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Empty Thy Mind and Come to Thy Senses: A De-constructive Path to Inner Peace

“For there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so”
William Shakespeare, Hamlet

1. INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, we live in an age of hyper-communication – in terms of both sheer quantity and speed. If one takes a complete break from one’s office for a couple of weeks, then the e-mails, text messages, letters, faxes, phone messages, etc, pile up and await us in intimidating bulk, all demanding instant attention upon our return. On top of all of these we have the ever-present radios, televisions, newspapers, magazines, videos, DVDs and the like also competing for our limited mental space. If this were not enough, bill-boards try to out-perform each other for our special attention – as do the many demands of our work colleagues and last, but hopefully, not least, the demands of our loved ones, families and friends.

Then there is the endless chatter – at work, social gatherings and conferences. The chattering species – or “Homo chatteraticus” – would punningly describe our manifest nature - especially that of our subspecies that dwells in our modern expanding urban sprawls. Is it any wonder that we compulsively prattle so much? Our minds are probably over-stimulated, with a constant barrage of hyper-communication on a level to which our so-called “primitive” ancestors were relatively unaccustomed.

Our over-talkative mouths reflect, of course, our unstoppable minds: Minds which find it increasingly difficult to switch off. Even when we go on holidays we take these over-stimulated, hyper-active minds with us on frenetic attempts to “enjoy ourselves” via novel forms of stimulation (de Botton, 2003). Well, not quite always – if we know how. Never before has quiet meditation been more appropriate as an antidote to this volume of mental overdrive. A real mental vacation means just that – a vacant mind. Meditation – whether by means of con-

centration on only just one stimulus at the time, or temporarily (trying) to remain mindful, i.e. practicing being a neutral, non-judgmental observer – aims at minimizing the thinking/analytical mind and fostering clearer sensory and reflective awareness instead. Paradoxically, deep mindfulness, if practiced competently, can eventually lead to a peaceful void or “mindlessness” – characterized by a state of “no thought” – even if it is only for brief moments initially.

2. THE TALKING CURE

So what can we do with anxiously driven and chronically over-aroused minds? Typically, one option is to offer them the “talking therapies” with a “talking cure” in mind! So we have Freud’s “free association” monologues, cognitive therapy’s “cognitive restructuring” dialogues, and many other variants all using verbalization as their *modus operandi*. I have no doubt that these are often very useful approaches – usually in the earlier (i.e. “repair”) stages of psychotherapy when dealing with deficits, conflicts and defenses, but I am less convinced that this always remains the case, for example, with those among us with varying degrees of obsessive thinking. Can problems of the pained and over-active mind exclusively be solved by the thinking mind? Hopefully some clarity on this shall emerge as we proceed.

3. INTERNALITY VERSUS EXTERNALITY

You may object that I am also right now engaging in communicative chatter! Well, yes, this has to do with externality. Talking and writing are useful means of communication between “objects,” i.e. between people. Internality, must not, however, be neglected. We are not just objects to each other, we are also subjects. Our internal space – our subjectivities – should not be overlooked. Again this is where meditation is also valuable. When we attend to our inner space we often notice how our incessant thinking is like a compulsion, well-nigh impossible to stop, even when we claim that these thoughts are often unwanted. This repetitive thinking has typically been dealt with in cognitive therapy by “thought stopping”, but evidence suggests that a gentler approach, based on the acceptance of unwanted cognitions via mindful “witnessing”, may be more effective (Tolle, 1999, 2005; Thich Nhat Hanh, 1975, 1991, 2003; Barnes-Holmes, et al, 2004). This is not a defeatist

acceptance, but rather a mindful choice. Hayes and Smith (2005) refer to the acceptance emergent from mindfulness practice as “radical acceptance.”

“Awakening” our “inner observer” capacity is what mindfulness meditation promotes. Much of our private thinking is comprised of unproductive monologues at best (often telling ourselves illusory stories), but also by destructive imaginary, internal disputes and conflicts. Many people suffer from minds which are ceaselessly engaged in anxious or depressive self-statements, in weary “battles” and the like, with little in the way of creative outcome. Many of us also “live in our heads,” disconnected from our bodies. What can be done about all of this? For a start one can begin to raise one’s awareness level via mindfulness training.

4. MINDFULNESS AND DIS-IDENTIFICATION

It may be easier to start mindfulness training by observing our physical bodies in action, e.g. simply by watching ourselves walking as in walking meditation. We can do likewise for various other daily activities, for example, while washing our hands or eating. The mindful practice of Hatha Yoga affords us an excellent means to deepen awareness of our embodiment. Paradoxically, when we apply our “inner observer” to our own thinking minds while practicing mindfulness, it is not necessarily with the intention of “refining” our thinking, but rather to learn how to dis-identify from it (Assogioli, 1965; De Mello, 1990; Holmes, 1997; Tolle, 1999; DelMonte, 2000, 2003). Observing our thoughts, like clouds passing through the sky without either rejecting or clinging onto them, is what dis-identification is basically about. Thereby one learns to let go temporarily of unsolicited and invasive thoughts so as to have a less “muddied” consciousness, and eventually to let go momentarily of all thoughts, rendering moments of stillness – or better still, the “just being” of clearer consciousness (see “Adaptive Dis-identification” later). Although consciousness without thought is a possibility, its opposite, thought without some consciousness is not (excluding the Freudian repressed unconscious). Consciousness thus appears to be primary, and from it emerges thought as a secondary epi-phenomenon: An epi-phenomenon that can become “parasitic,” in the sense that consciousness can play the role of a reluctant host to our unbidden thinking - as in dreams, obsessional ruminations and when “hearing voices” (auditory

hallucinations). When, in meditation for example, we experience consciousness without thought, we may be in touch with “just being”, i.e. our deeper essence beyond mental and physical form. Brain activation produces cognitions and emotions. Quieten this brain activity with meditation and one is left with the “no thought” of clear consciousness. Thus consciousness appears to be primary and mentation secondary.

