict or "discongruence" which desire may create.

A few years ago I attended a meditation retreat. The retreat was held in silence, which meant that there was no visual or verbal contact permitted amongst participants. Some of the yogis were old friends while others I had never met before. For six weeks I slept in a dorm, sat in a hall, ate and generally lived with 50 or more people with whom there was no normal communication. One day, as I was "sitting" in meditation, my mind became very quiet. There were no sounds in the hall and all I could hear was the gentle rustle of trees and the sweet sound of birds. The conditions were conducive, and I experienced peace. Part way through the session a person near me began to wriggle. The sound drew my attention, but it was not disturbing. Later he began to scratch his head and I also could hear him swallowing. My concentration was shattered and I felt irritation arise, but at that moment the end-of-session bell rang and we all got up.

As the days continued, a similar scenario was repeated a number of times. At these times his repertoire would also include getting up in the middle of the session to use the toilet attached to the hall, flushing the cistern and then, returning to his position in the hall, noisily writing memoirs in a journal he had been keeping. As my meditations became more difficult I began to notice the person on the other side of me as well. He was breathing

quite heavily and, though not previously noticed, the rhythmic rushing of air would distract me from my own breath which was the object focus of my meditation. What were previously very calm meditation sessions began to become times of great agitation and hatred.

My concentration deteriorated and instead of observing my breath, the sessions began by neurotically waiting for the agitating sounds to begin. As their vibration was detected, uncontrollable fantasies would arise. In my mind's eye I would see me violently stomping on the culprit's journal and pen and strangling him while simultaneously I could feel a power growing in my arms, getting ready to stuff any available cushion up my noisy neighbour's nostrils. The thoughts would arise, and with great aversion and clinging, I would suffer. Feeling the conflict in my heart, my mind began to bargain. One thought I had was to write each of them a polite yet frank note: "Please stop writing, it is disturbing my peace." or "Do you mind not breathing, it is distracting my attention". For hours I would sit obsessively planning the how, when, where, and what of my potential notes. While my colleagues were either getting enlightened or completing the first draft of a best seller, I was entangled and enmeshed with thought and conflict. Naturally, I didn't strangle my neighbours, nor did I write them any diplomatic messages. I did, however, remember a talk given by a Thai meditation master. He compared the suffering of worldly beings to a dog with an itch on its back. If the dog sits in the sun it blames the sun. If it finds a shady tree it blames the tree. If it jumps in the river it blames the river. The itch he said was greed, ignorance and hatred. He, like the Buddha, claimed that only when these taints of mind are uprooted will worldly beings find resolutions to their conflicts, peace and freedom from suffering (Chah, 1980, 1982).

I suffered with my intense aversion for about 3-4 days. However, the suffering came from my own mind. Its cause was attachment to pleasant and peaceful mind states, aversion to unidealistic sounds, delusion about the way things should be and ignorance about the way they were. The peace I originally experienced was conditional upon getting things to go the way that I wanted them to. It became clear, (intellectually and to some extent experientially), that true peace is unconditional and, so, not dependent upon changeable objects of mind or body.

After this insight I tried to become 'congruent' with the experience of life as it presented itself. I also tried to simplify and clarify the situation by becoming aware of sounds as just sounds, thoughts as just thoughts, aversion as just aversion and so on. As mindfulness sharpened the pain of desire, clinging and grasping became more obvious with letting go of my views, concepts and desires being the only natural resolution of my conflict and, thus, the way to peace and freedom.

Eventually I allowed myself to look at my noisy neighbours. I could see that they, just like me, had conflict. Struggling with the mind's insanities, they also had human difficulties, hopes, desires and personal issues. As I looked, and my 'seeing' became clearer, an overwhelming quality of compassion and acceptance arose to take the place of my anger and agitation.

