

## **SPIRITUALITY, MINDFULNESS, PSYCHOTHERAPY AND SCIENCE: Linking East and West**

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### **Summary**

There are varying approaches to, and levels of, understanding. The (Western) scientific approach is the most objective. It tends towards the concrete and is concerned, in the main, with the material world, e.g. as in physical medicine. At a more abstract level we have the rather more subjective understandings underpinned by psychological theory as exemplified by the various schools of psychotherapy. Finally, at the most abstract level, we have the traditional spiritual insights associated with relatively ineffable religious experiences linked to trans-symbolic practices such as meditation. This paper explores some of these relationships in the context of traditional Eastern and contemporary Western approaches to well-being – with specific focus on the awareness fostered in depth psychotherapy and mindfulness meditation.

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## Introduction

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep....  
And God said, let there be light: and there was light. (Genesis 1:1)

This scenario was described nearly three millennia ago and conjures up a prototypical image within the Judeo-Christian tradition. It implies a sudden beginning to the universe, a spiritual equivalent to the postulation of theoretical astro-physics that our universe began precipitously with a “big-bang” (Capra, 1975). This hypothetical “big-bang” led to the creation of time and space out of a void. But what is a void? Does it really contain nothing? Could there have been a singularity full of potential? “Form and emptiness cannot be conceived as a state of mutually exclusive opposites, only as two aspects of the same reality, which co-exist and are in continual co-operation” (Govinda, 1973). Putting this in Capra’s (1975) language of physics:

The distinction between matter and empty space finally had to be abandoned when it became evident that virtual particles can come into being spontaneously out of the void, and vanish again into the void.... According to field theory, events of that kind happen all the time. The vacuum is far from empty: On the contrary, it contains an unlimited number of particles which come into being and vanish without end.  
(p.234)

According to Matthews (2005) only about 4 percent of our universe is matter. The rest is composed of invisible “dark matter” (21%) and of “dark energy” (75%).

It thus seems that everything, including our universe, can be created, can vanish and be re-created endlessly. In other words, there probably was not just one “Big Bang” but many “Big Bounces” from an infinitely dense singularity to expanding universes that eventually collapse. This idea was already postulated philosophically about 500 years before Christ in The Bhagavad-Gita, a Hindu text: “At the end of the night of time all things return to my nature; and when the new day of time begins I bring them again into light.”

What is implied here is a dynamic transitory creation with death and re-creation continuing endlessly. Hence there is a cycle of impermanence in the context of beginninglessness, i.e. there is no true beginning or end. Impermanence, however, has its source in the infinite, which contains all potential. This observation has relevance to many Eastern beliefs and practices such as meditation.

In meditation one strives to create a nondualistic mental void or silence. This laying fallow of the mind prepares it for a new beginning, i.e. for the unfolding of unexpressed potential. We typically associate meditation practice with the Eastern wisdom traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, yet meditation may be one of the early links between East and West in that meditation was no stranger to the emerging

Christian church in the Eastern Mediterranean area (DelMonte, 1995).

The practice of meditation, like other approaches to esoteric experience, usually involves a quest for knowledge, largely subjective, and it can be contrasted with the more objective methods of inquiry which characterise Western science.

### **Methods of Inquiry**

There are many ways of thinking, understanding and knowing based on different methods of inquiry. On the one hand, we have the relatively recent scientific tradition of the West. Since René Descartes and others, this approach has emphasised knowing about the world by using reason, logic, measurement, controlled experimentation and, indeed, the intellect. This rational approach of scientists was very much needed as an "antidote" to some of the "wild", superstitious speculations of the past. Their methodology has become firmly established in the scientific community including, amongst others, cognitive-behavioural psychologists. Their scientific theories tend to be readily verbalisable, tightly constructed and easily put to the test. Psychologists who work in this tight way typically confine their understandings to conscious, rational observations and measurements made by (personal) mind on the functioning of an objective universe. This can also be described as the logical positivist position. It draws its findings and confidence from empirical research. The concept "positivism" was developed by Auguste Comte (1855) who saw intellectual development as passing through three evolutionary phases, i.e. the religious (or superstitious), then the metaphysical (or confused) and finally the scientific (or rational). The superiority of the rational approach is implied herewith, but is it really as simple as this? Has the past anything to teach us?

### **Ancient Wisdom Traditions**

Is the knowledge gleaned by this positivist approach really adequately comprehensive when one tries to understand more fully the human condition? Does the much older tradition based on introspection, meditation and even mysticism have anything to offer at all? This older approach can be traced back to the ancient wisdom traditions of the Orient, i.e. back about 4,000 years to early Hinduism, back about 3,800 years ago to early Judaism, about 2,700 years ago to Japanese Shintoism and about 2,500 years ago to Chinese Taoism. This approach can also be found in a further developed form in Buddhism (which emerged 2,600 years ago from Hinduism), and even in early Christianity (DelMonte, 1995). Islam, the "youngest" religion, is less than 1,500 years in existence. Thus, all the world's major religious traditions have their origins in the East. In the first millennium the Christian Church had a greater geographical diffusion in the East (including eastern Africa) than in the West, extending to Egypt, Ethiopia, Syria, Iraq, Persia, Afghanistan, India, Tibet and China (Freeman, 2002; MacCulloch, 2009).

