
Meditation and Psychotherapy

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Extracts

The main meditation instruction is just to relax and stay open to whatever is coming. That has certain similarities to Freud's idea of free association – to not inhibit the arisings of life. For Freud that is the work of the patient, whereas the work of the analyst is to provide a free-floating attention. Wilfred Bion expressed the same, saying that the analyst should be without memory or desire, just present.

If meditation is used as a holiday from life then it may have the benefits of reducing anxiety or increasing wellbeing, but that's all. However if you can bring an open presence into every situation then you can be connected with the whole of life. The mood of what is around you then becomes your ally and you take your place in the world as a participant. You start on the inside.

For example, imagine you can't really smell anything. There you are, sitting reading and now you want to make a cup of coffee so off you go into the kitchen and suddenly there is this aroma! The capacity to smell arises with the object. It is not a permanent feature. But awareness is there always, potential, like the mirror.

If we fashion our mind to be like a private garden in which we want to have flowers and no weeds then we are always going to be kept busy. For the meditator weeds are welcome to come... coming in the night-time floating in on the breeze.

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Meditation and psychotherapy

Psychotherapy is a very big field; there are hundreds of different styles of therapy now, and meditation also is a word that covers many different approaches. However both psychotherapy and meditation have some styles that are more concerned with analysis, with trying to gain some understanding of structures and so bring a clarity to how not to be so tied in to our lives. Both approaches have a spectrum with more knowledge-seeking approaches on one side and on the other side more attention on the immediate experience.

For example, in psychotherapy we have drama therapy and Gestalt therapy, where the work begins with encountering inhibitions. In fact the inhibition is the work: we have to get close to how we limit ourselves. It is one thing to talk about your situation as if you were some kind of object out there, and it is another to be in more naked direct contact with nowhere to hide. Your chosen approach may depend on what you think is at stake.

Living in a western country we have certain assumptions and beliefs about how life is, what its focus is. Generally we think we are born out of our mother's body, that we inherit some biological directions through DNA, and that our interactions in the family, in school and in society mould what is possible and what isn't possible. This includes such distinctions as gender, race and class which are very powerful in certain areas of the culture and not so important in others. You grow up and you do your best, you live a while and then you die.

Psychotherapy can try to take out some of the bad bits and make you more free to enjoy some of the good bits. That is to say, almost all the schools of psychotherapy are fundamentally secular; they don't include the goal of liberation. They are about finding ways to help people find and fulfil their potential – to recognise how they sabotage themselves, to see how they internalise messages from the environment and that these introjects from the environment can be incorporated into one's sense of self. To say that we are constituted out of our environment seems fairly obvious. Yet we also think, '*Hang on, but I am me*'. If I am me, then I am me, but this is a little bit dangerous because 'I am me' claims an identification of what I find coming inside me. So, if your parents didn't have much belief in you and you incorporate that belief as part of how you make sense of yourself, then long after you have left that formative environment you will continue to limit yourself.

A healthy functioning person is unstable!

Always the central question is what is the self. We know that when we are with different people different aspects of us are evoked. If we are playing with a two-year-old child our postures,

gestures and tone of voice are particular. If we are talking with our boss at work we are different. Performatively our potential is released situationally. That is say, I find myself situationally. It is not that we know exactly what to do but if we meet a friend and they have a young baby then without intention or effort our gaze will soften as we look at the baby. We will make strange sounds; we just find ourselves doing this. Then when we become more mindful we notice that our performance is often co-emergent with the environment. Our reading of the situation, however, is often self-referential. I develop an internal story to myself, which is ego-syntonic or harmonious with my sense of self. It is as if I know who I am and what I like and what I don't like.

This is a very light way of addressing the question of whether there is an unconscious. Are there habits and urges, impulses which arise through us and are taken by other people to be us, and without us being the conscious instigator or developer of these tendencies? In that way we start to see that there is a lot going on and that if I attend to it, it will put into question the singularity of my sense of self.

That is why many modern approaches to psychotherapy describe a dialogic self – a self manifesting through internal dialogue, between self sub-systems. The balance of these self-positionings is evoked by factors in the environment. Another way to describe this is to say that a healthy functioning person is unstable!

Psychotherapy generally is concerned with how to improve our possibilities of having a good life. Some therapy systems, particularly analysis, are not especially concerned with developing an ethical person; they are more concerned with seeing that this how we operate. The implications of what we do are uncovered but what we do is left open. There is a kind of existential ungroundedness in that approach. Who can say how we should do anything since people live in all sorts of ways? Many cultures, for example, are still dragging themselves slowly out of patriarchy. So there can be a suspicion of those who purport to know something, because of the power claims of knowledge: I know what you should do. Really? On what basis? Oh, if you are a woman then you should do this.

