

MEDITATION AND THE DILEMMA OF NARCISSISM

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The adoption of meditation by Western practitioners, psychotherapists, and health care providers has continued unabated over the past two decades. As the level of sophistication about meditation has developed, the initial enthusiasm over its relaxation benefits has matured into an appreciation of its psychotherapeutic value. Proponents of its therapeutic value generally make one of two arguments. The first advocates meditation as an adjunct to psychotherapy. In this view, meditation can be useful in the following ways: as a means of coping with stress, as a self-control strategy, as a method of achieving greater tolerance of emotional states, and as a regression in service of the ego. The second sees meditation as a kind of "meta-therapy," which is designed to begin where contemporary psychotherapy leaves off thereby opening a person to "transpersonal" realms. A major purpose of this article is to demonstrate that both of these approaches ignore the essential ways in which meditation practice engages core psychic structures and conflicts, particularly narcissistic issues which begin in early infancy and persist for an entire lifetime. Ego-psychology's understanding of the human mind can be expanded by utilizing the insights of Buddhism about the nature of ego.

The first argument for meditation mentioned above fails to address the fundamental way in which meditation strives to illuminate the inner world and resolve narcissistic conflict. By setting meditation up as an adjunct to Western therapy, the frame of reference remains Western, while the solutions that meditation offers are decidedly rooted in the philosophical heritage of the East. The second argument, wherein meditation is seen as "meta-therapy," endeavors to counter the prevailing psychoanalytic model that mystical states in general and meditation in particular foster a regres-

sion to preoedipal levels of satisfaction. This argument then tends to discount the tenacity of individual narcissism, thereby obscuring how meditation actually works with the narcissistic residue. In exploring this omission it is instructive to look at how meditation has been viewed as dependent on the "healthy" functioning of the ego. For example, the importance of sufficient ego development for successful meditation has been delineated by Wilber (1980, 1981, 1984a, '84b) in his descriptions of the "pre/trans fallacy" and further developed by Engler (1983, 1984). This view is succinctly expressed in the statement, "...you have to be somebody before you can be nobody" (Engler, 1983, p. 36). While it is clear that many of those with borderline personality structure (Kernberg, 1975) cannot withstand the rigors of intensive meditation practice (Epstein & Lieff, 1981), this does not necessarily mean that the ego must be fully developed, integrated, cohesive, intact or in any other way "normal" before the meditative experience can unfold. In the traditional Eastern understanding of meditation, practice begins wherever the person happens to be at the moment. To pretend otherwise, from an Eastern standpoint, is to ignore fundamental truths about both meditation and psychological development.

THE CONTINUATION OF NARCISSISM

From a Western perspective it is helpful to note that while it is not often emphasized, virtually all of the major theorists of psychological development assert that issues usually associated with the first years of life continue to exert an influence even as the individual successfully traverses subsequent levels and matures. Thus, the persistence of "oral," "schizoid," or "narcissistic" issues does not necessarily imply fixation at a primitive level of ego development. Although the struggle against both fusion with an idealized other and isolation is traditionally associated with the rapprochement sub-phase of the latter half of the second year of life, Mahler nevertheless suggests that it "reverberates throughout the life cycle" (1972, p. 333). She describes an "eternal longing" for the actual or fantasied "ideal state of self" (p. 338) which produces an ongoing

oscillation between "distancing from and introjection of the lost symbiotic mother" (p. 338).

