

SHOCK, UNCERTAINTY, CONVICTION: GATEWAYS BETWEEN PSYCHOPATHOLOGY AND INTRINSIC HEALTH

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Buddhist teachings maintain that the realization of our intrinsic nature entails not a successful escape from the pain and aggravations of the world, but rather a full acceptance of and participation in worldly experience as it is. Enlightened beings see the same world that unenlightened people do, only they see it in a manner unclouded by delusion. By recognizing the unconditional nature of mind (*tathagatagarbha*¹), they live in accord with the fluidity and ever-arising freshness of moment-to-moment experience. For those of us who do not realize this nature in our everyday lives, Buddhist teachings recommend that we contemplate what are known as the “three marks of existence”: the *suffering*, *impermanence*, and *egolessness* that are inherent to all human experience.

One way of defining psychopathology might be the arising of symptoms or maladaptive behaviors, with their concomitant suffering, resulting from a conscious or unconscious refusal to acknowledge the three marks of existence and fully “live” their implications. In this article, we will present a threefold schema outlining the development of psychopathology in terms of this mechanism of refusal—what amounts to a turning away from the inevitable anxiety of human experience in favor of a problematically solid sense of personal ego. Having described this three-part experiential process, we will endeavor to show how working with the very same steps mindfully and attentively might help loosen fixation on neurotic patterns, fostering increased accuracy, compassion, and vitality in one’s experience. Our intention is to reveal how each of the three parts—which we have named shock, uncertainty, and conviction—can serve as a gateway either into deeper pathology or toward an awakening sense of intrinsic health or goodness. At present the

schema is a work-in-progress that has been useful to us and to psychotherapy clients. It provides a simple series of reference points for thinking about the activity of mind and the rapid generation of habitual patterns of confusion. We hope that, through its presentation here, it may become useful to others.

The language and concepts used here in describing psychological processes presuppose two basic assumptions about the mind which have already been presented and explained elsewhere in this journal (Simmer-Brown (1987), Wegela (1988), De Wit (1990)). The first of these is that human beings are fundamentally awake and intrinsically healthy. Buddhist teachings posit a basic ground of spacious clarity out of which all phenomena arise. Intrinsic health consists in the awareness of perception itself, accommodating all perceptual phenomena without being dependent upon any of them. The second assumption is that clinging to *ego*, which in Buddhist terminology denotes an artificially solid sense of self and world, obscures the direct experience of one's intrinsically healthy nature. The traditional metaphor for this dynamic is the image of the sun obscured by clouds: clouds can darken the view on earth, but in doing so they do not affect the radiance of the sun itself. According to our model of contemplative psychology, the work of psychotherapy resembles that of spiritual practice insofar as it investigates both the qualities of mental clouds and the possibility of experiencing the sun directly.

Shock

Before considering the path of healing and sanity, we need to examine the development and maintenance of psychopathology. Since the self-sustaining island of ego can never completely shore itself up against the vast and complex ocean of phenomenal existence, it is perpetually vulnerable to disturbances. How the individual responds to disturbance determines whether psychopathology is compounded or is lessened. Ego constantly sustains shocks to its tenuous state of stability. An example of this in experience could be a physical injury, a sudden and unexpected violation of one's physical integrity. Another kind of shock might involve losing a job

and finding oneself extraordinarily anxious without the comfortable sense of identity the job had once provided. The sudden loss of an emotional pattern could also be a shock, as when a person once involved in a consuming love affair realizes she² is no longer in love.

Although each of these shocks pertains to a different realm of personal experience, they all have in common a connection to one or more of the three marks of existence. For the purposes of this article, we define shock as any experience of the three marks of existence. That which constitutes a disturbance of ego's dubious equilibrium is thus any perception of suffering, of impermanence, or of egolessness³. Ego's habitual manners of dealing with such shocks are closely related to what ego psychology describes as the ego-defenses, as should be evident from the descriptions that follow.

Suffering results from strong contrast. Physical injury introduces intense pain into what had a moment before been relative equilibrium of feeling. Losing a job can provoke an eruption of any number of troublesome feelings: feelings of failure or unworthiness, anxiety about the future, hatred of one's employer, and so on. We feel a shock when we suddenly experience suffering in contrast to not having suffered.

