

**The first ennobling truth, tragic vision and the unconscious:
their relevance for insight meditation practice**

Winton Higgins

*Time is the school in which we learn,
Time is the fire in which we burn.*

Delmore Schwartz

*O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there.*

Gerard Manley Hopkins

This paper reflects on an aspect of the long-term and complex process whereby dharma practice in general, and insight meditation in particular, establish themselves in a contemporary western setting. Today we're no doubt still much closer to the beginning of that process than to its end. The aspect of the process I want to highlight is the need to recalibrate dharma practice in terms that address our time and western culture, and thus our specific predicaments and how they present themselves to us.

So far we have only begun to take stock of the dharmic heritage from Asia, and to get a feel for the various inherited possibilities in its practice. We have barely begun the work our Asian forerunners have performed over many centuries, when they *adapted* the practice to their own culturally, historically and institutionally contingent settings. Implicit cultural settings invariably inflected these adaptations, and must do so again in the contemporary western case as well. Since our cultural and institutional settings are so different from those of our Asian forerunners, we run the risk that their hand-me-down adaptations will prove maladaptations for us, ones that fail to penetrate our peculiar conundrums and deep psychic processes.

Crucially: in order to produce our own adaptations, we will need to stop taking the dharma (and any particular practice around it) at face value, without reference to formative historical, cultural and institutional settings.

The origins of this paper lie in two recent recollective-awareness meditation retreats in which we the retreatants followed a practice that eschews technique. Recollective awareness exemplifies a growing trend among western dharma practitioners to embrace non-formulaic, 'allowing' approaches to meditation.¹ In these approaches the mind is invited – in Barry Magid's happy phrase – to *automatically appear and display itself*.² Reliably, the mind does just that: it reveals its contents, including some of its unconscious contents.

¹ For an extended discussion of this practice, see Siff 2010.

² Magid 2008: 4. He was referring to Zen practice in the ordinary-mind school, in which he teaches.

The practice then calls for those contents to be respected and articulated on their own terms, and not set aside as being outside what some inherited orthodox meditation technique calls for. The content of meditation experience comes before prescribed process. Everything that happens during a meditation session is part of the meditative experience, as Jason Siff, the founder of recollective awareness, insists.³ This rule of engagement opens onto an exploration of our inner life unfettered by the demands of technique.

During fifteen days of group reporting sessions on these recent retreats, I heard experienced meditators unfurl the contents that their minds displayed in particular sittings. A lot of it was anguished. What struck me was the preponderance of suffering due to change, mortality and ingrained character traits over 'ordinary' suffering. These kinds of suffering were the more intense and ubiquitous, and yet removed from the everyday pummelling from banal frustrations and aversions that conventional Buddhist teaching usually highlights, and that technique-driven 'moment-to-moment' attention reveals. The raw grief, loss, humiliation, separation and trauma that percolated up in our allowing practice typically had origins in much earlier stages in the meditators' lives, and sometimes went back to childhood. The repressed does indeed return, as Freud assures us. At the same time, though, it seemed to be returning *in an auspicious way* – a kind of mourning – rather than in a problematic way.

Experienced dharma practitioners are generally familiar with suffering, for obvious doctrinal reasons as well as their own life experience. But the intensity and nature of the suffering that emerged on these retreats was not of the expected kind, and to my mind it invokes the one interpretive tradition to hand that focuses on the unconscious (and the passage of its contents into consciousness) – psychoanalysis. I felt it could shed needed light on what happens to us in meditation and what we as teachers need to understand about our students' and our own experience. My paper seeks to explore this possibility.

The paper thus engages with psychoanalytic thought specifically (rather than psychotherapeutic practice in general). It does so precisely because of that tradition's focus on the unconscious and the dynamics of its contents becoming conscious, and because of its rich insights into our cultural and historical predicament as modern westerners.⁴ In other words, psychoanalytic thought grounds us in our own culturally defined predicaments and the peculiar psychic processes they give rise to. Still other reasons for this preference will emerge throughout the paper. Naturally, I'm hardly a pioneer on this dharmic-psychoanalytic frontier, and my forerunners will feature prominently in what follows.

But first we must begin where the dharma does, with the first ennobling truth. Then I want to account for an important but seldom acknowledged fault line that affects both traditions – that between the 'tragic' paradigm and the problem-solving one – to locate both the original dharma and psychoanalysis in the former. That

³ Siff 2008. A basic thrust of his teaching is that an allowing approach to insight meditation returns to the spirit of the Buddha's own teaching as it was before the Abhidharmic systematisers reworked it as techniques supported by scholastic elaborations and re-interpretations.

⁴ Paraphrased in Rubin 2003: 394.

preoccupation segues into a discussion of mourning as essential to human thriving, for reasons psychoanalysis elucidates and the first ennobling truth indicates. I then ask whether a theory of the unconscious fits in the dharma, and find that it has already been there, albeit in rudimentary form, for 1500 years.

But in order to appreciate the potential of modern psychoanalytic theory for dharma practitioners, we need to acknowledge a split perspective in the dharma itself, between other-worldly and this-worldly conceptions of the path and where it leads. If we choose the this-worldly perspective (as I do), we have to consider the changed experiences of self we now meet, and what they imply for meditation practice, spiritual realisation and human development in the west today.

1. There is this truth of suffering, which is to be deeply understood

Traditionally, *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness, suffering, anguish, stress) comes in three categories.⁵ *Dukkha-dukkha* refers to common-or-garden samsaric suffering – frustrated longings, unwanted circumstances and companions, and confusion. The second category, *dukkha-viparinama*, refers to suffering brought about by change and impermanence (or, more precisely, our inability to accept and surrender to it). Included here is what many spiritual traditions and some psychoanalytic thinkers focus on – our need to bring meaning to our lives in the face of our own and our loved ones’ mortality. Thirdly, we have *sankhara-dukkha*, or the suffering that arises from our ‘conditioned mental states’ – our ingrained character traits. Here we may include our constantly rehearsed neuroses and traumas. In the Buddha’s account of dependent arising, expressed in the succession of *nidanas* (links in a causal chain) which received graphic expression on the outer rim of the wheel of becoming, the *sankharas* (also translated as mental or karmic formations) *come before consciousness*. Thereby hangs a tale I will return to later in this paper.

Conventional, technique-driven insight meditation and its exposition – as well as religious-Buddhist teaching – tend to privilege the first two kinds of *dukkha*. The third kind usually comes up on the religious-Buddhist radar in discussion of rebirth, wherein it bolsters exhortations to live skilfully in this life so as to launch the next one with promising karmic residues, that is, auspicious *sankharas* and other starting points. Connected to this view is the one that we can and should meditate independently of our psychodynamic processes by cultivating formulaic moment-to-moment awareness. But as Jack Engler (a Mahasi insight practitioner and psychoanalyst) puts it, ‘there is no way to practice meditation that is immune from the anxieties, needs, cognitive-emotional styles, and dynamics of our own character structure.’⁶

⁵ I’m guided in part here by Jack Engler’s (1998: 2-4) account.

⁶ Engler 2003:38.