The early Christian tradition, with roots in Judaism and with influence from the Orient, especially Persia, had much more in common with the ancient wisdom traditions of the East than does contemporary reformed Christian Protestantism. The ancient

Greeks, and the Hellenistic culture in general, were also in contact with Eastern cultures. This was particularly so after the conquests of Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.) whose control spread from Greece to Egypt, Persia, Mesopotamia, Afghanistan and northern India. A reading of the third century Greek philosopher, Plotinus, reveals how similar Greek mysticism was to ancient Eastern mysticism. (O'Brien, 1964). There are other east-west links and similarities. Zoroastrianism, the official religion of ancient Persia, had teachings which were similar to, and most probably influenced by, early Jewish mysticism and sects such as the Essenes, which then subsequently also left its mark on early Christianity (DelMonte, 1995).

Zarathustra was an ancient mythical figure born in Persia around 660 B.C. who preached on the end of the world, heaven and hell, the resurrection of the dead, life after death, the last judgement of the soul, a future saviour born of a virgin who ascends into heaven and angels who are guardians over "man and nature" in our struggle between good and evil. The parallels with Judaism and Christianity are self-evident, and are most likely due to Israel being under Persian domination from 538 B.C. to 333 B.C.

The Christian Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches with their (former) emphasis on devotion, ritualistic and repetitive prayer, the Holy Ghost, silence, meditation, contemplation, candles, incense, sacred music, and the use of ancient Greek and Latin (unintelligible to the masses) may have fostered dissociative experiences and thereby facilitated a mysterious aspect to worship. Hereby, they also nurtured a sense of spiritual security and satisfied the needs of the heart. However, viewed through the lens of logical positivism these practices would now be deemed "irrational" – especially in the context of concomitant superstitious practices such as exorcism, the buying of indulgences to save sinful souls, and, worse still, the Inquisition. The Christian God was not all love and forgiveness. He was also capable of creating the devil and sending souls to eternal damnation in hell!

With the Enlightenment in Europe and with the development of rational thought and scientific enquiry, traditional religious values were challenged by Luther, Calvin and many others, which led to a demand for Christian church reform, and the subsequent evidenced by the birth of several Protestant churches. These "new" churches tended to emphasise the individual and one's direct relationship with the scriptures and with God. Intermediaries such as angels, the Virgin Mary, saints, statues and even priests were no longer valued as they had once been. The communal struggle for good and God increasingly became transformed into one's individual task and burden.

Gradually, countries which still were nominally Roman Catholic became more Protestant (i.e. Reformed) in attitude. The "Protestant work ethic" spread throughout the West. For example, the Republic of Ireland, despite the large decline in the proportion of Protestants in the population since independence in 1922, has never been as "Protestant" (i.e. Reformed) in mind-set as now. The move away from ritual, devotion, the Latin Mass, collective obedience, etc., towards a more rational, individualistic, materialistic and monetary view of ethics (e.g. the compensation culture) is quite remarkable. Fewer people appear to publicly acclaim the value of confession, forgiveness, divine revelation

or grace as heretofore. Contemplative introspection in general and mysticism in particular have given way to the rationality of humanism and of the scientific method of enquiry. But are these ancient wisdom traditions really so irrational, or are they more aptly described as non-rational, and maybe even as adaptive? What does research indicate?

### **Religious Experience: The Evidence**

Religious experience is remarkable for its prevalence in historical time and geographical space. The oldest written texts, paintings and music were often religious, and every society has had its devotees and practitioners. Spiritual quest and aesthetic expression have often gone hand-in-hand. The splendid beauty of old churches, cathedrals, paintings, statues, sacred manuscripts and sacred music is ubiquitous. There has been continuity to such spiritual quest and expression over time. “Heaven does not change nor does Toa” (Mingyi, 1998). The Western equivalent could be, “plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose”.

But is religious experience really a valid, adaptive experience linked to these ancient wisdom traditions, or is it more akin to dissociative hysteria, schizotypic projective hallucination or borderline psychosis? Put differently, do people subject to such experiences ever have insights (albeit perhaps unwelcomed and premature at times) that can usefully inform us, as propounded by Carl Jung, or is religious experience, i.e. mysticism, no more than superstitious projection of our neediness? Freud (1913) suggested that there is a link between engagement in religious rituals and obsessional neurosis. However, research in this area fails to find any positive correlation between religiosity and various psychiatric disorders such as neurosis, psychosis, schizotypy and borderline personality (Cowie, 1997; Joseph & Diduca, 1997). On the contrary, a few studies have shown that religiosity is negatively correlated with psychosis (Joseph & Diduca, 1997). Freud was not entirely wrong, however, because religiosity (in terms of beliefs and practices) although not correlated with psychiatric obsessional symptoms (Lewis, 1997), is correlated with obsessional personality. Moreover, those who have an extrinsic orientation to religion, i.e. those instrumentally motivated by secondary gain rather than those pursuing it for its intrinsic value, are more likely to show psychiatric obsessional symptoms (Lewis, 1997). Here I am more concerned with the intrinsic value of religion as a spiritual quest for meaning. This quest may be enhanced by practices which foster adaptive dissociative experience, leading to insight that emerges from a suspension of one’s habitual identification with both one’s “self” and with the predictable aspects of apparent “reality”.