It is usually the case that the direction of other people's existence is manifesting from a very narrow reading of a person's potential. And on the basis of what you think you know you can predict. You know about, so you can know ahead. Before the phenomena emerge you are already planning what you are going to do. This is basically a monologic structure.

When we start to ease ourselves out of these predictive structures we are returning to the question of ethics. How should I live? What is my obligation to other people? As we see with climate change and the consequences of mass consumerism, the consequences of our actions are becoming clearer and clearer. What shall we do? Do I have to keep a sense of the bigger picture?

Generally speaking psychotherapy is not very concerned with this. However some of the approaches developed from systems theory, particularly models of family therapy and group therapy, are concerned with collaboration in forms of relating which are inclusive of the potential of each person.

Meditation in the Buddhist tradition

In Buddhist meditation the view of how we are and where we are is very, very different. It generates a particular ethos and an approach of how to live. Buddha's first teaching was pointing to the four truths: the fact that there is suffering; the fact that suffering can end; that it can end because it has cause; and there is a way of ending suffering. Sufferings were named as birth, old age

sickness and death. We have been born; if we are lucky we will get old, and we will die. Often there is some sadness in that.

But that's not the end, because as we move through the world our activity is propulsive. That is to say, we are dynamic creatures and there is an excess in what we do: we formulate an intention; we bring it into being; once concluded, like rubbing our hands together, there is a kind of electric charge that is built up and this charge manifests as karma. Karma simply means activity. That is to say, activity, because it is dynamic, has consequence arising after the ending of its immediately visible result.

One of the things that Buddha encouraged was to reflect on the nature of impermanence. I have only been in Lisbon a short time but it seems to me that this is a very nostalgic city haunted by past, by history. In a sense you are lucky you are just called Portugal and so you can fade gently. I am from Great Britain so our collapse is much more public and embarrassing. What once was is no longer the case. The world changes, economics change, we have to find ways to survive in a very competitive world. Countries have to reinvent themselves. Individuals have to reinvent themselves. The coal industry is under attack in many countries. Heavy engineering and many other traditional jobs are vanishing and so the patterns of human skills and capacities that were useful working in a shipyard are not so applicable for IT. Everything in the outer world changes. Seasons change, leaves come off the trees. Social structures change. Children behave in ways which horrify their parents. Why do you want a tattoo? I don't have a tattoo. Why do you want a tattoo? Tattoos are for criminals and sailors. Culture changes. Our bodies change. Our thoughts change. Sensations, feelings, patterns of memory...

When we look we see that all the constituents of what we take to be ourselves are unstable. They are not there as a continuing formation but are more like the strings in a piano. Strings are there, ready to be played, however someone's fingers have to depress the keys for sound to arise. Depending on the pathways of society some chords will arise frequently and some remain silent throughout our life. We are dynamic in a dynamic world. So who am I? Transient patterns. Is that all? We see these transient patterns and we have two approaches to them. One way is to identify these patterns through reflecting on what has happened. Shifting through the moments of experience and creating a topology of interpretation. Some things peak and seem very important, others are in the valley and in the dark. In forming myself, I edit myself. I can edit it internally in terms of critical aspects of my own psyche or in terms of what I think will be acceptable to others.

The other aspect is that as I am walking and talking I see the street in front of me, I see the people walking towards me, I feel the movement in my knees and in my feet, the body is moving according to people coming towards me, and there is an aspect of myself which is organising my participation in this moving world. It is almost as if I am on a stage moving with other dancers on the stage. Everything is being revealed; the cars, the street lights, the glistening on the water and so on. Everything is coming at once: when we finish here we go down the stairs, out of the door and there is a big world, it comes to us all at once. We are not consciously building up a picture.

Once we encounter it our selectivity comes into operation, that is to say within the field of experience revealed by awareness, the particularising ego referential constructive organisation selects some things as important and other things as not important. So the potential of myself and the potential of the world are constantly pulsing.

In terms of meditation, there is meditation to promote well-being, to help us to be a bit more calm, clear, perhaps a bit more mindful. This is a kind of ego-syntonic or ego-harmonious presence that helps me see factors in the environment which could be provocative to who I think I

am. As 'me' there are a lot of things I don't like. The problem is that life has already arrived! It happens because it happens immediately and then I wonder, why are you saying that? Why do you look at me like that? But you are already looking at me like that. I can't stop you but I can react. So the ego is almost coming after the fact. The ego is out of time. It's like a really bad band. The drummer doesn't get it. So, we are catching up with what is already going on. This is again a kind of friction. It is quite exhausting partly because when you stay affected with, or identified with, your particular ego patterning, this is a predictive patterning, and so you have a selective attention. You are looking for things that will confirm your notion of how it is. We call that self-deception: in order to continue in our fantasies we hide from ourselves the gap between how we think the world is and how it actually is.

