DRIVEN TO DISTRACTION:[1] Observations on Obsessionality
in Cooper, P. (ed) (2006) Into the Mountain Stream: Psychoanalysis and Buddhist Experience. Rowman & Littlefield, Maryland

Marjorie Schuman

Introduction

For me, this chapter provides an opportunity to write about my own experience as a psychoanalyst, as an analytic patient, and as a Buddhist meditator in a way that is both personal and professional. What I want to explore from these separate but interrelated points of view is my thinking about obsessionality.

Specifically, I will discuss the nature and function of obsessionality as I have come to understand it in myself and in my patients. I have spent many hours observing the obsessional behavior of my own mind both in psychoanalysis and in Buddhist meditation practice[2], and in this chapter I attempt to conceptualize these experiences within a framework which integrates Buddhist and psychoanalytic thinking and, in addition, is informed by a psychobiological perspective.

Buddhist psychology reinforces the idea that an intrinsic tendency of the mind is cognitive activity which is continually recurring and autonomous. For example, it is said that the mind forms thoughts as water forms waves. In whatever metaphor, the mind engages in an unending (although intermittent) process of discursive thought. So what, then, is the distinction -- if any -- between this basic restlessness or lack of attentional focus in the mind (autonomous thinking) and obsessional thinking? Is there a seamless spectrum of activity between "normal" restless mind and clinically defined obsessionality? And, if so, how can this continuum best be understood?

Obsessionality

Obsessionality may be defined as the domination of a person's thoughts, feelings, or behavior by persistent, recurrent thoughts, ideas, or images; obsessions may involve wishes, temptations, prohibitions, or commands, or they may involve anxious rumination about a problem. Obsessions involve the effort to solve an emotional problem by thinking (Moore and Fine, 1990). In classical psychoanalysis, the obsessive-compulsive dynamic was conceptualized as a defense against hostile or sexual impulses, although in a broader sense it may also be interpreted as a defense against awareness of feelings, or against thoughts which tend to produce shame, loss of pride or status, or a feeling of weakness or deficiency (i.e., narcissistic injury) (Salzman, 1980). In simple terms, obsessions substitute for feelings that are unsafe to experience.

In his classic description of obsessive-compulsive character, Shapiro (1965) emphasized several interrelated features that bear repeating here:

- the obsessive's character style is one marked by rigidity in regard to thinking and intellectual activity, a rigidity which extends also to behavior generally, including body posture and social manner.

- The obsessive person's attention operates with intense, sharp focus, but in a way that is inflexibly narrow and which lacks the ability to be regulated at will. The

[1] The title of this chapter was created without knowledge of the existence of a book by the same title, on the subject of Attention Deficit Disorder, written by Edward Hallowell.

[2] Vipassana mindfulness meditation

cognitive inflexibility of the obsessive person is revealed in the inability to shift attention from one thing to another, a lack of volitional mobility of attention.

- The obsessive person is also described as "driven"; genuine motivation is replaced by the sense of necessity or requirement to do something that, in actuality, is a pressure that the person applies to himself. For example, the obsessive gives him or her self deadlines for activities, which logically may be quite arbitrary.

- But if the obsessive is driven, he is equally the driver. The obsessive person's life space is structured around a sense of "should" which is quite ego syntonic, (although the person may complain about the experience of the pressure).

- "The activity – one could just as well say the life – of the obsessional person is characterized by a more or less continuous experience of tense deliberateness, a sense of effort, and of trying". The obsessive is over-controlled, operating from a state of tense effort that restricts affect, playfulness, and spontaneity in general. There is thus little room to experience satisfaction in doing anything without a continuous sense of purpose and effort.

- Any relaxation of deliberateness or purposeful activity is felt to be improper, uncomfortable, or worse.

- The overcontrol of the obsessive is linked with a specific anxiety and discomfort over loss of control.

It is important to bear in mind that obsessional style as described by David Shapiro cannot be viewed merely as a dimension of psychopathology. The capacity to focus and to organize the *doing* of life in an obsessional manner is a very adaptive capacity in our culture. Natural intelligence may readily be channeled into obsessional activity which provides gratification and success in school and which can be of great value in the achievement of work-related goals in adult life. Too much obsessionality, however, results in a loss of cognitive flexibility.

Psychobiological Substrates of Obsessionality

From a neurophysiological perspective, the process of recurrent and autonomous thinking in the mind reflects a baseline level of mental or 'computational' activity in the brain[3]. Salient components of such cognitive activity in normal waking consciousness include the functions of planning and problem solving, thought to be mediated by the pre-frontal cortex. In turn, this baseline level of activity reflects the balance of subcortical and emotional processes.

One current theory is that dysfunctional levels of obsessionality, termed obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), come about when the subcortical neural circuits involved in the

[3] Computational mind is a term taken from cognitive science, and is based on a model of the brain as a computer-like device which embodies logical principles in its component elements or neurons. This assumptive model is not essential to the discussion at hand.

regulation of cortical activity become dysregulated. Using PET scan[4] technology to compare the brain function of patients with OCD to normal controls, Schwartz (2002) has found that OCD patients show hypermetabolic activity in several brain areas, including orbital frontal cortex, which are involved in the regulation of cortical activity. Without belaboring the neurophysiological details, the basic idea here is that OCD involves a state of what Schwartz calls "*brain lock"*. Essentially, subcortical pathways which are supposed to regulate the activity of the cortex become locked up, like an automobile transmission that fails to shift, and thinking becomes dysregulated; as Schwartz explains it, it is as if certain brain mechanisms become stuck in the "on" position so that the brain can't move on to the next thought. The OCD patient typically experiences this being "stuck in gear" as ego-dystonic[5]; obsessional thoughts and compulsive urges are experienced passively, something which occurs with no choice and which feel beyond the patient's ability to change. Thus, in Schwartz' theory, obsessive compulsive behavior arises from chronic overactivity of the orbital frontal cortex and the resultant state of 'brain lock' which ensues.