5. AWARENESS TRAINING

It is possibly obvious by now that the early stages of mindfulness practice can also be seen as a form of sensory awareness training. Awareness training often starts with self-observation (De Mello, 1990). As already mentioned, we have several objects of choice on which to focus our attention, such as our breathing, hearing, and so forth. We learn to train, i.e. sensitize, all our senses in this way. This is best done non-analytically and in the “hic et nunc” (here and now) mode. We can also observe our cravings, our dislikes, our clutching and needy minds in action and via “just letting-be,” learn to side-step them. Such stoic side stepping can be seen as a form of adaptive dissociation. Identification with the desired contents of one’s mind, i.e. with one’s attachments, typically leads to fear of their loss, and consequently to emotional distress, pessimistic thinking and compensatory behavior. These cravings can be simply observed, and, for a change, neither judged nor acted upon. We can also become attached to, and identified with, our pain, losses and suffering, as in a felt sense of prolonged victimhood. (See Attachments section below).

So developing an awareness of our varied attachments is another aspect of mindfulness training, contradictory as some of these attachments may seem to be. Craving for sensory gratification, for continued existence and for annihilation, corresponding to the Freudian constructs of libido, ego and the death instinct (See de Silva, 1990), can all be problematic. Dependence on sensory gratification implies dependence on instinct and on externality. Craving for continued existence is a denial of impermanence, and craving for annihilation is surrender to the death wish, i.e. to Thanatos. This can be seen in impulsive aggression turned outwards on others (sadism), or inwards on oneself (masochism), as found with drug and alcohol abuse, self-harm and suicide. Behind the death wish is often a desire to return to a non-suffering peaceful state free of longing, frustration and fear. This peace can, temporarily, be

attained on earth much more constructively via meditation, yoga and mindfulness practice.

Many approaches to mental health see the development of self-awareness as beneficial. The insight gained through psychoanalysis is purportedly transmutative in terms of neurotic symptoms (Freud, 1900). Likewise, the self-awareness fostered in Gestalt therapy (Perls, et al., 1973) was seen as therapeutic. (See later for psychodynamic, Gestalt and constructivist approaches to awareness). Schwartz (1983) saw self-attention per se as playing an important homeostatic, and thus integrative, role. It has also been argued, with some empirical support, that meditation in general, and mindfulness meditation in particular, is conducive to well-being (Shafii, 1973b; Carrington & Ephron, 1975; Deatherage, 1975; Brown & Engler 1980; DelMonte, 1984a, 1985, 1990; DelMonte & Kenny, 1985).

Moreover, it has been suggested that increased (non-neurotic) self-awareness, with its attendant clarity of vision, should allow one to make more informed choices, and thus enable one to discard old habits, attitudes and attachments that no longer serve our evolving needs. These claims are addressed (see later) in the context of our attachments to people, objects, emotions and ideas, as well as in the context of our attempts to foster self-awareness via self-attention strategies. So is there a link between self-attention and health?

6. SELF-ATTENTION, AWARENESS AND SELF-REGULATION

Schwartz's (1983) disregulation theory can be catch-phrased as: "Repression and Disease versus Mindfulness and Health". He postulated that awareness is linked to health and that repression is associated with "dis-ease". He produced considerable empirical evidence that repressors show elevated levels of psycho-physiological distress such as electrocortical (brain-wave), electromyographical (muscular) and, especially, cardiovascular arousal. These latter findings are consistent with some later work of my own also showing a significant relationship between defensiveness and haemodynamic arousal in general and cardiovascular arousal in particular (DelMonte, 1984a, 1985). Repressors also report significantly more physical illness than "true low anxious" subjects (see Schwartz, 1983).

Schwartz agrees with Galin (1974) when he proposed that repression is produced by a functional cerebral disconnection syndrome in

which the left hemisphere (which is usually associated with verbal and analytic functioning) becomes functionally isolated to varying degrees from the right hemisphere, with its relative non-verbal (e.g. emotional) and spatial function. Schwartz produced evidence that repressive subjects appear to show more (right hemisphere) cerebral lateralization with regard to negative emotions and in situations which are potentially threatening. He also quotes other evidence indicating a relative attenuation of information transfer from the right to the left hemisphere in “repressive” compared with “true low anxious subjects.” Traumatic memories tend to be stored in the right parietal lobes (van der Kolk & Fisher, 1995). Overall, the right hemisphere seems to be activated in the expression of difficult and disturbing emotions, and the left hemisphere tends to be associated with the expression of positive emotions such as joy and happiness. Two months of mindfulness training has been shown to lead to a significant shift to a higher ratio of left-sided compared with right-sided brain activation (Davidson, et al, 2003).

Warrenburg, et al. (1981), reported a significantly high proportion of hypertensives being repressors. For these hypertensive individuals, the more relaxed they said they were during the speech-task the higher their blood pressure! This observation is supported by other evidence that high blood pressure (internal arousal or “noise”) can be used to dampen cognitive awareness of distress (Dworkin, et al., 1979; DelMonte, 1984a).

Schwartz (1983) argued that self-attention, as practised in various mindfulness meditation techniques, “seems to have specific autonomic, self-regulatory, stabilizing effects on physiological functioning” (p.114). He contended that self-attention can promote localized healing, “especially if the self-attention is guided by relevant imagery that is targeted to the appropriate part(s) of the body” (p.114). This suggestion is interesting in terms of the often quoted pioneer work done by Simonton and Simonton (1974) and by Meares (1978) in which they used meditation and visualization exercises with cancer patients.

In a similar fashion the insight gained in psychotherapy may be therapeutic. There is some evidence that those receiving psychotherapy are less likely to subsequently report physical illness (Rosen & Wiens, 1979). Psychotherapy typically aims to enhance insight and awareness, as well as provide a corrective attachment experience. But do we need to distinguish between such positive attachment experiences, and our tendency to clutch indiscriminately in many directions?

7. ATTACHMENTS

Much has been said elsewhere (DeMonte 2003, 2004) about our clutching minds attaching to opinions, appearances, possessions, success, power, status, prestige, wealth, pride and so forth. Less has been stated about our minds' equal capacity to identify with, and stay with, suffering, by either living in the past in holding onto bygone insults, losses, hurts, defeats, etc, or by anticipating the future in pessimistic, paranoid or hypochondriacal ways. Victimhood can become a fixed identity, i.e. an attachment and even a way of life (Tolle, 1999; Bruckner, 2000). The "Pain-body" (Tolle, 1999, 2005) and the pain-mind are often characterised by an exaggerated need to wallow in and talk about suffering compulsively and self-righteously – usually blaming others for our current misery. Then there is the compulsion to compare and judge others from a "knowing" position. Engaging in such non-compassionate "sitting in judgment" and "forming opinions" self-righteously about others only isolates us. Psychic pain is inevitable if one is identified with one's egotistic mind, which seeks a constant array of ego gratifications, including the need to be always right or victorious. Ego identifications lead us to cling to past gains, regret past losses and worry about future snags, snares, pitfalls and more losses; thereby taking us away from living fully in the present reality – especially when it can have so much to offer. Life inevitably involves a series of gains and losses. Griffin (2001) saw adjustment to loss as a lifelong regenerative learning process. Losses also open up new opportunities.