Religious Buddhism often lapses into a fundamentalist idea of karma, one the Buddha himself rejected.⁷ This version makes karma the sole determinant of our experience, good or bad, as if the 'law' of karma operates as a cosmic justice system which dispenses dukkha (and its opposite, *sukha* or joy) according to our just deserts. If we crave, spurn, or act in deluded ways, we'll sooner or later be visited by the negative consequences of so doing. And so on. This story enjoys a degree of superficial plausibility around the first two kinds of dukkha, but it relies on belief in rebirth to gain any purchase on sankhara-dukkha. In any event, *the strongest sources of suffering that came up on the retreats in question did not seem self-generated*. The full set of modes of causation in the canon includes a non-karmic mental element, which is the appropriate category for much of the anguish (for instance, after trauma or bereavement) that surfaces in non-formulaic meditation.⁸

Many western practitioners now (at least implicitly) resonate with Stephen Batchelor's distinction between religious Buddhism and dharma practice. Belief in rebirth has in turn attracted increasing scepticism, a stance which I share.⁹ If karmic residues from previous lives no longer provide a plausible explanation for the sankharas, then how are we to see them and respond to them? I will return to that question a little later, after we have made sense of the two contending paradigms that mould our understanding of our life process.

2. *The problem-solving paradigm versus tragic vision*

A broad fault line runs through both dharmic and western thought; it has generated two diverging paradigms about how we are to engage with (or avoid) the inescapable sufferings, cruelties and indignities in each person's life and death. Nietzsche called the first of them 'the optimism of reason', but in today's idiom – in honour of our modern western hubris – we might want to call it *the problem-solving paradigm*. It is now the dominant paradigm in the west. According to its underlying premise, our lives are supposed to be happy and trouble-free, and anything that disturbs this picture is an anomaly, mistake or *problem* that demands a rational corrective or solution. To its critics, the underlying premise is not only implausible, but the paradigm itself leads us to see many normal and inescapable life

⁷ See Nagapriya 2004: ch.3. Karma is one of the five modes (*niyamas*) of dependent arising. The other four operate on our lives independently of karma. They are the physical, biological, mental, ethical and spiritual modes. Locating karma in this restored, wider sense of dependent arising also rescues this important principle from being the explanation of everything, and thereby of nothing.

⁸ See the previous footnote.

⁹ Nagapriya, David Loy, Barry Magid and Stephen Batchelor exemplify the sceptics (though Batchelor may prefer the 'agnostic' label – see his *Buddhism without beliefs*, pp. 14-20, the work in which he drew the contrast between religious Buddhism and dharma practice). Jeremy Safran (2003: Introduction, 17), a Tibetan practitioner, comments: 'there has always been a tension between the official Buddhist doctrine of...no-self, and the belief in rebirth.' Not surprisingly – given rebirth/reincarnation's 'obviousness' in the ambient culture of his time and place – the Buddha affirmed rebirth, though he indicated in the *Kalama sutta* that this belief was not essential to practice. But in the subsequent religious Buddhism, it grew to be a central tenet.

contingencies as anomalies or problems that require solutions. ‘To a man with a hammer,’ Mark Twain wrote, ‘everything looks like a nail.’

As we will see, a response to suffering that seeks alleviation, or even cures, is not at issue. The practice of medicine in this spirit, for instance, and its extension into psychotherapy, are uncontroversial. But the medical *model* (what Martin Seligman calls ‘the disease model’)¹⁰ indiscriminately pathologises suffering as a prelude to self-confident and unreflective professional intervention in aid of a conformist notion of mental hygiene; in this way it exemplifies the paradigm in question, and drags psychotherapy along with it. In a time and culture in which the fix-it mentality reigns, even ancient spiritual practices are repackaged as solutions to supposed problems, and become marketable as such.¹¹ For instance, sociologists have found that religious faith slightly postpones our deaths, and psychologists have discovered that the Buddha’s ancient *satipatthana* meditation practice alleviates depression.

At the same time as the Buddha was teaching, prominent Greek playwrights and thinkers had independently begun their own inquiry into suffering, one now known as *tragic vision*, which has poignant resonances with the Buddha’s own approach. Since that time, tragic vision (which I will outline below) has been a major trope in western culture, especially in prominent art forms, literary criticism and philosophy. But in modern times it has been increasingly eclipsed by the problem-solving paradigm.

Now some champions of tragic vision are seeking to restore it. Two modern western philosophers, Friedrich Nietzsche and Simone Weil, have argued strongly against the modern problem-solving view of life, and their ideas have recently been picked up by the liberal Catholic theologian David Tracy.¹² These three take us back to the Greek tragedians (especially Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides), for whom *human life must always consist of a very uncertain mix of great suffering and great joy*. We find the same ideas crystallising in Shakespeare’s tragedies and history plays.

For the tragedians, the mix of suffering and joy in any individual life – or that of any community – is beyond human prediction and control. Rather, many of the predicaments that confront us arise from something variously called chance, fortune, providence or luck, as well as the normal entropic processes that will inevitably (gradually or suddenly) debilitate and dispatch even the ‘lucky’ ones among us, and those we love. The convergence with the Buddha’s own teaching hardly needs underlining.

Self-respecting human beings have to ground themselves in their predicaments and respond to them, however lucky or unlucky, or ‘fair’ or ‘unfair’ the mix they contain. ‘You have to play the hand you’re dealt,’ in the modern idiom. They have to respond to them with courage and intelligence, from a sense of moral agency and integrity, uniting theory and practice – what the Greeks called *theoria* (not

¹⁰ Seligman 2004: 3. He confesses to having ‘sold out’ to this model earlier in his career.

¹¹ See Carrette and King’s (2005) critique of today’s ‘asset-stripping’ and commodification of ancient spiritual practices, which are then marketed bereft of their ethical and communitarian supporting conditions.

¹² See Tracy 2005.

theory *as opposed to* practice). This is not bad news – being able to live one’s life on these terms goes to the heart of human flourishing. Our predicaments are not anomalies, so there is no point in asking *why* I’m facing the predicament I’m in, they suggest. That question will only distract me from the real one: *how should I respond?*

As David Tracy explains it, tragic vision has three elements: *necessity*, *suffering* and *response*. In this it resonates powerfully with the dharma. So let’s quickly look at these elements in turn.

For Simone Weil, *necessity* is ‘the reality of force in every human life’: we will all die, those we love die, disease comes, pain and separation come. They come as force or necessity – we can’t deflect them or negotiate with them. Tragic vision never blinks in keeping them in sight. This in no way entails fatalism or determinism. Just realism (a value that Freud, as the founder of psychoanalysis, would enshrine as ‘the reality principle’).

Suffering in the tragic vision has obvious resonances with dukkha. As noted above, in the dharmic (as opposed to religious-Buddhist) conception, karma is only one of five separate modes of causality – the other four being independent of our previous actions and intentions. Logically, then, our suffering does not arise solely from our unskilfulness. Tragic vision converges with this view: it is pointless to ask God, the universe or any other imagined cosmic justice system *why* I suffer (unless it is self-induced), and how my suffering will somehow be compensated in a future existence. David Tracy praises Buddhism for showing how the *why* question comes from the ego. Then he quotes the Christian mystic Meister Eckhardt: ‘Learn to live without a why.’