The attitude of mind cultivated in mindfulness meditation is a natural antidote to the state of 'brain lock', in that mindfulness practice develops flexibility of attention. With this hypothesis, Schwartz has done research studies on the application of Buddhist mindfulness meditation to the treatment of OCD patients. His findings demonstrate that the habitual narrowing of attention, which is pervasive and encumbering in OCD patients, can be counteracted by mindfulness meditation in combination with cognitive behavioral interventions (Schwartz, 2002).

From a Buddhist perspective, the understanding of obsessionality may come down simply to this: the severely obsessional person has a unique difficulty with simply *Being*. He or she can only *Do*, in the very restrictive manner described. The attitude of mind cultivated in Buddhist sitting meditation counteracts obsessionality by fostering receptivity in place of active effort, *being* instead of *doing*[6].

In the remainder of the chapter, I want to try to 'unpack' the psychological importance of obsessionality and attachment to *doing* in relation to psychoanalytic and Buddhist ideas about the mind.

Indwelling patterns of arousal & associated personality traits

As a starting point, I will describe phenomenologically what will be elucidated in later sections of this chapter. I will use my own experience as a 'case study' to illustrate the major themes. The 'case material' is divided into segments in relation to particular points.

Case Study of Self: #1:

My experience of waking in the morning is typically one of "hitting the ground running". Throughout my life, even preceding my addiction to morning coffee, I have found that I become instantly busy when I wake up in the morning, actively engaged in what I want to do that day before I am even fully awake. There is an anxious, driven quality to this pattern, discernible in the experience of (literally) cold feet[7]. For years I counseled myself that it might be helpful to do my sitting practice first thing in the morning in order to counter this state of arousal. But often I would find that a half hour of meditation was no match for the strength of this pattern. In contrast to the state of tranquility that I encountered almost invariably when I sat for any length of time,

[4] Positron emission tomography
[5] An unwanted and non-congruent aspect of the self.
[6] Notwithstanding this distinction, there is a certain kind of effort involved in the practice of mindfulness.
[7] Peripheral vasoconstriction mediated by the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system.

morning meditation for me was completely dominated by this experience of being "driven to distraction". I concluded that it was more skillful for me to sit at the end of the day, when conditions were more conducive to stability of concentration. It is only in recent years, probably as a result of a commitment to deepen my practice through frequent attendance at meditation retreats, that this intractable pattern has begun to shift.

Apart from acknowledging that I am a rather high strung person with adrenaline dominated habits of being, I have found that my morning arousal is a useful barometer of my level of stress. It varies from 'over the top' (a label I attach to an ego-dystonic amount of early morning hype) to a more gentle form of desire to 'get going'. Being hyperaroused has come to feel distinctly unhealthy to me and has become increasingly ego-dystonic over time. I attribute this change in large measure to my sitting practice, because the mindful experience of hyperarousal in meditation has changed my sensitivity to and awareness of my own anxiety.

I have also spent many hours in my own analysis looking at where this pattern comes from and what function it serves, one example of which is elaborated in the next section of the chapter. My analytic work with patients has given me additional opportunity to see how hyperarousal relates to personality characteristics of ambitiousness, perfectionism, and performance anxiety.

Hyperarousal, Performance, Anxiety, and Obsessionality

In my efforts to understand the genesis of my hyperarousal pattern, I have found it useful to consider the literature on Type A Behavior, originally described in cardiac patients by Friedman and Rosenman (1959). The classic Type A individual is characterized as intensely competitive, aggressive, and impatient, with a high time-urgency, and is described as having a persistent desire for recognition and personal advancement. The psychophysiological profile of the Type A person also has certain distinct characteristics, including high levels of sympathetic (autonomic nervous system) arousal.

I am organized psychologically in certain ways (but not all) that match the classic description of "Type A." In addition to the pattern of sympathetic arousal already mentioned (including my cold feet), I have been motivated by a persistent desire for recognition and personal advancement in my professional and academic life, and the pace of my work day tends to be dominated by a sense of 'time urgency'. Looking at these Type A traits both in myself and in patients I have treated, it is quite clear to me that they cluster with related characteristics of perfectionism, performance anxiety, and obsessionality.

In my own case, I think that all of these behaviors and personality characteristics became established in relation to the early development of my intellect and the programming connected with school. The drive for achievement and its associated performance pressure engenders stress and psychophysiological arousal. These traits are much less pronounced in me now than when I was younger, a change I attribute in large measure to my mindfulness practice and dharma study[8] over the past 30 years.

Meditation in a retreat setting has allowed me to enter into states of profound calm, a shift which represents a radical departure from the familiar baseline of my psychophysiological 'self'. These experiences have brought into exquisite focus the habitual nature of the "engine racing" that my mind often engages in. One way to convey this experience might be to say that meditation has heightened mindfulness of the ways I animate myself, and, concomitantly, has facilitated the emergence of an alternative experience. This has also been accompanied by the

[8] 'Dharma' is a comprehensive term in Buddhism which refers both to the universal truths which underlie human existence and to the Buddha's teachings about these truths.

insight that, whereas prior to my meditation practice I might have been inclined to say that ***I am*** a Type A individual, I am now clear that Type A behavior is something that ***I do***.

