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# Becoming the True Self: Spiritual and Psychological Perspectives for the 21st Century

by Robert A. Jonas

Socrates admonished us to “know thyself.” Most modern cultures bow in the direction of this sage advice. But what exactly is it that we know when we know our selves? What is the self? Where and how do we look for it? The answer to these questions depends on whom one asks. In late 20th century Western culture a multitude of opinions circulate from psychotherapists, religious leaders, talk show hosts, New Age gurus, advertisers, political leaders and the old wise person next door. While such diversity is often valuable, the lack of a common standard of discernment is also a problem: Not only because some definitions of the human person are demeaning, isolating, hate-filled or uninspiring, and not only for young people who find it difficult to sort out the apparently contradictory images of the human person, but because the survival of our species on this planet requires it.

As our globe revolves into the 21st century, earth’s people need images of the self and persons in community which foster non-violent, life-giving values. Characteristics and values such as self worthiness, interdependence, compassion, empathy and healing must be invoked if our biosphere is to survive. We need a vision of ourselves which inspires self-esteem and other-esteem, one that is grounded in love-relationships, families, neighborhoods, classes, tribes, cultures and nations while simultaneously transcending them in the direction of a peaceful, vibrant, interdependent global community. At the 1993 Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions, there emerged a unanimous agreement on this point. The document “A Global Ethics” was approved after four days of intense discussion. It read, in part,

We are interdependent. Each of us depends on the well-being of the whole, and so we have to have respect for the community of living beings, for people, animals, and plants, and for preservation of the Earth, the air, water and soil. . . . We take individual responsibility for all we do. . . . The Earth cannot be changed for the better unless the consciousness of individuals is changed first.

What sort of self-knowing can be both intimate and non-narcissistic, both interdependent and individually responsible? Where can we look for the conceptual building blocks of a universal and healing vision of self-understanding?

In the United States today one finds at least three outstanding and well-established paths to consciousness and self-knowing. A collaboration amongst these three traditions offers an exciting glimpse into a new global self-hood. Two of these paths, Christianity and Buddhism, are ancient religious traditions. The other, psychotherapy, is a relatively new path in the west, developed by Sigmund Freud and others in the late 19th century. On the surface, these three traditions express themselves in very different languages. But there is in each of them a core image of the self which finds echoes in the others, an image which may provide a common ground for people of many different faiths and philosophical orientations. What is that core image?

Each tradition, Christian, Buddhist and psychotherapeutic, suggests that we don’t know who we really are. Each brings the good news that we have a “true Self” or larger “Self” which, if allowed to blossom, will bring blessings upon us and our communities. But already at birth, or soon afterward, each person becomes wounded, alienated, marginalized, abused or oppressed. Slowly, day by day, we create a false, perhaps socially acceptable self to get us through our social transactions. Soon we are

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out of touch with our true selves. Who we really are must be found, discovered, unearthed. How is it that we lose touch with who we really are in the first place and how can we find our way back? Let's listen to what each tradition has to say and then see where the common ground might lie.

Before considering the common insights into the self that these three traditions share, I propose briefly to sketch each tradition's view of the self, the nature of its woundedness and the methods and goals of self-discovery and healing. Of course, each path of self-discovery is itself composed of many schools, denominations and cultural variations. The reader should know, therefore, that I have selected paradigms based on my own direct experience as a person who has received and offered help within each tradition. My knowledge of the Christian contemplative tradition started with a childhood and adolescence immersed in Wisconsin German Lutheran piety. Then, as a convert to the Roman Catholic Discalced Carmelites I began what continues to be an intimate friendship with such mystics as Meister Eckhart, St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila and Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection. Today I continue to go on retreat at a Carmelite monastery twice a year and have spiritual friendships with monks, priests and ministers of various Christian denominations. I have a Master of Theological Studies degree from the Jesuit Weston School of Theology with a concentration in the history of Christian contemplative spirituality.

