SUFFERING AND THE EVOLUTION OF SUBJECTIVITY

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The human mind is impressive in its evolutionary progression of consciousness and intelligence. We see the emergence of imagination and creativity and the development of remarkable abilities to understand, mimic, and manipulate natural processes. However, it seems to me that, in the balance, these evolutionary developments have not helped much when it comes to mitigating human suffering. To the contrary, the evolving complexity of the human mind seems to have set the stage for the emergence of greater suffering. This raises interesting questions about how suffering arises from the structure of the human psyche.

There are several themes interwoven in these opening remarks. The first is the relationship between the evolution of mind and the genesis of human suffering. I will briefly discuss how cognitive complexity and the experience of self embedded within it have provided the conditions for suffering.

My second theme is the split between psyche and spirit in psychotherapy. This split is reflected in the hidden philosophical assumptions implicit in the psychoanalytic view of the mind. These limiting assumptions, which are largely unconscious, permeate our lived experience as well as the theory and practice of analytic psychotherapy. They give rise to a variety of existential attitudes which cause a great deal of suffering.

The last of the major themes I will address is the transformation of suffering. I will sketch an integrative view which combines elements of

both western and eastern views of the mind. The western ideas relate primarily to psychoanalytic models and reflect my training as a psychoanalyst. In terms of eastern ideas, the strongest identifiable influences are my Vipassana meditation practice and reading in eastern philosophy over the past twenty five years. I broadly refer to these ideas as 'eastern wisdom'. I have found in both my personal and professional life that eastern and western psychological insights are complementary; together they define a view that is more encompassing than either one alone.

Rather than addressing Buddhist psychology or its clinical applications per se, my intent will be to define some elements in what I term the spiritual re-organization of meaning. My belief is that spiritual experience facilitates the evolution of subjectivity in each of us as individuals as well as in the collective psyche. As such, it points to the possibility of a transcendent stage in the ongoing evolution of the human mind.

EVOLUTIONARY ROOTS OF SUFFERING

As I think about what makes our minds distinctly human, foremost is the capacity to make symbols. As Eugene d'Aquili emphasized in his talk yesterday, the rich complexity of the world of lived experience is comprised of symbolic meanings. Of course, there is a spectrum of human experience which ranges from direct, immediate, and unmediated by symbol to that which is highly symbolic and abstract. But the ability to symbolize underlies self, language, and culture and, accordingly, it stands out as the quintessential human characteristic.

As I see it, a major source of human suffering came into being once the mind developed the capacity to make complex, symbolically-encoded models of reality. This established an enduring tension between inner and

outer worlds; between subjective and objective. Also, symbolic capacity gave human beings the ability to think and talk about problems in order to explore alternative possibilities for their solution. This opened a dimension of imaginary scenarios of what might have been, should have been, or could happen in the future, all of which obscure the simple but compelling reality of what is. Infinite possibilities for unhappiness!

Suffering was also engendered by the evolving ability of the human mind to construct symbolic models of itself. As the mind self-reflects, it constructs elaborate concepts or representations of itself. These concepts may refer to any aspect of oneself as a person --one's body, personality, identity. They are unified into the stories we tell both others and ourselves about who we are. When we identify too strongly with these self-representations and become narcissistically invested in them, this can give rise to psychological suffering. We confuse our representation of ourselves with who we really are.

Last and most basic, the conceptualization of oneself as a self, apparently separate from the universe of which it is a part, is one of the root causes of human suffering. Since the nature of self is the topic of several other presentations today, I will not do more than mention it at this time. Suffice it to say that while it has always been one of the primary tasks of psychotherapy to inquire into the patient's view of themselves, it is only recently that psychotherapy has turned its attention to our basic and ingrained assumptions about being a self.

As this brief overview suggests, fundamental confusions about self and reality co-arise with the evolving complexity of mind. I will be discussing throughout these opening comments how basic misconceptions about self and reality underlie psychological pain. To put it in the most

basic terms, the complexity of mind is reflected in the complexity of psychological suffering. Cynically speaking, one might also say that human beings have evolved the ability to make life complicated!

