

Echoes from the East: A response to Paul Solomon

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As I sit down to respond to Paul Solomon's article, I am reminded of how many jokes begin with an opening line such as "Did you hear the one about the Jew, the Catholic and the Buddhist?—except that by 1978, I was no longer a Catholic and, instead, was in training in Igatpuri with a Burmese Buddhist from Bombay, now Mumbai, who is referred to in Paul's writing. I want to acknowledge my indebtedness to this inspiring teacher, S. N. Goenka, and his lineage, in my poem:

Dissolvable

The women of Igatpuri
scoop up fresh ox dung from
dawn's dusty streets.

Already I have emerged from
my grass hut. Gently trod
the cobra's path

to the meditation hall. I
drink from the deep well while
Goenka and

all the other chanting ancients
teach me to sweep away
solidity. (03-05-08)

Neuroscience and trauma studies have brought the body back into psychotherapy. Maybe now, modern physics, with encouragement from Buddhist psychology and writers such as Paul, will awhi the profession further into the positive possibilities of transcendent attunement.

However, there is a shadow side in moving in the direction that Paul is exploring and it is this that I want to address. Some heed is needed before rushing prematurely into any form of liminal unboundedness. The most obvious caution is summarised by Engler, who writes, “you have to be somebody before you can be nobody” (1984, p. 17).

Writers such as Engler, Epstein, Kornfield, and Wilber have been invaluable catalysts in the interweaving of the insights of Buddhist psychology with psychoanalytic theory. Each in his own way has elaborated the benefits of meditation and learning to dissolve the boundaries between self and other. At the same time, none of them is unaware of the risks involved in this adventure, and the preparation that may be needed to take up the challenge of moving towards transcendent attunement. Thus, I am fully in agreement with Concetta Alfano’s addition of the word “disciplined” into her statement quoted on page ten of Paul’s article. Both meditation, the operational arm of Buddhist psychology, and psychodynamic psychotherapy are disciplines, with designated schools, texts, teachers, and lineages. In my training in vipassana meditation, Goenka often reminded students of how he and we were being carried by over 2000 years of rich tradition. He initiated us into a rigorous and structured practice of concentration before we were invited into deconstructing practices. So, too, is psychotherapy a discipline, with clear contractual containment, a code of ethics, and a rigorous assessment using a tradition known as psychodynamic formulation.

Both disciplines use uncovering techniques in order to work more directly with what is below the surface of ordinary consciousness. These techniques involve the practitioner’s becoming a neutral observer as well as an active participant. There is an encouragement in each tradition to work towards eliminating censorship, and to avoid “acting out.” Both utilise mindfulness. Another strong similarity that both share is the understanding that ego or personality belief is an internalised construct, formed in relation to experiences with the world of others. Each acknowledges how this construct appears to possess a consistent and continuous identity. However, it is here that these two paths move apart. Psychodynamic psychotherapy understands that the lack of a sense of self is the problem. Being deprived of developmental cohesion, the person describes feeling unreal, inauthentic, and the psychotherapeutic relationship becomes a reparative identity-formation hothouse. In Buddhist psychology, through the practice of meditation, the opposite happens. The intention is to dissolve the illusion of a sense of self.

A way through this seeming impasse has been hypothesised by Wilber. He writes of the development from the pre-personal to the transpersonal

stages of consciousness. Thus, for him and a growing number of theorists and practitioners, transpersonal experiences are no longer seen necessarily as evidence of pre-egoic states, although both have obvious similarities. They argue that traditions such as vipassana meditation are able to assist human beings to progress towards transcendence, rather than towards a regressed arrest into more primitive experiences. What is important here, though, is that the human being is integrated sufficiently into a stable sense of self. Only then can there be sufficient assurance that the individual has the capacity to surrender safely to the guidelines of any lineage that encourages the attending to and the experiencing of all the thoughts and sensations and feelings as they arise, without desire or judgement. This is especially so when surrender involves unstructuring previously-intact psychic structures. If individuals are already fragmented, or have a borderline personality style or other relatively unformed selves, then, of course, the goal needs to be exactly the opposite. As Engler explains, “meditation is designed for a different type of problem and a different level of ego structure” (1984, p. 39).

Yet, once psychotherapists are cognisant of the dangers for themselves of inappropriate use of meditative techniques, the benefits of this tradition can be identified. And this is what Paul has done in his article, outlining one such benefit, a way towards what he calls transcendent attunement. I believe that Buddhism, either in itself or through commentators such as Engler, Epstein, Kornfield, Solomon, and Wilber, has much to offer psychotherapy. Both Buddhist teaching and the insights of modern physics may assist us to wake up to the possibility that psychotherapy’s traditional attachment to the goal of assisting the development of a stable intact self may be simply another stage of arrested development that, in time and with discipline, we may grow out of, as we do from the schzoid phase. From the Buddhist point of view, an adherence to an enduring sense of self is none other than the prime source of human suffering. We gain a self in order to transcend the self.

So, thank you, Paul, for writing this article. I will finish with another of my recent poems:

The Sun.

I was the sun pulsating, light
undulating and love’s
vibration till

birth earthed me, made me as solid
as an Easter Island
statue. Question

now is, after adapting to
this still dense form, do I
move on or back?

All I want is I am you are
me are we are us all
again the sun. (01-05-08).

References

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