There are many diversionary ways of answering the ‘why’ question, from the fundamentalist view of karma and rebirth for religious Buddhists, through theodicy (God has a good reason for everything he makes happen, even if his reasons are impenetrable for us mere mortals) among theists, to cynicism and despair. One of the functions of religion, after all, is to generate just such consolations and certitudes, and spiritual inquirers need to decline their obfuscations. In contrast, for tragic vision – as with the first ennobling truth – suffering always raises the question about response, rather than being a fact that demands an explanation and a problem that must have a solution.

Response is the third element of tragic vision. For Nietzsche it must always be in the affirmative. Say ‘yes’ to life; embrace ‘the whole catastrophe’ (as Zorba the Greek famously put it) in all its energy and its exasperating mix of joy and suffering. ‘Tragic’ does not mean fatalistic, hopeless, pessimistic or passive.

But for Simone Weil, the response may also sometimes need to contain an element of ‘no’: a person of integrity will always respond with a ‘no’ to injustice and cruelty. And will do so no matter what the odds against being able to defeat them. For her, the tragic vision *empowers*: it throws us into the struggle for justice and compassion, but with open, realistic eyes. We may note here that the response will often involve calculated and energetic amelioration, but not one subordinated to the problem-solving mindset. We may even know we can’t win.

Any teaching that doesn't help us to confront the evil and suffering of life is worthless, she says. We go on resisting evil in order to express our dignity as self-aware and self-responsible human beings.

The fault line between problem-solving and tragic vision runs through dharmic development, not least the Theravadin element. As the latter's heirs, insight teachers need to be aware, in outline, of how it has moulded our inheritance.

As I've indicated, the Buddha's presentation of *dukkha* places him predominantly on the side of tragic vision. We may also note how, in the canonical account of his life, many of his followers awakened fully in fairly short order, in some cases with striking ease. Awakening was originally accessible to practitioners of various capacities, propensities and circumstances. But as the systematisers increased their grip on teaching and practice in subsequent centuries, *problems* (such as the 'defilements' and 'fetters') received greater emphasis, while the arcane doctrines of Abhidharma, together with the formulaic meditation techniques they prescribe for overcoming such perceived problems, proliferated. These techniques tend to sequester the actual contents of human interiority, at least as life in the modern west has propagated these contents.

And paradoxically, awakening became more and more difficult to 'attain' – indeed, virtually impossible outside of the monastic institutions that were promoting the very ideas and regimens in question, which were actually supposed to *facilitate* awakening. In effect it ceased to be a this-worldly, this-lifetime undertaking and fulfilment. It came to depend on rebirth and monasticism, and when it happened, it propelled the mind into another (timeless, deathless) world similarly uncontaminated by human interiority.

Another way of putting this trend might be this: once the inevitable contingencies of life and character-development came to be seen as *problems*, they proved insoluble in this world and in this lifetime (let alone in the present time), and the promised solutions had then to be sought somewhere else, in some other time and in some other, unearthly mode of existence. In short, awakening itself was mythologised and mystified. We may think of this as the typical religious turn: suffering humanity demands its consolations and guarantees, but they can only be redeemed in some other place and lifetime.

By no means all dharma practitioners accepted this development; the tussle between problem-solving and tragic vision runs through dharmic history to our own time and place. Zen is the tradition that has most pointedly (and earthily) insisted that dharma practice and its fulfilments belong right here, in everyday life, and in the present time. It has no truck with problems, solutions, far-off goals or other-worldliness – a point I will return to below.

In this tradition's endless stories of student-teacher exchanges, the lofty and fuzzy (mystical, religious) notions of awakening meet with gruff correction. 'What is enlightenment?' one student asks. 'Flypaper,' answers the teacher. As Barry Magid (who recounts the exchange) explains, flypaper is a practical device that catches all sorts of bugs and dustballs. It's a nice metaphor for awakening from the myriad

delusions and projections (including ones about spiritual ends and means) that cloud a mind otherwise quite capable of grasping the undisguised elements of our life.¹³

3. *Psychoanalysis as a wisdom tradition*

For around fifty years in the west, some Buddhists and psychological thinkers have engaged in a dialogue of sorts. Both groups deal with the mind, and human suffering takes centre-stage for both. But the problem-solving/tragic-vision fault line splits the dialogue into two distinct conversations. One of them unfolds within the medical model: dharma (primarily vipassana) practitioners press their wares onto cognitive-behavioural psychotherapists as being useful solutions (or ‘therapies’) in treating the putative disorders of the human mind.¹⁴ Venerable Theravadin defilement-eradication, evident in formulaic vipassana techniques, works on a similar logic – hence the affinity. True to the medical model, the criteria of therapeutic usefulness here are time- and cost-effectiveness, generic one-size-fits-all applicability, and ‘evidence-based’ claims to eradicate or suppress behaviourally-defined symptoms.¹⁵ No open-ended inquiry into the client’s subjectivity delays the outcomes sought.

In the second conversation, some psychoanalytic thinkers – starting with Karen Horney and Erich Fromm in the 1950s – have sensed that they may be reinventing someone else’s wheel as they pursue their curiosity- and compassion-driven open inquiry into human unhappiness and emotional blockages. It is this conversation, and its relevance to non-formulaic meditation practice, that will inform the rest of my paper. Like insight and Zen meditation, the psychoanalytic inquiry is not constrained by the criteria mentioned above. The thinkers in question find a meeting place with the dharma in the tragic vision, in that they highlight the need for meaning in the face of human vulnerability and mortality.¹⁶

Though born to the medical model just over a century ago, psychoanalytic theory has gone through its own twists and turns. As we will see in the next section, the drift of Freud’s own development soon breached the medical model’s terms. Later, some in the movement sought the respectability of hard-scientific status, which hobbled the open-ended inquiry into the human condition at the heart of psychoanalysis. As the postwar object-relations school restored the discipline’s humanistic concerns, it also corrected for the discrete individualism that tended to underpin Freud’s thought. The more networked sense of the psyche that arose out of

¹³ Magid 2008: 53-5.

¹⁴ For the pitfalls inherent in this enterprise, see Dawson & Turnbull 2006.

¹⁵ Understood as a *response* to extraordinary, avoidable suffering, much medical and psychotherapeutic practice is skilful. Its recurring downside consists in the medical model as such, and scientific pretension to rigour and effectiveness. As a psychiatry registrar recently wrote in an op-ed in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (10.7.09), psychiatry remains ‘a hazy field, an arena where diagnosis and treatment are poorly correlated and where clinical energies focus on symptom relief’ (Tanveer Ahmed, ‘Shocking home truths in the pursuit of happiness’). In contrast, Magid (2008: 144) asserts, psychoanalysis is not a symptom-focused, problem-solving technique, but an open-ended inquiry into self-esteem, personal meaning and identity.

¹⁶ Rubin (2003: 394-5) makes the psychoanalytic alignment to the tragic view explicit. See also Rubens 1992.

this development received further support closer to our own time through Heinz Kohut's and Jacques Lacan's contributions and influence. I will take up the recent work of a Lacanian psychoanalyst, Darian Leader, in a moment.