Jacobsen (1964) describes fantasies of "(total) incorporation of the gratifying object" that arise subsequent to the breakup of the blissful union of child with mother. "This desire," she asserts, "probably never ceases to play a part in our emotional life" (1964, p. 39), reemerging, for instance, in the act of sexual relations. Kohut (1966, p. 246) asserts that "there remains throughout life an important direct residue" of primary narcissism, the time in which the infant and mother are united in a symbiotic universe that precedes self-consciousness. A. Reich (1960) describes the "overlapping of phases" as ubiquitous (p. 289) and defines an oscillation characteristic of narcissistic states. This oscillation is between anxieties stemming from fears of annihilation and a compensatory fantasy of "restitution via fusion with an archaic ego ideal" (p. 311). Guntrip (1969) insists that "every personality has to some degree a schizoid core of the self..." (p. 240) which he defines as hovering "between two opposite fears, the fear of isolation in independence with loss of his ego in a vacuum of experience, and the fear of bondage to, of imprisonment or absorption in the personality of whomsoever he rushes to for protection" (p. 291). Chasseguet-Smirgel (1975) describes the longstanding effects of the "violent end to which the primary state of fusion" with the mother is brought, forcing the infant to give up his "narcissistic omnipotence" and to project it onto the object, creating the "infant's first ego ideal" (p. 6). This ego ideal, she declares, represents "a narcissistic omnipotence from which he is henceforth divided by a gulf that he will spend the rest of his life trying to bridge... Thus the ego ideal is seen as a specific anthropological phenomenon (in the broadest sense of the term) which takes man beyond the simple quest for instinctual satisfaction" (p. 7).

PREOEDIPAL CONFLICTS AND THE MEDITATIVE PATH

While I agree with Engler that meditation is not appropriate for those without the ego functions necessary to carry out the practice, I nevertheless believe that intense preoedipal conflicts are in fact

addressed throughout the meditative path. The teacher-student relationship, the concentration and absorption experiences, and even the subjective knowledge of voidness or emptiness, all impact upon such conflicts. Meditation practices are directed toward creating the basis and means by which voidness is experienced directly, without flight into fusion or omnipotent fantasies, or annihilation and nihilism. Instrumental in this confrontation is the guru-disciple relationship, in which the disciple is brought into contact with intense feelings of both annihilation and union en route to the correct apprehension of voidness. Reminiscent of classical transference, this relationship enables the disciple to vividly encounter his or her own narcissistic projections directly, as experienced through the medium of the teacher. The liberation from suffering that is promised in Buddhism is, after all, wrought from an exquisite awareness of these narcissistic projections, which are manifestations of the ongoing struggle to maintain a sense of self. This struggle begins in early childhood. It follows that Buddhism must have developed ways of dealing with just these early narcissistic tendencies.

GRANDIOSITY AND EMPTINESS

Given this understanding, there are two related but distinct vulnerabilities with infantile origins that predispose a person to being attracted to spiritual pursuits. These must be confronted and reconciled in successful meditation practice. This is not to say that practices such as meditation can be explained solely in terms of infantile origins, but it is to affirm the significance that the early phenomena of ego-development may play.

The two vulnerabilities have their origins in the two aspects of separation-individuation that Wilber (1984a) has identified in his review of developmental psychology. The first relates to the "hatching subphase" when "the infant's sensoriphysical bodyself 'hatches' or wakes up from its previous, symbiotic, fused or dual unity with the mother and the sensoriphysical surround" (Wilber, 1984a, p. 89). This phase is bodily, involving the first recognition of the non-I, and requires surrender of infantile omnipotence and grandiosity. The second relates to the "rapprochement subphase" (Mahler, 1972)

of the second year of life when "a separate and distinct phantasmic-emotional self has finally emerged and clearly differentiated itself from its emotional-libidinal object representations" (Wilber, 1984a, p. 89). This phase involves the maturation of cognitive structures and requires the integration of multiple self and object representations. The first involves the essentially narcissistic desire to regain the lost sense of perfection symbolized by the pre- or postnatal unity of mother and child (Grunberger, 1971). The second involves a basic anxiety, expressed most commonly in a *subjective sense of emptiness*, that stems from the need to forge and preserve a cohesive and integrated self. In metapsychological terms, the first sets the groundwork for the ongoing desire to fuse the irreconcilably separate ego and ego ideal (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1975). The second represents anxiety over the image of the self, which basically is "not a firm unit," but "fused and confused...with...object images, and...composed of a constantly changing series of self images which reflect mainly the incessant fluctuations of the primitive mental state" (Jacobsen, 1964, p. 20).