My knowledge of the Buddhist path comes from twelve years of occasional short retreats in both the Vipassana and the Mahayana traditions, and years of private reading and meditation. I have almost no academic training in the Buddhist worldview. My teachers, including Larry Rosenberg, Joseph Goldstein, Sui-zen flautist David Duncavage and Zen Master George Bowman, have been American, non-academic Buddhists. Since I have relatively more experience in the Mahayana tradition of Zen, I will emphasize its insights here. For the past twelve years I have been active in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, having organized and moderated several joint retreats with master teachers in each tradition.

The psychotherapeutic model which I offer is based on my experience in a psychoanalytically-oriented doctoral program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Academic understandings of the self are also informed by years of experience as both a client and a practitioner of psychotherapy. I refer to this path of true-self discovery as "relational psychotherapy," a distilled model having its roots in the post-Freudian school called Object Relations or Self Psychology.

My approach in this article is experiential rather than scholarly. Sitting in silence with a teacher in each of the three traditions, what would be one's direct experience of the self? To what would the teacher's finger point?

## **Christian Contemplative Tradition**

### **The Individual Self**

**E**ach person is created by God to be in free, loving relationship to God, others and nature. We are each a unity of body, mind and soul. According to Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, each person is created in God's image (*imago Dei*). Jesus of Nazareth is the *imago Dei* in the flesh and Christians

are meant to follow in his path of self-giving love (imitatio Christi). In Christian Scriptures the imago Dei at the core of the self participates in the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In fact, St. Augustine (A.D. 354-430) saw the dynamics of the Trinity as the elemental constituents of the self (vestigia trinitate). In the memory, intellect and will the movement of the Trinity-- Lover, the Beloved and the Love--circulates eternally.

Because the imago Dei participates in the Ground of unconditioned freedom--that is, God--the ground of the self is free from all conditioned interactions of daily life, time and space. A reflection of the ultimate, free personal cause of all things is within our very selves. By participation, something of the presence of God exists within the individual self. Thus, knowing oneself and knowing God are simultaneous events.

Experiences of one's self in silent reflection and meditation are entirely sensual--seeing, smelling, touching, hearing, tasting, emoting and imagining. When one tries to observe one's self directly, one notices a flow of bodily sensations, thoughts, images, passions, sounds, desires and memories. Looking inward one cannot see a self-existing self or the imago Dei directly. The medieval Dominican mystic Meister Eckhart, once wrote that ultimately the soul (a rough equivalent to our modern use of "self") "is free and void of all mediations and representations," and therefore the soul "has no way of knowing herself." The true Self is something transcendent within us. Somewhere within us there is a subject looking out into the world, but there is no magical mirror which will allow us to see this subject, this core self as it is in itself.

Likewise, even though Christians say that God, Christ and the Holy Spirit are within us, they also caution that this divinity cannot be sensed directly. Catholic theologian Karl Rahner once said that we do experience grace directly, but not as grace. That is, God's presence must always be mediated by our senses. For example, listening in faith is actually an elevated kind of hearing. Listening to a Bach cantata in the faith that God is somehow present transforms one's everyday capacity to hear into an available channel of grace and revelation. All sensual experience may be, in any moment, similarly iconic--sense windows which are transparent to divinity. God's invisible presence moves within and through the sights, thoughts, smells, sounds, sensations, motivations and memories of the self, when we perceive everything in faith. We may glimpse our true selves and the divinity within, but in order to do this we must employ our senses in a faith-inspired way. As St. John of the Cross wrote, "Faith gives and communicates to us God Himself (that is, directly), but covered with the silver of faith."

At the core of self is an I-Thou which shines through & transcends the ego "I" and all other historical I-thou relationships. This unique Thou, the source of our existence, is an "Other," but an Other who invites us into a union-in-love. Our true selves can only manifest when that union has been glimpsed, when we have been united with the source and destination of our being. Since this Other of Mystery is the ground of all creation, union in God is simultaneously a union with all of creation in God. One's true Self is therefore essentially relational, coming to fruition in communion with God, nature and our neighbor.