In addition, I have readily observed that when I am faced with a task which has performance pressure connected with it (such as the writing of this chapter), I am likely to seek out additional stimulation in the form of caffeine in an effort to 'power through' this anxiety. I call this the "adrenaline junkie" syndrome because it seems to me that it has elements in common with substance abuse. As I have come to think of it (based on my own experience as well as that of patients I have worked with), I am psychologically dependent on a state of arousal which seems necessary for the performance of certain psychological tasks, especially when there is anxiety associated with them. The desired arousal state may be self-generated or may be facilitated by the ingestion of caffeine. Such "autoaddiction" to adrenaline[9] seems quite parallel to substance abuse involving exogenous stimulants. Indeed, I have worked with patients who used nicotine or cocaine in a similar manner to sustain performance.

Conceptualized psychoanalytically, the state of arousal (or hyperarousal) I have described might be thought of as a self-state. If so, we might further theorize that some people become "autoaddicted" to their own self-states, repeatedly inducing those states in themselves (albeit unconsciously). This "addiction" is an habitual way of being which rests on a platform of performance anxiety in a multifaceted way: hyperarousal is sought as a way of coping with anxiety, while at the same time it is itself a *manifestation* of anxiety and *sustains* anxiety. I hypothesize that this complex relationship between performance anxiety and hyperarousal may be one of the underpinnings of obsessional character; the chronic and repeated experience of states of anxious hyperarousal generates obsessional defenses as a way to defend against and contain them.

Case study of self #2:

When I am engaged in a creative project that I find stimulating, my mind tends to go into overdrive and I experience what I affectionately call "my obsessional neurosis." A recent example is typical. I was re-decorating my bedroom, and was bogged down in indecisive uncertainty about what color to paint, what fabrics to choose, etc. My mind will typically become completely preoccupied with a creative problem of this kind, aided and abetted by my perfectionism and accompanying self-doubts.[10] Once my mind gets its teeth into this kind of problem it doesn't easily let go, to the point that it will often interfere with my getting to sleep at night. As one might expect, obsessional thoughts about these decorating decisions began to permeate my daily meditation practice. There was so much energy attached to my creative problem that thoughts about decorating even disrupted my (generally quite stable) psychoanalytic attention in the consulting room.

Sitting with this kind of experience in meditation has been instrumental in my coming to realize that obsessional thinking rests on a foundation of anxiety. When I am relaxed, my mind does not perseverate on thoughts; and, conversely, when I am in obsessional mode, I can invariably become aware of the bodily experience of being hyper-aroused. At the same time, to the extent that I am obsessing, I lose touch with being grounded in my body, and it generally

[9] More accurately, the pattern of psychophysiological arousal under discussion is probably mediated by norepinephrine (noradrenaline) or a combination of epinephrine (adrenaline) and norepinephrine.

[10] This dualistic construction exemplifies a split between the observing ego and the functions of the mind which are being observed. I elaborate on the significance of this split in a later section of the chapter.

takes quite a bit of steady and patient effort for me to settle down from this jangle into a meditative state in which I feel more embodied.

In my sitting practice, my effort is to try to get in touch with the bodily aspects of the anxiety 'underneath' my recurrent thoughts.[11] At such times, each moment in meditation that my attention returns to the present tends to find me holding my breath, shoulders tensed. I find the experience of my mind racing to be quite aversive, a condition which makes it difficult to stay present with my experience.

Although I had certainly been aware for some time that there was a lot of anxiety entangled in this 'obsessional neurosis', the whole psychological structure of it came into focus for me one day after I had spent some time with a friend who was acting as a decorating consultant for me. I had put together an entire little design 'presentation' including a list of the confusions that I was experiencing. My friend commented on how difficult it was for her to be with me because of the intensity of need she felt coming from me. Although she intended (and said) this to me in a very loving way, the feedback felt humiliating.

That evening in my meditation practice, I found my mind replaying the interaction with my friend. As I sat with this experience, my mind automatically examined these events in a way that is second nature after many years of psychoanalysis. It became clear to me that the psychological pressure I brought to bear on my friend derived from experiences that were common in my relationship with my mother. My mother had been a working mom and, with three children, seemed always to be in a hurry. (No question that my mother was a Type A individual). When I needed her to help me with something, she would always do her best to be there with me, but the sense that I had was that I had to be very focused and organized about what I needed. This makes quite intense at times. The humiliation I experienced with so little provocation by my friend tipped me off to the painful feelings that had been associated with the experience of dependency on my mother. Feeling anxious, needy, and vulnerable made me feel ashamed, as though I was *too needy* and fundamentally flawed.

These insights proved pivotal in the resolution of this particular episode of obsessionality. Once I realized that I had an unmet need for maternal attention in relation to my decorating process, it became evident that my obsessional thinking was functioning as a substitute for maternal care. The obsessive planning and thinking in my mind was providing a form of containment which allowed me to tolerate the anxieties associated with my decorating project. I elaborate on this idea below in connection with the psychoanalytic concept of the *mind-object.*

In response to these insights, I realized that it would be useful for me to hire a professional decorator to help me resolve my design problems. That way, I could have all the time and attention (i.e., substitutive maternal care) I required without feeling a sense that my needs were an unwelcome burden. With this resolved, my mind settled down and my obsessional decorating neurosis disappeared.

The process of insight and problem resolution that is described in this series of events illustrates the interdependence, for me, of psychoanalytic insight and meditation in penetrating obsessional processes in the mind.

Psychoanalytic Factors: The Grandiose Ego-ideal

[11] An important insight in this regard was facilitated by a meditation teacher who pointed out to me that I was using the Vipassana technique of noting "thinking" in response to my obsessional thoughts as a subtle way of *pushing away* the *experience* of them. This allowed me to put attention on the bodily experience that accompanies obsessional thoughts.