Batson et al. (1993) in a meta-analysis of 115 studies found that intrinsic religiosity correlated with reduced depression and with lowered distress. Spirituality appears to be linked to happiness in general (Ricard, 2003) and with feelings of gratitude (McCulough et al., 2002). A U.S. study found that church members live on average seven years longer (Hummer et al., 1999). Is the spiritual quest motivated by a need to make sense of both life and death, in search of the consolation of meaning?

## **The Quest for Meaning**

Spiritual and mystical understanding (in its broadest sense) is, arguably, the opposite of the rational, logical, linear and tight construing which so characterises the positivist scientific approach. Religious experience is more likely to be seen as an "irrational", dissociative, intuitive, holistic and loose form of sense-making. Its "findings" are not readily communicated with words, which gives it an ineffable quality. Instead of dealing with the measurable objective world, religious experience appears to be more concerned with the "subjective" domain, and is more likely to be communicated via posture, ritual movement, song, music and art. However, some word-forms, especially as expressed in poetry and in chanting, can also convey a mystical flavour, i.e. that of the 16th century St. John of the Cross (Barnstone, 1972) and the 14th century Julian of Norwich (Doyle, 1983).

However, habitual verbliness and mystical experience are not easy partners as the latter is more likely to be fostered by deep silence as in meditation (DeMonte, 1995). Moreover, religious experiences do not confine themselves to the personal subjective domain. They purportedly include ethical and transcendental aspects of mind. In other words, they go beyond the habitual cognitions of personal mind ("the psyche") to embrace the metaphysical spiritual domain.

Spirituality is said to stretch beyond the here and now of personal mind, ; that it is supposedly not limited by time and space. Jung's (1958) postulation of the "collective unconscious" would come to mind here as do Jung's four ways of knowing, namely, thinking, sensation, intuition and feeling. Thinking is central to scientific endeavour whereas, intuition, feeling and sensation are strongly implicated in religious experience, especially in mysticism, but also, for example, in Vipassana (mindfulness) meditation. With respect to sensation, both sound and sight can evoke strong mystical feelings as with music (e.g. sacred music as well as some types of classical music and jazz), and with awesome skylines, landscapes, seascapes and other sublime vistas. Such experiences can be conceptualised as forms of adaptive dissociation. Religious, spiritual and mystical experiences are commonly reported world-wide, yet Western psychologists tend to remain sceptical of religion (Cowie, 1997). At its highest level, spiritual experience goes beyond the written word into the non-symbolic and nondualistic domain. Words cannot readily convey the full complexity of such experiences without showing the potential limitations inherent in confining understanding to (dualistic) thinking only. Yet, one cannot dispense with thinking as it is part of the spectrum of knowing.

### **Ways of Knowing: The Spectrum**

It can of course be argued that no attempted understanding of life is complete without the complementary inputs of science, the humanities, religion and, even, mysticism. Western science deals, above all, with an objective experience of the material world. However, the scientific approach may "dip" into the subjective (i.e.

psychological) domain, as long as it is confined to personal intra-psychic experience, although scientists do not as readily address the systemic or inter-personal domains. In other words, "hard" scientists usually are most comfortable when studying the material world (including our bodies), somewhat less confident when inquiring into mental phenomena (at the level of personal mind), often challenged when dealing with the social aspects of the "collective" mind (for example as described in systems theory in relation to systemic family and group therapy), and many are outright uncomfortable when asked to consider "universal mind", the collective unconscious or other purported aspects of the trans-symbolic domain.

The trans-symbolic lies beyond both the sensing body and the thinking mind, i.e. beyond the physical domain and beyond (dualistic) language. Hence it does not readily lend itself to exploration by the scientific method. It may correspond, in part, to what Lacan (1966) denotes as the "Real" and is largely unconscious, i.e. largely unknowable. For some, it can also be referred to as the spiritual domain. In contrast, the pre-symbolic domain is found in early pre-verbal childhood where language acquisition is only beginning. Moreover, much emotional and sensory experience remains sub-symbolic in adulthood, i.e. unverballed, as we cannot readily put the "right" words on all our feelings, sensations and intuitions, be these past or present.

The scientific method, when used to build up our knowledge base, is biased in favour of objective observation, quantification, thinking, languaging and schematisation. Scientists characteristically set out to discover and communicate "the (objective) truth" i.e., make nature reveal her secrets to us. Those drawn to spiritual and meditative experience on the other hand, are engaged with the less readily verbalisable domain at or beyond the borders of normal consciousness, as revealed subjectively.

In between the "tight" scientists and the "loose mystics" we have a wide spectrum of individuals, some of whom may identify themselves as humanistic psychotherapists, psychoanalysts, existentialists, and so forth. Many of these are less sure of discovering universal truths at all, but instead concern themselves with hermeneutics, i.e. with interpretations of our descriptions of our experiences. This phenomenological approach unavoidably requires a degree of experiential "immersion" out of which new understandings may arise. Apropos the word "understand", it hails from the old Anglo-Saxon "under standan", meaning literally to "stand under". Empathy, i.e. intuition, feeling and sensation appear to be strongly implicated herewith, just as much as "thinking" is. Deeper understanding is multi-faceted – as practitioners of mindfulness meditation, Vipassana, know only too well.