BUDDHIST AND PSYCHOANALYTIC VIEWS OF SUFFERING

It is interesting to juxtapose Buddhism's First Noble Truth -- that life is suffering -- with the psychoanalytic view. I cannot take the time here to explain in depth the Buddhist view of suffering, but Robert Thurman and Stephen Batchelor have already given us an illuminating overview. Essentially, Buddhism posits that suffering, ultimately, is based on false assumptions and conditioned habits of mind. It also holds that suffering can be transcended by awakening to our true nature.

Like Buddhism, psychoanalysis sees suffering as implicit in the structure of the mind. This is so because psychological trauma and conflict are inevitable and become structuralized in the mind. Analogous to mental scar tissue which forms at the site of injury, psychic structure embodies the history of our pain and our attempts to defend against that pain.

I imagine that many of you may be familiar with Freud's famous dictum that the purpose of psychoanalysis was to turn neurotic suffering into "common unhappiness". He asserted that psychoanalysis could resolve neurosis by making the unconscious conscious. As to the nature of the "common unhappiness" that remained, Freud was less clear. Perhaps he meant by this the basic suffering of the human condition: sickness, old age, loss, and death. It is a moot point in any case, since neurosis can never be entirely resolved.

We can conclude, then, that pain is inherent in psyche. It is not just an unfortunate circumstance which will go away once we handle all our problems. Analogous to the physical pain that accompanies living in a body

- "embodiment" - I call this the pain of being "enminded".

ON BEING ENMINDED

The quality and intensity of the psychological pain we experience is related to our sense of ourselves as an ongoing subjective presence. Psychoanalytic theory holds that there are multiple, functionally organized forms of subjective experience. Each configuration of subjectivity, or 'positions' as Melanie Klein termed them, consists of a particular psychological organization in the internal world - each with its own quality of thinking and feeling. Subjective experience is continually shifting among different configurations of self and world. Indeed, the very experience of being the subject to whom experience is happening is constantly changing as we shift among different structural positions, different organizations in the mind. In one position, subjective experience may be coherent, with a sense of agency; in another, we may be caught up in a world of thoughts and feelings in which we feel ourselves to be more object than subject.

With these ideas in mind, I'd like to propose a view of two contrasting states of subjectivity, or perhaps states of Being. In the first case, when things are going along well, we feel subjectively cohesive. There are no major threats to our models of self and world; we feel alive and integrated. To say this more psychoanalytically, our psychic structure is able to contain and metabolize our experience. When our minds are optimally tuned and responsive in this way, there is energy available for being present with our experience, and we tend to have a clear sense of Being. This is what I call, for want of a better phrase, "true subjectivity".

In the second case, we encounter events, internal or external, which are so disturbing that we can neither effectively process nor let go of them. Psychic defenses are engendered and true subjectivity is interrupted; we

become absorbed in ego functions which obscure our capacity to be present. In this state, which I call enminded, we are reduced to a small segment of our ordinary capacity to respond and may become caught up in dysfunctional thoughts and action. Moreover, the more intense the emotional reaction, the more constricted our subjectivity tends to become. One outcome may be a retreat to a form of psychic organization in which we feel ourselves to be surviving rather than Being.

What I am describing here as an interruption of true subjectivity may be further understood by analogy with Winnicott's interpretation of psychic events in infancy (Winnicott, 1960). Attuned maternal attention, in Winnicott's view, is necessary to the continuity of the baby's nascent sense of self; reactions to external events impinge upon and disrupt the baby's experience of going-on-being. As I see it, many of our psychic responses, similarly, constitute impingements which present a threat to true subjectivity.

Remarkably, constriction of subjectivity often goes unnoticed. We may be so identified with our mental content and situational concerns that we are unaware of the fact that we are not present. We are enminded -- lost in the mind. [Cartoon] In effect, we are prisoners not only of childhood, but of our very psychic structure. It is as if our awareness of our Being were itself repressed.

IMPLICIT ASSUMPTIONS IN THE PSYCHOANALYTIC VIEW OF THE MIND

Similar to the unconsciousness we may experience in relation to our own ground of being, our systems of thought, too, reflect certain unseen assumptions. Psychoanalysis came into being at a time when the scientific world view was ascendant and reflects the biases of that point of view. From a more contemporary vantagepoint, some of its primary assumptions

are seen to be unnecessary or misleading. I will briefly mention several of the important ones.