Then there is the social domain. Attachment has both physiological and psychological components. Developing a "theory of mind" in childhood facilitates the latter (Fonagy, et al, 1994). People often remark on the proclivity of human beings to form strong emotional bonds. We are popularly described as "social animals". However, there is considerable variation in this tendency to seek out others and to maintain contact. Social "stickiness" does not appear to be spread out evenly in the population. Some individuals deliberately enhance their out-reaching social skills, whilst others, for a variety of reasons, use various strategies to distance themselves from people or to withdraw into themselves. I shall go on to explore the way Eastern techniques, in particular, can be used to alter these apparently opposite inclinations – to either "connect" with others or to retreat from them.

Much has been written about the manner in which children learn to socialize as they grow up. Establishing "healthy" roles and social

links is seen as a prerequisite to mental health. Those of us who are unable to form and sustain intimate affiliations are usually perceived as having serious emotional problems – but so are those whose emotional bonds are overly dependent. In other words, extremes in emotional distance, that is, being too closely enmeshed in a dependent way or, at the other end of the scale, being excessively self-reliant, are considered socio-maladaptive in adults (see Birtchnell, 1997).

As already alluded to, we not only become attached to people, we also form strong attachments to a range of objects and experiences, such as the taste of certain foods and drinks, the sound of particular forms of music, our possessions such as childhood toys, paintings, ornaments, land, houses, money, etc. Moreover, we also become attached to the non-material realm in terms of our languages, religions, ethnic groups, theories, ideologies and achievements. We may identify with such attachments, to the point of describing ourselves in terms of their labels. So we may characterize ourselves as “communist,” “nationalist,” “feminist,” “Protestant,” “Orthodox,” “liberal,” “left-wing,” “Afrikaans-speaking,” “humanist,” etc. We also characterize these attachments in egotistical terms, e.g. my religion, my flock, my people, my career, my territory, in my opinion, and so forth, and express strong dislikes of other identities. So, is our real identity the sum of such potentially divisive, personal attachments, or is this just our mask hiding a deeper essence? We may cling as arduously onto non-material as onto material attachments, e.g. try persuading an “opinionated” person to change his mind! Attachments do not always make much rational sense. We can become attached to, or enmeshed with, other peoples’ difficulties, our own personal problems and abusive relationships. Attachments can limit, hold and constrain consciousness to particular viewpoints, attitudes and perspectives. They can imprison and isolate us, and impede our further development.

8. ATTACHMENT AND LOSS

However, attachment and loss are two sides of the same coin. Nothing is permanent – all is flux. Much is illusion and even delusion. All investments are potential losses – if not during our current lifetimes then certainly upon their physical ends. We all live in the shadow of death – the ultimate narcissistic blow!? This knowledge – colored by our own personal history of previous losses (both emotional and material) – has

as a consequence that we can feel varying degrees of insecurity about our desired attachments.

Paradoxically, the various objects and people on whom we have become dependent for our emotional identity and security may also become the very source of our deepest anxiety, as observed in the “separation anxiety” linked to their feared loss. Although with emotional attachment comes varying degrees of social support, this support is often at a price – namely that of burdensome counter demands and responsibilities! Caring for others can be emotionally draining – not just rewarding.

9. DEFENSIVE DETACHMENT

Some of us try to avoid this anxiety by means of a “schizoid defence”. It is likely to be found in those who are fearful of the risks involved in emotional inter-dependence, often due to past failures and hurts in this area. This defense is characterized by a contrived emotional detachment (largely unconscious) based on an exaggerated attitude of personal self-sufficiency, often where childhood bonding with care-givers was painfully inadequate or insensitive. In the absence of adequate parental attunement and nurturing behavior, emotional self-dependency may be sought via varying degrees of emotionally insulating and “autonomous” behavior. An extreme version of this defense could be the affective “non-attachment” (and non-attunement) found in borderline personality disorder, where long-term intimacy is too uncomfortable to be sustained (see Holmes, 1997). However, several variants of defensive isolation, or extreme egoism, exist. Solipsism, for example, is an intellectual rationalization for this cut off stance in life. But is mere withdrawal adequate? How can one really enjoy such false “escapism” when surrounded by others who may be in pain? This issue of defensive detachment shall be expanded on later. (See “Problems with Detachment and Dis-identification”).

10. ADAPTIVE DIS-IDENTIFICATION

Not all forms of detachment are mal-adaptive defenses. Some psychotherapists deliberately encourage a form of non-attachment as a way of coping with potential loss. For example, both Assagioli (1965) and, later, Holmes (1997) refer to the strategy of “dis-identification” when

dealing with psychic pain (see earlier “Mindfulness and Dis-identification”). Assagioli’s viewpoint was similar to that of those Buddhists who perceive our tendency to identify in a clinging way with objects of our desire as ultimately leading to the pain of their actual or imagined loss. He described cognitive exercises to encourage the development of a mental set of “dis-identification” as a counter-force in coping with this tendency to over-invest and to over-identify ourselves with our physical bodies, emotions, thoughts, etc., and with our attachments in general. The objective of Assagioli’s “dis-identification” exercises is to be less at the mercy of our longings, wishes and desires. One finds an echo here of the Buddhist dictum, already referred to, that craving is the source of suffering. Mindfulness training can raise awareness of our acquisitorial nature and help liberate us from the slavery of endless grasping, of which contemporary materialism and consumerism are obvious hedonistic examples. For Freud (1900, 1912, and 1930) the pull of the pleasure principle is not freedom, and is only one side of a dualism – the other side being the displeasure which inevitably follows in the heels of pleasure seeking. Psychological freedom also comes from letting go of defensive and reactionary views, and from moving above polarised construing as in “them versus us” attitudes.