You can see political leaders doing this. *"The health of the nation is increased by cutting down all the trees."* This is obviously ludicrous – something to laugh at but it is not laughable because it is really serious. Stupid people with power do a lot of harm, but you can't tell them they are stupid because they have to power to will lock you up and give you a lot of trouble. In this way you can see how the ego and the power system of the world go together. This is why traditionally people who do a lot of meditation retreat into mountain caves or other remote places – because politics, inequality, funny stories, fake news and so on are always going on in the everyday world.

Two basic kinds of meditation

In the buddhist tradition the two basic kinds of meditation are shamatha and vipassana. Shamatha is the calming of the mind often by focusing one's attention on a stable object it. It could be the sensation of the breath at the nostrils or an unexciting pebble, something you can just rest your attention on. Then when you find your attention drifting off you bring it back to this focus you have decided to have. Gradually you learn to have a more consistent focus for your attention.

In vipassana you can use that focused attention to start to analyse how you are. You can, for example, take the focused attention that maybe you had at your nostrils and take it to the top of your head and then back down through your body, simply being attentive to what's there. As you go down various sensations occur; it could be hot, it could be grinding, it could be sharp... the idea is simply to be attentive to that. Not to interpret it, not to elaborate it, but to keep going down until you come to the soles of your feet and then you reverse and go back up through your body. When you come to the place where formerly there had been this hot sensation then notice that perhaps something else is there now. You can repeat this again and again noticing what is there and the changes that occur. This how phenomena are. They are momentary, precise, and specific.

Now when you feel this hot feeling you may wonder what it is. 'What's that?' You phrase your question like that. This implies there is a what. You want to get a handle on it. Oh, some pain is there. It is not very much but anyway, we are not very brave. 'Oh what is that?' So there is a concern. When you are next coming up from your feet you want to check it out. How is the pain getting on? In giving attention to the formation as something you are investing it with attention, which thickens it. It gives an importance to it. You are making the pain and so now what should I do with it? I should think about it? I should tell someone about it? I should go to the doctor? Many people turn up at the doctor with these kinds of questions. What does it mean? It doesn't mean anything. You have a human body; it is full of nerves and they go like this and they go like that. It's meaningless but it has occurred. I am full of meaningless occurrence. But I want my life to be meaningful so I apply all that I know to wrap this event, to give it a shape. I have a name for it, and every time I pay attention to it I inject it with more density and more intensity. This is the process of

reification. I am making a thing. It was an event that was transient and impactful, undeniable and yet in and of itself ungraspable. Now that I have determined what it is I can grasp it.

But what am I grasping? The sensation is long gone. I am grasping my idea. So I go to the doctor and I tell him, *'I don't know what happened yesterday, I had this very strange sensation.'* *"Well, What do you feel now?"* *'Actually it seems to have gone now but yesterday it really, really hurt.'* In that way we can see how transient phenomena become building blocks for creating structures of meaning and identity.

Someone comes to therapy and says that they were bullied at school. *'Oh, when was that?'* *'Twenty years ago.'* *'Any bullying recently?'* *'No.'* If the therapist were to ask, *'So why is it important to you now?'* that wouldn't sound very polite. *'I am paying you money and so you should listen. Make your ears bigger Mr. Therapist! I was bullied, poor me.'* Something happened. We have 'something' and we have 'happened.' 'Something' is big. 'Happened' is gone. Then you might realise how although the past is gone, we still keep it close to us. In fact a lot of symptoms are iatrogenic, are created by the doctor or therapist, by feeding into the seeming importance of phenomena.

Therapy and buddhism diverge

From the buddhist point of view, to be fascinated by the story and its account will increase suffering rather than decrease it. Therapy and buddhism diverge here; they go in opposite directions. From the buddhist viewpoint, the aim is to notice how you get involved.

Even though we are sitting in a relaxed way, there is still a lot going on. Sounds outside, maybe a dog barking, a car passing by, people may be moving around a bit. Different thoughts and feelings arise, arising and passing, arising and passing. Our ego orientation feels there is something there, something important going on. However the meditation instruction is to be aware of that desire for grasping and involvement.