- **The Root Delusion of Mind:** Contrary to Freud's understanding, the human brain and mind do not represent the outside world as it is. Cognitive science shows clearly that external reality is not passively represented in the mind. To the contrary, our brains actively select, filter, and process information in accordance both with what is genetically given and with what is learned. In this way, we construct complex maps or models of our world.

The problem with this is that our cognitive models of reality, embedded in both biology and culture, are very compelling -- so compelling that we often mistake the map for the territory. We are readily persuaded that our experiential world corresponds to, or represents, objective reality. This naïve, experiential confusion between psychic reality and 'Reality' (with a capital "R") carries over into the theoretical constructs of western psychology. Eugene d'Aquili has termed this the *root delusion of mind*.

This basic truth of experience in summarized in Pearce's evocative phrase "man's mind mirrors a universe that mirrors man's mind" (Pearce, 1971). While it may not be difficult to grasp this truth intellectually, it is very difficult indeed to actually see that mind and reality are interdependent. This wisdom comes to us mostly in sporadic moments of insight or through systematic introspective investigation. And if it is hard under even the best of circumstances to discern the 'root delusion' that the world we experience is a state of mind, it becomes even more difficult when we come under the sway of painful emotion.

- **The Myth of the Isolated Mind:** This phrase, coined by the psychoanalyst Robert Stolorow (1992), refers to the error of thinking of mind as something intrapsychic. As is now widely appreciated, psychic reality is not generated in an isolated mind. Rather, psychic reality is intersubjective in nature, actively constructed in the context of relationship. Therefore, contemporary psychoanalysis describes itself as an interactional or two-person psychology.

What a spiritual world view suggests is that intersubjectivity theory does not go far enough. It stops short of recognizing that the intersubjective field extends beyond the interaction of individual minds. From a spiritual point of view, all living and non-living things are fundamentally interconnected. Thich Nhat Hanh calls this our "interbeing". A flower exists only in relation to earth, rain, sunshine, bumblebee. Analogously, each individual mind is fundamentally connected to the natural environment as well as to the culture of ideas and the community of minds in which it comes into being. Stewart and Cohen (1996) term this our extelligence; the cultural collective of our intelligence. In a psychoanalytic vein, we might say that extelligence is the aspect of the intersubjective field that does not belong to anyone.

Because our extelligence does not promote the knowledge that we *belong* in any fundamental way, we suffer the pain of separateness. All suffering ultimately stems from the feeling of being separate, isolated. This is true in different ways at different subjective positions in the psyche. For example, we may experience separation variously as the primitive terror of objectlessness or abandonment, the depression of rejection or object loss, or the angst of existential alienation. Experiences of enminded subjectivity amplify our sense of being separate.

- **The Pre-Trans Fallacy:** This phrase, borrowed from a paper of Ken Wilber's (1980), refers to the fallacy in psychoanalytic thinking of regarding spiritual experience as regressive, infantile, or even pathological. The cohesive experience of self has been considered the end-point of psychological development. Within the framework of that assumption, western psychology has failed to appreciate the value and significance of the expanded sense of subjectivity and Being characteristic of spiritual experience.

To summarize, certain fundamental misconceptions have been embedded in the field of psychotherapy due to its philosophical beginnings. The root delusion of mind, the myth of the isolated mind, and the pre-trans fallacy are fundamental flaws in the theoretical foundations of psychotherapy. These spiritual confusions give rise to existential attitudes which are associated with our psychic suffering.

UNCONSCIOUS EXISTENTIAL ATTITUDES

The sharp split between subject and object leaves us with the enduring mystery of what is inside and what is outside. A recent book states the dilemma this way: is reality a figment of the mind, or the mind a figment of reality? (Stewart & Cohen, 1997) But this is a trick question, really, because the very form of the question presupposes a dualism which is false to begin with. Mind and reality cannot be separated. Here again is the root delusion of mind. In contrast, eastern wisdom is based on a non-dual view. How can mind oppose itself to a universe of which it is an inextricable part?