## **Woundedness**

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In the Genesis myth the first human beings, Adam and Eve, possessed the fullness and joy of a clear, unfettered relationship of union to each other, to nature and to God. Their Fall came as the result of a temptation to move outside that union. The result was a self yearning for freedom but suffused with shame, guilt, fear of death and existential loneliness. Adam and Eve's personal decision carried universal consequences. It plunged all succeeding generations of people into a stream of darkness which runs through each individual self--heart, mind, soul and body. After Adam and Eve, the tendency to separate oneself from God, nature and other people is built-in to the human condition. No one can escape its influence. Its dark presence brings sorrow and suffering to every living thing on the planet.

Original sin is a wound within the self, preventing us from reaching the promised land of the larger, blessed Self that we really are. It would have us be smaller in our vision and more isolated in our social and spiritual lives than we really are. For Jews the Torah ("the teaching") and the Prophets are the healing bridge over and through evil to the promised land. For Christians, Jesus is the bridge to the kingdom of God that is both already present within us (Matthew 3:2) and simultaneously not yet manifest fully in the world.

Throughout Christian history contemplatives have noted an inherited disposition for people to desire "creatures" (attachment to various things & pleasures) rather than the Holy Thou. We are created to find eternal peace and equanimity in God, but we "miss the mark" (a translation of our "sin" from the Greek) This missing the mark is the "old Adam" at work in the self. The central manifestation of woundedness is our alienation from a free, spontaneous being-in-love with God, nature and others.

## **Path of Healing**

The self that one can know apart from God is only a "false" self. Thus, if one is reflecting or meditating on one's self (e.g. self-images, memories, impulses, thoughts, sensations, emotions and so on) apart from an intimate relationship to God, one is actually seeing only the surface of things, a "false" self-representation. St. Augustine said that when one knows one's true Self, one simultaneously knows God and is healed. To be healed is to become whole or "holy." Jesus said that in order to get there one must "love God with all one's heart, mind and soul, and one's neighbor as oneself." Finding or knowing oneself is not simply a function of seeing things correctly. It is also a way of living. When one lives in a holy way, one discovers who one really is. The life of the "true Self," living in a holy way and being open to God, are mutually co-present. In Christian Self-realization one's behavior reflects Jesus's life, caring for those who suffer and telling others about God's presence.

Healing, personal transformation and true-self knowing result when we allow God's love to permeate self-experience, self-knowing and action. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215) wrote that "It is the greatest of all lessons to know oneself. For if one knows oneself one will know God, and knowing God, that person will be made like God." In the Eastern church this knowing and becoming like God is called "deification," based on early writers such as St. Athanasius (296-373 A.D.) who wrote, "For [Jesus Christ] was made human that we might be made divine." Knowing oneself,

knowing others and knowing God are aspects of the same activity of a knowing-with-love that is God.

Christian healing is named differently in different Christian denominations and communities, each name highlighting a different aspect of the experience. It is called variously, “redemption,” “salvation,” “deification,” “divinization,” “metanoia,” and so on. Contemplative practitioners suggest that the transformed, healed self is one which has been infused with the light of God or the “Dark Night,” of God’s presence. The “old Adam” and “old Eve” drop away as one becomes a “New Adam or Eve,” or a “True Self.” Evangelical and charismatic Christians speak of being “Born Again.” This new Self—larger, deeper and truer—acts continuously, spontaneously in loving co-presence with others. A reborn self (or Self) is not another self to replace the first, but rather a transformed self, having all ordinary human elements, but now infused with grace. This view follows from the medieval saying that “grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it.”