According to the constructivist George Kelly (1955), creativity is borne out of the cyclical dance between loose and tight construing. If we consider loose sense-making as "yin", then tight construing is "yang". Tight sense-making is more logical, scientific and mathematical – and characterises the Western scientific method. Loose construing, on the other hand, is associated with the insights gleaned from meditative, spiritual and aesthetic experiences. Loose yin and tight yang are the complementary sides of the same coin of discovery, yet they are often perceived as alien to each other – "East is East and

“West is West and never the twain shall meet”!

### **East versus West**

In the West humanistic and scientific values have, and to a great extent still are, replacing religious ones. Herewith there has been a notable shift towards a more materialistic and reductionistic reasoning. Bankart et al. (1992) have argued that the Eastern world-view “values contemplation over dissection, understanding over analysis and concern for the whole over the reductionistic isolation of the individual” (p.142).

Western psychotherapy is a child of the rational, humanistic and irreligious values of the Enlightenment (McDonagh, 1982; Black, 2002). The current Western focus on individual identity, personal analysis, individuation, separation, and personal success can be contrasted with the traditional Oriental approach which tends to emphasise interpersonal dependency and mutual relationships. According to Bankart et al. (1992), “In the Eastern tradition, identity is defined much more directly by one’s ties to ancestral, kinship, neighbourhood, and occupational/educational groups” (p.144). In this context analysing one’s personal mind as in psychoanalysis may make less sense. Hence the Zen admonition to “lose your mind and come to your senses” (Bankart et al., 1992; DelMonte, 2009).

Viewed from the East, the West (especially North America) appears to be in the grasp of social-Darwinianism, where tough, competitive, careerist, goal-orientated striving “lone-rangers” are idealistically portrayed. This behaviour appears to many Eastern observers “as self-limiting egoism and psychologically counter-productive selfishness” (Bankart et al., 1992, p.147). For Ricard (2003) such narcissistic ego-centrism yields little happiness. With an excellent and thorough review of the literature and some supportive research evidence, Ricard argues that deep happiness (“*joie de vivre*” and “*bien-être*”) as opposed to temporary pleasure issues from the development of altruism, social engagement for the common good and compassion. O’Donoghue (1997) cautioned – “when you extend yourself frenetically outwards, seeking refuge in your external image or role, you are going into exile” (p.154). In the East, spirituality, family, community unison and co-operation appear to have suffered less from the cult of competitive individualism. But for how long? For O’Donoghue (1998), “Individualism is the enemy of real individuality” and is described by him as “lost islands of desiccated individualism” (p. 371-372).

Bankart (1998) reviewed the Westerner’s pre-occupation with self-enhancement through psychotherapy and meditation. This attitude has been depicted as a “culture of narcissism” (Lasch, 1979) and “solipsistic self-indulgence” (Benjamin, 1988). For many Westerners, meditation should be stripped of its spiritual attributes so as to render it an acceptable clinical “technique” for personal development. What is missing here is the social and ethical frame so important to Eastern wisdom traditions in which a sense of family, community, continuity and spirituality are essential (De Vos, 1986; Russell, 1986; Mingyi, 1998). For O’Donoghue (1998) “much of the modern fascination with mysticism is more self-indulgent than ascetic” (p.112). Today mindfulness meditation,

although becoming increasingly popular (often in combination with cognitive therapy) , is often taught without adequate reference to its ethical and relational base.

Whilst it is interesting, and undoubtedly somewhat simplistic, to contrast Oriental and Occidental approaches, it must be borne in mind that all living systems (including human) seek balance. The desire for individuality is probably attenuated by a fear of isolation; just as a desire for fusion with idealised others can be tempered by a fear of bondage (Epstein, 1990). The heroic solitude depicted metaphorically by the image of a rugged lighthouse master all alone in the throes of an Atlantic storm may be temporarily appealing and even, for some, enlightening, but it is difficult to sustain, even for its Western advocates, as a stance in life.

As Christianity had Eastern origins (MacCulloch, 2009), it may well be that in the past the early Christian Western world view was not too dissimilar in many respects from what we now tend to regard as “Eastern values”. (Likewise, it is unlikely that the East has escaped modernisation without increasing Westernisation). A reading of John O’Donoghue’s (1997) book, *Anam Chara* (Soul Friend), on Celtic spirituality reveals beautiful parallels in attitudes between the early Christian church in Ireland and Eastern thought. Both valued inner development, i.e.. “If we become addicted to the external, our interiority will haunt us” (O’Donoghue, 1977, p.14), and both encouraged some detachment from the external world, i.e. “the mystical life has always recognised that to come deeper into the divine presence within, you need to practice detachment” (p. 246). Such parallels were probably found throughout Europe in the past. “East” and “West” are probably more than geographical locations – they reflect attitudes and mentalities found beyond their respective shores. Although “East is East and West is West” - forever the twain shall meet! Let us not become bogged down in East/West dualism. There is an overlap between Eastern and Western concerns with insight (Fleischman, 1995). The West’s growing interest in Eastern approaches to physical and mental well-being, as exemplified by the increased practice of Chinese medicine, acupuncture, yoga, mindfulness, Tai Chi, Buddhism and so forth, may be an awakening of an older spirituality. It may also be a reaction to the increasing emphasis on rationality and externality in the contemporary post Judeo-Christian Western world (especially in Western Europe since the two World Wars).

