

# Psychological Work as Spiritual Practice

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I view spiritual work as a way of opening up to, or connecting with, Being and allowing that to become the manifest reality in one's consciousness and one's life. Different spiritual traditions are slightly different in how they define Being, but each tradition provides ways for us to recover our connection to Being. In contrast, the psychological understanding that has developed in the West is relatively useless in approaching Being directly, since it is limited to studying the mind as the psyche or personality. Western psychology is not really concerned with something like Being.

But the view that has developed through my work over the years is that the psyche is not really separate from Being; only the person who is not in touch with Being experiences them as separate. Here it is helpful to understand that Being is not only ultimate reality, which is called voidness or suchness, but also a multifaceted richness, which manifests in the spiritual life. Whereas the ultimate aspect of Being is somewhat indefinable, the manifest aspect has specific and distinct qualities. In the Buddhist tradition, for example, Being has two aspects: *dharmakaya*, which is absolute reality, and *sambhogakaya*, which is more varied, rich and colorful. It is because Being manifests through specific and distinct qualities that one can discover the connection between Being and the psyche.

What we call personality or ego or psyche—our mind—does not exist in a vacuum separate from Being. It is very intimately connected with Being. In fact, normal consciousness is really a manifestation of Being. It contains all the virtues of Being, qualities like compassion, love, peace, truth, strength, and determination. These are qualities that we usually think of as needed for spiritual work.

The perception here is that our personality is quite inextricably linked with these qualities of Being. In my view, the personality (or ego or self) cannot be truly understood if we do not include the qualities of Being as its underlying basis.

What I find true is that those qualities of Being are not only connected to our usual manifest consciousness but they are connected to specific parts of it. Each quality of Being is primarily connected to a particular part of the ego structure. As an example, consider the structure of the super-ego, which is supposed to be a major part of the self according to Freudian psychology. If we really explore the super-ego, we find that it is connected with, and is in some sense an attempt at imitating, a particular quality of Being that is not part of our usual mental structure. I call that quality "objective conscience," which is the innate understanding of how to behave or how to conduct one's life. It is what discriminates between the way that will take us to truth and the way that will take us to more falsehood. Later on, I will give more detailed examples of tracing psychological phenomena back to the corresponding qualities of Being which are their source.

In the exploration that I have done—mostly personally and then with students—there is a whole body of knowledge, a way of seeing the self not only as something wrong that has happened, as a problem to be gotten over, but also as an attempt to manifest Being. By seeing how that attempt has gone astray, we can see the underlying reality beneath it. My view is that if we take any ego manifestation and attempt to understand it as completely and precisely as possible, then there is a path that is bound to lead to the qualities of Being. There is no other way because psyche and Being are completely linked; they are not separate.

Normal consciousness is really a manifestation of Being, but it distorts the true qualities of Being for a number of reasons. Depending on one's perspective, one may see these reasons as inadequate knowledge, lack of guidance, bad karma, early childhood trauma, and so on, but the basic point is that one's mental functioning somehow became more defensive, based on wrong identifications. As a result, consciousness, whose function is to manifest reality, instead became distorted and neurotic. That crooked manifestation

can be corrected by applying a particular method whereby what we call psychological work can become a way to connect with Being.

The method involves looking at all the concerns that are usually important for ego development: separation, individuation, self-esteem, object relations, and so on. We can take any of these phenomena and explore it from the perspective of wanting to find out what the truth is within this manifestation, rather than from the perspective that it is a problem that needs to be corrected. Then we can ask some questions: What is the psyche trying to do that is manifesting in a neurotic way? What is the truth about it? Why is it happening this way? What is it a reflection of? What is it saying? So from beginning to end, the method is an approach towards truth, working towards finding the truth about any manifestation of consciousness.

The usual psychological approach is to think that if we explore a particular difficulty in enough detail, then we will discover its roots in a childhood conflict—or some other kind of psychological explanation, depending on the theory we adhere to. In my view, that doesn't give the complete picture. Not only is it an incomplete picture, but psychological cure probably won't happen this way, either. For the picture to be complete, we have to follow our investigation to a much deeper level, beyond what we call emotional, psychological, or mental. We have to trace the neurotic manifestation all the way back to Being.