More and more one’s own mind participates in the “mind of Christ,” which is characterized by interpersonal love, compassion, freedom, selflessness and grace (Phil 2:5ff; Luke 14:33). In classical Christian practice the death of the small “I,” ego, requires a spiritual progression from purgation to illumination to union. Ultimately there is union-in-distinction, such that “It is no longer I but Christ who lives in me,” (Gal 2:20). Of course, even in union there is still a “me,” and also an Other within me. But now, in the mind of Christ, we participate in a unifying love which transcends self and other. This mind, the intellectual, intuitive and volitional center of the Self, is characterized by an intersubjective dance (perichoresis) as in Jesus’s saying, “I am in my Father and you in me and I in you” (John 14:20-21). In union with Christ’s mind one suddenly realizes that he or she is a part of the Body of Christ. Time and space are irrelevant in this cosmic Body. In it Christians are joined spiritually to others who live in distant lands and cities. And in it one finds a trans-historical participation in “the communion of saints,” that is, all who have died, who now live and who will live, in Christ.

The new, “reborn” life, experientially and morally transformed, is a participation in the Mystery of the Incarnation of Christ. One glimpses the Incarnation as a divine/human Ground in one’s own experience. This personal incarnation is a profound letting-go into the depths of one’s being, sometimes characterized as a “loss” of self. As one loses one’s small self or ego in Christ one becomes another incarnation of the divine. The Incarnation of Jesus Christ in Holy Scripture is both a real historical event (the concrete life of Jesus) and a symbol for the mutual participation of infinite and finite within history, thus within the life of each particular person and community. The community of baptized seekers is the Body of Christ. Now, when one looks inward, the true Self that one finds is described as the cosmic Body of Christ. Finally, knowing one’s self transcends ordinary self-reflection. It is a kind of being-in-love, and a being-in-joy which wells up from the unconditioned Ground within us and which we then share with others.

Realizing this transformed Self in the Christian path is not only a subjective experience. It is also immediately evident in one’s behavior. One behaves in a manner reflective of Jesus’s life, caring for those who suffer and telling others about God’s presence.

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## Method of Healing

There are two dimensions of healing activities, one which takes place within oneself in solitude, and the other in community. In the first dimension we open our heart and search ourselves with the eyes of Christ. The goal is to know ourselves as Christ knows us. But to know ourselves in this way is to know as Christ knows. To become one's true Self is to become (by participation) the Spirit of Christ who prays, sees, smells, hears, thinks, knows and feels in us. In solitude we read Scripture, meditate, commune in nature, listen to music, write, create and pray. In solitude we soon realize that God is experiencing our life from within us, feeling the joy and the suffering that we feel. We can never know ourselves fully, but we trust that in God we are known completely. That Jesus was drawn to solitude is clearly indicated in Scripture. He eagerly sought those precious moments apart from others and warned his followers to avoid ostentatious displays of public and even verbal prayer (Matthew 6:5) A relationship with God is something like our everyday relationships in that it is strengthened by regular moments of intimate silence together.

Christian meditation, contemplation and prayer in silence are meant to focus one's mind on God exclusively and thus to purge those ego processes which take us away from God. In Byzantine Christian practice, one repeats the Jesus prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me!" over and over. In centering prayer as suggested in the medieval tract, "The Cloud of Unknowing," it is suggested that one repeat a sacred word over and over, sub-vocally, until that repetition has, through grace, created an invisible bridge from the soul to God. In the deepest levels of prayer we let go of what we (the small self or ego) want and simply let the Spirit of God pray within us. In meditation the Spirit moves us to acknowledge our vulnerability and longing for God and to pray for others, empathizing with their burdens, sharing their joy and holding them in Christ's presence.

In the social dimension of healing and true-self discovery Jesus is again the model. His life was spent for God and others. He was a man of deep and intense relationships who was emotionally affected in his social life. His social life was marked by a passionate concern for those who had been marginalized by or outcast from the society: tax collectors, sinners, the guilty, diseased and maimed. He did not hold back the love and joy he experienced in communion with God but sought to share that love completely, and in so doing to fulfill the destiny of his true Self. St. John remembered Jesus' words:

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. . . .11 I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. (John 15: 9)

I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. (John 15:15)

Christians discover who we are and value what we are becoming, when we serve others in the name of God. We want others to be happy because we know that this is God's desire. We find

ourselves doing things for others which are irrelevant to, and even detrimental to, our purely self interest. We soon discover that the interests of the larger Self include and transcend our own families, communities, nations and religions. We feel moved to work for justice and right relationships not only in our families, but among all people and between people and nature. Through our continuing, prayerful participation in community, our own identity becomes large enough to take in all that we had previously considered different and therefore threatening. The cosmos becomes our home in the same way that it is God's home.