These two vulnerabilities spring from two primary sources of a sense of personal identity, the awareness of the "non-I" which emerges as the child is "deprived of bodily closeness and skin contact," and the awareness of the self derived from the "unfolding relations to love objects" (Lichtenstein, 1961, pp. 192-3). They are not dissimilar from what Andreas-Salome (1962) has termed the "dual orientation of narcissism," that of the "desire for individuality" with its concomitant feeling of "a ghostlike facsimile of existence" (p. 7) versus the "contrary movement toward conjugation and fusion" such that "identification with the totality" (pp. 4-5) becomes an attempt to satisfy the yearning for grandiosity and union. These two vulnerabilities, of grandiosity and emptiness, form the two poles of the primitive matrix of the meditative experience.

Engler points out the attraction of Buddhism for those with "self-pathology" characterized by "alternating omnipotence and devaluation" (1983, p. 44). He recognizes the confusion that may exist between their subjective feelings of emptiness and their ideas of the meaning of *shunyata*, or voidness, as well as the potential for gratification of their desires for oneness, grandiosity, or omnipotence.

It is inevitable that the conceptual framework of a given spiritual approach will attract individuals who are attempting to relate to that approach on the basis of their pre-existing experience. Even if the particular experience of emptiness that propels someone toward Buddhist meditation in the hope of somehow assuaging that feeling is not the same as the realization of *shunyata* or voidness, this does not mean that the process of realization of voidness does not somehow speak to the initial feeling.

CONCENTRATION AND INSIGHT PRACTICES IN BUDDHISM

The traditional Buddhist division of meditation techniques into “concentration” and “insight” practices (Goleman, 1977) is instructive in light of the vulnerabilities already identified. Concentration practices stress the development of one-pointed attention on a single object, producing feelings of tranquillity, contentment, and bliss that culminate in absorption, or trance, states (Goleman, 1977; Goleman & Epstein, 1983; Nyanamoli, 1976). Insight practices emphasize sustained attention to changing objects, moment to moment awareness, so that insight or understanding of their true nature is achieved as the faculties of perception become more and more refined. The essential understanding that is said to emerge from the latter practice is that of the insubstantial nature of the self. Yet in order for complete understanding to emerge, a certain degree of concentration (“access concentration”) must be united with the insight factors of mind to produce the optimal constellation for the realization of voidness. It is this combination of concentration and insight that is most distinctive to the Buddhist approach (Goleman, 1977).

WESTERN PSYCHOLOGY AND CONCENTRATION PRACTICES

The concentration practices, and the feelings associated with them, were the inspiration for Freud’s well-known description of the “oceanic feeling” (Freud, 1930). Influenced by the French poet Romain Rolland, a follower of the Hindu teachers Vivekananda and Ramakrishna (Werman, 1977; Masson & Masson, 1978), Freud

attempted to explain the "limitless" and "unbounded" sensations that Rolland described to him. The meditation practices producing these feelings were exclusively of the concentration variety (Goleman, 1977) stemming as they did from the practices of Hinduism. Freud compares the loss of ego boundaries with the "non-pathological" state of being in love. He then goes on to compare this state of "limitlessness" and oneness with the universe with the "primary ego-feeling" of the "infant at the breast" who does not "distinguish his ego from the external world." Thus was the identification of religious practices with the "restoration of limitless narcissism" (Freud, 1930) established. This formulation has been supported by many others (Fingarette, 1958; Alexander, 1931; Horton, 1974; Jones, 1913; Masson, 1974) who tend to reinforce the implications of Freud's stance that such practices are pathological. Rose (1972) and Ross (1975) also stress that the origins of mystical states lie in the infantile experience of symbiotic union, but they invoke the notion of regression in service of the ego to defend the healthy aspects of such states. Andreas-Salome recognized that such practices, rooted in the desire for primitive narcissism, represent a "transformation" (1962, p. 16) of the infantile drives "in the interest of its fulfillment." Grunberger (1971) and Chasseguet-Smirgel (1975) make this idea more intelligible with their concept of the ego pursuing its "ego-ideal," the remnants of the narcissistic child-mother fusion (Freud, 1914, p. 117). Thus, "mysticism...corresponds...to the need for the uniting of ego and ideal via the shortest possible route. It represents fusion with the primary object, and even when the latter is represented consciously by God, it is nonetheless, at depth, an equivalent of the mother-prior-to-the-loss-of-fusion" (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1975, p. 217).