Much psychological theory and most psychotherapy practices have evolved, and are conducted, in the context of the Western scientific tradition. This includes the work of the "grandfather" of psychotherapy, Sigmund Freud, who saw himself as first and foremost a scientist. So let us briefly take a closer look at his thinking.

### **Relevance to Clinical Practice**

Freud (1912, 1913, 1930) was, philosophically speaking, a "naturalist" who perceived mind as part of nature. For example, he saw personality formation as being linked to bio-developmental stages of life - the so-called oral, anal and genital phases with their associated defences and emergent personality structures. However, Freud was influenced by the Jewish mystical tradition, Kabbalah (Lancaster, 2005), and thus was

also concerned with meaning. But meaning, as Freud discovered, cannot solely be extracted from the biological domain, as meaning must be holistic. Nor can meaning (the "text") be reduced simply to internal mental factors as propounded by some psychoanalysts. It has thus been argued (Langs & Badalament, 1996) that meaning is not simply located in our heads (or even in our whole bodies), as meaning is always holistic and thus contextual (e.g. social). Thus systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968) in acknowledging this embraces contextualism. Comprehensive systems theory could, therefore, even include the spiritual domain in its sense making - as well as the more obvious biological and psycho-social domains (DeMonte, 1989, 1996). But does the work of psychotherapists typically suggest that they are even aware of this spiritual or mystical dimension? And, more to the point, do they care to incorporate aspects of it into their practice? I hope to show, with some examples, that this is being attempted by some practitioners.

Allow me to continue with some pertinent quotations. Freud stated that a psychoanalyst should maintain an "evenly hovering attention" between patient and self in the selection of material during analysis, but "if one's expectations are followed in this selection, there is the danger of never finding anything but what is already known" (Freud, 1912, pp.111-112). Here Freud is arguing for a form of neutral "choiceless awareness" typical of Eastern mindfulness practice, i.e. for an openness to novel perceptions. To my knowledge Freud did not go on to describe how this interesting advice on the use of a floating "third eye" could be cultivated. Did Bion (1970) take him up here when he advised psychoanalysts to forsake "memory, desire and understanding" during practice? By suggesting that analysts eschew these three functions was Bion reformulating Freud's original advice not to follow habitually one's expectations in therapy? In a similar vein Bion quoted from a letter by the poet John Keats, written 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). It is my hope that a deeper understanding of meditative silence shall allow us to address, later on, the issues just raised by my quotations from Freud and Bion. Some of Bion's conceptualizations were among the most mystical in orientation of all the psychoanalysts, and it is thus to mysticism that we now return.

### **Mysticism: A Link Between East and West**

Those familiar with the writings of Jan van Ruysbroek and Meister Eckhart (both born in the 13th century) will know about the very long tradition of mysticism in Western Europe. Let us look again at Plotinus, the third century Neo-Platonist Greek philosopher, whose writings six centuries after Plato, "The Enneads" (O'Brien, 1964), reflect views which lie comfortably with both the Eastern wisdom traditions and Western mysticism. Contemplation was of central importance to Plotinus. Let me quote him: "I am myself born of contemplation; mine is a contemplative nature. The contemplation in me produces the object contemplated" (p.165). Plotinus went on: "Contemplation rises from Nature to Soul, from Soul to Intelligence" (p.169). For Plotinus everything derives from "The One". The One is totality, unity, infinity and, as such, unknowable in the intellectual sense. The One precedes all, is the source of all things. It begets "The

Good”, “Being” and “The Intelligence” from which, in turn, Beauty, Eros, Ideas and The (Divine) Soul are begotten. Individual souls and Nature flow from The Soul, i.e. the Soul contains the body and not vice versa.

O’Brien (1967) wrote that Plotinus had stated the One is the primal begetter and further that Plotinus described it as:

... perfect – seeking nothing, having nothing, needing nothing – The One “overflows” and its excess begets an other than itself, begotten turns back towards begetter and is filled and becomes its contemplator, “The Intelligence”. (p.107)

What begets is thus always simpler than what is begotten. The One is simple unity – its derivatives are multiples and complex, hence the drift towards evolutionary complexity in a multitude of forms, each with its own form and performance, and all from the same source or essence.

Being is the object of thought. Knowledge (thought) implies duality – the knower and the known. Nevertheless, we aspire to the One, to dance around it. “In this dance the soul looks upon the source of life, the source of “The Intelligence”, the origin of Being, the cause of The Good, the root of the Soul. All these entities emanate from The One...” (p.84). The One being everything is also nothing. Meditation, East and West, has been seen as a means to suspend dualistic construing and to access this “nothingness”, this pregnant void, the All, The One. Many contemporary writers have retained an interest in such contemplation and mysticism.