Case study of self #3:

As I worked to understand the issues I am discussing in the crucible of own psychoanalysis, I remembered an event which occurred when I was 3 years old and which was formative of my performance pressure and obsessionality. My father was taking piano lessons at the time, and had been practicing trills (rapid alternation of fingers on two adjacent keys of the piano). After listening for some time, I jumped up next to him on the piano seat and excitedly begged, "let me try!" After banging on the piano keys experimentally (probably not the first time that I had done so), I successfully executed a trill. This mastery would have been sufficient reward unto itself, but my father then proceeded to make a major fuss over me, calling my mother and other family members into the room to see what I could do.

I believe that what happened at that moment (and, undoubtedly, on many occasions thereafter) was a co-opting of natural curiosity and play in the service of approval[12]; the nucleus of a narcissistic constellation within my psyche. In place of the mirroring that would have been matched to *my* developmental needs for mastery, my father conveyed that having a bright daughter was narcissistically gratifying to *him*. Thereafter, and life-long, I endeavored to perform in ways what would win both approval and recognition of my having exceptional intelligence. School was a perfect breeding ground for the development and elaboration of this deep-seated personality trait. I became an outstanding student and endeavored to make my parents feel that they must be wonderful parents to have such a brilliant child.

In her well-known book Prisoners of Childhood: The Drama of the Gifted Child and the Search for the True Self, Alice Miller (1981) wrote very insightfully about this search for admiration and its confusion with love. She understood attachment to admiration as a substitute gratification for the meeting of primary needs for respect, understanding, and being taken seriously – i.e., love. Miller further explains that a self-esteem which is based on performance, or on the possession of any specific qualities or traits, occludes the development of a healthy self-esteem based on the authenticity of one's own being. Benjamin (1999) echoes these ideas in her conceptualization of the need for recognition in the development of subjectivity. The search for admiration defends against the pain of non-recognition, low self-esteem, and the loss of contact with the true (or authentic) self. In addition, the search for admiration may hide conscious and unconscious fantasies of grandiosity, functioning as a defense against an underlying depression.

The Mind Object

Along similar lines, Corrigan and Gordon (1995) wrote about psychic development in the precocious child (which I certainly was). Following upon earlier thinking of the British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott and others, they describe how precocious intellectual development can become so important in the child's psychological economy that the mind itself comes to function as a mother-substitute; the cognitive mind in essence becomes an internalized parentified object which plays nursemaid in the care of the child-self. This results in a reliance on the mind at the expense of bodily experience, a fracturing of what is presumed to have been, originally, a seamless connection between psyche and soma: "when the mind takes on a life of its own, it becomes an object – separate, as it were, from the self." Corrigan and Gordon (1995) term this phenomenon the 'mind object': the cathexis of one's own mind and intellectual function. They also describe how this mode of psychic function serves the need to feel in control.

Clinical observations reported in Corrigan and Gordon's work are quite germane to the mental processes I am focusing on here and are worth quoting. One patient, "Mr. A.", described

[12] This example shows how authentic experience or 'true self' in Winnicott's sense can be dominated and replaced by another mental function, described and elaborated in the next section of the chapter (the "Mind Object").

the recognition of his effort to be in "fierce control…. The very act of making something happen – no matter how insignificant – is what that is about for me". A second patient, "Mr. B." tells his therapist: "My mind is like a factory, it has to produce work". 'Miss C.", a profoundly depressed woman, speaks of "never being able to relax or trust her academic and career accomplishments". Despite exemplary achievement, fears of failure and exposure are ever present. "Mrs. D.", a young physician and mother, describes how "I do everything in a hurry… I'm always ahead of time…. But I feel if I wait, it won't happen".

These examples illustrate the inter-relationships among drive for achievement, obsessionality, perfectionism, and the need for control; the similarity to the Type A syndrome described above is also instructive. Corrigan and Gordon comment that the patients they describe vary in the nature and extent of their pathology as well as in personal style; some are narcissistic, some depressed, some boringly obsessive, while others are wonderfully quick and humorous. They also remark that "none of these patients are on particularly good terms with their instincts or with their bodies in general". They describe their series of patients as blocked in relation to free sexual expression, and, in many instances, as having medical conditions with significant psychosomatic components. They view these patients as "fiercely attached to their mind as an object, an object whose use is overvalued and exploited, whose existence is vigilantly protected, and whose loss is constantly dreaded…. The mind object promises perfection and omnipotent control, but this ceaseless search never yields satisfaction, only anxiety, depression, and threatened breakdown". Perhaps most significant, in the present Buddhist context, is their comment that these are patients who "cannot relax into just being, but must be constantly stimulated and enlivened by something or someone outside themselves".

Understood within an object relations[13] framework, mind-objects form as a distillate of experiences which the child has had in actual relationships, encoding not only the actual behavior of real others but also the affects that have colored those interactions. What is unique in the mind-object formulation is that it describes how we *relate to our minds* in object relations terms. I discuss some of the implications of this concept in the light of Buddhist thought in the final section of this chapter.

Buddhist Meditation, Obsessionality, and the Mind-Object

Juxtaposing the characterological features of obsessionality with the experiences cultivated in Buddhist meditation, the first thing that becomes clear is that obsessional style is in some ways antithetical to the process of mindfulness meditation. An obsessional person may be able to rigidly control attention in meditation, and may be able to achieve certain altered states of consciousness in this way, but meditating with tense effort actually impedes the ability to let go and 'surf the mind'[14], which is the *sine qua non* of mindfulness meditation. The modus operandi of the obsessional mind is incompatible with flexible mindfulness[15].