Impermanence connotes loss. When a person loses something valued, part of her pain may derive from being reminded of the inevitability of birth, life, and death. Everything that comes into being—a spouse, a child, a party, an automobile, a feeling, a state of mind—passes away again. Because we habitually concentrate our attention on the birth and life of things, avoiding perceptions of death, we experience loss as a shock. In the example of a woman fallen out of love, shock derives from the loss (or sudden perception of loss) of the love and good feelings she had counted on to enrich her life and make it satisfying. Where there had been light, warmth, and comfort, now there might be darkness, cold, and anxiety. Such changes jolt a person, disrupting her habitual patterns of thought, feeling, and action.

Egolessness refers to the insubstantiality behind the apparent solidity of mental constructions, which are the stuff of ego and the worlds it perceives. Suddenly seeing through the mind's illusions

comes as a shock. This could apply to the woman who loses her job and suddenly realizes that her identity as a competent, self-respecting provider has no ultimate foundation. Not only her self-image, but all the attached feelings of security, comfort, and pride are swept away in a moment by forces beyond her control. In the example of lost love, imagine the partner of one who says, "I don't love you anymore": suddenly she hears that the love she assumed to be mutual is no longer so. She is shocked upon realizing how different her images of the relationship and herself are from what seems now to be true.

Clearly there are many psychological fronts along which the three marks of existence can intrude into one's world. How does an individual respond to such intrusions? In the development of psychopathology, shock is met with aggressive reflex. One resists the experience of suffering, impermanence, or egolessness. One doesn't want it to be true. Because denial tends to be unconscious and automatic, one may not even be conscious of wanting it not to be true. A pushing-away of experience takes place as ego turns inward toward itself, increases its isolation, and fortifies its barriers against open, unmediated experience.

The ways in which one pushes away any experience of shock are described well by the traditional Buddhist teaching of the "three poisons," which describes how *passion*, *aggression*, and *ignorance* obstruct full realization of one's being in the world. In order to avoid an experience of shock, one person might seduce the world into giving her more fulfillment (*passion*); another might attempt to destroy, discredit, or get even with that which comes as a shock (*aggression*); and a third might try to deny the reality of what has happened (*ignorance*). All of these styles are available in some form to anybody who is in pain and wants the pain to go away. *Passion* involves a physical or emotional grasping. A lonely person might try desperately to hang on to her distancing lover. Alternately, she might seduce a new, third person into her life, driven by the need to avoid hurt and humiliation. *Aggression* could be used by a mother who, having been suddenly dismissed from work, acts hostilely toward her family as a means of averting a sense of loss or injury. *Ignorance* is a duller form of avoidance, in which one merely

suppresses anxious feelings, thinking and acting as though no shock had ever been sustained in the first place. The defensive strategies of passion, aggression, and ignorance take on a myriad of forms in everyday experience, serving in great measure to sustain ego's supposed comfort, permanence, and stability.

Uncertainty: Fear

“Shock” is generally followed by a feeling of uncertainty. Suddenly, the conditions of one's being and action have changed. “What do I do now?” A gap has opened up, breaking the apparent continuity of personal experience. Habitually, this triggers fear—fear associated with injury, with loss, with disorientation, or with incapacitation. One's fear can manifest in a variety of observable ways, including the typical autonomic responses of adrenaline secretion, increased heart rate, and sweaty palms. Typically, there is a general “speediness” of thought processes. There might be an intense proliferation of obsessive thinking. A person might physically speed up her movements, speaking fast, working fast, eating fast, and driving her car fast. In fact, she might just get in her car and drive, aimlessly, without any purpose or goal. A quality of “scrambling” may arise, the person thinking and behaving in a fragmented, jumpy fashion, as though desperately trying to find something to hang onto, some fixed reference point in her experience that can relieve the discomfort of fear. Much of this frenetic activity of mind and body proceeds at unconscious levels; mistakes, forgetfulness, and mindless accidents are common when one resists feeling the reality of a shock. In general, one's environment turns into a world of chaos, disorientation, and anxiety. There is a feeling of not knowing what one is doing.