### **Mysticism: Some Contemporary Views**

According to O’Donoghue (1997) “The eternal comes to us mainly in terms of nothingness and emptiness” (p.266). Let me continue with a paradox. Ria Weyens (1992) stated, “We are afraid of the void” (p.50). Yet she also said that “emptiness is the source of fullness”, and that to develop fullness “We must find the no-self or selfless-self” (p. 50). To help resolve the above paradoxes it is useful to look more closely at the tradition of mysticism. The words mysticism and mystery have a similar origin. Both come from the Greek “mustikos” suggesting closed lips and eyes. Mysticism, like psychoanalysis, is a quest into the unknown, i.e. into the realm of the mysterious motivated by a desire for knowledge beyond the level of appearances. The mystic appears to be exploring the depths of the unconscious while remaining wholly conscious (Bomford, 2002). For Louth (1992) this journey is more likely to be characterised by the workings of Eros than by Logos. Hence according to Louth the unknowable reality of the Divine cannot be logically apprehended, but is experienced by “transformation of the soul” via Eros. Eros, meaning love, is characterised by feeling and intuition, whereas Logos connotes the logical, thinking, rational, and dualistic aspect of mind. For O’Donoghue (1998), “Mystery cannot be unravelled by thought” (p.137).

Mysticism is thus concerned with moving beyond, i.e. transcending our habitual thinking or dualistic construing of the world. According to Stace (1960) mysticism has to do with the essential unity of experience whereby "the seer and the seen are one". Techniques used to gain access to the experience of this unity include yoga, Qi-gong and meditation, among others. With such techniques practitioners regularly report that the usual dimensions of time and space become perceptually distorted (dissociated) - often accompanied by an upsurge of cathartic emotion (DelMonte, 1990). However, mystical experiences do not depend on such special techniques. They can be evoked in a variety of natural situations like distant skylines, wild seascapes and majestic landscapes, and may involve awareness of timelessness and of the sheer imponderability by humans of infinite space or time. For O'Donoghue (1998) "A life that has closed off mystery has deadened itself" (p.137).

When it comes to gaining knowledge and understanding there are two main approaches - the "via positiva" and the "via negativa". The former, based more on logic and objectivity tends to focus on what the objective world has to offer, and, as already mentioned, is exemplified by the logical positivist tradition of scientific enquiry. The mystical path, the via negativa is, on the contrary, concerned with emptiness, void and nothingness and tolerance thereof. It is thus also concerned with potential. Bion's views on the importance of "negative capability" come to mind here. Through "unknowing" one opens up the possibility of mystical understanding. To understand creatively one must first suspend previous notions and thinking patterns so as to produce a temporary "tabula rasa" or fallow state, i.e. to produce "something from nothing" (Barnstone, 1972). "Nothing is the sister of possibility" (O'Donoghue, 1997, p.267).

In concentrative meditation (e.g. Samatha), by focusing exclusively and continuously on one meaningless and monotonous stimulus (e.g. a mantra), all contrasts (dualisms) fall away. As contrasts are necessary for ordinary conscious, rational, dualistic, sense-making, one is left with nothing to construe, i.e. with no news of a difference or "no-thought" (DelMonte, 1987). No thought can thus be envisaged as deliberately fostered adaptive dissociation or dis-identification involving the suspension of habitual cognitive construing. This nondual void is the still and silent nothingness of the via negativa. In a way the mind is taking a vacation by being vacant. Fresh ideas can flow into such empty places. "Until you really listen to the call of this void, you will remain an inner fugitive, driven from refuge to refuge, always on the run with no place to call home" (O'Donoghue, 1997, p.133). This inner void can also be described as the unknowable in that it cannot really be understood intellectually, despite being a source of inspiration. In this sense it can be ascribed as being part of the (Jungian) collective unconscious.

### **Meditation's Ethical Base**

Historically meditation has an ethical base. Feelings of love emergent from the experience of unity with the One, the All or the Divine are to be translated into acts of love and kindness. According to Laurence Freeman (1992), "The human good is not found only within people, but also between them" (p.15). On first impression, one often

thinks of mysticism as being concerned with finding goodness (or Godness) within. The relational aspect of love (and spirituality), as expressed behaviourally, is not always adequately highlighted in the contemporary practice of mindfulness. Ria Weyens (1992) made the point that "as long as all our energy is absorbed in self-occupation (self-fascination) we remain restless, diseased" (p.48). Yet, paradoxically, John Main (1989) would contend that we need to regularly and systematically turn inwards to deal effectively with this limiting self-fascination.

Sustained silence produces a fertile state of mind open to experiences beyond language. It may lead to an ineffable, transcendental state of non-attachment, non-clinging and equanimous, in which one experiences undifferentiated unity, i.e. the Infinite or the Absolute (Main, 1982, 1984, 1989; DelMonte, 1995). This is just one example of how the ancient practice of meditation is embedded in mysticism and spirituality. I shall now try to make some links between this simple example and the practice of psychotherapy.