Let us now look at a non-clinical example of dis-identification. The exile is an interesting case, especially if he, or she, comes from a poorly understood cultural background or ethnic group. Being an exile in a foreign land often means that one’s former cultural identity has to be suspended while a new one is being constructed. Todorov (1996) refers to the latter process as acculturation. Here we should also speak of de-constructing one’s former persona (or de-culturation) and developing a new identity (or mask?). This can be a painful process, characterized by considerable nostalgia for lost familiarities and by obsessional reminiscing about the lost world in an attempt to keep it mentally alive while we construct a new one. But this process is rarely fully complete, so that one is left as a transcultural hybrid betwixt two worlds. Rather than view this new state of affairs as a failure, it could on the contrary be seen as an adaptive dynamic in which one’s identity is “elastic.” Fixity gives way to resilient flexibility in which acquisitions (identifications) are constantly being balanced by losses (dis-identifications) to produce a freshly evolving self.

11. NON-ATTACHMENT TECHNIQUES OF THE ORIENT

In the Orient there is a long tradition going back thousands of years linked to Hinduism, Taoism and Buddhism, of using various techniques such as meditation, Yoga, Tai-chi, Qi-gong and so forth to achieve altered mental states characterized by equanimity and non-grasping, by moving beyond (i.e. "transcending") the issues and problems onto which our thoughts can "stick" (see Mascaro, 1962; DelMonte, 1995a; DelMonte, 2000). Meditation, Hatha Yoga, and Qi-gong exercises can be used to focus on bodily posture, breathing and the contents of one's mind. They (like the use of Zen Koans) also play down the value of intellectualization, rationalization and other aspects of what is known as "shi-shen" in ancient Chinese Qi-gong. Shi-shen, or conceptual knowledge, must be balanced by "yuan-shen" which lies beyond conceptual consciousness, yet permeates all aspects of life – being its very source. Yuan-shen is seen as the dynamic force inherent in "Qi". Qi could be referred to as "vital energy" in the West. Yuan-shen, being essentially ineffable, is difficult to symbolize, e.g. to put into words. During meditation and Koan contemplation one tries to side-step the discursive mind with its focus on conceptual knowledge or shi-shen. The periods of meditative "no thought" characterized by stillness, silence and openness may present opportunities to experience the ineffable yuan-shen referred to above. Moreover, yuan-shen may be phenomenologically similar to Jung's (1958) "collective unconscious", namely a vast, loose, pre-verbal, pre-conscious and inchoate transpersonal resource of vast potential. This resource can be "tapped into" more readily by the use of certain techniques such as meditation in which the chattering conceptual mind is temporarily silenced. Lose thy mind and come to thy senses – in the here and now! (See "Gestalt Therapy Perspective").

Dorcas argued that meditation and Qi-gong are similar insofar as they both use attentional concentration and mindfulness to tune the mind to "an advanced level of consciousness, in which the divisions between subject and object cease to exist, the division between me and not me melts away and in which one feels at one with the entire universe" (Dorcas, 1996, p.13). This advanced state of consciousness is also hallmarked by "choiceless awareness" (Krisnamurti, 1991) in so far as such awareness implies a non-seeking and non-clutching approach to the contents of perception.

Bearing the above train of thought in mind, a distinction can usefully be made between "detachment", which implies detaching, i.e.

withdrawing interest or giving up something previously valued on the one hand, and “non-attachment” on the other, which implies a more neutral or non-grasping stance whilst accepting, in a non-possessive manner, all of that which momentarily forms part of our experiential world. Whereas detachment can seem anti-social, non-attachment does not imply a lack of compassion, nor indifference to the world or to the lot of others. Detachment can also be seen as harboring strong defensive undertones and may have little to do with maturing through life’s experiences – be they work or love related.

12. MINDFULNESS MEDITATION PRACTICE

Advanced practitioners of meditation often focus their attention on the phenomenology of consciousness by means of introspective mindfulness (see DelMonte, 1995a; Kabat-Zinn, 2005). With mindfulness techniques the meditator is encouraged to maintain “a quiet awareness, without comment, of whatever happens to be here and now” (Watts, 1957). The objective of mindfulness meditation is “to come to know one’s own mental processes, to thus begin to have the power to shape or control the mental processes, and finally to gain freedom from the condition where the mental processes are unknown and uncontrolled, with the individual at the mercy of his own unbridled mind” (Deatherage, 1975, p.134). Hendricks (1975) sees such introspection as a form of discrimination training which helps meditators to observe their own thoughts in a relatively detached way. He speculates that “since nearly everyone has a certain number of neurotic thoughts mental health is dependent upon the ability to recognize that they are “just thoughts” (p.145). This approach can be applied to depressive, anxious and obsessive cognitions, and several authors have done just that (e.g. Kabat-Zinn, 1996; Teasdale, 2000).

A variant of meditative mindfulness (analytic mindfulness meditation) can also be used to observe the psychic nature of felt attachments, with their complex interwoven webs of emotional, cognitive, attitudinal and behavioral sub-components. In observing the very construction of consciousness in this non-attached (i.e. non-grasping or non-identificatory manner) practitioners hope, at least temporarily, to move beyond the pull of their unbridled yearnings and the push of irrational dislikes. Being mindful of the impermanence of all material and psychic attachments facilitates awareness of the ephemeral nature of our

personal consciousness, laden as it is with regular eruption of instinctive craving. Freedom is where craving is converted into mindful choice. If cravings are invariably suppressed then we are no freer than if we always yield to them! Full acceptance of “the now,” by neither clinging to nor rejecting our experiences, is the essence of mindfulness. Its aim is to free us from our reactionary minds, i.e. minds dominated by raw instinct and by past conditioning.

Mindfulness meditation encourages an opening to broader consciousness. In this way it is similar to some forms of spiritual practice. One can say that such meditation favors an opening of our intuitive self. It fosters this intuitive self over our more driven instinctive self and reactive conditioned self, as well as over our split-off cerebral self. The insights gleaned from meditation are not to be limited to personal gain, but should be transformed into relational acts of kindness, compassion, respect and tolerance of others. Acceptance of the suchness of reality does not preclude compassionate work towards improving the lot of ourselves and of others.