Given the arising of fear and the speed and chaos it engenders, a de-synchronization of body and mind⁴ determines that this type of reaction participates in the furthering of pathology. The mind loses its grounding in physical sensation and spins off into realms of confusion and obsession. Since a firm sense of mind as inseparable from the physical body threatens to make experience of the three marks of existence seem more dauntingly real, thinking splits

itself off from feeling. This obviously makes realistic assessment of one's immediate situation difficult. Behavior takes on a quality of missing-the-mark, of being slightly (or grossly) "off." A disjuncture arises between where one *thinks* one is and where one *really* is, physically and interpersonally. A gross manifestation of desynchronized body and mind might be spilling a glass of wine because one's obsessive focus on the content of a dinner conversation has cut off all awareness of one's hands. A more subtle manifestation might be a public speaker's habits of shifting her weight from one foot to another, scratching her head, or turning her gaze toward the ceiling to think. Whereas there may be nothing dangerous about such habits, this example nonetheless suggests how one's awareness of where one is and what one is doing can be limited. There is a mindless quality to movement and behavior, as though one were relying on one's habits and mental notions of appropriate behavior to the point of neglecting to attend fully to the moment at hand. Having turned one's back on shock and its attendant feelings, one finds it impossible to be completely present. Body is in one place while mind is in another.

Conviction: "Basic Badness"

According to our observations in personal and clinical experience, the developmental process begun by turning away from the pain of shock culminates in an overly zealous conviction that reality is in accord with one's conceptual notions about it, whatever these may be. The mind spontaneously fashions a view of self and world that, by virtue of its apparent logic, affords a sense of self-orientation and certainty. Regardless of how well or poorly the view may correspond to outward phenomena, the important thing is a sense of certainty. It would be inappropriate to attribute comfort to such a state, but on some level, conviction in a given mental assessment of things (even at times when it is demonstrably inaccurate) appears preferable to the anxiety of uncertainty.

This type of certainty is grossly manifest in religious or political fundamentalism. It is not the particular set of ideas and values that makes a fundamentalist stance problematic, but the extreme rigidity

in one's maintaining that stance. "Conviction," however, need not be so blatant. More generally, what we are describing is a quality of inflexibility, a striking lack of curiosity. Since maintaining the validity of one's views has become a preoccupation, one does not risk self-examination. There is no appreciation for irony, plurality, or relativity; simply stated, one has lost one's sense of humor. The coexistence of incompatible views feels unacceptable; one has to know which view is "right." One has ceased to doubt, to ask questions about one's experience. Ego, or a sense of, "This is who I am," has grown stubbornly solid. The mind automatically produces a plethora of explanations about how things became the way they are, how they in fact must be that way, and how they surely will never change. Such intense identification with narratives and explanations may occur among all types of people, from the chronically mentally ill person, to the spiritual aspirant, to the atheist businessperson, to the addictive personality and the alcoholic in recovery. At the conviction stage of mental process, experience becomes especially rigid, if not outright ritualistic. What may once have been a fluid process of movement and discovery has been overwhelmed by the attachment to a monolithic framework of images, ideas, and feelings.

It has been our finding that the content of such conviction is most commonly a variation on a single theme: what we might call "basic badness." This is the conviction that experience in itself is basically bad. It may be a sense of oneself as bad, or it may be a sense of the phenomenal world as fundamentally unacceptable. The stance is an aggressive one in the sense that one is rejecting experience as it is. Chgyam Trungpa has suggested that, "insanity does not usually come from passion; it usually comes from aggression, from resentment and disliking" (Trungpa, 1983). Aggression, in this sense, is the culmination of turning away from the three marks of existence. In Trungpa's words, "the point of aggression is to keep yourself intact."

There are myriad ways in which conviction can outwardly manifest. It may take an observably aggressive form and sound like the following: "I am basically bad. My environment is bad. Life this way is unacceptable." Contrary to experiencing health and sanity

as intrinsic to one's nature, one holds a belief that deep down one is objectionable, repulsive. Often people who are extraordinarily sullen and negative are living, as it were, in an elaborate story centering on their own worthlessness. Painful conditions are compounded by the force of self-imposed negative judgements of the same. Everything appears to take on more intensity, more power to torment by virtue of one's conviction in the badness of it all. Different people, obviously, have different styles of manifesting worlds of badness; in experience, one's approach might be anywhere from, "I deserve to die," to "my father must be destroyed," to "everything is worthless." In contemporary psychiatric terms, these differing styles could manifest as what we label depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, personality disorders, or anxiety disorders. They may also form a large part of the world experienced by someone suffering from schizophrenia or bipolar mood disorder.