Generally in our relating to outer and inner objects there are two main movements; one is desire/attachment/fusion/merging and the other is aversion/pushing away. Both positionings arise from the sense that something has happened. They are a reaction to something-ness. Here a buddhist reading is very different from most therapy readings. Something-ness from a buddhist point of view is not intrinsic. It is a compound: a construct left by the investment of our potential. As in Gestalt therapy, we bring something to the foreground, we make it figural, and the rest recedes into the background. When things are in the background they don't vanish but they are in a kind of limbo state where they could come into some existence or they could remain as a potential. However once they come forward it is as if something is happening and then we react – liking not liking, getting involved, pushing away. The meditation instruction is just to relax and stay open to whatever is coming.

That has certain similarities to Freud's idea of free association: to not inhibit the arisings of life. For Freud, not inhibiting what arises is the work of the patient, whereas the work of the analyst is to provide free-floating attention. Wilfred Bion expressed the same, saying that the analyst should be without memory or desire, just present, because as soon as you commit yourself into identifying patterns you then go into the co-creation of meaning.

The meditator however allows both simultaneously, the uninterrupted free flow of experience and a free open attention without bias or judgment. Of course we have a lot of habit formations lurking in the background – psychic anxiety, psychic policemen who will try to maintain

patterning that are socially acceptable or acceptable to our internalised symbols. We allow these to arise in the practice but we do not merge into them. The voice of our mother speaks through us telling us what to pick up and what to drop. But if we don't pick it up it is just there. If we fashion our mind to be like a private garden in which we want to have flowers and no weeds then we are always going to be kept busy. For the meditator weeds are welcome to come... coming in the night-time floating in on the breeze. Keeping a tidy garden is a lot of work. Even the roses have need to be pruned because they get very big. So all this is self-maintenance, having to be on the job all the time.

But whose mind is this? These things are all arising; it only becomes 'my' mind when I adopt it. But if I relax then this is a public park, not a private garden. All kinds of things happen in a public park. In the bushes there may be people injecting heroin. Other people may be fucking behind a tree. All sorts of things are happening. It just happens, and the paradox is that the less involved we are the more clarity we have.

The harder we try the more stupid we become. Maybe you are very intelligent and even have a PhD but you are still stupid if you are not there in the moment of the arising. We build up an edifice of knowledge and information which we then refer to for analysis and organisation after the fact. However through meditation we have the possibility of directly perceiving the birth of the ego. The ego is not an enduring entity. It is not a 'thing' that we have: 'I have an ego.' It is an organisational function. It is how we make sense of what is around us, what is inside us, when we have our starting point *'This is me.'*

You are my world, for the moment

So here I am, standing looking at you. You are my world. For the moment. You are not some added extra. You are not a side salad. You are not chips on the side. After a while I'll get up and go out of this room and maybe I won't see you again. Our lives just cross for a moment. That's it. But in this moment, you are all I am. You are me. Because you are what is happening for me. That's the direct experience. You have your life. I have my life. But at the moment you are my life. It is not that you are in my life as if my life were a bucket. It's not like I put you in for a while and then take you out again. But directly, this is what there is. We have the past which is gone. We have the future which hasn't come. And we are here. And this is this, vital, alive, connected. We are coemergent in this moment. We are the field of experience manifesting in the diversity of each of us in this situation.

When we look at the actuality of phenomena rather than our ideas about them we can't find an essence to them. The essence is imputed. We get to know someone. We learn their name, what they do, whether they are with someone or not, whether they have kids or not... We build up our image of them and we think that our image of them is somehow connected with them. But they are alive moment by moment, this, this, this; this is them. Each of us is the thisness of our existence. The narrative is an explanation after the fact of this.

However if you said that in an interview you wouldn't get the job. You say, *'I can perform these tasks. I am a reliable person. I am trained, I am qualified. I know what I am doing.'* This will get you the euros. If you say *'This, I am very good at doing this'* then they will think, *"How are we going to make money from 'this'? What we want is 'that'. That is where the money is. Bring us 'that' things."* So if we want a job we have to solidify ourselves. And we do. This is the ego.

The key thing is not make it an either/or. When you see that the ego is a pattern formation and you manifest that pattern, as I did when I worked in the National Health Service or taught in

therapy trainings, moving with the tides of liking and disliking was not so serious since I was not producing my life. My life is not an outcome of my activities. My life is this fresh naked open moment. Revealing and revealing and revealing all these patterns of interaction.

Actually you can be in some quite trapped situations, for example you might be looking after elderly parents, and this can take a lot of time and be quite sad. So how can you be free? Because you are always free. Feeling trapped is also just a particular pattern arising in the bright field of immediacy.