13. THE SILENCE OF MEDITATION

Meditation, with practice, can become very simple. For example, we can learn to observe the silence within us – if we progress that far. Moments of timelessness may emerge as may a sense of formlessness. Our personal experience of timelessness is just a small chip off the eternity “block,” just as our experience of formlessness yields a sense of infinity. These moments of dwelling in timelessness and formlessness, however brief they may be, nevertheless yield a sense of unity where the dualistic discursive mind has suspended its “me/other” construing. By letting go of dualistic sense-making and just “letting be” one approaches whatever emerges with increasing equanimity. Deeply silent meditation, characterized by “no thought” and by a sense of unity, brings us face-to-face with the unmanifest, i.e. with yet-to-be expressed potential - a real break from repetitive and predictable thinking.

This dichotomy between the discursive mind and no-thought does not imply an inherent conflict. Thinking undoubtedly has its value and place – especially when we use thought and speech to facilitate informative, creative, humorous or playful communication. Silence, on the contrary, facilitates communion (Shafii, 1973a), i.e. the meeting of minds (or rather of “hearts”) non-verbally through intuition, feeling,

empathy and sensation. As Jung pointed out (Jung, 1958) there are four ways of knowing – i.e., thinking, sensation, feeling and intuition – with thinking being increasingly favored in contemporary Western culture. However, with the silence of meditation one uses focussed sensory attention (sensation) to foster the emergence of the intuitive mind.

The practice of silent meditation leading to “no thought” can be described as the “*via negativa*” (the empty way) as opposed to the “*via positiva*”, which is the more habitual mode as seen daily in our discursive minds. They represent opposite ways of sense making. The path of meditation (silence) should not seek to negate the mind in action, but rather to assist in the liberation of one’s self from blind allegiance to our instinctual impulses, obsessions and compulsions (Freud’s id), and also from fleeing from our dislikes and fears. It may also free us from the impoverishment resulting from our maladaptive defenses which primarily serve to limit our awareness, and from judgmental attitudes (Freud’s “harsh” super-ego). Silence and mindful meditation thus facilitate the emergence of “creative emptiness” in which “benevolent depersonalization” is fostered, i.e. the discarding of unhelpful id and super-ego impulses and control (see Moncayo, 2003 for fuller exposition).

14. SILENCE IN PSYCHODYNAMIC PSYCHOTHERAPY

Western insight psychotherapy, compared with Eastern mindfulness meditation, is a neophyte on the world stage. Both, nevertheless, are concerned with awareness, in so far as the insight sought from therapy and the mindfulness emergent from meditation may be similar. However, most forms of psychotherapy use verbalization as their *modus operandi*. A common view held by psychoanalysts is that those who do not learn to “think through (i.e. to symbolize verbally) are bound to “act out” and to go on suffering – as with the hysterically inclined who tend to “feel” too much. Hence we have the “pain-body” (Tolle, 1999), a somatizing body impoverished in terms of its capacity for reflective thinking. While one would not dispute that there is great merit in the “talking cure” approach there is, nevertheless, a growing corpus of opinion on the value of some fecund silence in therapy. For example, the obsessionally inclined, in thinking (and often talking) compulsively, block out feelings, and, in so doing, demonstrate that we cannot always just “think” our way out of problems. In therapy they typically have difficulty in being “in touch” with feelings – their own and those of

others – and are usually very uncomfortable with silence. Hence the endless chatter, which is often split off from feeling. This is sometimes pejoratively referred to as “free disassociation” (Perls, et al, 1973) or split-off intellect. (See Gestalt Therapy Perspective later). These people may need to learn that speech, just like music, is given deeper meaning by being punctuated by fertile silence so that something more profound than words may emerge. According to O’Donoghue (1977) “If you are outside of yourself, always reaching beyond yourself, you avoid the call of your own mystery. When you acknowledge the integrity of your solitude, and settle into its mystery, your relationships with others take on a new warmth, adventure and wonder”. Thereby silence can foster a sense of compassionate communion.

However, silence on the part of the patient was seen as resistance by Freud (1912). But, Balint (1958) argued that “if we can change our own approach – from considering silence as a symptom of resistance to studying it as a possible source of *information* – then we may learn something about this area of mind”. Later authors saw silence as indicative of shyness, shame, sorrow, anger, hostility, psychic absence and fear (Shafii, 1973a; Coltart, 1992). Silence has also been construed, at times, as adaptive regression to pre-verbal sense-making (as opposed to malign or psychotic regression – Shafii, 1973a).

The psychoanalyst Coltart (1992) goes as far as saying that “my own preference above all others, is for a silent patient.” This may be because the relatively silent patient allows the analyst ample time to work with the visceral felt-sense of the counter-transference. It should come as no surprise that Coltart also described herself as a practitioner of meditation and Buddhism. This is a long way from Freud who typically did not work with the counter-transference, and who saw religious experience, meditation and mysticism as regressive, irrational and maladaptive phenomena, i.e. forms of “oceanic” fusion and oneness with mother, or the wish to re-experience intra-uterine life (Freud, 1930). To facilitate the patient in adaptive regression the therapist must also be capable of silence, e.g. by avoiding premature, aggressive and excessive interpretations, instructions or comments. In this way pre-verbal traumata can be “re-experienced and mastered again in silence” (Shafii, 1973a).

Dreams also tend to be silent. It is well known that Freud (1900) described dreams as the “royal road to the unconscious.” Perhaps less well known is that Jung (1958) similarly described meditation as a “sort

of a royal road to the unconscious” (p.508). Jung, however, also saw meditation as a “surrender” to the collective unconscious, as its practice leads primarily to an indefinite experience of oneness and timelessness, which according to Jung are hallmarks of the collective unconscious. Kretschmer (1962) also saw meditation in a similar light, and I quote “Dreams are similar to meditation except meditation gains the reaction of the unconscious by a technique which is faster than depending on dreams” (Kretschmer, p.76). However, it may take several years of practice to arrive at the adeptness of an “advanced” meditator.

By now it should be obvious that it is not just meditators who strive to clear the mind of its sticky attachments. Psychoanalysts like Bion (1970), Shafii (1973a) and Coltart (1992) also see value in analysts themselves temporarily creating an empty or “fallow” state of mind during clinical sessions so as to be more receptive to the patient’s transferences (see DelMonte, 1995b). Bion (1970) advised therapists to forsake memory, desire and understanding during clinical practice. He quoted from a letter written by the English poet John Keats in 1817 in which Keats referred to “negative capability” as “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Bion, 1970, p.125). Here we see a psychoanalyst advising his colleagues not to hold too tightly onto one’s professional opinions and theories when dealing with an individual patient. This is also a variant of mindful non-attachment. The silent mindfulness emergent from meditation training allows the analyst to listen more deeply to their patients, to receive their projections, and to let go of these projections after the therapy session. Other forms of therapy, in particular Gestalt therapy, also question the value of too much focus on verbalization in therapy.