Sometimes such conviction will manifest in a seemingly passionate style. For example, a grasping quality appears to underlie much addictive behavior. A dependent style, in which one believes one cannot live without a certain significant other, may also appear to lack the aggressive qualities described above. Nonetheless, it has been our experience in working with people that a conviction in personal unworthiness or inadequacy consistently underlies such passionate quests. Persons with eating disorders can be seen using their abstinence, bingeing, and purging in a rejection of mind-states that are unacceptably painful. From a Buddhist point of view, insofar as one's impulse is to reject or avoid experience as it is, seeking to be filled or to otherwise change one's state of mind is regarded as a basically aggressive activity. Patterns of passionate attachment or addiction, whether the objects include people, substances, or personal behaviors, are also seen to be permeated with aggression from this point of view.

In addition to aggressive and passionate styles of conviction-in-action, we find styles associated with ignorance, or ignoring. This would apply to people who have seemingly become numb to the world, who have withdrawn from the vividness and irritation of ordinary life through schizoid phenomena, drug-induced euphoria, or fugue states. Again, it is typically the case that such a person has,

either while growing up or by way of a later critical experience, found the world to be basically hostile and unpleasant. She may have felt rejected by her parents, her peers, her whole world. Her coping response is to reject the world in turn. In extreme cases, such all-encompassing rejection take the form of multiple personality disorder or even psychosis.

At the root of much psychological pain, there seems to be a fundamental rejection, an energetic assertion that life-as-I-experience-it is unacceptable. Under this condition, sanity appears not as intrinsic but as something needing to be attained and re-attained. Since experience-as-it-is is unbearable, life becomes a constant struggle either to escape punishment or to improve oneself. According to a contemplative view, the fundamental problem of this kind of complex is not a lack of ego strength or self-esteem. Rather than suffering from a lack of any kind, the individual actively exacerbates her own suffering with the strength and tenacity of her conviction in basic badness. She suffers, in fact, from the unbearable weight of ego, or the edifice of self-image and world-image that blocks the natural self-sufficiency of sensory awareness.

Given that the experience of ego is perpetually vulnerable to shocks of newness and different-ness, how can the individual avoid cycling through the stages outlined above, reacting to shock with the intensification of an already problematic sense of self? Our experience with Buddhist mindfulness meditation suggests that the practice of *awareness* can transform what seems an all-too-human defensive response into an opportunity to perceive the reality of intrinsic health. If we approach the difficulty of experience with curiosity, taking a genuine interest in our own irritability, space and openness become possible where otherwise there was only constriction and inertia. In line with traditional Buddhist teachings, we contend that the experiential pattern of shock, uncertainty, and conviction, while appearing intrinsic to our human condition, does not doom us to downward spiraling cycles of illusion. Rather, it represents the necessary context for awakening to the true possibilities of health and sanity. We can now look at the same three stages described above from the point of view of health. Approached and

navigated with awareness, the threefold cycle of shock → uncertainty → conviction can be transformed into a new process: freshness → fearlessness → doubtlessness.

Freshness

Developing a positive appreciation for the ways in which experience disrupts habitual patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior lies fully within the scope of human capabilities. Although reacting to shock with aversion may at first glance appear natural and even proper, training oneself to respond instead with curiosity can entirely transform one's relationship to anxiety and uncertainty. Particularly through a practice of mindfulness/awareness meditation, an individual can come to perceive shocks to ego's illusion of pseudo-certainty as thresholds to something new, as opportunities to experience the world with enlivened brilliance, free of perceptual filters. Where once we experienced "shock," a type of phenomenon habitually viewed as negative and unpleasant, now we can speak of "freshness," noticing the clean-air quality of the gaps arising in our worlds.

It is commonly known that individuals in crisis often experience a heightened clarity and accuracy of perception, such as when a car driver speeding toward collision begins perceiving in slow-motion, then performs an accident-averting maneuver that could never have been planned in advance. Other examples might include people who, upon suffering the death of a loved one, come to surprising realizations of how they had really felt and behaved in relationship to that person, arriving at new, more accurate perceptions of their personal needs and values. Experiences such as these suggest that the perception of any of the three marks of existence—suffering, impermanence, and egolessness—leads to less biased, more accurate modes of being in the world. The sudden arising of freshness actually happens all the time, in situations far less extreme than physical or emotional emergency. If, as the Buddha taught, the three marks of existence are qualities immanent in reality, then we need not search for them in an overzealous attempt to live more truly. All that is required is a relaxing of ego's guardedness.