---

[13] Object relations is the school of psychoanalytic thinking based on the premise that the mind is formed of elements taken in from the outside, primarily aspects of the functioning of others with whom we have significant relationships (such as our parents).

[14] The surfing metaphor comes from Jason Siff's book Unlearning Meditation (Siff, 2000).

[15] It should be noted that the early stages of meditation experience will likely tend to be driven by a perfectionistic mind-object in someone who is organized psychologically in this way. Although meditating with tense effort is less than optimal, this may perhaps be a necessary stage in the development of meditation which ultimately helps to develop mindfulness of one's obsessionality. In my own case, like many meditators my natural tendency for a long time was to try to discipline my mind in a manner that unconsciously reflected the (obsessional) habits of overcontrol that were second nature to me. As Siff has noted, right understanding of meditation instructions may

Mindfulness practice develops flexibility of attention. Presumably, this comes about in relation to the emergence of states of consciousness in which the mind becomes markedly more settled and obsessional thinking decreases[16]. Such experiences are fairly typical in sitting practice. What determines whether such shifts in mental experience during meditation become consolidated and stabilized over time?

In my effort to address this question, I find it useful to invoke the concept of the mind-object. As a way of illustrating my point, however, I want to turn next to some "case material" quoted at length from journalist Lawrence Shainberg's memoir Ambivalent Zen (1995). In this book, Shainberg narrates his attempts to use Zen sitting practice to free himself from the prison of his obsessional mind. What makes Ambivalent Zen especially relevant for the present discussion is the fact that its author was both a Zen practitioner and a psychoanalytic patient. Shainberg's journal expresses beautifully the complex texture that can be generated by the cross-fertilization between the two traditions. His narrative conveys the dance between spiritual (dharma-related) and psychological insight in the context of a real life experience. In reading the section that follows , it is important to bear in mind, however, that Shainberg studied meditation with a Japanese-born Roshi (Zen teacher) and that this took place during an era in American Buddhism (in the 1980's) when many people studied Buddhism with foreign-born teachers who came from a very different cultural tradition and who were not necessarily equipped to relate to the psychological difficulties of their American students.

Shainberg came to Zen practice with a life history which included a father who had been a psychoanalytic patient as well as an early follower of Khrishnamurti, Alan Watts, and others who popularized Eastern philosophical traditions in 1960's American culture. Several passages from Ambivalent Zen provide apt descriptions of what can happen in the collision between obsessionality, meditation practice, and the 'crazy wisdom' of the dharma.

***"*Case Study" #4: Ambivalent Zen**

Our "case material" begins with excerpts from Shainberg's diary, which he begins at the suggestion of a psychoanalyst, in which he records his problems and his efforts to understand them.

> "I write [in the diary] only when my mood sinks, which is more and more often these days, and I feel better as soon as I pick up my pen. A typical entry begins, "feeling totally depressed, I don't know why". No matter how much one entry resembles another, I am always excited when I begin. Often, I write in my diary as soon as I wake up in the morning, hoping to organize my thoughts or at least slow them down. Away from the house, I make notes if possible for future entries, and, if I cannot write them down, make mental notes which, if I forget them, leave me bereft and obsessed to remember them. Sometimes, the thought of the diary alone can lift my spirits, and sometimes, too, it seems that I derive so much pleasure from writing in it that I cultivate my problems…. [often] my words seem slightly disconnected from my thoughts, and this makes it seem as if my pen is ahead of my mind, almost as if my hand is writing on its own. With the exception of masturbation, there is no other activity in which my concentration is so complete or my sense of time so absent. As often as not, I am certain that the writing is

---

be subverted when the meditator (unconsciously) employs them within a context of ***should*** infused with self-judgment (Siff, 2000).

[16] See Holroyd (2003) for a systematic discussion of the role of attentional processes in altered states of consciousness induced through meditation and hypnosis.

profound. Sometimes I have visions of its being posthumously published. Later, when I read it over and find it vague and muddled and embarrassing in its self-absorption, my disappointment does not discourage me but leads instead to another entry: '…feeling depressed that I spend so much time writing in this diary…' …. Psychological and spiritual understandings appear with equal frequency and to me seem interchangeable. I am beginning to be familiar with words like 'ego', 'desire' and 'emptiness'… I see Zen and Krishnamurti as extensions of psychoanalysis, a sort of Oriental pipeline that fuels the engine of my diary…..".

In counterpoint to his diary, Shainberg also presents anecdotes describing his interactions with his Roshi. One series of encounters revolves around Shainberg's confusion about what to do in his relationship with his girlfriend:

Listen, Roshi, I've come to you with a problem. I don't know what to do, OK? In America we call this "indecision". Are you familiar with the word?"

"Indecision?" He pronounces it "indeeseeshun" with accent on the last syllable. "Yes, I understood, Larry-San. Cannot decide. Wandering mind. Indeeseeshuyn. Very good word."

"And yet you are telling me that the cure for it is to make a decision?"

"Yes, yes. Great decision! Never shaking! Never turn back."

"But Roshi…. I've just been telling you. A decision is just what I can't make. Have you never had that problem?"

…. "Of course I have that problem," he says. "Twice".

"Twice!"

"Yes, after high school, when I cannot decide what to do. And again before I go to monastery."

"Before the monastery! That was thirty years ago! C'mon, Roshi, admit it. You don't know anything about indecision! I'm a fool to ask you for advice. It's like I'm crawling up a mountain and you fly past me in a helicopter".

Confused by the word, the Roshi consults his dictionary, and at last, pronouncing the Japanese word, he cries: "Yes! Yes! Hellicopper! I hellicopper! You crawling on mounting! I flying! You crawling! Ha! Ha! Ha!

And then, turning suddenly serious again, the Roshi says: "Listen, Larry-San. I fly over you, I see what you not see."