15. GESTALT THERAPY PERSPECTIVE

Perls was influenced by Tao philosophy as well as by Freud, Reich, Moreno, Gestalt psychology and existentialism. He emphasized personal responsibility in the resolution of problems. Both Gestalt therapy and meditation techniques focus on the “hic et nunc” (here and now) of experience, i.e. both meditation and the various Gestalt techniques play down the value of verbalization. In fact, Perls, et al (1973) stated that verbalization, as in free-association, could become a sort of escapist “free-disassociation” from feelings and emotions. Together with obses-

sional verbalization, Perls also saw excessive rationalization as a defense against subjective feelings.

Instead, Perls stressed the importance of “contact” and “sensing,” hence his admonition “lose your mind and come to your senses”. He described many specific techniques, involving sensation, used to foster awareness. In this regard it is worth noting that Perls defined himself as an existentialist who applied the phenomenological approach (Perls, et al, 1973). The phenomenological method used by many existentialists is a method of subjective inquiry originally developed by Edmund Husserl and later used by Martin Heidegger as a means to examine one’s immediate experience. It has to do with a critical and scrupulous inspection of one’s mental processes and one’s consciousness. It involves an attempt to exclude all assumptions about external causes of internal phenomena. (See DelMonte, 1989, for a fuller discussion of phenomenology and existentialism). As existentialist phenomenology concerns subjective awareness without prejudice (prejudgment) it could be argued that it closely resembles the technique of mindfulness meditation in that the latter is purportedly characterized by a de-automatization of experience (i.e. the dropping or suspension of perceptual and cognitive habits). With both the mindfulness and phenomenological methods one strives for a permeable (or open) stance to the flux of consciousness without trying to punctuate any experience had. In this way both methods are typified by what Perls calls “confluence”, i.e. the absence of figure/background contrasts.

In both meditation and Gestalt therapy the observer role is valued. For example, Perls encouraged patients to observe tension and anxiety and not to engage in “pre-mature relaxation.” In other words, Perls promoted “approach techniques” rather than avoidance. In the same way in mindfulness meditation one is encouraged to observe steadfastly one’s moods, feelings, thoughts, and so forth in a non-attached and non-judgmental way, i.e. neither clinging to them nor pushing them away.

Perls, like Schwartz (1983) and many practitioners of meditation saw awareness *per se* as being therapeutic. This even included awareness of simply “being” for which he used his “internal silence” and “make a void” techniques. Perls acknowledged an influence from Tao philosophy here, and the similarity between Perls’s internal silence technique and the “no thought” strategy of concentrative meditation is

striking (See earlier and DelMonte, 1990, for a fuller discussion on “no thought”).

Perls also used breathing exercises similar to those found in breath meditation. Both involve paying attention to one’s breathing. In Gestalt therapy there are also exercises for focusing on anxiety, panic, depression, fatigue, psychosomatic symptoms and behavioral problems – all in order to “integrate” and resolve them, thus leading to Gestalt “closure.” Likewise, mindfulness is increasingly being used with a similar range of psychological disorders (Kabat-Zinn, 1996, 2005; Teasdale, 2000). Finally, it has been argued by McGee, et al., (1984) that those experiences which are too threatening to one’s core psychological functioning may be suspended as “unexperienced experiences,” i.e. without being fully processed or integrated at a conscious level. Such experiences remain akin to the “unfinished business,” the “unfulfilled needs” or the “incomplete Gestalten” of Gestalt therapy. These incomplete Gestalten tend to be at low levels of awareness and “acted out” behaviorally or hysterically in order to be communicated or when trying to achieve closure. In this sense the symptoms of hysteria are seen to be functional and symbolic (Szasz, 1972). It may be that the weakening of one’s cognitive defenses during Gestalt exercises, free association and meditation facilitates the abreactive emergence of incomplete Gestalten (or repressed material). Following abreaction, patients can check on any emotions that they have just experienced. Such enquiry should enable the client to put some verbal structure onto these preverbal feelings. By learning to put verbal form on feeling the client is in a better position to discuss his or her experiences with others – including the therapist. Putting verbal form on feelings, i.e. labeling them is also an aspect of constructivist psychotherapy.

16. PERSONAL CONSTRUCT THEORY APPROACH

George Kelly (1955) saw man as living in two realities, firstly the reality beyond human perception and secondly our interpretations or personal constructions, as he would put it, of this primary reality. For Kelly, man is like a scientist developing bi-polar constructs in order to make sense of the world by looking for repetitive patterns of similarity and difference among a series of events occurring through time. Even as infants, before we acquire language, we construe events dichotomously via bi-polar discriminations such as “milk versus not milk”, “mother

versus other,” “thick versus thin,” “hot versus cold,” and so forth. Therefore, initially these discriminations or constructs are pre-verbal, that is, they have not been verbally labeled. Although a growing child learns to attach verbal labels to many such discriminations, much of adult construing remains non-verbal (or somatic). As each person moves along the dimension of time he, or she, develops his or her own personal construct system to be used in the anticipation of events. The construct systems of “normal” individuals are constantly being “updated” in the light of newly assimilated evidence. Such accommodation or revision of our construct systems allows for a better fit with primary reality.

As McWilliams (1984) postulates, both Buddhist psychology and personal construct theory acknowledge that normal human understanding of the universe involves the use of dualistic dimensions to make sense of a unitary universe. Buddhist approaches would emphasize the need to see through this illusion of duality via practices such as mindfulness meditation. On the other hand, constructivist psychologists would focus on the reality of a more sophisticated and more effective personal construct system in order to be able to more accurately predict events. Buddhists and many Eastern writers such as De Mello (1990) would see suffering as stemming from our desire to force the unitary world to conform to our dualistic and egocentric cravings, beliefs and values. A fundamental concern about dualistic construing is that it creates conceptual divisions and boundaries in a universe that Buddhists postulate to be inherently holistic, unitary and in flux. Thinking tends towards dualism. Concepts tend to fragment reality. Different languages fragment reality in their own unique ways, rendering exact translations impossible. As McWilliams says, “to the extent that we attend to conventional, dichotomous, ideas about the universe, we are taken away from direct, immediate experience of the universe”. McWilliams contends that the Buddhist viewpoint is that it is possible to transcend the delusion of our self-invented dualistic world, and, in seeing the transparency of our construct system, experience a greater sense of unity (with the universe). Such an experience comes from an awareness of how we personally construct our subjective view of this greater reality. This awareness may be unfolded through mindfulness meditation practice. An aim of this practice is to put us in touch with the interpenetration and the inter-dependence of all forms of life, and also with compassion and “inter-being” (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1975, 1991, 2003).