The social dimension of healing includes the practices of virtue such as faith, hope, love, compassion generosity, forgiveness and speaking the truth in love. The Christian church, broadly speaking, is like a large extended family of like-minded persons seeking oneness with Christ. We bear each others' sufferings, celebrate each others' joys. Jesus Christ in us sees Jesus Christ in others and in nature. Seeing oneself and others in this way brings out the precious individuality and gifts of each thing, being and person.

Beginning in the early Christian contemplative communities we also see the emergence of great spiritual guides as a necessary resource for spiritual transformation. In the trusting intimacy of spiritual direction Christians describe their prayer life to another person, seeking feedback, advice and support. Spiritual director and directee pray for one another. Christians grow into their larger true Selves by receiving the attention and spiritual nourishment of those who know and love them as spiritual friends.

## **Buddhist Mahayana Tradition**

### **The Individual Self**

**B**uddhists refer to the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha ("The awakened one," 6th century B.C.) for guidance on this topic. Looking inward at the self one finds a dynamic, ever-changing kaleidoscope of sensations, emotions, images, memories, thoughts, smells and sounds. And one sees also a grasping after these fleeting experiences, a desperate need to hang on to, and squeeze every last drop of pleasure out of them. The Buddhist asks, "In all this flux of moment-to-moment experience, where and what is "the self"? The answer is "Nowhere" and "Nothing." No one of our inner experiences is, in itself, the self. When one looks very closely in meditation one finds no enduring thing called the self. Japanese Zen master Dogen wrote,

To learn the way of the Buddha is to learn the self. To learn the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be authenticated by all things. To be authenticated by all things to be free of "self" and "other."

In the Buddhist traditions of Southeast Asia, all of one's inner experience is an impermanent process of basic elements (skandas). These skandas are the ultimate, ever-changing elements of self-perception and perception of others and things. In the Mahayana tradition, even the skandas are ephemeral and empty. In fact, all "things" such as the self are empty of self-nature.

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In his discussion of the “Heart Sutra,” Thich Nhat Hanh speaks about the essential emptiness of a tree’s leaf. There are, he says, rain, sun and clouds in the leaf. There is water, oxygen, carbon and so on. The leaf is composed of not-leaf elements. Thus any one thing always and essentially refers to and includes other things and events upon which it is dependent. Likewise, the self is composed of not-self elements. When I look within myself I find a flow of sense experience and images from past events and interactions. No one thing is the self. This Buddhist concept of each thing’s essential emptiness is thus a simultaneous declaration of each thing’s interdependence with all other things. Everything, including our selves, is constituted inter-dependently. In Sanskrit this relational nature of all things is called Pratitya-samutpada, ‘conditioned arising,’ ‘interdependent arising,’ ‘conditional nexus,’ or ‘causal nexus.’

## **Woundedness**

**I**nsight into the nature of human suffering is a fundamental characteristic of Buddha’s enlightenment and teaching. The Buddha’s Four Noble Truths (Sanskrit: arya-satya) include the truth of suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path that leads to its cessation. All beings suffer, no matter what conditions surround the birth and development of the self. However, the source of suffering is mistakenly perceived. For, before enlightenment, the suffering person believes that there is a permanent thing or personality residing in the self with enduring characteristics. He or she must protect and defend this presumed “I” or “me” against all perceived threats. Such a person is attached to certain configurations of thoughts, feelings, and images as being foundational truths which define his or her self, others and the world. Such a person believes that his or her thoughts, emotions and beliefs are both purposefully produced and also that they are accurate reflections of reality as it is. The wounded person is living an illusion, living out of a “false self,” and is therefore unknowingly inviting suffering.