In most cases interpersonal conflict resolution is dependent on being able to hear another's point of view. Carl Rogers (1980) praised the ability some of us have to really 'hear' another. If the mind is defiled with "taints", then perception and human interaction may beclouded by one's

judgments, expectations, desires, aversions, hopes, fears and limitations. "Most of the time, of course, I, like everyone else, exhibit some degree of incongruence. I have learned, however, that realness, or genuineness, or congruence -- whatever term you wish to give it -- is a fundamental basis for the best communication." (Rogers, 1980, p15)

According to Rogers (1980) real 'hearing' is a subjective experience where one listens without judgement or expectation, but with an open mind. Words and the concepts they create are therefore not twisted to fit into a listener's ideals or desires but are heard in an honest and realistic manner. It was only when I could 'let go' of my preconceived views, judgements and aversion that I could really 'see' the yogis on either side of me and thus appreciate them with compassion. The ability to let go, however, seemed to be dependent upon present centred awareness, which allows for the recognition of conditions and fosters the wisdom to accept their reality. Conflict (inner or interpersonal) is, of course, painful, and we tend to want to avoid it. Yet, if we honestly feel and perceive our experience, whatever it is, in a present moment context, we may find simple solutions.

To feel lonely is to feel isolated, alienated and disconnected from oneself and the rest of the world. Love is a means of reconnecting with oneself and the world around us, thus becoming whole through the union which love engenders. Love is normally considered as liking something, however from a Buddhist perspective it is to allow someone or something to be without judgment or expectation with "a willingness to listen and be attentive" (Kittisaro, 1989, p155).

Intrinsic Freedom: No Self No Problems

The Buddha taught that there are two types of understanding. The first type is the understanding which comes from an accumulated memory and intellectual grasp of concepts. The second type is not dependent upon intellectual reasoning and comes from a penetrative (non-discursive) insight into the 'truth's or the way things are. According to Buddhists the root causes of dukkha are attachment, aversion, and ignorance and the way to liberation from dukkha is with morality, concentration and wisdom. Morality is basically the act of living life with integrity and doing those things which do not harm oneself or others. Concentration is the ability to centre and focus attention while wisdom is a penetrative insight into the way things are (Rahula, 1959). Mindfulness can engender both intrinsic knowledge and penetrative wisdom (Mahasi Sayadaw, 1983).

Morality, concentration and wisdom are dependent upon one another. If one leads a life that is fragmented with acts that are harmful, it is difficult to focus the mind. If one cannot focus the mind, then it is difficult to see the truth. The more one knows the truth, the more likely one is able to live life with integrity. Like a forest water pool, if the muddy water is stirred up, one can not see its bottom, but if the muddy water settles and the water is clear, one can then observe and know what is on the bottom of the pool. Wisdom is the quality of clearly knowing the 'bottom of the pool', that is, the truth of existence (Chah, 1980; 1982; Kornfield & Breiter, 1985). According to Buddhists the truth of existence is that all conditioned phenomena are impermanent and all phenomena are insubstantial, empty or not self (Sole-Leris, 1986). The Buddhist line of thought considers that all psychological problems or dukkha, gross or subtle, arise because of the idea that there is belief in a solid, abiding self and the way to liberation is to gain insight into the

empty nature of this deceptive self concept (Rahula, 1959).

Egolessness has become an accepted aspiration of many meditational practitioners (Epstein, 1988). For example, Wilber's (1981) "unity consciousness" is a state where the "self" boundaries expand infinitely and disappears and "identity, as a psychological concept, is achieved with the universe" (Koltko, 1989). Many concentration practices, such as developing the Jhanas, can lead to a loss of ego boundaries. For example, at the seventh level of the formless Jhanas there is an "awareness of No-thing-ness" While at the eighth formless Jhana there is "Neither perception-nor non-perception" (Goleman, 1975, p215). Egolessness is commonly understood the sought after end state and so many meditators attempt to abandon the ego for an experience that is free from ego boundaries. This is not unlike my attempt to "get" enlightened when in Thailand. It seemed that if I could surrender my ego and experience "Egolessness", I finally would be free from dukkha. A few years back I began to realise that no-body "gets" enlightened and there is nothing to be abandoned. According to Epstein (1990) emptiness does not mean nothingness or that nothing exists. Rather, it means that nothing solid and lasting can be found with the concept attributed to self. Consequently, the freedom of emptiness is not an experience or a state, but a relationship to conditions which are in constant flux. "Egolessness is not a state, it is only found in relationship to a belief in concrete existence." (p30). Epstein argues, that by an individual's attempt to be rid of an ego and to merge it with its surroundings or attain a "state" of "egolessness", emptiness is recified into yet another 'thing'. The Buddhist doctrine of emptiness certainly does not intend to replace one 'thing' (self) with another (emptiness) (Epstein, 1990).

