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THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND NEUROBIOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF ZEN PRACTICE

PART ONE: THE PATH OF INTIMACY (05.07.20)

The first talk today is called The Path of Intimacy. Some of you will be familiar with the territory I cover in this talk and some of you won't be. I am going to be discussing the psychological and neurobiological aspects of Zen practice which will continue into next fortnight. I am interested in exploring how we incorporate an understanding of the relationship between the feeling of safety, the sense of self and the regulation and dysregulation of self-states and I will be drawing mostly in the next talk on the attachment system and what is known as polyvagal theory.

This topic has fascinated me for a long time. One of the more confusing aspects of Zen practice is what we mean by "self". Traditionally, in the Japanese Zen teaching, which we inherited in the West, there is often a distinction made between what is referred to as the True Self or the Universal Self and the Ego-Self or sometimes its referred to as the big self and the little self or the big mind and the little mind. In this tradition the true self is seen as the realisation of oneness with the universe. It is



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the self that is never born and hence never dies, it is the “self that transcends time and space and is one with all things”. Sounds very inviting.

However, I think there is something problematic about how this distinction is sometimes portrayed. For example, the Ego-Self is often I think simplified or caricatured as the “grasping, demanding ‘me’ that is never satisfied” rather than appreciating how the self, the human self is at the apex of evolution as indeed a precious jewel. I think this parody of the self reflects the lack of an in depth understanding of depth psychology in the Japanese tradition. Therefore, I think its important to look with new eyes at the relationship of interdependence between the universal self and the personal self.

When I first read Charlotte Joko Beck, I use to interpret the “self-centred dream” as this identification with this Ego-self, seeing the Ego-Self as bad. However, the psychological approach to Zen practice as outlined in Barry Magid’s first book



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changed all that for me. Then, after reading the work of Russell Meares, I began to revise my understanding of what we might call personal self or personal being and the relationship with the universal self.

In his book, *Intimacy and Alienation*, Meares writes about how the self develops within the context of a care-giving environment and achieves its potential when it has developed a number of attributes such as continuity and coherence, the capacity for self-reflection, self-agency and most important of all, the capacity for intimacy. Self is defined not as an entity or a thing but as a process that is constantly in flux.

Interestingly, Meares builds his work on the great American psychologist-philosopher William James, who was the brother of Henry James, the novelist.

William James published his *Principles of Psychology* in 1890 and his *Varieties of Religious Experience* in 1902. He was writing at the same time as Sigmund Freud but describing the self in a very different way. So James conceived of the self “as an awareness of the flow of inner life” which he called “the stream of consciousness”.

Ring any bells?



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“Whatever I may be thinking of, I am always at the same time more or less aware of myself, of my personal existence. At the same time, It is I who am aware; so that the total self of me, being as it were duplex, partly known and partly knower, partly object and partly subject, must have two aspects discriminated in it, of which for shortness we may call one the Me and the other the I” (Russell Meares, *Intimacy and Alienation*, 2000, p. 9).

These are both different aspects of the same process. Meares builds on the work of James by arguing that this core sense of self is founded on a form of language which creates a form of relatedness which he calls intimate. This intimacy is personal because it is founded upon what Meares refers to as “poetical memory”. There is what Meares calls a ‘doubleness’ in this state – there is the sense of being aware and the contents of awareness which are in a constant stream or flow: “one lives in the immediate present and at the same time is aware of a different domain of experience, which belongs to another time in one’s life” (p. 2).



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Some of you are probably aware this concept of the “stream of consciousness” was later introduced into literature by modernist writers such as James Joyce, who published *Ulysses* in 1922 and Virginia Wolfe, who published *Mrs Dalloway* in 1925. Just to give you an example from *Mrs Dalloway*, the main character, Clarissa Dalloway, an upper-class, fifty-two-year-old woman married to a politician, and this is how the novel opens, (the novel takes place on one day) she decides to buy flowers herself for the party she is hosting later that evening instead of sending a servant to buy them. London is bustling and full of noise, almost five years after the end of World War I. It is a fresh mid-June morning, and Clarissa recalls one girlhood summer on her father’s estate, Bourton. She sees herself at eighteen, standing at the window, feeling as if something awful might happen. Past and present continue to intermingle as she walks to the flower shop. So, I’ll just give you a quote from that opening page of *Mrs Dalloway* to give you an idea about how she writes in third person about the stream of consciousness. So it starts with:

Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.



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For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off the hinges; Rumpelmayer's men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning - fresh as if issued to children on a beach.

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flat of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she was then) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen; looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling; standing and looking until Peter Walsh said, 'Musing among the vegetables?' - was that it? 'I prefer men to cauliflowers' - was that it? He must have said it at breakfast one morning when she had gone out onto the terrace - Peter Walsh. He would be back from India one of these days, June or July, she forgot which, for his letters were awfully dull; it was his sayings one remembered; his eyes, his pocket knife, his smile, his grumpiness and, when millions of things had utterly vanished - how strange it was! - a few sayings like this about cabbages.



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So that is a good example of the intermingling of the present and the past as she walks out into the morning and she is taken back to this particular time in her life; how many of us would experience that often with smells or music, especially songs that can evoke certain images and memories, that come up from the past, as in the stream of consciousness of this very personal sense of intimacy that we can share with others.

Meares then goes on to discuss how most people do not live entirely in this zone of self. From time to time another system interrupts and disrupts our sense of self – he identifies this as the unconscious traumatic memory system. “The intrusion of this system of traumatic memories is alienating.” (p. 1). We become alienated from our sense of self, from others and from our environment. The sense of “double-ness” is lost and one does not know the origin of the discomforting mood. The experience of the mood feels located in the present, yet, it is actually a dissociated traumatic memory outside of our awareness that is being re-experienced.