## **Path of Healing**

**B**uddha called the way to healing and release from suffering, the Eightfold Path (Sanskrit: Ashtangika-marga ). It includes right view, right resolve, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.

Healing is characterized by a sudden or gradual realization (samadhi) that the apparently permanent self is actually a dynamic process that is interconnected to all of reality by elements which, in and of themselves, are also “empty” and impermanent. Thus, the healing path is to seek this non-dualistic state of living called enlightenment. The illusion that we are substantial subjects over against an objective world is broken. Then we see that all of us possess or rather are, the Buddha-nature. This is our true Self, already present in each moment. When our eyes are opened we see in the light of selflessness, love, compassion, joy and equanimity. An awakened or enlightened person has attained wisdom (prajna), a most profound insight into emptiness and the inter-relatedness of all things. Such a person is called a Buddha or a Bodhisattva, one whose basic vow is to liberate all beings from suffering. Ultimately, this vow is not an intention of the individual’s ego, but rather an expression of a

timeless truth which manifests itself in the person.

In the enlightenment experience one finds the universe within oneself, thus becoming what one Zen Master calls the “transindividual individual.” All separation between self and others has been overcome.

## Method of healing

Realization of one’s true Self comes by way of shikantaza (just sitting) or zazen (sitting + absorption). In zazen one sits, as it were, at the side of one’s thoughts, feelings and sensations as if sitting by the side of a flowing stream, not clinging to anything that is passing by. In zazen one’s disciplined awareness comes to be characterized by mindfulness, watchfulness, compassion and a penetrating curiosity about one’s experience. Slowly the idea that a subject “I” is looking out at “objects” of awareness breaks down. It is not that the subject “I” or the ego or self is destroyed, but rather that the self becomes transparent or illuminated. In Vipassana meditation one practices “loving-kindness” meditation (metta ), saying for example, “May all beings be happy. May they be joyous and live in safety.” In Tibetan Buddhism a meditation of compassion is called Tonglen (Tibetan: “giving and receiving”). In this practice one considers oneself equal to suffering persons and imagines taking on their pain. In fact, as the Tibetan master Sogyal Rinpoche has written, “In Tonglen. . .we take on, through compassion, all the various mental and physical sufferings of all beings.”

Meditation, however, is not enough to reveal one’s true Self. One also relies on the three supports (“three jewels”) of Buddha (both as the historical Buddha and the eternally present Buddha-nature), Dharma (the ancient teachings) and Sangha (the community of practitioners). The power of these supports passes to the student primarily in the intimacy of the student-teacher relationship. One commits oneself to a teacher who is a recognized channel of Buddha-Dharma and is himself or herself on the path of the Bodhisattva. One makes oneself available for “face-to-face” or “mind-to-mind” transmission, an intimate exchange of self for other which is then passed on to still others.

One studies the Dharma, meditates in the hourly, daily rhythm of the meditation community and develops an intimate relationship of transmission with a Master. Sometimes one ponders a question (koan) to break open one’s conditioned thinking. At some point the journey to the true Self culminates in insight into “emptiness” (shunyata)--that is, to see for oneself that all things, including the self, are composite and so to see further that all composite things are “empty” of essence. Immediately one knows “the Dharma gate of non-duality,” and experiences directly “that all human beings are intimately related, and that one’s own self and the selves of others are bound inseparably to one another.”

In Mahayana’s Zen practice, the “three pillars” of practice are Dai-gidan (great doubt), dai-shinkon (great faith), and dai-funshi (great resolve). Great doubt connotes a determined, open-minded inquiry into one’s true Self. One must not rely on other people’s knowledge or even on one’s own past knowledge of self or others. This “not-knowing” then becomes a form of deep, direct knowing. Great faith is the unquestioning trust in the Buddha’s teachings. The modern Zen Master Hakuun Ryoko

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Yasutani wrote that great faith is “a faith that is firmly and deeply rooted, immovable, like an immense tree or huge boulder.” Great resolve refers to our single-minded determination to attain enlightenment and to save all beings.