Given that the concentration practices, by definition, represent fusion with a single object and produce a state of non-differentiation between internal and external worlds characterized by feelings of rapture and tranquillity, it is difficult to deny the metapsychological relationships described above. Certainly the desire to recover the "prenatal state of elation" (Grunberger, 1971, p. 246) may be a significant motivation for spiritual practice. The experience of the fruits of the concentration practices may both

soothe a primitive sense of loss and gratify narcissistic desires for omnipotence and grandiosity. To assert that these experiences are *nothing but* a regression to the womb is certainly erroneous, but to deny the deeply embedded memories, images, and desires that form the matrix of the experience is equally invalid.

Yet to assert that all of mystical experience can be explained by this formulation is to ignore the entire spectrum of the insight practices. It is a well-known tenet of Buddhist theory that the concentration practices, while providing a foundation, are by no means the endpoint of meditation practice. Their transfixing qualities are recognized and the dangers of succumbing to their charms are well detailed (Trungpa, 1973). For the essential mystical experience, at least from a Buddhist perspective, is not blissful absorption alone, it is absorption coupled with understanding. It is not a transient return to primary narcissism. It is the simultaneous experience both of the limitless and the insubstantial nature of the self. The primitive antecedents of these two aspects of the self are infantile omnipotence and the apparently irreconcilable split that succeeds that state of mind. This split sets the stage for the struggle to solidify the self and the images of the object world. Just as the development of concentration permits fusion of ego and ego ideal, the development of insight resurrects the primitive anxieties of emptiness, annihilation, and fragmentation of self. In fact, meditation practice focuses the practitioner on those precise experiences while disallowing escape into narcissistic resolution of that discomfort (Epstein, 1990).

THE EXPERIENCE OF EMPTINESS: BUDDHIST AND WESTERN

While the concentration practices allow experience of the "continued existence in the unconscious of the primordial ego which encompassed the world" (Federn, 1928/52, p. 303) which Federn christened "ego-cosmic ego," the insight practices appear to relate much more to the attempts to form solid self-representations that begin after the breakup of primary narcissism. As the child develops the perceptual and cognitive capacities to form mental representations, to distinguish "self" from "object," and to observe himself with "reflective self-awareness" (Lichtenberg, 1975, p. 468), he beg-

ins to have ongoing “sensation, constantly present, of one’s own person—the ego’s perception of itself” (Federn, 1952, p. 60). Called “ego feeling” by Federn, such “self-representations,” “self-feelings” (Jacobsen, p. 23), “self-experience” or “sense of self” (Lichtenberg, 1975, p. 454) form the basis for the later sense of identity (Lichtenstein, 1961) that gives a sense of individuality.

It is my thesis that inevitable disturbances in the formation of a “cohesive” (Lichtenberg, 1975, p. 474) sense of self contribute to a feeling of emptiness which often predisposes an individual to “spiritual” pursuits. Such a feeling, while relatively unexplored by traditional psychoanalysis (Singer, 1977a), is well recognized in both Eastern and Western philosophical systems and is, in fact, based on a reality that both Buddhist psychology and Western object relations theory assert to be true (Engler, 1983, p. 33). Although unstated, ego-psychology clearly but unknowingly implies that a cohesive sense of self, while useful, is nevertheless simply a more refined and workable fabrication than are the narcissistic projections described above. All of the “self” formulations that are depicted as the culmination of ego-development still remain personal constructs designed to allay primitive anxieties about the experience of emptiness or non-being. Insight practices appear designed to expose the origins of these fears while the combination of concentration and insight practices illuminate the possibility of working directly with emptiness.