The conversation between some psychoanalytic thinkers and some dharma teachers in the USA has explored these two traditions' converging paths. Several prominent dharma teachers, such as Jack Engler (insight), Jeremy Safran (Tibetan), and Barry Magid (Zen), are veteran psychoanalysts. Like the first ennobling truth and the dharma as a whole, psychoanalysis confronts, albeit in a secular spirit, humanity's basic conundrum about how to work with inevitable suffering, loss and death, and it stakes out a path to liberation in this life (and way of life).¹⁷

Some western manifestations of dharma practice are themselves heading in a secular direction, at the same time as they take a fresh look at the Buddha's own (pre-commentarial) teaching.¹⁸ The cross-fertilisation between these traditions has profound implications for our work as insight teachers, to say nothing of our own dharma practice. It relates directly to the kind of meditation experiences with which this paper began.

Since the postmodern sensibility now informs both traditions, it brings them together on the relationship between teacher/analyst and student/patient. In contrast to mainstream psychotherapy (and formulaic insight practice), where the therapist (or teacher) is the expert who 'knows' how to characterise the student/client's experience and what is best for her or him, 'the analyst does not know better than the patient,' Darian Leader writes. 'Their primary goal is not the removal of symptoms...what matters is to allow what is being expressed in the symptom to be articulated...The patient is the expert here and not the analyst.'¹⁹ A similar understanding underpins recollective-awareness practice, and presumably also comparable meditation practices that honour the actual content of meditative experience, rather than technical precision in the process. The former accentuates the need for meditators to work up a language in which to articulate their own experiences. Safran refers to this ethos as 'democratic individualism'.²⁰

It certainly challenges conceptions of spiritual authority that secular dharma practice has inherited from its monastic antecedents, just as some psychoanalytic

¹⁷ Safran 2003, Introduction: 30.

¹⁸ Bubna-Litic & Higgins 2007.

¹⁹ Leader 2008: 19-20. Cf Freud ([1912] 1957: 114): '[T]he most successful cases are those in which one proceeds, as it were, without any purpose in view, allows oneself to be taken by surprise by any new turn in them, and always meets them with an open mind, free from presuppositions.' Cf Freud ([1912] 1957: 130): '[O]nce begun, [the analytic process] goes its own way and does not allow either the direction it takes or the order in which it picks up its points to be prescribed for it.' Neither should be read, however, as denying the essential role of the analyst's skill and expertise – matters that Freud in particular emphasised.

²⁰ Safran 2003, Introduction: 30. He adds: '[T]he growing emphasis on the relational nature of all human experience can be seen as a corrective to Western culture's excessive individualism. On the other hand, the growing emphasis on the mutuality of the analytic relationship and the positional nature of all knowledge is consistent with this emphasis on the value of the individual and the challenge of traditional authority' (pp. 30-1).

thinkers today are qualifying older notions of the analyst's interpretive authority in the analytic relationship.

4. *Mourning and flourishing*

Having established this context, let's return to the contents of yogis' meditative experience in an open, allowing practice that eschews technique and that seeks to *re-collect* and enlarge the contents in question. Meditation under these conditions, we might note, has a good deal in common with free association in psychoanalysis, and strong content typically emerges in the midst of seemingly trivial narrative and discursive threads. As indicated earlier, the strong content oftentimes concerns grief, disappointment, humiliation, separation and loss, often springing from events much earlier in the meditator's life.

These phenomena by no means exhaust the serious mental disturbances that people can encounter and that their professional carers must then tackle with whatever means they judge appropriate. What is special about grief and loss is their ubiquity and inevitability: they bring up our central existential issue, our vulnerability and mortality. They confront every adult, and even many children. Grief and loss overtake us all, and as Freud pointed out, the healthy response is to undertake the active *work* of mourning. Refusal to mourn impoverishes our life.

We mourn because we are alive and love others in the midst of change: we live in transience and we seek to live fully. The importance of this work can hardly be overstated, and (I suggest) it is going on in the type of meditation practices I'm concerned with here.

Up until a few decades ago, the general population understood the work of mourning, not just in the form of public funerary rituals, but also in private etiquette to be observed around the bereaved. In her arresting account of her own mourning, the writer Joan Didion quotes Emily Post's popular 1922 manual of etiquette, which spells out guidelines for what a friend or acquaintance should do (drawing the blinds, preparing small quantities of light food only, keeping the house warm) in order to support a person through the profound psychological and physiological processes of mourning.²¹ '[T]his *painful unpleasure* is taken as a matter of course by us,' Freud wrote in 1917, and 'when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again.'²²

Yet, as Darian Leader reports in his recent book, when he went into a local bookshop to look for current writings on mourning, he drew a blank. The subject – along with melancholia, its malignant relative – had been swallowed up in the omnibus diagnosis of 'depression'. The contrast between tragic view and problem-solving could hardly be starker. This shift obliterated important diagnostic distinctions and now *pathologised* mourning as a *problem* that called for generic *solutions*: medication or cognitive behavioural therapy. In '*our new dark ages*' there's

²¹ Didion 2005. For an interesting, grief-counselling perspective on her work, see Brennan & Dash 2009.

²² Freud [1917] 1957: 245. Emphasis added. These days psychotherapy operationalises the work of mourning as 'grief work'. But much depth can be lost in this translation.

no longer any need to enter into the intricacies of the client's inner life, her subjectivity, Leader asserts. Then he realised he'd been looking on the wrong shelves in the bookshop for new work on mourning. When he turned to the fiction section, the books on offer dealt with little else, thus bearing witness to this leitmotif in our developing inner lives and creativity.²³

To begin to make sense of our inner lives – and to honour the first ennobling truth, we might add – Leader suggests we have to go back to Freud's 1917 essay, 'Mourning and melancholia'. Here the latter explains:

Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or the loss of an abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on...Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido [capacity to love] shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. This demand arouses understandable opposition...[which] can be so intense that *a turning away from reality takes place*...Normally, respect for reality wins the day. Nevertheless its orders cannot be obeyed at once. They are carried out bit by bit, at great expense of time and cathectic energy, and in the meantime the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged. Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercathected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it.²⁴

This *work* is painful but essential, even though present-day approaches to 'depression' deny it. As each memory of the lost one arises, so too does pain of loss, but these events contribute to a gradual dissipation of the mourner's attachment. Mourning leads to a necessary and profound reordering of our inner life, one complicated by the *ambivalence* we nearly always feel towards the lost object but are inhibited from acknowledging. In insight-meditation circles we often refer to 'a meditator's *work*' that also cultivates a deeper relationship with our inner life and a broadening of our human capacities; it must surely include the work of mourning and the acknowledgement of ambivalence.