Meditation practice reveals thoughts as discrete events, each having a beginning, a middle, and an end. When one looks carefully at the arising and dissolving of thoughts, experience no longer appears as solid and continuous as it is habitually assumed to be. One can observe thoughts as discontinuous fragments. Between the filled-up spaces of story and drama there are empty spaces in the mind as well. These can become sources of relief, relaxation, and new perspectives. Our experiences with meditation have revealed that once one has been alerted to the occurrence of "gap," or freshness in the sense we have been discussing, one perceives it with increasing frequency and spontaneity. As one sits in meditation, the mind returns from absorbing fantasies to moments of, "Oh. . . here . . . sitting in this room," all by itself. In daily life, when one experiences the embarrassment of forgetting an acquaintance's name, the mind spontaneously re-awakens, taking this mild shock as a cue to return to the senses, to the information that is present and accessible.

Uncertainty: Fearlessness and Not-knowing

Whether we rigidly reject freshness or actively invite it into our awareness, gaps and discontinuities inevitably bring with them the sense of an unknown. If there is no clinging to a situation of "this is what I am and so these are my options," feeling, thought, and action can arise free from conditions. It seems that anything could happen. Following a path of sanity entails enduring the uncertainty, being inquisitive about what might be happening rather than impulsively forcing a pre-conceived plan onto an otherwise open situation. One recognizes that, regardless of the maturity of one's understanding and judgement, there is a difference between mental views of an assumed reality and the direct experience of reality in its multi-dimensional openness. One can afford to allow the mind to trip and stumble. Confusion, rather than causing frustration or panic, becomes a source of insight.

Alternately, confusion may indeed trigger panic, and yet this need not become a problem either. Fear follows shock just as uncertainty does. Fear seems a natural, inevitable part of being human.

One can work with fear constructively, without needing to get rid of it. In fact, trying to get rid of it means taking an aggressive posture towards one's experience and once again capitulating to the cycle of pathology described in the first half of this article. In order to use fear as an opportunity, one needs to acknowledge its reality, to reconcile oneself to it. As one practices experiencing fear directly (instead of impulsively seeking security, fighting against fear, or denying it), fear ceases to exert as strong an influence on behavior as it otherwise might. By way of this process, one cultivates what Trungpa calls "fearlessness" (Trungpa, 1984), meaning not a lessening of fear but a going beyond fear's capacity to dictate what one does or does not experience. Paradoxically, inviting experiences of fear and uncertainty cultivates not weakness but courage and creativity. Ellen Langer, for example, concluded in one study (Langer, 1989) that subjects who were more uncertain found more creative solutions to problems than subjects who were certain. She has also connected the capacity to experience uncertainty with mindfulness.

Therapists can easily feel the wholesomeness of not-knowing as it manifests in their clients. If a client relates fantastical delusions in an intense, passionate manner, the therapist naturally wonders whether the client really believes what she is saying is real. If, upon questioning, the client says, "Well, I'm not really sure about that," the therapist feels heartened. It is good to see that the client's interpretation does not claim a complete hold on reality. Some doubt is present and operative. This gives both therapist and client some space of possibility, an inroad to healing.

Within a broader perspective, we could speak of any individual's healthy capacity for tolerating not-knowing. In his book, *The Faith to Doubt* (Batchelor, 1990), Stephen Batchelor discusses the importance of allowing there to be doubt, of recognizing that not-knowing is itself a path. He refers to the Korean Zen koan, "What is it?" as a vehicle for practicing this kind of open view. When one renounces the obsession with knowing, with trying to be prepared for everything in advance, spaces of possibility open up spontaneously. This is one way of understanding the meaning of synchronization of body and mind. Allowing experience to have a quality of question-mark softens the heart, making it receptive and open. It

allows a person to be relaxed enough, interested enough to be here, now. The discovery of doubt, rather than triggering a defensive panic, turns out to be good news. In the final analysis, it is impossible to know for sure if it is indeed safe to let go of ego's clinging. Likewise, it is impossible to "know" what intrinsic health is, or if it really is intrinsic. The willingness to not-know, however, makes it possible to investigate what health could be fundamentally and experientially.