"What's that?"

He presses his thumb against his forefinger and holds them poised together above his teacup. "You and mountingtop – only this far apart!"

****

Much later, leaving the Zendo after an evening sitting, Roshi asks if I've come to a decision about my girlfriend. It's a question I've been dreading.

"No, I can't decide".

"Can't decide? Ah, great decision, Larry-San! My teacher, he say, 'If you confused, do confused. Do not be confused by confusion'. Understand? Be *totally confused,* Larry-San, then I guarantee: no problem at all".

This interaction between Shainberg and the Roshi has a humorous element which relates, in part, to communication across the language barrier. On the one hand, it conveys a sense of the paradox which, for Western readers, may seem to typify Zen. Examining this exchange from a clinical vantage point, however, what strikes me even more is Shainberg's psychological urgency. Perhaps he had less need for Zen guidance than for an empathic and interpretive understanding that would help to liberate him from his obsessional dilemma.

Also illuminating is Shainberg's narrative of his sitting practice. Although he is at first skeptical about whether sitting practice is good for someone who already watches his mind to excess, Shainberg decides to try it. And, predictably, despite the intellectual understanding that sitting is about being with what *is*, not about achieving some ideal concentration, Shainberg experiences great difficulty with his inability to control his mind. Agitation dominates his meditation, and he finds himself chagrined and embarrassed at his inability to tame his mind.

Before long, breath counting has incorporated itself into Shainberg's obsessional paradigm; he finds himself counting breaths when he is out for a walk or on the subway, even at times while sitting across from a friend at dinner. As he comments, he stumbled into a confusion about Buddhist practice in which sitting practice began to seem extraordinary and ordinary life felt reductive and distracting.

As his sitting practice deepens over time, Shainberg has many experiences of what feels to him like profound insight or some sort of an enlightenment experience. In the present context, what was especially fascinating to me was how experience which opened in a space of meditative insight could devolve in the next moment as it was reified and 'swallowed up' by obsessional structures in Shainberg's mind. He himself was acutely aware of this, noting his observation that meditation can reverse itself, becoming fixed and rigid rather than a means of letting go: "The more I sit, the more I am aware of the impermanence of my thoughts and emotions, and the more I am seized by a need to control them" (Shainberg, p. 112)

At one point, Shainberg engages in a month-long period of solitary retreat. He returns from retreat feeling heroic, ecstatic, and filled with fantasies of Zen triumph. However, within a few days, his ecstasy collapses on itself, depression sets in, and his inner "Zen voice" begins a litany of self-criticism:

> "how can you imagine that you've learned anything from Zen when you turn a simple one-month retreat into an exercise in vanity and self-importance?" The inner Zen voice, which loathes nothing so much as self-loathing – is ashamed of being ashamed. "When I search[ed] for the insights I had on retreat – all those epiphanies about Beckett and time, memory and impermanence – I find nothing but hollow, intellectual fragments, like pieces of small talk overheard on the street.. within a week, I have stopped sitting altogether. My mind spins with the argument between the Zen voice and its opposite…. Is Zen good for me or bad for me, a practice in humility or an exercise in narcissism?

Later, Shainberg attempts to cleanse himself of ego by destroying his diaries:

> "It is punishing to read, an irrefutable confirmation of Zen's argument against self-consciousness and analytic mind. After reading just a few pages, I pile all of my steno pads into the car and take them to the dump. Three garbage bags, sixteen years of self-analysis and what I took to be revelation. A huge compactor closes on them like a set of teeth, crushes and grinds for a moment, then drops them into a dumpster parked behind the building. I feel a kind of giddiness. It's as if the compactor has chewed up my self-consciousness. As if the I-me separation on which self-consciousness depends has been

compressed into singularity. After all, what am I doing on my cushion if not destroying my diary breath by breath, uniting that which watches with that which it presumes to watch? (p. 112) …

In the end, however, Shainberg's familiar obsessional behavioral patterns prevail:

"Finally, the argument becomes *interesting.* I go to my office and write about it: my Zen attraction, my Zen resistance, Beckett and Zen, writing and Zen, everything I remember about my retreat, everything that's happened since its ended. Fascinating! Brilliant! The best writing I've ever done! Three feverish hours at my desk, fifty five pages in a brand new notebook… I tell myself this is not a "diary" but a "journal", the beginning perhaps of the book on Zen that I have been wanting to write since the first time I sat on a cushion. I am wrong, of course. It is a brand-new diary I have begun, and I have been keeping it ever since. (p.115)

Buddhist Meditation, Obsessionality, and The Mind-Object

These excerpts from Shainberg's book illustrate how experience which is authentic and centered in the present moment can get co-opted by an obsessional mind-object. In place of experience which flows along moment-to-moment in an unfettered manner, the mind is held hostage by a process of obsession and self-judgment. Before leaving this narrative, it is interesting to speculate on what might have been possible if Shainberg had studied Zen with a psychologically sophisticated, Western teacher; or, better still, if Shainberg had discussed his meditation experience with a Buddhist-informed psychotherapist, who might have been able to help him get at the emotional issues underlying his 'Zen sickness'[17].

In an earlier section of this paper, I developed a few basic concepts about the 'mind object'. To reiterate, the mind object of precocious self-sufficiency described by Corrigan and Gordon pushes and drives the 'self' with intense feelings of guilt, anxiety, and inadequacy. Such a (persecutory) mind object develops in relation to premature and rigid structuring of ego ideals. From the integrative perspective I have tried to develop in this chapter, an underlying biological disposition to OCD coupled with psychodynamic influences may be thought of as interacting to create an obsessional mind object in a susceptible individual.