### **The Role of Silence: Beyond Language, Symbolisation and Duality**

Psychotherapy, compared with meditation, is a neophyte on the world stage. Most forms of psychotherapy use verbalisation as their *modus operandi*. A common view held by many psychoanalysts, and shared by this author, is that those who do not learn to "think" (i.e. to symbolise verbally) are bound to go on suffering - as with the hysterically inclined who tend to "feel" too much. Whilst 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 fecund silence in therapy. For example, the obsessionally inclined, in thinking and often talking too much, demonstrate that we cannot always "think" our way out of problems. In therapy they typically have difficulty 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 dissociation" (Perls et al., 1973) or split-off intellect. These people may need to learn that speech, like music, is given deeper meaning by being punctuated by expectant silence so that something else besides words may emerge. According to O'Donoghue (1997):

If you are outside of your self, always reaching beyond your self, 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. (p.133)

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". (p.338). Later authors saw silence as indicative of shyness, shame, sorrow, anger, hostility, psychic absence and fear (Shafii, 1973; 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, 1973). In keeping with this theme Shafii (1973) sees words as creating communication, and silence as fostering communion. The psychoanalyst Coltart (1992) goes as far as saying that "my own preference, above all others, is for a silent patient". (p.85). 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 did not work with the counter-transference typically, 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 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, 1973, p.442). There are probably several ways in which therapists can learn to work comfortably with silence. One pathway is via the practice of meditation (see DelMonte, 1995).

### **Meditation for the Psychotherapist**

Many authors have written on how the practice of meditation by psychotherapists can enhance their capacity for deep listening, receptivity, empathy, insight, staying in the "hic et nunc" (here and now), and thus their use of counter-transference (Lesh, 1970; Carrington & Ephron, 1975; Keefe, 1975; Fromm, 1977; Speeth, 1982; Rubin, 1985; DelMonte, 1987, 1990; Coltart, 1992; Fleischman, 1995). For example, Speeth argued cogently that meditation can be a form of attention training. She saw that concentrative meditation is a training in narrowly focused or specifically invested attention, whereas mindfulness meditation trains one to adopt a non-attached, open, panoramic or wide-focus attention, which is evenly invested in everything that comes to mind - namely a kind of "choiceless awareness". Allied to these two approaches Speeth also described a third (and higher) level of integrated attention which she called "witness consciousness". This involves an awareness of the type of attention being given (narrow or panoramic), as well as the object of attention. Is this "witness consciousness" similar to Freud's (1912) "evenly hovering attention"? Bion's (1970) advice to forsake "memory, desire and understanding" when listening to patients also comes to mind here.

In a similar vein, Rubin (1985) argued that training in both concentrative and mindfulness meditation enhances "psychoanalytic listening". He postulated that meditation produces a "laying fallow" state of mind. Such an open state would be more receptive to any pregnant silence emergent from the analytic dyad. Fromm (1977), in an excellent article, descriptively contended that the practice of meditation helps to make the unconscious conscious by enhancing ego receptivity, primary process mentation, fantasy, imagery, free-floating attention and adaptive regression. Finally, on this theme, Coltart (1992) argued that, since much of what patients present to us is "beyond words" (as in psychosomatic symptoms, hysterical conversions, traumata and existentialist crises), it cannot simply be dealt with at the level of language. Instead she used her training in meditation to enhance neutral or "bare attention", both "sharply focused and scanning" to

tune into the patient's transferences, and especially, into her own counter-transference. It is worth quoting her conclusion on this subject. "The discipline of meditation practice enhances the discipline of one's contribution to an analytic session which sometimes is, in fact, itself almost indistinguishable from a form of meditation" (p.147). I would call this mindfulness meditation. Such mindfulness aids attunement with both the patient and one's own counter-transference.

An aim of mindfulness meditation is also to enhance reflexivity, i.e. the ability to perceive events and oneself in wider context. Reflexivity is thus much broader than "ordinary thinking". It includes an awareness of personal, social, historical and spiritual factors, so that we can place our narratives (texts) in an evolving contextual awareness.

All of this is not to argue that during therapy, patient and therapist must sit out session after session in blissful silence! Rather, the ability to suspend, at critical moments, the complex cognitive processes involved in "memory, desire and understanding" (Bion, 1970) is a stance in therapy which meditation training enhances. However, I think that it is not so much a question of forsaking or eschewing memory and desire like Bion advised, but rather temporarily holding them in abeyance. This is where mindfulness meditation is helpful. This process has also been referred to as the "de-automatization" of cognitive construing (Fromm, 1977; DelMonte & Kenny, 1985; DelMonte, 1987, 1990), and is akin to Bion's use of the expression "negative capability", which, as already mentioned, refers to the therapist's capacity to suspend logic and dwell in uncertainties, mysteries and doubts while "containing" the patient emotionally. Hence we can conceptually link Bion's "negative capability" and Freud's "evenly hovering attention" to the mindfulness fostered by meditation. Here we see a bridge between Eastern mindfulness and Western psychoanalysis. In Judeo-Christian contemplative prayer God is felt to be one's witness, thus facilitating one's capacity for reflexivity in that one imagines God observing one's innermost mental life. The uncensored free-association in psychoanalysis to an attentive "other" likewise fosters meta-reflexivity, in that one reflects on the analyst's reflection on oneself. This self-observation process in analysis is eventually internalised and typically leads to enhanced self-awareness in daily life. Fully fledged and honest free-association is akin to mindfulness practice in that both are forms of uncensored "choiceless awareness" of whatever emerges into consciousness.