So this method is a path by which what we call psychological work can lead us to a deeper realization of Being. Just as meditation or other spiritual practices can promote relaxation and detachment from our habitual identifications so that we become aware of the inner richness of Being, psychological techniques can be used for the same purpose and to the same end. This view gives Western psychology a broader dimension. Usually psychology is thought of as being the basis for psychotherapy, for working with different psychological difficulties. This is obviously a useful and valid function for psychology. But as we know, many psychological theories are not only applicable to pathology; they're supposed to be theories about the mind or psyche in a fuller and more general sense. That was definitely Freud's intention, for instance.

It is very difficult for most people, even psychotherapists, to imagine that it's possible to use the psychological method that we use with clients as a spiritual technique to realize the qualities of Being. Ordinarily, we think you have to do advanced spiritual practices like visualizations in order to connect with Being. Since it is difficult for people to understand how this method works unless they encounter it experientially, I will now provide some specific examples.

We can begin by looking at self-esteem. For someone who is highly neurotic, self-esteem might be a very big problem, the focus of his or her life. But even for most ordinary people, self-esteem is still a question. In order to reach a personal understanding of self-esteem, I explore all the ways I try to create, uphold and protect my self-esteem. In an honest and true way, I look at myself and ask: Why is my mind running here and there about how this person thinks of me, how successful I am here, how good I feel about myself there, and so on? What's all this concern about? In exploring self-esteem, it is important to try to be objective in the sense of seeing these manifestations as they are, regardless of what we think or judge. See them and let them be, without judging them, without opposing them, without going along with them.

The attitude of wanting to see the truth is crucial if you want to understand the situation because if you are looking at these manifestations from the perspective of wanting to get someplace, or trying to get something out of it, you will tend to see what you want to see. What we're really interested in is exactly what is the truth, regardless of whether it's going to be bad or good for us. If we can be objective and precise in this way, at some point we will invariably recognize that at the root of all these activities is a place in the psyche where there is a lack of self-esteem. We feel that something is missing. If there was no lack of self-esteem, the consciousness would be settled about it, would not even think about it. We usually conceptualize self-esteem because there is a problem about it.

When we explore our lack of self-esteem, we encounter all kinds of things that happened in our lives that injured our self-esteem. With the help of our psychological training, we can stay with that history and understand it, reaching a place where the lack of self-

esteem will appear as an actual sensation, a feeling of emptiness. When we finally get to what is the particular event or circumstances that really hurt the sense of self-esteem very early on, and experience that hurt without any defenses against it, then spontaneously and naturally there will arise a kind of healing presence, a pure quality of Being. That presence manifests as a pure uncontaminated sense of value, the value of just being the Being that I am.

So we start from a psychological manifestation like the difficulty with self-esteem and we try to find the truth about that manifestation in a completely impartial way, using the psychological techniques that we know. There will be the usual psychological defenses and resistances, which the psyche will use to cover up the emptiness. If we continue to explore our self-esteem from a completely impartial perspective, we will at some point arrive at a quality of Being, which I call value, that we will recognize as what we have been looking for all along. It is not what someone thinks of me, nor an excellence in a certain accomplishment, but the felt sense of the very fact of my beingness, my aliveness, as something intrinsically valuable.

This same method can be used with any manifestations of our personality, taking us to dimensions or qualities of Being. This is a specific psychodynamic approach that takes us directly from a psychological or emotional dimension to one much deeper, far beyond psyche or mind. We discover that this quality, such as value for example, is not just another feeling or emotional response, nor is it an idea or image. It is truly an existential, ontological presence. It is the way that Being can manifest beyond our conceptualizing mind. When we experience it, we recognize that not only is it pure consciousness, but it also has a color, a texture, a taste that is almost physical, yet not physical. That's what I mean by pure presence. A journey begins of learning about my intrinsic value, which then makes me more independent of external sources of value. It not only frees me from the external, it also gives me access to my Being, to what is intrinsically true, beyond my history. The quality of value can teach us what Being is, which ordinarily we have some sense of only in spiritual practice. This is because value is a manifestation of Being.