In the Mahayana path, this “saving” proceeds from a complete transformation of both one’s inner life and one’s social activities. One makes vows, to liberate all beings (the Bodhisattva vow), to become a manifestation of wisdom (prajna) and to develop compassion (karuna) for all beings. Letting go into one’s Buddha-nature is accompanied by a commitment to social action. One practices the virtues (paramitas) such as generosity, compassion, discipline, patience and effort/energy.

Thus, in becoming the true Self which thrives living in the well-spring of “emptiness,” one also becomes a unique location (Nirmanakaya ) of the Buddha’s cosmic body (Dharma kaya). Such a Bodhisattva lives out the interdependence which arises in the realization of “I-emptiness,” knowing that the knowing, liberation and healing of self and others are coincidental. As Akizuki writes, “The heavens and I are of one root, all things and I are one body.” In sunyata any I and thou are ultimately inseparable. Because the pain of the other becomes the pain of the self, the enlightened self cannot stay put. Instead of abiding in nirvana as a Hinayana arhat, the Mahayana bodhisattva works for the salvation and happiness of all sentient beings.

## **Relational Psychotherapies**

### **The Individual Self**

**O**ur present experience of our selves and our relationships is shaped by our earliest, intimate relationships. Each of us carries our personal history in the form of invisible templates for interactions with others which arise from those early relational experiences. If we sit silently and look into ourselves we may find just what the Christian and Buddhist meditator finds--a cacophonous flow of sensations, memories, emotions, sounds, smells and thoughts. But where spiritual practices tend to seek eternal beings or truths in the storehouse of one’s memory, relational psychotherapies insist on the importance of our finite, concrete historical relationships and events.

For relational psychotherapists, every bodily sensation, smell, memory, fear and image that pops into awareness bears a relational message to another subject, another person from our past experience. Much of our present experience points back to our earliest caretakers and the qualities of their being with us. The mark of our principle caretakers’ distinctive presence is on every single thought, smell, sound, emotion and image which we experience. It is even on every experience which does not come to consciousness. Relational psychotherapists assume that all particular sensual, emotional and intellectual experience is symbolic and only partly accessible to consciousness.

Thus, our experience of self always points to others, whether we know it at the moment or not. We cannot ever lift ourselves out of the matrix of self-otherness. In fact, an individual self is a dynamic process of symbolized self-other resonances. For example, a client of mine named Walter felt tremendous rage toward former President of the United States, Richard Nixon. His anger was eating

him up, and there was no peace when he thought of Nixon, even after Nixon's death. Walter soon discovered that this rage expressed an implicit self-image of feeling helpless in relation to Nixon. As the unconscious self-other image came more clearly to consciousness, Walter found that Nixon was a stand-in for his emotionally distant father. Then it became clear that Walter's whole inner life of self-talk and perceptions about the world were dominated by the presence and opinions of his father. In spite of being 50 years old, the content of Walter's "self" hadn't changed much from when he was 8 years old. It was a "false" self, not because there was not a truth there, but because all of Walter's adult relationships with authority figures were in large part symbolic and therefore not based on present reality. His relationship with his father was unfinished.

In relational psychotherapy the presence of others in one's inner life is not an epiphenomenon. That is, these others do not appear in unconsciousness and consciousness by chance and their role is not merely incidental to the integrity of our selves. Rather, our selves are inherently other-seeking and other-needing from the beginning. As they develop into some coherence, our selves "take in" or "digest" images of affectively-charged relationships. They are the self's food. Walt Whitman once wrote "I am, I contain multitudes." Relational psychotherapists hear the voices of these multitudes as constituent elements of the individual self, an inner community of self-other resonances (imagoes) which have become models for present and future intimacy. Self-image is really "self-other" image. Low self-esteem is really low "self-other" esteem.