Kelly was adamant on the notion of bi-polarity of constructs. One always abstracts on the basis of both similarity and contrast. Dichotomy is seen as an essential feature (and limitation) of thinking itself. Whilst Kelly says that one can transcend one's biography and not become a victim of circumstance, one can only do this through developing alternative constructs. One never escapes from one's construct system, but always assimilates the world through it or through its elaborations. Thus, when one transcends a particular bi-polarity, one tends to climb to a higher and more abstract level, but to a level which, nonetheless, is structured in bi-polar terms. It may be that some meditation and yoga approaches are directly or indirectly attempting to elaborate the non-verbal construing of the person so that it supersedes the verbally-labeled constructions. From this point of view one could initially be talking about "descendence" from the psyche to the soma, rather than transcendence. One, therefore, has to distinguish between descendence, ascendance and transcendence. Descendence implies moving "down" from cognitive to pre-verbal or somatic construing. In psychodynamic terms this is known as adaptive regression as opposed to psychotic regression. Here there may be a gradual decrease in the level of cognition (thinking) right down to the unconscious level. Ascendance, on the other hand, describes a movement "up" to a higher and more abstract bi-polar construct, i.e. to super-ordinate construing within one's personal construct system. Such super-ordinate construing may, if taken far enough, be seen as the supra-conscious (Assogioli, 1965) and may also become difficult to verbalize. Transcendence, as in "no-thought", is the feeling of unity or bliss when the meditator has the experience that he or she has transcended the bi-polarity of all construing – but nonetheless is still construing at a very basic somatic level in terms of balance, posture, respiration, osmo-regulation, blood pressure and other vital aspects of one's metabolism. Transcendence is, therefore, where the person recovers his or her non-verbal sense of "oneness" by not confusing the duality of our personal bi-polar construing with the essential unity of greater reality. Both ascendance and descendence, in so far that they side-step the bi-polar thinking mind, may involve varying degrees of transcendence.

17. PROBLEMS WITH DETACHMENT AND DIS-IDENTIFICATION

As I mentioned earlier, there are individuals whose attachments are problematic, being either, too intense and overly dependent, or in the other direction, practically non-existent. Does meditation ever encourage an exaggerated introverted stance to the external world, at times bordering on pathological dissociation and fostering social isolation, i.e. the avoidance, or even rejection, of the relational domain?

Epstein (1990) thought that meditation could lead to “narcissistic emptiness” as ego-strivings aimed at the external world are negated. Castillo (1990), in a similar vein, could see excessive meditation practice as leading to pathological de-realization and de-personalization as both the external world and the self are eschewed. These comments shall be returned to later.

So what is it about Eastern techniques, like meditation, that may lead to these concerns? Are there any parallels with Western techniques such as hypnosis in general and auto-hypnosis in particular? For example, Wang (1998) described similarities between “internal Qi-gong” and self-hypnosis. Both can be used to raise finger temperature, an indicator of relaxation (Song, 1998). It can also be argued that adaptive dissociative processes may be operative, to varying degrees, in meditation, hypnosis and Qi-gong. All require a capacity for relaxed absorbed attention in the practitioner which is directed inwards and away from external stimuli.

Those forms of meditation which employ a relaxed posture, closed eyes and the rhythmical and monotonous repetition of a mantra, encourage a shift away from one’s habitual construing of external reality towards a trance-like state in which suggestibility may be enhanced (see DelMonte, 1981; 1984b). Thus mantra meditation, like hypnotic induction, can weaken one’s ability to marshal one’s cognitive defenses, thereby encouraging partial dissociation between external reality and one’s inner world dominated by memories, fantasies, wishes, desires, and the like. It has also been argued that turning attention away from the external world facilitates an exploration of the internal realm, including the unconscious and archetypal imagery in the Jungian sense (see DelMonte 1995a, 1995b). Such an exploration would usually be seen as “adaptive” regression. Adaptive regression operates in the “service of the ego” (Shafii, 1973b). It purportedly leads to a fuller familiarity with one’s internal world.

18. PATHOLOGICAL REGRESSION

Adaptive regression can be contrasted with “pathological” regression. The practice of meditation is typically associated with adaptive regression, but it can also lead to pathological regression, i.e. back to primitive psychic functioning with those who are emotionally vulnerable and probably in need of psychotherapy prior to taking up meditation. The practice of meditation can, especially with novices, increase suggestibility (DelMonte, 1981). The monotonous repetition of a mantra, the relaxed posture and the reduced sensory input all tend to increase regressive mentation and hence facilitate a relaxation of one’s cognitive, e.g. intellectual, defenses.

This regression can become pathological with some individuals when it no longer serves healthy ego functions nor Eros (love, the life-force or Qi), but instead becomes fixated on the id, or worse still, on Thanatos (the death-drive, i.e. the wish to return to an undemanding pre-incarnate state). It is thus not surprising that several decades ago Alexander (1931) described meditation as a “sort of artificial schizophrenia with complete withdrawal of libidinal interest from the outside world” (Alexander, p.30). He is referring to the meditators’ attempted non-attachment to desires and drives, and to their avoidance of ego-gratification. Here people can be split off emotionally from others, from meaningful relationships and escape from troublesome aspects of social life into isolated self-absorption. This fostered (maladaptive) dissociation between the self and one’s surroundings can, for those at risk, lead to de-realization, as one becomes estranged from once-familiar aspects of the external world. It can also lead to defensive de-personalization as the (often excessive) meditator may dis-identify from his or her peripheral social constructs (and even to some degree from one’s personal constructs) and thus increasingly withdraw into a minimalist core dissociated from the external trappings of selfhood and devoid of the necessary motivation to deal with outside demands. The twin effects of such avoiditive de-realization and de-personalization can amount to a premature dis-engagement from life in which relationships – both of the “heart” and of work – are neglected in favor of an obsession with the complexity of one’s internal space. Here meditation, in some cases, may lead more to self-absorption than to self-awareness. Such self-absorption has little to do with either creative de-personalization or with adaptive “transcendence.” As it lacks compassion for, and social engagement with, others the relational aspect of growth is neglected.