According to Buddhists the "self" is made up of five basic elements or clusters of conditions (called kandas). The kandas are: matter (form), feelings, mental formations (such as thoughts etc), perceptions, and consciousness. The kandas are constantly arising and passing away in a manner similar to a motion picture which is only a sequence of still pictures manipulated in such a way as to create an illusion of life (Rahula, 1959). The usual self-concept is the result of bringing the kandas together into an illusively solid entity and calling them "I" "mine" and "myself".

When I ordained as a monk in Thailand my head was shaved. The hair which I once called mine fell into a drain and was washed away. Later, when I thought that I was dying, I scrutinised the self that I thought I was. Everytime I looked I found a different concept. Sometimes I was a "monk", sometimes I was a "lonely boy", sometimes I was "an Australian", at other times I was "frightened" "brave" "young" "old" "confused" etc. With every introspection I found yet different images and concepts of myself, all of which inevitably would fade into something else. I could not find a stable and lasting concept that I could call "I", "mine" and "myself".

A few years ago I went on (yet another) satipatthana meditation retreat. The retreat was scheduled to last for six weeks. Usually on retreats I can maintain a reasonably stable and comfortable sitting posture. However, for some reason on this retreat, no matter how many cushions I used or how I twisted my body, I could not find a comfortable position. For the first two weeks I wriggled and squirmed (possibly driving my neighbours crazy) and then, eventually, decided to surrender to the discomfort. Like other times before (with my heart pain) I made "pain" the object of my meditation. This time though, the pain was not an obvious reflection of something else in my life but was distinctly physical in nature. The pain usually occurred around my knees

and feet. At first I felt great aversion to the pain and the one hour sitting sessions seemed like four or five. Slowly, however, as I tried to remain present centred and aware, my mindfulness and concentration sharpened and my attention could focus right into the centre of the sensations with a quality of openness. What I found was fascinating. The essential nature of the pain was space. Out of the space there were qualities of hardness, heat, movement and moments of burning, sharpness, pulling and twisting. All these elements would arise like miniature explosions out of the space only to change to something else and disappear again. Some explosions were bigger than others but all of them only lasted moments. If I became distracted, or mindfulness faded, all the little separate explosions became diffuse and connected and the "knee" felt "painful". If, on the other hand, I could remain focused, the next moment would arise before the last one had a chance to hurt. If I could remain mindful and focused there was no "knee" and no "pain", only moments of sensations. Only when all the little momentary fragments of sensations were put together did it feel painful.

The "pain" of a "knee" can be compared to the pain of our lives. Our ignorance allows all the thoughts and feelings related to the past and the future to be mixed with delusions about the supposedly solid present in order to create an illusion of a self which is miserable. On the other hand, if life can be experienced moment to moment, then the potential for dukkha is greatly minimised. Present centred awareness is way of seeing clearly the moment to moment nature of life. Present centred awareness has the capacity of grasping reality to its maximum (Epstein, 1988) and is like a solvent which dissolves the glue (i.e. ignorance) that sticks the self concept together.

"There is a story of a man fleeing a tiger. He came to precipice and catching hold of a wild vine, swung down over the edge. The tiger sniffed at him from above while below another tiger growled and snapped waiting for him to fall. As he hung there two mice began to gnaw away the vine. Just then he saw a big wild strawberry growing nearby. Reaching out with his free hand he plucked the strawberry. How sweet it tasted." (Goldstein, 1976, p22)

Because Buddhist thought emphasises dukkha, Buddhists have been criticised for being pessimistic. However, a Buddhist view is neither pessimistic nor optimistic but, rather, realistic (Rahula, 1959). The only certain thing about life is that there is death. It is like we are always hanging over a cliff from a vine being gnawed by mice. Yet, life can be sweet if we are present to taste it. Being present for life is intrinsically liberating because it illuminates the emptiness of both self and psychological distress. As far as I am able to understand, emptiness does not mean nothingness or annihilation. On the contrary, emptiness is full to the brim with experience. "Emptiness is where you experience everything in itself and of itself without meaning and judgement" (Peter Nelson, personal communication, 1990). Again, if we can do what we do for the sake of doing it, then the energy wasted in maintaining a self can be free to experience life (Moss, 1981).