Freud gave a hint of how important he saw this work for human development in the face of mortality, in a brief 1915 essay, 'On transience' – a subject that dharma practitioners might find of more than passing interest. It begins as a memoir of 'a summer walk through a smiling countryside in the company of a taciturn friend and of a young but already famous poet'. Freud's two companions declared themselves unable to appreciate the natural beauty around them as it was all doomed to extinction come the winter, and the same could be said of all the beauty that people

²³ Leader 2008: 6, 21. A superb recent addition to this literature is Anne Michaels's *The winter vault*. As Leader also points out, the explosion in diagnoses of depression has occurred over the last three decades, driven by changes in the pharmaceutical industry and public-health provision which have mandated the bundling of diverse miseries in this way.

²⁴ Freud [(1917) 1957: 244-5, emphasis added. Joan Didion's (2005) account of her mourning of her husband of 40 years is a textbook example of this process, and the reference to *magical thinking* in her title illustrates the 'turning away from reality' that Freud refers to.

themselves created. Poignantly, he was recalling a scene that unfolded in the last summer before the first world war broke out, and he was writing in the midst of its savagery.

Freud himself – often caricatured as pessimistic – found it ‘incomprehensible...that the thought of the transience of beauty should interfere with our joy in it.’²⁵ He then identifies his companions’ mental block:

What spoils their enjoyment of beauty must have been *a revolt in their minds against mourning*. The idea that all this beauty was transient was giving these two sensitive minds a foretaste of mourning over its decease; and, since the mind instinctively recoils from anything that is painful, they felt their enjoyment of beauty interfered with by thoughts of transience...I believe that those who think thus, and seem ready to make a *permanent renunciation* because what was precious has proved not to be lasting, are simply in a state of mourning for what is lost. Mourning, as we know, however painful it may be, comes to a spontaneous end...When once the mourning is over, it will be found that our high opinion of the riches of civilization has lost nothing from our discovery of their fragility.²⁶

In other words, as vulnerable mortals living in a fleeting world, we cannot love and flourish fully while we recoil from the work of mourning. (The recoil itself leads to a sort of *renunciatory temptation* that ascetic spirituality endorses.) Leader reviews at length the ways in which Freud’s heirs up to Lacan have elaborated into a four-fold process his account of how we internalise our interconnectedness and do our work of mourning, or languish in states of suspended mourning, or self-destruct in the throes of melancholia.²⁷

Tellingly, Phillipe Ariès’s and Geoffrey Gorer’s major studies of modern western attitudes to death and mourning point to the postwar taboo against acknowledging death and grief as part of life (notwithstanding the old Anglican graveside service’s reminder that ‘in the midst of life we are in death’), in aid of today’s hedonistic imperative to always enjoy life and never disturb others’ enjoyment.²⁸ Mourning is now an anomaly, a problem to be medicalised. This, of course, is the basic premise of the problem-solving paradigm; we have come a long way from tragic view. The injunction has swept away the rich cultural understanding of mourning, once popularly presented by the likes of Mrs Post in such practical detail. Today’s pathologisation of mourning in the west colludes in the denial of mortality and loss, and the correspondingly shallow, hedonistic notion of enjoyment. In Freud’s terms, the latter holds us back in the immature ‘pleasure principle’, instead of encouraging us to flourish according to the ‘reality principle’.

²⁵ Freud [1915] 1957: 305.

²⁶ Freud [1915] 1957: 306-7.

²⁷ The interested reader will find them recapped in Leader 2008: 168. There he also comments that the fourfold process is ‘nearly always impeded’ and requires inner work to overcome the impediments.

²⁸ Gorer 1965 and Ariès (1974)

All this denial notwithstanding, the link between mourning and flourishing remains. It illuminates, I suggest, an important dimension of practising the four ennobling truths understood as central inquiry questions in our spiritual lives. Jack Engler, while remaining faithful to the Mahasi framework, counts capacity to mourn as one of the minimal psychological conditions for spiritual practice, and sees the mourning process itself as endemic to the higher 'insight knowledges'. 'The point is to loosen the anxious grip we have on ourselves and initiate the mourning and grief work that will finally allow life and experience to flow unimpeded by maladaptive fixations about who "I" am.'²⁹

5. *Is there a place for the unconscious in the dharma?*

Psychoanalysis uncovers the dynamics of the unconscious mind; psychoanalytic practice seeks to bring its troublesome contents, routines and assumptions into consciousness, to articulate them. In a nutshell, this is how it stakes out a path to liberation. Does this focus on the unconscious make it incompatible with the dharma, which seems only to address cognitive processes, and has been historically associated with the monastic exclusion of so many primary aspects of human life (intimacy, family, and social embeddedness) that feed unconscious processes?

Monasteries have incubated the meditation techniques we know today, and the latter reflect monastic conceptions of hierarchical authority and conformity to a renunciant way of life, as well as to an idealised, orderly spiritual progression that need never touch on psychodynamic realities. These conceptions address cognitive issues only. Unsurprisingly, the formulaic techniques (and associated notions of spiritual development) leave no room for the idiosyncrasies – the individual contents – of individual subjectivity, especially its unconscious processes.

Yet the unconscious is not a new, foreign concept in the dharma as such. In *The Buddhist unconscious*, William Waldron³⁰ argues that there was already a suggestion in the suttas that cognitive processes could not fully account for consciousness. As the Abhidharma tradition evolved after the Buddha's death and presented consciousness as radically discontinuous, atomised into separate *moments*, it created an acute conceptual problem in trying to explain quite clearly continuous – and *continuing* – aspects of mind, including individual character. The Yogacara school (third to fifth century CE) retrieved and developed the incipient idea of an unconscious from the canon, and developed it into a concept of *alaya-vinnana* (base, store or home consciousness) which could explain the continuities of mental life, including the preservation of the mental formations (*sankharas*) – predispositions, basic character traits – through death and rebirth.

Psychoanalysis, of course, tells a different story about how the foundations of character are laid, a story that foregrounds early childhood experiences, not past lives. For those dharma practitioners today who find the rebirth story unconvincing,

²⁹ Engler 2003: 48, 92, 94. In an earlier paper, he presents mourning as endemic to the awakening process: Engler 1999: 3-5.

³⁰ Waldron 2003.

the psychoanalytic accounts of early childhood as the crucible of the enduring structures and processes of the unconscious appear more plausible. The main point, however, is that the unconscious is not an alien construct in our tradition.

Once we embrace it, it provides insights and pointers in other primary areas of dharma practice. One example is in the practice of three linked, signature dharmic values – loving kindness, generosity and compassion. *Kindness*, in short – what the Dalai Lama calls his religion.

In their historico-psychoanalytical study of kindness, Adam Phillips and Barbara Taylor³¹ strongly affirm it as a joyful experience central to human flourishing. As socially and psychically interconnected beings, we thrive on reaching out to each other. The Buddha attested to this in the *Metta sutta*, and so did Jesus, as did his contemporary, the Stoic philosopher Seneca, and the slightly later Stoic philosopher and emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180 CE).

From Augustine (354-430 CE) on, though, kindness ran into a headwind in the west. His doctrine of original sin set a vicious human nature against kindness, and much later developments in Protestant and secular thought (especially Thomas Hobbes's in the seventeenth century) intensified the idea that kindness strove against human nature. From Adam Smith (1723-90) on, greed and egoism were correspondingly celebrated, reaching an apotheosis in the 1970s' 'culture of narcissism'³² and the greed-is-good slogan of the 1980s. Phillips and Taylor now ask: how are we to rescue kindness from the suspicion of artificiality and hypocrisy that now shroud it, and from accusations of moralistic bullying and sentimentality made against philanthropists, so that we might once more be able to practise it fully but realistically?