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The experience of self is therefore in constant flux and can change states sometimes dramatically. If we are lucky, we have a on-going sense of safety and well-being. Zazen can also help us facilitate this sense of calmness, which we will discuss next time. However, this state can be disrupted by the traumatic memory system where we find ourselves anxious or even panicky. If we feel our life is threatened, we may even shut-down completely in a severe depression or dissociate. These are both examples of movements down the hierarchy of consciousness to negative or alienated self -states. Alternatively, we might experience a dramatic mystical peak experience of say “oneness” with the universe. This usually occurs during states of samadhi, of calmness (becoming one with Zazen), however, there are reports documented in the history of Zen and also in the autobiographies of contemporary spiritual teachers, such as Byron Katie and Eckhart Tolle, of people who have experienced these mystical break-throughs while they were in the midst of a severe depression. But normally in our Zen practice, these states are sometimes experienced as a result of,



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you know, a number of hours sitting in a samadhi which makes us more “accident-prone” to those kind of special states.

So, I believe a distinction between personal self and universal self needs revision according to the findings of western psychology. I think there are three ways (probably more) into this integration. The first is to draw upon our understanding of the hierarchy of consciousness and the tripartite structure of the brain. The second is to acknowledge that the self is totally dependent on the body and the environment. The third is our understanding of what is meant by intimacy in both traditional Japanese Zen and in the work of Russell Meares. For example, Dogen has a chapter on Intimate Language in his Shobo Genzo.

Firstly, to start with the hierarchy of consciousness. I won't go into the details of this, but to keep it simple, the human brain can be understood as a tripartite structure being the evolutionary product of our reptilian and mammalian ancestors:



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“About 300 million years ago, reptiles had evolved on earth. Mammals and finally humans followed much later. Amazingly the structure of our human brain still bears witness to this history. What we ended up with were, arguably, three interconnecting brains each with some particular functions” (Margot Sunderland, *The Science of Parenting*, 2006, p. 16).

The human part of the brain, the neocortex, is a very recent development in evolutionary history. The reptilian part of the brain, in contrast, is concerned with survival and it controls body functions such as breathing and digestion. The development of the mammalian brain is about the attachment system, the need to bond and care for our babies and the need to regulate our emotions. Finally, the neocortex takes care of higher-level cognitive functions such as language, reasoning and the capacity for self-reflection.

“What's more, our higher rational brain can easily be hijacked by these lower regions. When we feel unsafe, physically or psychologically, impulses from the reptilian and



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mammalian parts of our brain can override our higher human functions, and we can behave like a threatened animal”.

Now when we experience psychological trauma, consciousness goes through a dissolution falling down the hierarchy to more archaic states. This often happens outside of our awareness and can be an involuntary shift in state. I will explore this topic further in the next talk. But what I want to suggest is that the personal self in its calm state is on top of this hierarchy of consciousness and hence we need to re-conceptualise what we mean in Zen when we talk about the universal self.

So, for example I now understand the “self-centred dream” as the accumulated experience of various traumas. The more severe the trauma the more self-centred we become. When we feel threatened the self-window narrows, and we get caught in so-called negative states such as anxiety/panic or anger/rage or we can also shutdown or dissociate. When we are caught in these states (and this can happen quite outside our awareness and voluntary control) we perceive others and the world in general as



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threatening – they become THE OTHER. On the other hand, when we are resting calmly in Zazen for example, we may experience a gradual or dramatic expansion of the self-window – or to use Dogen’s words, we are “enlightened by the ten thousand things”.

Secondly, we need to acknowledge that our personal self is dependent upon our universal self for our survival – this would include heart and respiratory functions and digestion all happening outside our conscious control. We are also dependent on all our organs to protect us and the environment for the source of our need for food, water and oxygen. Without this universal self that we all share equally, our unique individual personal self would never emerge.

Thirdly, through the experience of intimacy, the universal and personal meet. In both Dogen and Meares, intimacy means closeness and feeling inseparable. In our Zazen practice we become intimate with the stars, the sound of the wind and rain and the clouds in the sky and our personal “poetical memories”. Meares agrees that “Self is a



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state that includes the world around” (Meares, 2016, p. 16). We speak the language of intimacy both in artistic expressions such as poetry and in our body language, epitomised in Mahakasyapa’s smile, for example. So, whatever we feel, think, and see, we could say is you:

There is no choice in the matter - no escaping you. That is what I mean by the word “awakening” - a sudden awareness, quite undeniable, that everything you see, feel, and think is you.

Robert Saltzman (2017) *The Ten Thousand Things*, p. 13.

So, you could say, you are the universe. But it is a personal universe, personal universe which is intimate to you. Your universe is totally unique and personal to you. When you die, as in the personal self dying, that intimate universe also dies.



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To conclude, our personal self is the treasure that is hidden in plain view. The personal self is the window into the universal self. On the morning of his awakening, Shakymuni Buddha looked up at the morning star and proclaimed, “that’s me!” Our personal self is not separate from our universal self – our personal self is what enables us to appreciate the wonder and preciousness of this life that we are. This moment. The universal self without the personal self has no capacity for self-reflection and self-appreciation except through the prism of the personal self – it is only with the evolution of the personal self that this potential is liberated. To finish with a quote from Uchiyama Roshi: “When we do is zazen, we personally experience this clearly; we become nothing other than ourselves! Though we become nothing other than ourselves alone, the whole world is contained within that self” (Opening the Hand of Thought, p. 81).