Dynamic theory has, in fact, begun to unravel the origins of the subjective sense of emptiness, exposing that which for the Buddhists must be the starting point of meditative investigation. In the early part of this century, Federn (1952) wrote of inevitable deficiencies in an ego feeling that is “constantly fluctuating...(whose) content is constantly shifting” (p. 62). Such deficiencies, he asserted, produce a “sense of unreality” or “estrangement” (German: *Entfremdung*) (p. 61) that is perceived by the ego and inevitably contrasted “with the preceding state of perfect wholeness” (p. 269). Such feelings of unreality or estrangement prompt comparison with the affective memory traces (Grunberger, 1971, p. 261) of the preceding state of oneness, contributing further to the sense of emptiness. “The cause of the disruption of that ideal state of elation is bound

to be confused, by the primary narcissistic agency, with what is in the process of becoming the operational ego..." (Grunberger, 1971, p. 261). Thus, emptiness can result from a sense that the self-feeling is not as solid as it should be nor as complete as it once was. It is a function of the inherent anxiety involved in keeping a number of self and object images integrated as well as the unsatisfactoriness of this image in relationship to the earlier state of fusion and oneness.

Emptiness has been invoked as the feeling state resulting from deficiencies in emotional nurturance, defenses against conflicted drives, and defects in self/object integration (Singer, 1977a; Levy, 1984), and so it remains the final common pathway of disturbances in ego identity. Guntrip (1969, p. 97) writes of the "feeling of emptiness and nonentity in depth, sensed as experienced in the unconscious, creating the feeling of not having an ego, only an amorphous experience of indefiniteness and weakness." Such feelings lead to what he called "ontological insecurity, insecurity as to one's essential being and existence as a person, insecurity about one's ego-identity, the feeling of basic inadequacy in coping with life, and inability to maintain oneself as in any sense an equal in relationships with other people..." (1971, p. 291).

Kernberg (1975) has described the "subjective experience of emptiness" in depressive, narcissistic, and borderline personalities and shown how each of these personality organizations color the way in which such emptiness is perceived. Describing such experiences as resulting from the disruption of the "normal" relation between the self and the internal world of objects, he concludes that such personality structures are prone to chronic feelings of this nature. "The subjective experience of emptiness represents a temporary or permanent loss of the normal relationships of the self with object representations, that is, with the world of inner objects that fixates intrapsychically the significant experiences with others and constitutes a basic ingredient of ego identity" (Kernberg, 1975, p. 220). Singer (1977a, 1977b) has also directly focused on emptiness from a psychodynamic point of view. Providing dynamic explanations of such feelings from several theoretical vantage points, Singer (1977a) reviews the possible ways in which emptiness may be understood and points out its predominance in narcissistic and borderline

states. He concludes however, that emptiness is but "a virulent expression of the destructive drive" and, I believe, makes the mistake of identifying the feeling too closely with the borderline personality organization with which it is most often associated in the minds of clinicians.

Emptiness, while more virulent in severe narcissistic and borderline personalities, is a feeling accessible to most individuals. Greenacre (1958) demonstrates the ambivalence with which this feeling is regarded by clinicians, recognizing its lurking presence but preferring to deny its influence, except in "special" cases. "Most adults seem to accept their own identities unquestioningly, or at least without much contemplation except under rather unusual circumstances, such as when coming out of an anesthetic, being alone in a foreign country, or that even rarer instance of having some experience which is or seems almost completely new. Otherwise only young children, philosophers, artists, and certain sick individuals concern themselves constantly with questions of their own identity" (Greenacre, 1958, p. 613). One might add to this list many of those who undertake meditation practice or anyone who has allowed themselves to experience an existential crisis. Thus, it is possible to have experienced "estrangement" from the self, dating inevitably from the preoedipal period most closely associated with the "rapprochement subphase," without being so pathologically borderline that meditation practice becomes impossible.