Shainberg's narrative illustrates the anxiety-based perfectionism, drive for achievement, and obsessionality that Corrigan and Gordon described in their series of patients. His relationship to his 'mind object' also seems typical: on the one hand, he feels frustrated by his inability to get past his obsessional thinking and feels controlled by it, but at the same time he is infatuated with his psychic productions[18]. His relationship to his mind object is truly ambivalent.

Since I personally resonated with many of Shainberg's experiences, especially his intense yearnings to transcend the prison of his 'ego' (or, as I am thinking of it now, mind object), it was especially poignant for me to observe how the glimpses of real freedom that Shainberg experienced were so quickly co-opted by his mind object functions. What makes the

[17] Kapleau (1965).

[18] Patients with OCD typically experience their symptoms as ego-alien or even malignant, and feel controlled by them. They are often less aware of positive feelings they have about other features of their obsessionality, or may not even recognize them to be obsessional in nature.

mind keep reverting to the familiar egoic structure of obsessionality? What is necessary for one's mind object to become lastingly transformed by meditation/ dharma practice?

In my own case, I have a distinct impression that meditation practice and/or psychoanalysis *have* created lasting changes in my mind object structures. Although obsessionality, perfectionism, and drive for achievement still remain formidable challenges in my psychic life, I seem to have developed an impressive capacity to let go of those 'psychological imperatives' in favor of an experience of equanimity. As I think of it, the psychic membrane of my mind object structure has become more permeable, more receptive to change from the stimulus of insight. This leads me to the tentative but hopeful conclusion that meditative awareness *can* develop into a mind object function in its own right, one which is healthier than the mind object of self-sufficiency described by Corrigan and Gordon.

While there are many ways of conceptualizing the psychological function of meditation, I am struck most by the way in which meditation practice can become a container for experience. (This function has been described in the work of Joseph Bobrow (1997) and others). Though helpful, however, the containment afforded by meditation may be insufficient for getting free of the domination of a rigid mind object. For myself, I am inclined to believe that one essential factor was my analytic treatment.

There are several ways that I credit my psychoanalysis with helping to transform my relationship to my (at times dysfunctional) mind object. First, my analyst brought my mind object into my conscious awareness by her interpretations of the ways it presented itself in my experience. She supported the cultivation of a more loving and beloved superego (Schafer, 1960). Second, she was receptive to the insights I brought back from meditative retreat, mirroring and validating developments in my capacity to be present, to be more embodied, and to be open hearted. Third, there was an attunement in the analytic space that facilitated the development of a mode of conscious experience that I have elsewhere termed the 'transcendent position' (Schuman, 1998)[19]. Following Melanie Klein's notion of a psychological position, the transcendent position is a space from which is possible to de-center from and disidentify with entrenched and previously unconscious habits of being and states of mind. The transcendent position represents an evolutionary development in subjectivity.

By analogy with the development of subjectivity in the infant, I believe that transcendent awareness develops in an intersubjective context. Perhaps it may even be said that such awareness is intersubjectively *communicated*, existing in potential or virtual form in one person and brought into being by another. In any case, although we never spoke about it directly, my sense is that my analyst's own dharma-awareness created transitional space in which I could develop transcendent awareness[20]. The analytic relationship together with my practice of mindfulness co-facilitated my ability to be compassionately aware of the ways that I habitually related to my mind.

My exchanges with my analyst were informed by her capacity to recognize and articulate self-states that were characterized by expanded consciousness. Perhaps these features were lacking in Shainberg's relationship to his analyst, (and in his relationship to his Zen teachers). Perhaps meditative awareness, in of itself, is insufficient for the transformation of a 'mind object'; perhaps such transformation requires a working through which can happen only in the context of a good-enough relationship.

---

[19] Alfano (2005) has developed a similar concept, 'transcendent attunement'.

[20] I do not mean to suggest, however, that an analyst necessarily needs to be a Buddhist or a meditator in order to facilitate this type of transformation.

Summary and Conclusion: Buddhism and The Intrapsychic Object Relation

As I have tried to illustrate in this chapter, mindfulness meditation has helped to mitigate my obsessionality in several interrelated ways. First, the receptive awareness cultivated in sitting practice has been conducive to my letting go of body tension, and to the relaxation of my mind's habitual and automatic obsessional thinking and efforts to be in control. Second, sitting practice has been a container for my being able to notice and be present with my obsessiveness in a new way. Third, meditative awareness -- supported by a framework co-constructed by Buddhist psychology and psychoanalytic space -- has helped me to become aware of the object-relational aspects of my mind's relationship to itself . Specifically, it has heightened my awareness of the fluid, constantly shifting, and non-unified experience that comprises the 'mind-as-subject' and 'mind-as-object', what is termed the *intrapsychic object relation.* Paying close attention to one's experience in meditation, or simply noting the linguistic structure in which experiences are expressed – for example, in the narrative from Ambivalent Zen extensively quoted above – it is evident that there is a fluid and shifting focus of identification between the experiencing self and the mind object.

Elaborating this point further, it should be noted that 'mind object' tends to be equated with 'intellect' or 'ego functions'. To the extent that we are identified with ourselves as cognitive beings ("I think, therefore I am") there are embedded confusions between 'self' and 'ego' and between the subject and object of experience[21] . Moreover, if we have a developmental history which fosters the precocious and therefore premature development of the intellect, we are especially vulnerable to developing the kind of obsessional mind object that has been discussed in this chapter.