19. THE VULNERABLE

Not everybody is suitable, i.e. ready for meditation. In the West, those who take up meditation tend to be more anxious, neurotic and to report more problems than the population at large (DelMonte, 1990). Those with dissociated-identity disorders, as well as psychotic, narcissistic, very shy, schizoid, paranoid and socially phobic individuals, i.e. those who are already having difficulties in the social domain, and whose ability to “read” other people’s emotions and to empathize is impaired, may inadvertently come to use meditation as a schizoid defense to escape even further from others and end up feeling even less connected and thus more isolated.

Furthermore, immature or traumatized people with very poorly integrated personalities may use meditation to “escape” into a split off sub-personality which is less orientated to the outside world. In other words, when meditation practice induces solitary escapist dissociation, poorly adapted “alter-egos” may emerge in those whose personalities only hold together rather loosely.

It thus is argued that the deliberate fostering of non-attachment to the external world, i.e. to mundane reality, may lead to a pathological detachment (or indifference) in those who are already emotionally and socially frail. Likewise, deliberate dis-identification from the contents of one’s consciousness can also be used as a mal-adaptive defense by those whose self-identity has remained under-developed and never blossomed. In other words, when special techniques are used to foster non-attachment and dis-identification this can, for some, have varying degrees of pathological dissociation as its outcome. This is not to argue against the obvious benefits of adaptive non-attachment, dis-identification and mindfulness as practised by the majority of meditators. However, it does suggest that with more vulnerable individuals, i.e. those with poor ego-strength, psychotherapy may be indicated to help build up their ego-strengths before they embark upon prolonged meditation practice, as the latter is about learning to side-step identification with one’s over-reactionary and egotistic mind. It should be easier to meditate successfully with a reasonably well-integrated ego. Paradoxically, one needs considerable ego-strength in order to successfully suspend reactionary ego-functioning by means of meditation.

20. CONCLUSION

In general, practices like meditation, Hatha Yoga, Qi-gong, Gestalt therapy and some forms of insight-orientated psychotherapy, by encouraging quiet adaptive introspection, circumspection and mindfulness, can, with many people, serve psychological growth (Eros) by encouraging the development of a more reflective self through an exploration of the conditioned and furtive aspects of consciousness, and of the clutching nature of our attachments and of our dualistic obsessional thinking. The resultant self-awareness should help clarify our desires and choices.

However, all techniques can be used inappropriately by the vulnerable. Thus meditation can encourage dis-engagement and demotivation with respect to the external world and lead to an escape into an inner-self, to the detriment of social engagement, emotional attachments and cathexes. Here neither love nor work satisfaction can be properly experienced, as the individual in the premature grasp of Thanatos forgoes compassion and the interactional aspect of living. Life does involve taking risks, both with attachments and with the building up of a sense of self-identity – even if death shall finally transform all physical and mental attachments into naught (or into the spiritual domain?). The fear that nothing of the body and of the mind (like castles in the sand) can survive in their present forms prompts many of us to try to transcend these passing aspects of experience in a quest for something durable beyond the dance of earthly impressions. However, the defensive pursuit of escapist “transcendence” can itself become a form of selfish ego-striving. Such escapist “transcendence” is really a cultivated, but maladaptive, form of dissociation.

The dilemma facing all of us as self-conscious and reflective beings is, how to build up and forge an internal sense of self, how personally and socially to sustain this fragile sense of self and attain a continuity of deeper identity, while living in the shadow of impermanence and discontinuity. The ancient practices of meditation, Yoga and the like, as well as the contemporary practices of Gestalt therapy, constructivist and psychodynamic psychotherapies, offer us some choice out of many possible approaches in dealing with this challenge; but no approach is without its own limits and risks. Balance is required in dealing with this dilemma.

Our quest for knowledge and fulfillment has two principal orientations – namely those typified by introversion and those by extraver-

sion. Both are valuable and neither should be neglected. It is a question of equilibrium. Introversion naturally implies introspection and elaboration of our subjectivity and self-awareness, whereas extraversion involves circumspection and adaptation to cultural reality, thereby enhancing social awareness. Such extraverted social adaptation more typically occurs during the first half of life. On the other hand, with introspection one is connected inwardly with our essence, i.e. the mystery of the self (- a microcosm of the universe?). Such introspection tends to become more important to us as we age, but can be precipitated at any stage of life if in crisis.

Circumspection is the *sine qua non* of enhancing our sense of relatedness to external form, i.e. to social convention and to “*linguaging*”. Inwardness (i.e. subjectivity) and outwardness (i.e. objectivity) can be complementary. (Also see Nino, 1997, on this topic). Put psychodynamically, self-psychology should be balanced by object relations. It may be tempting to escape from harsh external reality by taking refuge inwardly into illusions and even delusions. Likewise, one can remain in exile from one’s true core-self by being overly adapted to and concerned with external reality, and by developing a false self or facade. Bridging the chasm between our inner and outer worlds allows for a two-way flow that enriches both in the process, and brings them more into harmonious alignment. This is the nature of our connection with the social and physical worlds of which we form a part.

A final point is that the Western obsessive focus on individualism, with the forging of a strong individual identity, can create a neurosis around the loss of this over-valued persona or mask. When we identify with this mask we are identified with a limited and false self. The traditional Eastern emphasis on developing a social sense of collective identity, i.e. an awareness of social inter-penetration, which does not overly focus on individualism, may facilitate attempts to dis-identify from over-invested egoism. The aim of meditation, Yoga, (and other Eastern techniques) and some forms of psychotherapy is not to become atomised emotional islands, but rather to be more in touch with the personal, social and spiritual aspects of living. Some individuals also use mindfulness meditation to foster a personal relationship with the spiritual domain, and as a preparation for an after-life. However, this quest is enhanced by wholeheartedly including the relational aspect of our spirituality in our daily living by practising compassion, loving kindness, inter-being and the like. We can thereby evolve our capacity to

perceive, and to relate to, the deeper essences in both ourselves and in others.

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