Where do you start?

So the function of meditation is to help us shift the starting point. If you start with the idea of the self, with the person you take yourself to be, you are starting with assumptions. That creates a reasonably efficient capacity to operate in the world as we take it to be, but because of gravity and solidity you get friction. You get worn out. You get tired. You try your best. Life's hard. You're in it. It doesn't seem to get any clearer. Things happen. You're trapped. Who is trapping you? Not your sick relative but your own conceptual interpretation of your identity. So the function of meditation is to open oneself to awareness, which is always present but rarely attended to.

For example, you get up in the morning, you go to the bathroom, you look in the mirror and you see yourself. Maybe happy, maybe sad. Anyway, that's me. What is unlikely is that you say, *'Thank you mirror for showing me the reflection.'* Without the mirror we would not have a reflection but the mirror is taken for granted. The mirror is like awareness. It's the basis of showing. Our attention, however, goes towards the image not the mirror. So we are busy with this and this and this and we fail to find the openness in which all these movements are occurring. That open awareness is itself something that is present all the time. Consciousness – in terms of consciousness through the senses and mental processing – consciousness comes and goes. For example, imagine you can't really smell anything. There you are, sitting reading and now you want to make a cup of coffee so off you go into the kitchen and suddenly there is this aroma! The capacity to smell arises with the object. It is not a permanent feature. But awareness is always there, always potential, like the mirror. Meditation offers a possibility of being liberated from the limitation of ego identity being the totality of who you are.

Of course, if you do a classical psychoanalysis, whereby there is a loosening up of the ego, super-ego and unconscious and consequently more capacity to be with the dynamic movement of the psyche, this tends to be a capacity which is present in the consulting room, a particularly privileged situation that can be difficult to take into the world. When we do meditation there is the same risk. Many people do long retreats and long intensive practices, and then when they come out they feel weird. They can't quite get back in the rhythm of life. Ours is a culture where you need to earn money and have a job since no one else is going to take care of you. So this can be a problem for people coming out of long retreats.

The kind of meditation I will be teaching is done for shortish periods of time, followed by attending to how that feeling tone, or mood, or presence shifts as we get up from our meditation cushion and move into everyday life. If meditation is used as a holiday from life then it may have the benefits of reducing anxiety or increasing wellbeing, but that's all. However if you can bring an open presence into every situation then you can be connected with the whole of life. The mood of what is around you then becomes your ally and you take your place in the world as a participant. You start on the inside.

Alienation is a problem in modern life, alienation, loneliness and desolation. Cities can be unfriendly. Our lives can be sad. Family structures may not be strong. So where do I belong? When you relax and open you are already here. Awareness is inclusive and the ego is exclusive. So if you can get a presence of awareness in your life suddenly everything becomes easier.

Question

Question: If I become a practitioner or experiment with meditation, what role is there for psychotherapy? Could someone who practices meditation regularly still have a need for psychotherapy?

Answer: Generally speaking in buddhism there are two aspects; wisdom and compassion. Through doing the meditation we have the wisdom of seeing that our self-construct is not a safe castle to inhabit but rather, is a limit to our potential. When we see this in our own case we might then feel some compassion for other people who are also unnecessarily limiting their lives. Meditation, in the way I am describing it tonight, means an open welcome to whatever arises or occurs. The mind is an open park; it is not mine, I am not in charge. We say, whatever comes, comes. If we can then take that mood into the therapy then there is the possibility to free associate.

Internalised parental prohibitions put fear into the ego: *'If I am not acceptable to others I am going to collapse inside. I need the approval of other people in order to be myself.'* And that is true because inclusivity means that we are in it together; I can only be me with you. I am talking here today because you are here. Imagine if the room were empty and I was talking. Or that it is two o'clock in the morning and poor lonely James is here talking on his own. What on earth is he doing? I am talking *with you*. Hopefully I am not talking *at* you or even *to* you, but *with* you.

To find an ambiance where we are connected is the basis of psychotherapy. All neurosis comes from the absence of love and love is welcoming. Love is welcome. *"Come as you are!"*

Many therapeutic techniques have been developed now. For example, some styles of analysis do a long initial assessment, which may be quite objectifying. The key thing is for there to be a sense that 'I can be me here.' Since I don't know who I am, I am necessarily going to be here in my artificiality. In my persona. In my mask. Gradually the mask starts to thin and there is a more naked 'here-I am'-ness. That, I think, is primarily facilitated by the quality of gaze of the therapist, by the tone of their voice and by the welcome that they embody.

I hope this has been useful. Thank you all very much for being here together.