This not-knowing suggests an open-mindedness beyond the limitations of any particular thoughts or doctrines (including Buddhist doctrine). Cultivating doubt in the sense discussed implies the recognition that any "adaptive" cognitions a therapist may suggest to replace a client's "maladaptive" ones are in themselves still limiting. When given too much emphasis in therapy, even the most empowering re-framings obscure the direct experience of sanity's intrinsic nature. While improved coping techniques have value on a path toward uncovering wakefulness, they may still serve as havens for neurotic escape from discomfort or essential aloneness.

Conviction: Doubtlessness

As we follow the transformative aspects of the shock → uncertainty → conviction pattern through to the stage of fruition, we might name the sane correlate of neurotic conviction, "doubtlessness" (Trungpa, 1984). In contradistinction to the "I know how things are" quality of what we have called conviction, doubtlessness signifies a relaxing of the reflex to "know" in the anxious, grasping sense. As one practices the discipline of not-knowing, one naturally discovers in what ways it is indeed feasible to live and communicate without preconception. One gradually develops a dependable sense of confidence. In our culture confidence is typically understood as confidence in *something* or confidence in oneself. Paradoxically, by learning to rest with the experience of confusion, fear, or uncertainty, one develops a confidence that is not dependent on any particular set of inner or outer circumstances. This kind of doubtlessness is synonymous with what has been called synchronization of body and mind. Given the confidence to approach situations

with genuine openness, the myriad mechanisms of solidifying ego ease their intensity and persistence. With mind and body in synchronization, there is no need to check up on oneself continually, no need to wage the apparent battle between ego and egolessness. It is like a person riding a bicycle: the need to understand the exact nature of space, movement, effort, purpose, and so forth, does not even apply. One simply pedals and rides, clearly and unself-consciously. Balance comes without effort. There is faith that everything essential to bicycle riding will present itself moment-to-moment. This is not a faith that someone or something will see to it that everything is properly taken care of. It is the faith, rather, that no one and nothing is required to ensure a special result in the first place. At the stage of doubtlessness, one has shifted one's personal allegiance from the struggle to maintain a strong sense of self to the trust in the reality and self-sufficiency of intrinsic health.

Such trust is related to the Buddhist notion of *maitri*, or "loving kindness." *Maitri* refers to unconditional friendliness toward experience, be it one's own or another's. When one neither grasps onto states of mind identified as good, nor rejects states of mind considered bad, one is free to appreciate experience however it is. *Maitri* is the quality of warmth associated with intrinsic health. The therapist cultivates warmth within the discipline of working with her own mind. She may then extend her basic attitude of warmth to her clients. *Maitri* serves thus as the ground from which compassionate action can arise. *Maitri*, too, is a kind of conviction—an unconditional conviction that all states of mind can be accommodated, even appreciated.

SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR PSYCHOTHERAPY

A traditional Buddhist analogy states that when a person first steps onto the path of wakefulness, pain is like a hair tickling one's palm. As one progresses further, pain becomes like a hair irritating the tongue. Finally, when one is enlightened, pain is like a hair directly on the surface of the eye. Experience becomes increasingly immediate, intense, and conscious. It is the habitual turning away from things as they are which characterizes psychopathology. Men-

tal health, on the other hand, involves the willing uncovering of clarity, openness, and compassion—but not the cessation of pain *per se*.

In psychotherapy our goal is to assist clients in re-connecting with their basic sanity, recovering the bright precision and natural compassion that come from being fully alive. The threefold schema itself suggests a number of goals or ongoing processes for psychotherapy. What follows are descriptions of some of the avenues along which these goals might be pursued.

From the point of view discussed here, psychotherapy could be understood as a working backwards through the schema of psychopathology's development. The three progressive phases we have described can be seen as subtle micro-processes that underlie and create momentary experience. They can just as well be observed over the course of an entire relationship or lifetime. For example, a client might discover through the course of therapy that she can actually relinquish the solid notion of herself as a woman trapped in the roles of "bad mother" and "adult child of alcoholic parents." In experimenting with the uncertainty about who she might be in the absence of these labels, she may experience bewilderment and fear, which prompt her to re-solidify her "story" over and over again. Impulses will inevitably arise either to grasp onto the old story or to devise new stories for the sake of identity. Given such circumstances, therapy involves recognizing neurotic conviction for what it is, then investigating the possibility of *tolerating* uncertainty, again and again. Moments of freshness may emerge and be recognized as such, or they may emerge only to be hurriedly covered over with familiar thoughts. The contemplative psychotherapist remains alert to such moments, notes their arising, and chooses whether or not to draw attention to them on-the-spot. With the therapist's support, the client may gradually begin to practice tolerating the fear and uncertainty that naturally confront her awareness. Over time she can discover increased spontaneity and obtain release from the constriction of her habitual patterns.