Being has its own modes of perception and cognition. When we experience it, we know that it is not an emotion, not a feeling, not a thought, not a sensation. Being has a sense of purity, independent of your feelings about it, of your mind's reactions to it. It has a sense of certainty to it, a truthfulness that is unmistakable. Being is self-aware, so there is no subject-object dichotomy. So you are not experiencing value, for instance. The feeling is that I *am* the value: that I, whatever I happen to be, and value are not two separate things. The knowledge is intimate that way.

The work I am describing is not really oriented towards psychotherapy, but it is bound to have psychotherapeutic effects because we start with the manifestations of consciousness. Even for those of us who are healthy, many of those manifestations of consciousness are problematic, such as mental conflicts, misunderstandings, ignorance, reactions, and suffering. So the method has psychotherapeutic side-effects, although the intention of my work is to access the Being, the quality of our true nature. At the beginning we feel, and hence understand, the more obvious manifestations of consciousness, the various conflicts such as self-esteem. This process of understanding can go much further than the psychological surface.

As another example, consider the case of separation anxiety. We know the widespread phenomenon that everybody has separation anxiety, that regardless of how successful we are in our separation from our parents or early on from our mother, we have a distance beyond which we start becoming anxious. If we explore that separation anxiety using the method I have described, the inquiry will take us once again to a quality of Being. This quality, called the strength of Being, is characterized by vitality, energy and expansion. It is a more fiery quality than the quality of value. It provides us with the strength that makes it possible for us to be truly separate. This strength of Being is pure consciousness, an awareness that cannot be contaminated by the mind or its structures.

The interesting thing is that separation is not only separation from the other, or from the mother, but can also include separation from the whole set of object relations. When we separated from the mother, we stayed in the same object relations. That's how object relations theory conceptualizes separation: the self separates from

the object while at the same time internalizing the image of the object. At that time, our separation stayed on the ego dimension; our experience of separation was on the emotional or mental level. But if we follow the question of separation all the way to the level of Being, separation becomes not only from the mother but also separation from the whole ego structure that says there is somebody that is you, and *you* need to be separate from *them*.

If we continue to explore the experience of separation, we encounter other issues, other parts of the ego arising in relation to it, and our understanding of separation becomes more subtle. You might discover that you feel you need to be separate from your spouse, or maybe from your friends. Then you see the transference, how these separation issues connect with your relationship with your father and mother. If you go deeper still, you realize that separation means not that you are the subject separate from the object, but that you are the beingness rather than the self that is defined by the object relations. So the separation is not from the object; it is separation from the ego structure that contains that object relation. You see at some point that separation really means that you are who you are, and what you are is separate from the mind.

What is the role of separation in object relations theory? Separation is to be yourself, basically. I am not my mother; I am not a reaction to her. To be yourself at a deeper level, beyond object relations, is to detach from the self-image defined by your past so you can become the actual state of Being that is your true nature. At a deeper level, that becomes separation from all mental activities and structures, which is exactly the same thing that happens in meditation. Then if you go even deeper, you realize that the mental structure is not like an island. To be separate from your mental structure, you have to be separate from what you call the world, what in Buddhism is called appearance. Eventually, you can get to a place where the separation becomes so subtle that you cannot even separate the true Being from the appearance. Absolute truth and relative truth are coemergent. Ultimately, there is no such thing as separation. There is nobody to be separate from anybody else.

At the level of coemergence, there is a separation and yet complete contact. So the separation becomes not an isolation but some

kind of distinction, a difference. The quality of Being that we call strength, that aided in the process of separation, is what enables consciousness to be able to discriminate. In Buddhism, this capacity is called discriminating wisdom. Whenever there is any experience, even an experience of pure Being, there is a discrimination of the variety and color in that experience. We realize that this ability to discriminate is what we have needed in order to separate. I need to discriminate my own being from my mother or someone else. At the beginning, due to a lack of realization, that discrimination appears as an object relation in which the self tries to separate from an object. As we explore separation in more detail, by the method I have described, we come to the deeper spiritual phenomenon of strength.