The answer, Phillips and Taylor suggest, must include acknowledging the half-truth in Augustine & co's negative account of human nature, but balancing it with what we now know – thanks to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78), followed by a century of psychoanalytic development to the present time – about the essential *ambivalence* of human dispositions grounded in early childhood development. Our passions continue to be ambivalent throughout life: only love laced with hate is real. In terms of the tragic vision, this is our necessity, and our suffering. If we are to be realistically kind, we must own – and work with and through – our ambivalence, rather than reach for an inhuman ideal of pure saintliness. The latter leads to sentimentality and 'magical kindness' which delude us and demoralise our supposed beneficiaries.

Our inner life, then, must furnish us with a spacious container (as Joko Beck might say) that can hold our this-worldly conflicting passions, rather than an aspiration to dwell in a magical pure land, which we conflicted worldlings would find a cramped space indeed. In the next section I want to explore this view of spiritual practice in the company of people who are both dharma teachers and practising psychoanalysts.

³¹ Phillips & Taylor 2009.

³² Lasch 1979.

6. *Spiritual practice on terra firma*

Jeremy Safran performs an invaluable service by grounding our many conceptions of psychoanalysis and dharma practice in their varying cultural matrices.³³ Language itself is a social, cultural artefact, and our culture inflects everything we think, say and write. Beside its general influence come the cultural *institutions* in which we practise – professional bodies, collegial colloquia of various sorts, monasteries, lay sanghas, and so on. Finally we must pay attention (as I have tried to do above) to cultural shifts towards new world views. These historically contingent cultural matrices mould our conceptions of practice, the motivations and aspirations that drive it, and our changing experiences of our own subjectivity – in short, our spirituality – though we're normally unconscious of their influence. The Buddha spoke from his own fast-changing cultural matrix, and we must consider how his teachings translate into ours. In the process, we're likely to be informed (but also beguiled) by the interpretations of our immediate spiritual ancestors – often socially privileged monastic institutions that have long occupied and generated yet another, quite distinct cultural matrix.

As I suggested at the beginning, we've barely begun the task of acculturating and bedding-down the dharma in the west – a task we have to tackle if dharma practice is to fully address 'where we're at' in our time and culture. Understandably, we've been too preoccupied with propagating and deploying what we've received from the dharma's Asian homelands to identify its other-cultural adaptations which, in our own time and place, can prove to be maladaptations.

Safran suggests that two divergent meta-lineages have moulded dharmic development in Asia – the Indian and the Chinese. As he summarises the difference:

Ancient Indian culture tended to prize abstract philosophical thought and metaphysical speculation. It tended to have a world-weary quality...In Upanishadic thinking, life is suffering, and the goal is to seek liberation from the endless round of rebirth by seeing through the illusion of one's individuality. Ancient Chinese thinking had a more optimistic, humanistic, and earthy flavor to it...

Although the Buddha originally served as a model for the way in which all human beings could become enlightened through their own efforts, subsequent developments in Indian Buddhism tended to present enlightenment as a more and more extraordinary, rarefied, and otherworldly state, available to only the few. Zen tends to bring enlightenment down to earth, as it were, and to demystify and demythologize it.³⁴

In some ways the relationship between the Buddha's teaching and the ambient Upanishadic tradition of his time prefigured that between the Protestant Reformation

³³ Safran 2003, Introduction.

³⁴ Safran, Introduction: 17-18.

and Catholicism, Safran suggests.³⁵ Both reforming movements accepted the basic spiritual terms of the earlier dispensation; in the Indian case the key shared terms were suffering, its relationship to a mode of individuality that generated the suffering, and a spiritual practice that led to its supersession.

The Buddha turned his face against some of the striking features of Upanishadic theory and practice, above all its metaphysical discourse, its conception of the *atman* (self) as the enduring essence of the person up to ultimate absorption into cosmic oneness, ritualism, and the transcendental defence of the caste system. But he did not refute the existence of the self, only its mode of existence and the illusion of its enduring, substantial nature. And through him and the Theravada, we inherit the dualism between the profane and the sacred, between everyday life and the spiritual life, that looms so large for our monastic forebears. As we saw in section 2, it resonates with the dualism at the heart of the problem-solving paradigm, that between the problem and the solution, the disease and the cure, the 'path' and 'fruit'.

As with all revolutions, elements of the pre-existing order tended to creep back into Buddhism. Safran detects a tension between what he calls the 'essentially pragmatic and agnostic' nature of the Buddha's own teaching, and lapses back into a Upanishadic dualistic universe divided between the sacred and the profane – the transcendent and the worldly. It would seem, then, that awakening tended to slip closer to the older conception of transition to a transcendental condition. At the same time, the Abhidharma tradition proliferated and then reified the elements of selfhood and the stages in which they were to be overcome (path and fruit), and standardised mindfulness meditation practices. One of its enduring tropes has been – as we have seen above – the atomisation of consciousness into discontinuous mind-moments.³⁶

In the Indian tradition, then, awakening as the available outcome of skilful living in the world gave way to a developmental conception of practice, one that was tacitly monastic: it was a long and difficult road through monastic renunciation that led to a terminus understood as an event, after which there was no more to be done. The developmental model of Theravadin spirituality, its monastic setting, and the atomised, 'momentary' notion of awareness, all served to retard spiritual realisation and restrict its availability to ordinary mortals.

Whatever merit we find in it now, this spirituality is still the work of countless generations of men (overwhelmingly) huddling in the lee of privileged institutions, shrinking from the existential squalls that the rest of humanity faces. Its discourse and its ideals have a disturbingly world-deflecting, dissociative edge, and they point to a triumphalist 'overcoming' of suffering. In terms of tragic vision, the Theravadin subtext says 'no' to life. In Freud's terms, in the quote from 'On transience' in section 4, it amounts to 'a permanent renunciation' of the ups and downs of ordinary human life, due to the mind's revolt against mourning all that is transient. The Theravadin subtext sets samsara and nirvana infinitely apart, and seeks extinction.

³⁵ Safran, Introduction: 14.

³⁶ I'm grateful for this point to conversations with Jason Siff, and a dharma talk on the Buddha's first discourse that Patrick Kearney gave on 23.7.09 to Beaches Sangha.

Today's western Zen practitioners, who trace their dharma inheritance through the contrasting Chinese matrix, appear to have ended up with the makings of a quite different spirituality. This is especially so in the ordinary-mind school, with its unstructured 'just sitting' practice comparable to recollective awareness. Barry Magid begins his recent book, *Ending the pursuit of happiness*, with a critique of every immature meditator's 'secret practice' – the desire for self-improvement, for the eradication of character traits they reject. These are all *curative fantasies*, Magid writes; the path of true practice instead runs through their exposure and abandonment, and the ending of the dualism and inner conflicts they generate.