I spoke earlier in my comments about the suffering that is engendered by the capacity of the mind to construct models of itself. The specific dualistic construction that causes a lot of our problems is the experience of self-as-agent -- the idea that we are the do-er of things – including the

implicit representation of ourselves as the thinker of our thoughts. The mind which looks at things in this way is the ego: the knower, the doer, the master controller, blind to its own nature. [1]

In evolutionary terms, ego-centered subjectivity is born of the impressive masteries rendered possible by the human knowing system. The masteries entailed in knowing lead us to expect to be able to make life conform to our wishes and desires. Conversely, not knowing is interpreted as lack of control, and we resist it. However, this existential attitude amounts to kind of "willing against reality". This is an endeavor in which we can never prevail.

Embedded in our dualistic view is the conundrum of responsibility: How and in what ways am I responsible for my suffering? In denying responsibility we become victims, blind to the process of projection which constructs the world of our lived experience. In claiming excessive responsibility, we view life through a filter of ego-centricity that makes us seek to dominate events over which we have no control and blame ourselves for the failure to do so. Adding insult to injury, we make happiness into a project against which we measure our worth, and we take the fact of our suffering as an indication of our failure.

Another existential attitude that arises from spiritual confusion is the implicit view that life is a problem. This attitude engages an attempt to

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1 The word ego has a variety of different meanings. In psychoanalytic writings, for example, it refers inconsistently to both structure and function in the psyche, or may even reference the subjective self. In the present paper, there is wide latitude in my use of the term, and the reader must determine the specific meaning from the context [See Schuman (1991) for an explication of the terms 'self' and 'ego' in both psychoanalytic and eastern philosophical contexts.]

eliminate or solve unwanted states of mind; to wish that things were other than they are. This implies a fundamental resistance to life, analogous to what in Buddhist language is called aversion. Moreover, this attitude tends to suggest that the problem or unwanted experience is without value. Simply put, we become unhappy in part because we find our unhappiness to be unresolvable and without meaning. In this way, we end up unhappy about being unhappy.

THE TRANSCENDENT POSITION

The natural limitations on our introspective capacity are not often acknowledged. We pride ourselves as a species on the fact that we have self-reflexive awareness -- the ability to be aware that we are aware. However, the self-reflexive awareness of ordinary waking consciousness is not the fullest expression of this subjective potential. The refinement and consolidation of self-reflexive awareness, as in meditation, can bring about a further development of subjectivity. This experience is well-described by the metaphor of images seen in a mirror, where suddenly there may be a new awareness of the mirrored surface on which the images appear.

In contrast with the constricted subjectivity I described earlier as enminded, the *transcendent position* is marked by an expansion in the depth, fluidity, and locus of awareness. As our subjective frame alters in this way, awareness seems to penetrate experience more deeply; we feel a heightened sense of Being and are more alert to the here and now. There is a shift in the relationship between subjective sense of self and the contents of experience, so that we seem to flow *with* and *through* experience. At the same time, we feel less separate, more connected with our surround. The word 'transcendent' is misleading to the extent that it implies an experience apart from ordinary, embodied human existence. What we

transcend in the 'transcendent position' is only the frame of our accustomed ego-centeredness; the content of experience is, if anything, more ordinary, more fully embodied. As I conceptualize it, the *transcendent position* is a meta-level of subjective organization which includes ordinary subjective awareness at the same time as it expands beyond it. I should add, however, that there are many degrees and forms of transcendent subjectivity, including mystical states, which are extraordinary.

In transcendent subjectivity, we experience our relatedness to the transcendent unity or ultimate ground of meaning in life. This configuration of subjective experience is a developmental addition to what Ogden (1991) calls the *matrix of experience:* an expansion of the psychological space in which we live and construct personal meanings at any given moment. Thus, spiritual experience both comes out of and brings forth a *transcendent position* in the psyche.

The recognition of the fallacy of the ego's belief in the mastery of its mental life was part of the revolutionary significance of Freud's discovery of the unconscious. That it is possible to break free of the stranglehold of our ego-mechanisms is, I think, a profound message not only of the spiritual traditions but also of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis shows us that we can become aware of many of the disowned aspects of our thoughts and feelings. We can come to understand that the unconscious is bigger than we are; bigger than our ego-centered sense of our subjectivity. Spiritual practice reveals the possibility that we can transcend our identification with ego. In this sense, the spiritual is the completion of the psychological.