As another example we could look at lack of meaning, which many people perceive as an existential issue. This is experienced as the meaninglessness, helplessness, and sometimes pointlessness of life. In my work, lack of meaning ultimately can be traced to the fact of disconnection from Being, because there is no meaning except living one's Being. That's what meaning is. When we are not aware of our Being then we are not aware of the freshness and authenticity of our existence. Then we look for meaning.

The point I want to make is not the specifics about the various ego structures and associated qualities of Being, or even about Being itself. The basic point is that we have here a certain expertise—a body of knowledge and techniques—that has grown out of Western Developmental Psychology. I'm saying that this expertise can be put to use in ways that go far beyond what we have usually imagined. It is relatively easy to understand what is meant by psychological defenses, the unconscious, projection, repression, object relations, and so on. These can be understood and used in a special way that makes spiritual experience quite available. Not only quite available but also helpful for dealing with the various psychological difficulties of our lives.

As I have been emphasizing, each quality of Being is connected with a particular structure of ego. There is a one-to-one correspondence, a very specific map. Many people meditate and do all kinds of spiritual practices, and they have these spiritual experiences, but



they also have a lot of difficulties because of them. Psychologically speaking, they might not even know where their difficulties are coming from. If you meditate and get in touch with some quality of Being but you don't work with the associated psychological issues, then the next day you may experience an emotional constellation arising. It is possible to use your psychological expertise to understand this constellation in a way that will resolve it, allowing the experience of Being to become more permanent.

As an example, there is in Buddhism an understanding of the coemergence or inseparability of appearance and emptiness, or relative and absolute reality. This coemergent insight is related to the psychological issue of rapprochement. Someone might have a glimpse of coemergence, then have rapprochement conflicts with everybody in his life and not understand why. He doesn't know that his problems are caused by his meditation experience of the unification of the internal and the external. Those two levels of reality, emptiness and appearance, are associated in the unconscious with the self and the mother, respectively. So the unconscious projects the coemergent experience onto the world and you end up with a rapprochement conflict. This is an example of how a psychological constellation can be very connected with spiritual experience and how our already existing psychological understanding can be a great help for our spiritual practice.

Another example: If we have a self-image that becomes contrasted with another self-image that's arising, then we realize we are not identical with those images and we can let go of them. In this process, our perception of space naturally develops. There is a one-to-one correspondence between the quality of space and the structure that is self-image: the moment you have self-image, space is gone; if you let go of self-image, space arises. What is space? Basically, space is the openness of experience without a mental reflection saying it is such and such. People are always making self-images so they're always saying No to space. There are other barriers against space but that's the main one. If a person lets go of his self-image, he experiences a lot of space. He can just be, without defining himself. Although space is one of the qualities of Being,

as we go deeper, space merges with other qualities and becomes a characteristic more of the ultimate ground.

I usually work with people that I know, who want to stay with the process, which usually takes years. It often takes some time before a person is even able to experience his psychological content. Each of us has a framework, which orients us towards certain kinds of experience. It takes some time before we see it as a framework that we could let go of and then maybe other things could happen. When I work with people who have done a particular kind of therapy or spiritual practice I find that although they learn something from it, at some point it becomes another framework. Following something for years, it becomes part of your identity or self-image. If you've spent years doing Hindu practices, for example, it's hard for you to look fresh at your situation. You always have to look at it from your Hindu perspective. So the work I do involves letting go of this learned perspective.

True individuation, personal integration on a Being level, allows the possibility for immediate contact, the possibility to function and still be with Being. Individuation on the spiritual dimension means developing a personhood that is not disconnected from Being but is an expression of it. This is the aspect of the personal essence. It is the presence of this aspect that makes individual functioning possible on the dimension of Being. It is what allows one to be in the world without getting lost in it.