The same working-backwards sequence of conviction, uncertainty, freshness may manifest in a very brief instance as well. A woman client who was relating all the details of a proposal to

purchase a new house described herself as “pulled up short” when the therapist inquired about whether this meant she had decided to stay with her husband after all. This client abruptly stopped talking and met the therapist’s eye. There was a sudden drop in momentum. She seemed to be simply present for that moment, remarking how she really did not know what she wanted. She was able to recognize a moment of uncertainty and remain present to what followed. First there was a feeling of embarrassment and a desire to escape the discomfort; she dwelt in this for a moment. Then a feeling of tenderness seemed to arise within her, as the speedy, driving quality of her demeanor dropped away. Regarding her uncertainty and discomfort as familiar experiential landmarks, she could perceive a subtle choice between either jumping habitually back into her speedy thoughts or relaxing into the presence of the moment.

The usefulness of this schema is not limited to clinical one-on-one psychotherapy in an office; it is germane to other kinds of relationships as well. One of the authors participated in the following encounter over a meal in a restaurant⁵. The client, clinically diagnosed as schizophrenic, entered therapy at a time when she had moved into an independent living situation after over ten years of intermittent hospitalization. She was telling of an elaborate plan for creating performances of her music. She began with a small instance, then quickly went on to describe an envisioned series of concerts and significant changes in her life that would arise from her newfound sense of creative wealth. The enthusiasm for her plan was mixed with concerns that certain powerful people would be jealous of her talent and accomplishment. She wondered about what these people might do to harm her. At some point her reflections seemed to take a turn, when she asked the therapist, “Do you think they really care if I do this?” The therapist simply drew attention to the client’s own uncertainty. There followed a brief hiatus from the pressured tale of ambition and fear. Both client and therapist laughed aloud when the patient mused, “Who knows?” After this moment of expansive humor, the story began again from the beginning.

This woman’s uncertainty about her future stood in counterpoint to the simple, ordinary activities of her eating and tasting the

food, keeping an eye out for the waiter so as to order another soda, and attending to the details of “behaving properly when going out.” The synchronization she was able to bring to her being at the restaurant provided a grounded contrast of freshness to the excited spinning of stories about the future. She was able to acknowledge this: “You know,” she once said, “when I am worried about what is real and what isn’t, it doesn’t help me to have someone try to figure that out with me. . . . What helps is if someone says, ‘Tess [a pseudonym], would you like a cup of tea?’”

The above examples illustrate the opportunities to pay attention to the shifts that continually occur from uncertainty to conviction and back again. We could postulate that the wife who considered buying a house, for instance, had first experienced the uncertainty of her relationship to her husband. Then came conviction: “There will be no change. We’ll buy a house.” The therapist’s alarming question, however, revived a sense of uncertainty, which the house-buying plan otherwise covered over. The example of Tess demonstrates a movement from shock to uncertainty (i.e., “What might they do to harm me?”), and then from uncertainty to freshness (“Who knows?” and then laughter). In our view, it is essential that the therapist remain alert to a client’s moments of uncertainty and openness, investigating whether such moments are indeed related to the client’s awareness of her physicality, or to a synchronization of body and mind.

To go further in a therapeutic relationship, at some point a discipline of mindfulness must be introduced. Such a discipline involves acknowledging the reality of the present moment and discriminating between that reality and one’s fixation on internalized “stories⁶.” This develops the capacity to sustain uncertainty when it arises. Only when one can tolerate not-knowing can one experience the certainty of unself-conscious presence, or doubtlessness. This kind of mindfulness discipline is, needless to say, essential for the therapist as well. Sitting meditation is a prototypical, traditional form of mindfulness practice. And yet any activity with a pronounced element of physicality will do, given it provides one with an opportunity to continually return to bodily awareness. Client and therapist alike can practice synchronization of body and

mind through music, art, cooking, exercise, eating, putting on make-up—all the simple things one does regularly that involve the body and its senses.