### **Critique**

Traditional schools of meditation usually have little to say about finding, owning and coming to terms with our inner so-called "badness" or destructiveness (e.g. anger, hatred, greed, envy and the like). Zen Buddhists refer to "makyo" as morbid, unwanted (often unconscious) material which interferes with meditation by arising spontaneously during its practice (Russell, 1986). Eastern meditation instructors usually do not seek to analyse these emergent makyo. In this respect the practice of traditional meditation differs from Western psychotherapy. With the latter, there is an attempt to integrate "badness" (our "shadows") with our "goodness" (ego-ideals and idealised objects), rather than "side-stepping" our unwanted parts (Main, 1982, 1984, 1989; DelMonte, 1995). Psychoanalysts see splitting as weakening ego functioning. The approach in meditation is

to move beyond the dictates of the super-ego and of the id. A difficulty with this approach, especially in the West, could be that individuals with rather fragmented selves tend to be drawn to meditation, yet may experience considerable difficulty, especially with inadequate supervision, in transcending their unintegrated ego functioning. Paradoxically, we need reasonably good "ego-strength" to help us move beyond those unintegrated ego yearnings that temporarily yield some satisfaction but ultimately little happiness. Hence such transcendence depends for its success on a "healthy ego" being able to temporarily suspend its habitual functioning (DelMonte, 1987, 1990, 1995).

Another worry is that avoidant or schizoid individuals may use meditation as a defence to escape even further from the world, and rather than feeling "connected" they may become even more pathologically dissociated and cut off from others. They may also meditate in order to distance themselves even further from their unwanted feelings of aggression, sexuality, envy and competitiveness. It may be wiser to acknowledge and integrate this shadowy aspect of self, as advocated by Jung (1958).

A problem with those who exclusively advocate the "via negativa" is that they tend to deify all "no-self" or "nothingness" experiences. Although such experience can have considerable spiritual value for some it can also be a defensive escape into "narcissistic emptiness" (Epstein, 1990). In other words, there can be confusion between egolessness and self-abnegation. The latter has been described as pathological de-personalisation and de-realisation, i.e. hysterical dissociation (Castillo, 1990). Meditation can be used to deny the importance of certain bodily needs and aspects of external reality, thereby increasing splits such as connoted in "mind/body" and "person/world" (i.e. subject/object) dualism. Worse still, there is the risk that the via negativa can turn into a painless form of premature self-destruction anticipating death, i.e. working more in the service of Thanatos than of Eros.

The path of meditation (silence) should not seek to destroy the embodied self, but rather to accomplish its liberation from blind allegiance to destructive instinctual impulses (the instinctive self), and from our acquired habits (the conditioned self) as well as from the emotional impoverishment resulting from our psychological defences. Meditation should allow "ego" just to be "ego" - neither permanently subjected to repudiation by the via negativa nor indulged in with narcissistic grandiosity. The insights gained through self-reflection show us that Eros cannot stand alone without Thanatos, and that the via negativa, without the bridle of logic afforded by the via positiva, may be no more than an escapist defence.

The value of some fecund silence in therapy is acknowledged. There are limits to the "talking cure". Learning to put verbal form on feelings can be developmentally liberating, but can also be defensive - as with intellectualisation, mis-attribution and rationalisation - which serve to contort and reframe the truth of our emotional underworlds, and to distance ourselves from our spiritual "over-worlds" or "para-worlds". Hence simplistic notions that mind is superior to body, that West is always less spiritual than East, that "abstract" is better than "concrete" or that one "causes" the other, are just dualistic fallacies! Beyond both matter and (conscious) mind, i.e. beyond body and

dualistic language, lies the ineffable nondualistic domain, beyond symbolisation and representation - namely stillness and silence. It is largely unconscious. For Bomford (2002) God acts primarily through the unconscious. Adaptive dissociation, as fostered by meditation and prayer, may facilitate access to this largely non-conscious domain.

### Conclusion

This paper has argued that traditional Eastern approaches, as exemplified by the practice of meditation and mindfulness, can foster awareness and may help create purpose, understandings, communion and growth, which complement knowledge emanating from the now dominant Western scientific tradition with its emphasis on logic, analysis, communication and the thinking mind. Scientific research and meditative contemplation are both valid and appropriate methods of inquiry into the mystery of life. Although at different ends of an investigative continuum, they are capable of creative interplay, e.g. by the interweaving of loose and tight styles of sense-making à la Kelly - as often found in insight and growth orientated psychotherapies. Many of the “tight” scientific discoveries may have been emergent out of moments of loose construing (reverie) as found in meditative states, hypnogogic reverie, free association, or while simply relaxing. Archimedes comes to mind here. So the duality between tight (scientific) and loose (intuitive) sense-making may be more apparent than real, in that the one is more dependent on the other than is usually acknowledged. Science “feeds on” inspiration, whilst spirituality enhances our love and quest for scientific truth.

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