Satipatthana: Destabilising or Centring?

Earlier in this essay it was argued that Western psychotherapies are directed at self fortification while spiritual practices are aimed at self transcendence. Now, it will be argued that Satipatthana can fulfil both functions. Satipatthana is both a way of being and an intensive meditation practice. Wilber (1981) warns that meditation practices may be fragmenting and destabilising for those individuals who are still at the pre and personal

stages because "You have to be somebody before you can be nobody" (Engler, 1986 cited in Epstein, 1990, p18). If satipatthana unsticks the self concept, then satipatthana as a meditation practice may be inappropriate for those whose problem is some form of neurotic fragmentation. However, satipatthana is a meditation practice which incorporates both stabilising and integrating functions. The "ego", according to Epstein (1988) can be understood in both representational and functional terms. The representational aspect of the ego constructs a picture of the self and the world with multiple mental images. The functional role of the ego, on the other hand, maintains psychic equilibrium and facilitates adaptation and growth. The "I" of the ego can be found in its representational aspect and this aspect creates the "I" as something that is felt to be real and solid. The functional aspect of the ego, however, promotes organisation and integration of the diverse elements and inputs of the life experience.

While on a meditation retreat with a Burmese meditation master (Sayadaw U Pandita, 1988), I heard him describe sharp mindfulness as having the nature of penetration and the ability to 'cover', 'rub' or stick to any object of attention. With mindfulness one "stays with" what ever happens as it happens. Thus, mindfulness maintains a sense of connection with changing events. It does not destroy the ego, but, on the contrary, provides and enhances a stable yet flexible centre from which to integrate and synthesise changing experience (Epstein, 1988). This ability to integrate random and incessant change inherent in events is healing and leads to increasing well-being (Muzika, 1990; Epstein, 1990). Thus, satipatthana facilitates and engenders the functional aspects of the ego and those who are mindful appear centred, at ease and "together".

The representational self or "I", on the other hand, is an illusion which arises because we do not scrutinise our experiences closely enough but instead we examine ourselves from the viewpoint of a person (Muzika, 1990). If we practice mindfulness, we begin to see the space between the kandas and the illusion of the "self" is shown for what it is - no-thing. Thus, mindfulness lets ego be ego (Epstein, 1990). Mindfulness does not eliminate the ego but rather banishes the delusion regarding the ego. "This seemingly solid, concrete, independent, self-instituting I under its own power that appears actually does not exist at all" (The Dalai Lama according to Epstein, 1988, p68). When there is no self, then dukkha has no place to abide. When there is no self dukkha does not have an owner. No self no problems!

Conclusion

Dukkha, is a term that refers to gross suffering as well as the subtle aspects of unsatisfactoriness and uncertainty. Dukkha is the reason why individuals seek freedom. The path to freedom is a very personal path and I have faith in the Buddha's teaching because it has been confirmed by personal experience. Central to this teaching is the practice of present centred awareness.

Although I can not claim to be an expert on satipatthana, I do know that mindfulness has helped me cultivate freedom from dukkha. Satipatthana has given me a stable centre and the psychological space to help heal a distressed psyche. Satipatthana has also given me a means of dealing with inner and interpersonal conflict and provided an insight into how to love myself and others. Moreover, mindfulness has been intrinsically liberating because it has illuminated the fantasy nature of "my" "self". Satipatthana

is not an easy exercise. The habits of attachment, aversion and ignorance are strong. Like most people I become lost and enchanted with conditioned states and perpetuate dukkha. Every now and then, though, I sense a taste of freedom from the wheel of birth and death. In those moments I discover that present centred awareness is my refuge as well as my path.

There are numerous ways to cultivate present centred awareness. Present centred awareness can be an intensive meditation practice and/or a way of life, but essentially it is the practice of doing what one does for the value of doing it using 100% of one's being. Present centred awareness is one way to freedom of the heart, but in many ways freedom of the heart is simply present centred awareness which is being here now for the experience of life.

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