Like psychoanalysis, Zen does not set out to cure anything, though both may change us profoundly. More broadly, this (non-developmental) path runs through ordinary life with all its upheavals, and the ordinary mind that experiences them. Nor does it seek to 'overcome' suffering, which is endemic to every human life: *'suffering doesn't disappear from our life, but into our life. When we live our life as a whole, there is no longer an aspect that gets singled out as "suffering"'*.³⁷ This disappearance attends deep insight into reality and mind as they manifest in this (way of) life, insight which resonates with the tragic view. When Zen insists that samsara and nirvana are one, it is saying 'yes' to life, with all its joys and sorrows. The dharma does not bear us away from our vulnerability and mortality; it illuminates our experience of them. It's not an avoidance strategy, but rather a learning and enriching one.

Everything that befalls us provides an opportunity to practice, and 'practice is another name for being with our mortality and vulnerability'.³⁸ It is not the means to an end, it is not a path-fruit deal; we practise because it is in our nature as reflective, investigative beings to do so.

7. Owning all our self experiences

The dharmic-psychoanalytic writers I've been citing comment on a recurring phenomenon in the west: powerful dharma teachers in all the major traditions who have preyed on their students in particularly destructive ways, pocketed communal funds and cultivated addictions, thus unleashing havoc in their communities. There is a pattern here: deep spiritual realisation (as traditionally understood) goes hand-in-hand with basic psychodynamic disturbance and unfinished business, and consequent gross ethical breaches. What does this say about our inherited conceptions of spiritual practice and realisation, with or without wilder notions of attaining some sort of all-round human perfection?

The short answer would be that the misbehaviour in question confirms our suspicions about the dissociative nature of some traditional 'paths': they sequester the passions, attachments and emotional bruising endemic to human life, and spiritual 'progress' then proceeds – and is attested and celebrated – in a sealed

³⁷ Magid 2006: 70.

³⁸ Magid 2008: 92.

compartment, a psychology-free zone. When the repressed returns, as it must, it does so with the fury of an element unforeseen and unrecognised.

The longer answer does not contest this, but rather nuances it. It brings us up against our old friend, *historical contingency*, and invites in the possibility that our various experiences of self may now be more complex (and conflicted) than those known to our spiritual ancestors. We can now read scholarly histories of such things as filth and smells, crying, childhood, death, and kindness, and sometime soon we may be able to welcome a history of the self.

Jack Engler gives us an inkling of what it might address and reveal. He draws a distinction – one especially relevant to westerners today – between the ontological self and the psychological self.³⁹ From its inception, dharma practice has exposed ontological separate selfhood as a delusion, and realisation as traditionally understood includes an experience of this self as empty.

But psychological selfhood is much more recent and culture-bound. Following the work of Anne Klein and Clifford Geertz, Engler sees it as arising from the last three or four centuries of western civilisation's development. As Geertz sums up this 'rather peculiar' notion of the person, s/he is 'a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against a social and natural background'.⁴⁰ All four experiences of self that Engler lists⁴¹ are *adaptations* – they serve a purpose, he suggests.

My own sense is that the modern psychological self is an adaptation to 'the civilising process' as Norbert Elias classically conceived it. Over several centuries, this process has brought forth the 'the self-contained person', one who could fit into a more large-scale, differentiated and diverse society.⁴² The self-contained person ends up having to contain a great deal of repressed baggage in order to meet the inhibiting demands of this template for personhood. We might look here for an explanation for Engler's observation that meditation practice unfolds differently in the west: pressing emotional and relational problems are the rule rather than the exception, and they cannot be bypassed (re-repressed).⁴³

The fundamentalist temptation is to assert the ancient verities and dismiss all this 'psychological stuff' as delusion and proliferation, but it's just that mistake that allows certain prominent teachers with narrow, compartmentalised insight and one-off 'peak experiences' to pose (and be perceived) as 'advanced' beings and worthy

³⁹ Engler 2003: 50-2.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Engler 2003: 51. Naturally, nobody is suggesting that people didn't have psyches before the transformation in question; rather, the coming of the psychological self modified the way the psyche was organised and the kind of turbulence it could suffer.

⁴¹ They are the self as multiple and discontinuous, self as integral and continuous, unselfconscious experience, and no-self: Engler 2003: 54-73.

⁴² Elias [1939] 2000. 'The self-contained person' is Lynn Hunt's (2007: 82) coinage. Our modern conception of mental illness arose to pathologise those adults who could not satisfy the exacting demands of this template.

⁴³ Engler 2003: 43. In *Civilisation and its discontents*, Freud famously located the source of much chronic modern unhappiness precisely in the constraints civilisation places on instinctual drives.

role models. All experiences of self are ultimately constructed and thereby 'empty', and that includes the hallowed experience of no-self, Stephen Mitchell pointedly suggests.⁴⁴ Subjectively we live through them all – we leave none behind – and if we are to live fully, spontaneously and wisely, we have to shed light into all their dark corners so as to go beyond our fears, blockages, compulsions, projections and unexamined working assumptions. We can't meditate our way around them.

As Engler and Dan Brown discovered in a survey of IMS yogis before and after a three-month retreat in the mid-1980s, intensive insight meditation did not erode their psychological distress; on the contrary, their 'unresolved grief, fear, unfinished developmental business with parents, siblings, friends, spouses, children and others' obstructed their ability to follow (technique-driven) meditation instructions.⁴⁵

What can happen when the psychological self is not acknowledged? As Engler writes:

The enlightenment ideal itself can be cathected narcissistically as a version – the mother of all versions! – of the grandiose self: as the acme of personal perfection, with all mental defilements (*kilesas*) and fetters (*samyojanas*) eradicated – the achievement of a purified state of complete self-sufficiency and personal purity from which all badness has been removed, which will be admired by others, and which will be invulnerable to further injury or disappointment...

Spiritual practice also offers the possibility of establishing a mirroring or idealizing type of selfobject transference with teachers that remains impermeable to reality-testing for far too long...In their unique presence one can feel special oneself, thereby masking actual feelings of inferiority, unworthiness, and shame or, even worse, feelings of being defective or flawed at the core...

[N]arcissistic vulnerabilities aren't unique to a specific character disorder...If anything, narcissistic dynamics are probably far more intertwined with everyone's spiritual practice than I originally thought... [T]here is no way to practice meditation that is immune from the anxieties, needs, cognitive-emotional styles, and dynamics of our own character structure. Spiritual practice, like psychotherapy itself, can serve defensive ends.⁴⁶

These issues point to a need for a broader, this-worldly conception of spiritual work and realisation, one that encompasses the whole person, and abandons any idea of

⁴⁴ Mitchell 2003: 84-6.

⁴⁵ Engler 2003: 45.

⁴⁶ Engler 2003: 37-8. His comment here draws especially on Heinz Kohut's ([1971] 2000) framework. Cf Magid (2008: 16-7): 'Every insight is partial, requires long years of integration into our lives, and is liable itself to be incorporated into our narcissistic fantasies of specialness or into one or other of our secret practices.'

meditation (or the dharma as such) as a panacea for – and escape route from – all the travails of the human condition.