An additional implication of the schema we have presented is that the therapist must be able to withstand uncertainty herself. Uncertainty and compassion provide the fire that melts neurotic conviction for both client and therapist. The discomfort of feeling a client's distress will continually tempt the therapist to embrace the solidity of the client's world view (as well as her own). In order to be useful to the client, the therapist must be willing to experience the discomfort of not having the answers, of even appearing foolish. At the same time, the therapist carries the responsibility of recognizing the genuine conviction to which we have referred as doubtlessness. The twin tasks of tolerating one's own uncertainty and maintaining the strength of doubtlessness may at times appear equally uncomfortable. All the therapist's skill and kindness is required to know when it is beneficial to say what one sees and when it is beneficial to remain quiet. In the Buddhist tradition wisdom is regarded as inseparable from *skillful means*, or the ability to act appropriately within dynamic, unfolding situations. Knowledge has value insofar as it is embodied in precise, compassionate action. Taking appropriate action on another person's behalf cannot be prescribed from outside the alive situation of mingling that person's presence with one's own.

CONCLUSION

Tilopa, one of the founding yogis of Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism, once compared the process of enlightenment to the extracting of oil from the sesame seed:

Sesame oil is the essence.

Although the ignorant know that it is in the sesame seed,

They do not understand the way of cause, effect, and becoming,

And therefore are not able to extract the essence, the sesame oil

(Nalanda, 1980).

Tilopa's words seem to suggest that what separates the wise from the ignorant is the ability of the wise to "extract the essence" from

within the same seed hull that remains impenetrable to the ignorant. To paraphrase this into more psychological terms, we would contend that there are two ways of relating to personal experience, one maintaining mindless attachment to limiting patterns of habit, and the other opening awareness onto ever-widening vistas of insight, compassion, and vitality. Within our model of contemplative psychology, sanity is not a kind of experiential higher ground. Rather, it denotes a way of relating to all aspects of experience, including pain and anxiety, that sharpens and enlivens all the faculties of the senses, the mind, and the heart. Sanity involves recognizing all experience as a gateway toward the realization of intrinsic health. In this article we have endeavored to describe how, given the apparent realities of the three marks of existence and ego's aversion to perceiving them clearly, the individual can either intensify the pain of her world or, by means of inquisitiveness and acceptance, free her experience from the bonds of neurotic attachment. The key to mental health lies not in escaping the inevitable process of shock, uncertainty, and conviction, but rather in experiencing it directly and accurately.

Once one comes to tolerate the openness of not-knowing, it is possible to connect with the freshness of experience unmediated by expectations. Ego and its ministers passion, aggression, and ignorance, have not been eliminated, and yet space and vital energy, the sources of healing, become more real and more available to perception. In this way, health becomes a practice of attending to any sort of disturbance, painful or pleasurable, as a means to wake up. Suffering itself serves as the condition and the context for the cultivation of wisdom.

NOTES

1. *Tathagatagarbha* is presented extensively in *The Changeless Nature* (1979) by Arya Maitreya and Acarya Asanga. See also Wegela (1988) for an explication of this idea in psychological terms.
2. For the sake of freshness, alertness, and reflection, feminine pronouns will be used throughout.
3. John Welwood (1987) relates depression to an intolerance of the three marks, seeing it as a result of "punishing oneself for the way things are" (p. 126). For

- further discussion of the three marks of existence, see Kalupahana (1976), pp. 36-43.
4. The term, "synchronization of body and mind" was coined by Chögyam Trungpa to point toward direct, non-dualistic, skillful ways of being in the world. In *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior* (1984), Trungpa expounds his vision of synchronized activity and the possibility of a synchronized society.
 5. In this instance, the therapist was practicing not psychotherapy but "basic attendance" with a chronically ill client. Basic attendance is a fundamental part of the community treatment modality developed by the Windhorse Project in Boulder, Colorado, to support recovery from major psychotic illness. Podvoll (1990) devotes a chapter to "Learning Basic Attendance" in his recent book addressing the experience of and recovery from psychosis, *The Seduction of Madness*. Fortuna (1987) has also published a detailed exposition of the Windhorse treatment modality in this journal.
 6. Welwood (1987) also discusses the value, the working with depressed clients, of introducing a distinction between what he calls "stories" and "feelings."

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