While it is helpful to become familiar with the functioning of the mind object within psychic reality, from a Buddhist perspective the concept of 'mind object' suffers from several reductive oversimplifications. Principal among these, "mind object" is predicated on a dualism between one part of the mind and another; it divides the mind into subject and object. Indeed, Corrigan and Gordon (1995) acknowledged this in the way they delineated the concept of 'mind object' in the first place: "when the mind takes on a life of its own, it becomes an object – separate, as it were, from the self". Mind-as-object also exemplifies a dissociative split within the sense of agency. In being "driven to distraction", it is the mind object, not *me,* which is the driver.

Even within the realm of dualistic experience, it is misguided to imply that there is a singular self which cathects a singular 'mind object'. A psychoanalytic conceptualization of the 'mind object' more compatible with Buddhist thought might emphasize, instead, the existence of multiple mind objects and the complex and fluid psychodynamics that govern our relating to them. The concept of 'mind object' tends to reify what is in reality a set of complex and dynamic *processes* in the mind. Do we attempt to live up to the performance standards of our mind objects? Do our minds boss us around, drive us to distraction? Do we ignore the imperatives of our mind objects in favor of sensory pleasure or impulsive acting out? Alternatively, can we become aware of and learn to *be with* the mind object in a way that begins to heal the split between psyche and soma? Can practice with *being* begin to inform and transform our relationship to *doing*? In psychoanalytic terms, can we develop an intrapsychic object relation which transcends old self-structures, including obsessional mind-objects?

[21] See Schuman (1991) for a further discussion of the relevant issues.

As may be said of 'ego' generally, 'mind object' bears the stamp of defense. The engaging of 'mind object' functions, including obsessionality and planning mind, seeks to protect us and create the illusion of control in a world which otherwise threatens us with a free-fall of groundlessness. Attachment to doing, to staying busy, defends against anxiety; it blocks both awareness of *being* and the (co-arising) fear of *non-being*.

Psychoanalysis and Buddhist mindfulness meditation in tandem provide a unique opportunity for subjectivity to evolve beyond blind domination by our 'mind objects'. As I understand it, this transformation of intrapsychic object relations may develop in several stages. Initially, meditation cultivates a (non-pathological) splitting of mind through development of the observing ego. Supported by the culture of dharma, experiences arise in meditation which transcend old self-structure[22] and promote new ways of being. Deep experiences of awareness, presence, and clarity promote insight which potentially may transform our relationship to our minds (intrapsychic object relations). However, in order for this transformation to be consolidated and worked through, it is necessary to have an intersubjective context which supports that transformation. Otherwise, new experience rapidly devolves (as it did for Shainberg) into old paradigms.

Ultimately, of course, the real 'goal' of meditation is to go beyond subject and object to the realization of non-duality. As I have conceptualized the process in this chapter, meditation helps to make such realization possible by establishing a new, meditative mind object, thereby transcending old self-structures, including the structure of obsessionality. In this way, it is possible for the very conception of the mind and of the subject who is experiencing his or her mind to change as the web of representations in which the self is entangled is slowly penetrated.

[22] See Summers (1997) for an elaboration of this concept of transcendence.

References

Alfano, C. (2005)Traversing The Caesura: Transcendent Attunement in Buddhism and Psychoanalysis, Contemporary Psychoanalysis, 41(2): 223-248

Benjamin, J. (1999) Recognition and destruction: an outline of intersubjectivity. in S.A. Mitchell and L. Aron (Eds.) Relational Psychoanalysis: The Emergence of a Tradition. New York: The Analytic Press.

Batchelor, S. (1983) Alone With Others. New York: Grove Weidenfeld.

Bobrow, J. (1997) Coming to life: the creative intercourse of psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism. In C. Spezzano and G.J. Gargiulo (Eds.) Soul on the Couch. Hillsdale, N.J.: Analytic Press.

Corrigan, E.G. and Gordon, P.E. (Eds.) (1995) The Mind Object: precocity and pathology of self sufficiency. Northvale: Jason Aronson Inc.

Friedman, M. and Rosenman, R.H. (1959) Association of specific overt behavior pattern with blood and cardiovascular findings. J.A.M.A., 169: 1085-1096

Holroyd, J. (2003) The science of meditation and the state of hypnosis. Am. J. Clin Hypn. 46(2):109-28

Kapleau, P. (Ed.) (1965) The Three Pillars of Zen. Boston: Beacon Press.

Moore, B.E. and Fine, B.D. (1990) Psychoanalytic Terms & Concepts. New Haven: American Psychoanalytic Association and Yale University Press.

Salzman, L. (1980) Treatment of the Obsessive Personality. New York: Jason Aronson.

Schuman, M. (1980) The psychophysiological model of meditation and altered states of consciousness. In Davidson, R.J. and Davidson, J.M. (1981) The Psychobiology of Consciousness. New York: Plenum Press.

Schuman, M. (1998) Suffering and the evolution of subjectivity. Paper presented at a conference on *Psychotherapy, Spirituality, and the Evolution of Mind*. Santa Monica, Ca., May 1998.

Schuman, M. (1991) The problem of self in psychoanalysis: lessons from eastern philosophy. Psychoanal. and Contemp. Thought, 14(4): 595-624.

Schwartz, J.M. and Begley, S. (2002) The Mind and the Brain: Neuroplasticity and the Power of Mental Force. New York: HarperCollins Publishers/ Regan Books.

Schafer, R. (1960) Loving and beloved superego in Freud's structural theory. Psychoanalytic Study of the Child, 15: 163-188

Shainberg, L. (1995) Ambivalent Zen. New York: Pantheon Books.

Siff, J. (2000). Unlearning Meditation. Skillful Meditation Project, Idyllwild, CA.

Summers, F. (1997) Transcending the self: an object relations model of the Therapeutic action of psychoanalysis. Contemporary Psychoanalysis, 33(3): 411-428