STAGES OF INSIGHT

That insight practices resurrect the primitive anxieties associated with the initial integration of the self is clearly demonstrated when the traditional descriptions of advanced stages of insight are examined. According to a classic textbook of Buddhist psychology, the *Visuddhimagga*, a stage of advanced insight known as "Knowledge of Contemplation of Destruction" (p. 748), is achieved when the faculty of mindfulness is developed to such a degree that each moment of awareness is clearly distinguished by the faculties of perception in both its formation and destruction. At this point, the dissolution of each mind moment becomes particularly prominent

and the meditator experiences "all formations..." continually "breaking up, like fragile pottery being smashed, like fine dust being dispersed, like sesamum seeds being roasted, and he sees only their break-up" (p. 752). Following this stage, which has already long succeeded profound experiences of equanimity associated with the drastic abatement of influence from aversive emotional states, comes a very curious stage. Known as the "Knowledge of Appearance of Terror," this stage involves the upsurge of intense emotion otherwise unknown in the advanced stages of meditation. The emotion is not rapture or bliss, but terror, the kind of terror traditionally associated with fears of annihilation of the ego.

As he repeats, develops, and cultivates in this way the contemplation of dissolution, the object of which is cessation consisting in the destruction, fall and break-up of all formations, then formations classed according to all kinds of becoming, generation, destiny, station, or abode of beings, appear to him in the form of a great terror, as lions, tigers, leopards, bears, hyenas, spirits, ogres, fierce bulls, savage dogs, rut-maddened wild elephants, hideous venomous serpents, thunderbolts, charnel grounds, battlefields, flaming coal pits, etc., appear to a timid man who wants to live in peace. (Nyanamoli, p. 753)

Successive stages gradually distance the meditator from the raw experience of terror. Passing through the "Knowledge of Contemplation of Danger," the "Knowledge of Contemplation of Dispassion," the "Knowledge of Desire for Deliverance," and the "Knowledge of Contemplation of Reflexion," the meditator enters the stage of "Discerning Formations as Void." It is here that the "experience of oneself as unreal" (Guenther, 1974, p. 139) is crystallized, and that the "idea of a persisting individual nature" (Guenther, 1974, p. 207) is relinquished.

When he has thus seen that there is neither a self nor any other (thing or being) occupying the position of a self's property, he again discerns voidness in the quadruple logical relation as set forth in this passage: "I am not anywhere anyone's owning, nor is there anywhere my owning in anyone." (Nyanamoli, p. 762)

THE RECONCILIATION OF GRANDIOSITY AND EMPTINESS

Commentaries on this last phrase reveal that it indicates a clear unravelling of the integrated self and object representations that

constitute the cohesive self. "The commentarial interpretation given here is summed up...as follows: ...he sees the non-existence of a self of his own...he sees of his own self too that it is not the property of another's self...He sees the non-existence of another's self thus 'There is no other's self anywhere.' He sees of another that that other is not the property of his own self thus 'my owning of that other's self does not exist.' So this mere conglomeration of formations is seen...as voidness of self or property of a self..." (Nyamoli, p. 763). Substituting the term "introject" for the references to "owning" and "property" makes the link to object relations theory all the more obvious.