SPIRITUAL RE-ORGANIZATION OF MEANING

The psychotherapeutic narrative makes sense of suffering, and that it does so comprises an important part of the resolution it offers. I make two

related psychotherapeutic assumptions here: first, suffering is bearable to the extent that it has meaning. Second, an important part of the work of psychotherapy is the creation of new meanings.

To be metabolized, experience must be incorporated into the schemas of meaning through which we relate to the world. 'Meaning', here does not connote a conceptual interpretation but, rather, the whole framework of what we want, what we do, what we feel. To the extent that we can give meaning to an experience, we can accept and assimilate it.

One of the most important things that spiritual wisdom provides to the work of a psychotherapist is a new perspective on the meaning of suffering. The very experience that something is a problem implies a whole framework of existential assumptions that are grounded in ego-centered subjectivity. When we can hold the same experience in a non-dual frame of reference - - i.e., in the framework of transcendent subjectivity - - the felt sense that there is a problem may itself disappear, and we may come to appreciate the value or even the perfection in the situation.

To me, the spiritual dimension of healing is this meta-level understanding that the experience of a problem is a necessary part of its solution; that problem and solution are two sides of a single coin. To glimpse the interpenetration of problem and solution constitutes a transformational or existential shift, an experience of opening in which a new dimension of being can suddenly be seen. It is not unlike the emergence of new perspective that occurs when viewing one of those two dimensional Magic Eye pictures that have a third dimension embedded in them. Thus, the transformational moment involves the insight that one's problems actually represent an appropriate unfolding of one's self in one's life space. This is what Paul Tillich (1952) called existential knowledge: non-

conceptual insight born of an encounter in which new meaning is created and recognized. And, as in all existential knowledge, both subject and object are transformed by the very act of knowing.

I would like to emphasize that, in my view, spiritual re-organization of meaning is an aspect of spiritual practice which, while it may be based in meditative insight, extends beyond it. A spiritual framework -- whether it be Buddhist dharma, theistic religious belief, or whatever --becomes part of the set of personal meanings which give form to our living experience. And, while spiritual liberation may be fundamentally distinct from psychological growth, we do well to remember that the human psychic life is organized around the experience of meaning. The split between psyche and spirit cuts both ways; we ought not eclipse spirit from the psychological domain, but neither ought we exclude psyche from the realm of spirituality.

Just as psyche and spirit are seamlessly connected, spiritual understanding is not an abstract event that can be detached from the relational context of the therapeutic encounter. A spiritual re-organization of meaning may emerge in psychotherapy as part of the field of meanings that are transmitted consciously and non-consciously between therapist and patient. For example, therapeutic interpretation can expand the patient's awareness of unconscious existential attitudes. It can focus attention on the subjective experience of being enminded, and can highlight the patient's way of relating to the mind. In these ways, psychotherapy can facilitate the emergence of transcendent subjectivity. I am not implying a didactic process here, but merely elaborating on the way in which psychotherapy shapes unformulated experience by putting it into words. At least with some of our patients, in some moments, psychotherapy can be a meditation-a-deux which brings mindful awareness to bear on the patient's predicament. This

new awareness loosens the knots of unconsciousness which keep problems from naturally disentangling themselves.

Contrary to some interpretations, transformation of suffering is *not* about detachment from suffering; specifically, it is not about denial or suppression of suffering. The Buddhist teaching, if I understand it correctly, is about non-attachment: as John Welwood terms it, 'unconditional friendliness towards our experience' (Welwood, 1983). I think the wisdom here is the value of letting suffering Be and allowing its meaning to unfold in our experience. A psychotherapeutic narrative of deep understanding creates space for constructive surrender and enhances the patient's capacity to not 'push the river'.

A spiritual reorganization of meaning makes hope real; it transforms hope from a conceptual belief in the future possibility of something into a genuine acceptance of what is unfolding in the present. It broadens the scope of what we take to be the healing process, suggesting the possibility that, in Stephen Levine's words, "healing occurs not in the tiny thoughts of who we think we are and what we know, but in the vast undefinable spaciousness of being" (Levine, 1987).

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