8. *On the pavement thinking about enlightenment*⁴⁷

We practise in order to practise, because we are self-reflective beings. Open-ended meditation contributes to living an examined life, in Socrates' terms – the only one worthy of a human being. In more modern terms, we practise in order to clarify our inner processes as our life unfolds in often tumultuous ways (including the backwash of our own agency) en route to its approaching end.

Yet we also practise under the guidance of a *telos* – a purpose or goal – which in the dharma's case is variously called awakening, enlightenment and realisation. 'Full awakening' refers to liberation and the realisation of the highest human potential. As the *Lankavatara sutra* puts it, awakening is 'a turning around in the deepest seat of consciousness', not a compartmentalised, technical attainment.

How we imagine this ideal affects how we practise and teach. As we've seen, we can locate our own notion of enlightenment somewhere between two poles. One pole consists of an ex-Indian (quasi-Upanishadic) other-worldly idealisation, a once-and-for-all escape from the samsaric tiger's clutches; the other consists in an alternative, ex-Chinese, this-worldly ideal of riding the tiger with growing intimacy and confidence until death do us part. Whatever 'awakening experiences', samadhi states and other epiphanies we experience, the business of integrating them into our way of being in the world will spread across the term of our natural life.

The first of these notions of enlightenment stands for an 'attained' *status*, a permanent 'solution' to the 'problem' of suffering; the other indicates an ongoing *process* of developing and integrating clear vision and appreciation of our earthly life process, including letting go of fear and hope as we respond spontaneously to its vagaries. Here we find a conception of realisation that sits well with the 2500-year-old western search for 'the good life' – the well-lived life that fulfils our potential and ennobles us. A spiritual ideal that fails to make such a contribution has little merit.

As western dharma practitioners, we find two other wisdom traditions within our cultural matrix, both with a similar this-worldly orientation, that contribute to the inquiry into the good life: the Greek foundations of western moral philosophy, and psychoanalytic thought. The first refers to a story that goes back at least to the Buddha's contemporary, Socrates, and is rooted in tragic view. Throughout this paper I have been implicitly invoking the Greek concept of *eudaimonia* (sometimes spelt *eudaemonia*), best translated as *human flourishing or thriving*, which is how Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, saw it. (These days it appears in the diminished form of 'happiness', in the current flurry of conferences and publishing on happiness.) For Socrates, the key theme in the good life was precisely the constant return to the question of what the good life consists of, which made of it a lifelong spiritual inquiry.

⁴⁷ Apologies to Bob Dylan for adapting a couplet from *Subterranean homesick blues*.

Thus the good life had to include the love and habit of self-examination, and could not be reduced to a formula. Other contributions emphasise the development of our capacities and character, the quality of our important relationships and friendships, our effective response to the exigencies of life, and our practice of virtue (mainly courage, kindness, honesty, wisdom, self-mastery, moderation, justice, and participation in communal affairs) as components of eudaimonia. The latter thus foregrounds the ethical dimension. The Greeks saw the obsessive pursuit of fame and fortune as diversions from the good life. We hardly need to underscore the compatibility between this view of human flourishing and the one the Buddha set out in the noble eightfold path.

Compared to these two 2500-year-old traditions, the century of psychoanalytic development is brief and has not yielded such explicitly formulated elements of the good life. However, Jeffrey Rubin has provisionally extrapolated some of them. They start with the usual signs of a successful analysis, ones that reflect Freud's values: personal integration, heightened reality testing, a capacity to 'love and work', greater personal effectiveness (and therewith freedom), and capacity for self-reflection and self-analysis. Also relevant here is Freud's notion of transforming the super-ego from a harsh, tyrannical critic into a mature conscience. To which later contributors, especially those of the postclassical relational schools, have added the Greek- and dharmic-sounding virtues of empathy, a balance between altruism and self-care, creativity, authenticity and spontaneity.⁴⁸

One emphasis in psychoanalysis that has a superficial tension with insight practice relates to the past. Whereas the latter privileges the present moment, the former sees our past as the basis of our sense of self and our world, our meanings and passions, our sense of moral responsibility. It is only by appropriating our past that we can make sense of our present life. To neglect it would drain our lives of vitality and direction.⁴⁹ But as we saw in section 5, the dharma anticipated this point in developing the concept of store conscious (*alaya-vinnana*). And the experience of meditators with which this paper began indicates that we have little choice about confronting repressed elements of the past. Acknowledging the contribution of the past to present experience enriches our awareness of the latter; it does not detract from it.

Apart from affirming many of the elements of eudaimonia that moral philosophy and the dharma promote, psychoanalysis can make a unique contribution to the latter: it has access to otherwise unexplored depths of human subjectivity. In this way it is in a position to point out where spiritual traditions are missing their mark, and thus laying false trails to the good life:

Psychoanalysis demonstrates how accounts of the good life coming from the contemplative traditions neglect the ubiquity of self-deception, overlook the shaping role of the past...and underestimate the stubbornness of character, transference, and unconsciousness ...[These] traditions neglect the way

⁴⁸ Rubin 2003: 395-409.

⁴⁹ Rubin 2003: 401-2.

intentions and actions may have multiple unconscious meanings and functions. Altruism in a spiritual practitioner may hide vanity and sanctimony. Self-denigration may masquerade as spiritual asceticism.⁵⁰

To these examples we can add those referred to earlier, where a narrow 'realisation' goes hand-in-hand with narcissistic grandiosity and character disturbances that lead to grave ethical breaches.

With the exception of dharmic schools that see enlightenment as an attained status, all three of these wisdom schools see awakening and other elements of human flourishing as lifelong processes that are never perfected, and thereby never terminated. The perfectionist delusion is one of the first dustballs that the flypaper of enlightenment removes from circulation. As several western teachers have pointed out, the Buddha of the Pali canon practised 'as if his hair was on fire' throughout his long life, and was never free of Mara's visitations.

9. Conclusion

As teachers and practitioners of insight meditation, we have the insights of these three converging wisdom traditions at our disposal. We can use them to gain greater purchase on our own and our students' experiences, and can contextualise their and our own endeavours to flourish in our complex lay way of life and our own cultural context.

Naturally, insight meditation is a sub-discipline in the distinctive dharma tradition; we are not about to turn our dharma groups into philosophy seminars, or our retreats into a series of analytic consultations. We clearly don't have the training and clinical background for that, and it would mean abandoning our principal practice. I am proposing a cross-fertilisation, not a syncretism.

We could think of ourselves, for instance, listening to our students' meditation experiences (and re-collecting our own) in Freud's spirit of 'evenly suspended attention'⁵¹ – letting go of any impulse to interpret them, to reduce them to Pali stock phrases or formulae, to locate them in a developmental series, or to 'fix' anything they articulate. In this way, an enriched sense of what we are already doing is ours for the taking.

⁵⁰ Rubin 2003: 394.

⁵¹ Freud [1912] 1957: 111-2.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Win Childs, Betsy Faen, Jason Siff and Victor von der Heyde for bibliographic tips; and Win Childs, Michael Dash and Sarah Mares for detailed feedback on an earlier version of this paper.

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