Yet this experience of voidness of self is not exactly identical to the "estrangement" of self that predisposes to the subjective experience of emptiness; it is a transformation that comes from a willingness to embrace and work directly with that experience. As indicated above, the experience of voidness requires, according to Buddhist psychological theory, the simultaneous presence of both developed concentration and mindfulness. In order for the "experience of unreality" to occur, there must be simultaneous "concentrated absorption and appreciative analytical understanding" (Guenther, 1974, p. 139). In the Tibetan tradition, this is expressed as the union of "prajna" and "upaya," insight or understanding with the love or compassion that grows from advanced concentration practices (Govinda, 1960, p. 172). Thus the two streams that have here been traced come together in the experience of voidness.

On the one hand, there is sufficient absorption to allow the "oceanic" feelings of unboundedness and limitlessness to occur, while on the other hand the complete insubstantiality of the self is revealed. Both "grandiosity" and "emptiness" are simultaneously realized, but in forms completely different from what had been previously imagined. The result is that an apparently irreconcilable primitive dilemma is resolved. That dilemma was characterized by alternating feelings of grandiosity, associated with attempts at fusion with the ego ideal, and emptiness, associated with lack of cohesiveness of self and object images. The resolution of this dilemma

is expressed in the *Visuddhimagga* in the statement that, following the experience of voidness, the meditator, "seeing nothing to be taken as 'I' or 'mine,' ...abandons both terror and delight..." (Nyanamoli, p. 765). This abandonment of terror and delight is termed the "Gateway to Liberation" (Nyanamoli, p. 766), and represents the ultimate insight into psychological forces that have been operating since the psychological birth of the individual. The experience of voidness allows, concurrently, a workable sort of continuity, derived from the high degree of concentration; and the understanding of emptiness of self, derived from the high degree of insight. Each balances the other while the essentially impersonal nature of the process is revealed. The frantic oscillation between fusion and isolation that to some degree is unavoidable even in "normal" ego development is no longer necessary, since the correct appreciation of emptiness has obviated both extremes (Epstein, 1989). Similarly the struggle to maintain a fabricated monolith out of the "incessant fluctuations of the primitive mental state," (Jacobsen, 1964, p. 20) ceases. Thus, preoedipal anxiety is assuaged in a manner not possible as long as the striving for selfhood remains active.

PATHOLOGICAL DISTORTIONS IN SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS

Acknowledgment of the continued relevance of preoedipal forces in those undertaking the practice of meditation techniques permits cognizance of some of the pathological results of spiritual practice. In particular, group behavior centered around a charismatic leader seems to be especially vulnerable to the unbalanced allure of the ego ideal (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1975), often with unanticipated sexual involvement between pupil and teacher. Such groups, and there have been countless examples in the United States in the past decade, often come under the influence of a "pseudopaternal 'merchant of illusions' who provides the group with an ideology (defined as a system of ideas shared by a group and serving to unify the group), which confirms the narcissistic aspirations of fusion of

the individual with the group as a primitive ego ideal—the all powerful and all-gratifying preoedipal mother. Basically, the identification with each other of the members of the small or large group permits them to experience a primitive narcissistic gratification of greatness and power” (Kernberg, 1984, p. 15). Such a leader often becomes “the sexually ‘liberated’ narcissist who preaches sexual liberation in the group’s (symbolic or actual) bathtub and condenses polymorphous preoedipal sexuality with messianic merger” (Kernberg, 1984, p. 17). Because of the preoedipal forces that are engaged in spiritual practice, such groups are particularly prone to this kind of behavior.

CONCLUSION

Transpersonal psychology has endeavored to distinguish the spiritual disciplines from the psychodynamic ones and in so doing has not often investigated how the actual experiences of meditative states might be understood to relate to significant conflicts dating from the infantile period of development. In order to appreciate fully the therapeutic power of such techniques the persistence of such conflicts in individuals practicing meditation must not be ignored. For meditation offers an unparalleled opportunity to confront both the demands of the ego ideal and the subjective experience of emptiness, reconciling the narcissistic dilemma through the apprehension of voidness. In so doing, an irrevocable understanding takes hold, an understanding not just of the “self” but of the entire struggle between emptiness and fusion.

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