## **Woundedness**

**R**elational therapies believe that psychological and emotional suffering is a current result of past unhealthy intimacies. All personal woundedness, along with social violence, abandonment and oppression, comes not from eternal forces but from concrete relationships with real people. We are not born to suffer, but rather learn how to suffer by taking in the models for interaction exhibited by our early childhood caretakers. In adults, suffering is rooted in early experiences of emotional invasion, psychological, physical or sexual abuse, or emotional or physical abandonment. These early experiences condition the nature of a self's self-talk and its expectations for, and behaviors in, future intimacies.

In the words of a modern historian of relational psychotherapies, "Psychopathology . . . may be defined in its broadest terms as the tendency of people to do the same painful things, feel the same unpleasant feelings, establish the same self-destructive relationships, over and over and over." We keep re-creating the emotional dynamics of our earliest intimate relationships, not for masochistic reasons, but because we want to resolve misunderstandings, to finally get our needs for self-affirmation met and to forgive and be forgiven.

## **Path of Healing**

**I**t was Freud who first suggested that much of our self-experience is unconscious, that is, inaccessible to conscious reflection. He once wrote,

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You feel sure that you are informed of all that goes on in your mind if it is of any importance at all, because in that case, you believe, your consciousness gives you news of it. And if you have had no information of something in your mind you confidently assume that it does not exist there. . . in spite of the most obvious evidence that a great deal more must constantly be going on in your mind than can be known to your consciousness. Come, let yourself be taught something on this one point. . . . You behave like an absolute ruler who is content with the information supplied him by his highest officials and never goes among the people to hear their voice.

To undergo psychoanalysis or psychotherapy is “to go among the people” of one’s psyche. Authentic self-knowledge and healing is a process of moving from unconscious, conditioned behavior and thinking to free and emotionally spontaneous behavior and thinking. It is a movement from isolation to community living, from historically conditioned symbolic awareness to reality-based social awareness. One experiences a gradual liberation from unconscious, past, dysfunctional relationships. Internally, one moves toward more affirming and holistic self-talk and self-other images. Socially one moves toward relationships which are more spontaneous, creative, affirming, productive, present-oriented and playful.

Healing involves a movement of consciousness, from suppressing self-knowledge to accepting/loving hitherto unacceptable parts of the self. One’s true Self is seen as larger and more inclusive and more in touch with present reality. Acceptance of the self includes an increased ability to tolerate ambiguity and to be available for creative and loving surprises within oneself and in relationships. Coming to know and accept oneself is simultaneously a coming to know and to accept one’s community of origin since the past lives in the present, either consciously or unconsciously. From the very beginning we as infants carried the presence of our mother and father into new experiences as “an evoked companion,” and, as adults, several important inner companions still constitute the stuff of the self. They must be forgiven and welcomed.

## **Method of Healing**

**A** psychoanalytically-healed person consciously carries his early caretakers and communities of origin into present relationships. He resolves the damage to self incurred by certain people by recognizing their continuing presence within the self, “meeting” them again emotionally, seeing them as separate, often wounded people, and forgiving them. In this process he proceeds by empathizing with earlier caretakers, vicariously experiencing their woundedness and then “bringing them along” as internal images, memories and archetypes, into a healing environment.

One comes to authentic self-knowledge and healing through a process of exploring oneself (thoughts, images, behaviors, emotions), in relation to others, past and present. Such exploration focuses on the implicit “you” in all self-talk, fantasies, dreams, emotions and memories, especially concerning one’s early childhood caretakers and mentors. The goal is to see and to understand how the tone and behaviors of past relationships can be unconsciously, unintentionally, repeated in the present with spouses, lovers, friends and significant caretaker “stand-in’s” such as bosses.

This method of healing occurs almost entirely in the context of one's current intimate relationships, especially in relation to one's therapist. In the therapist-client relationship one commits to an intention to discover and to speak the truth, even if that truth be unpleasant, painful or contrary to one's preferred self-image. The goal is to let oneself be who one really is (the true self) in the actual moments of being with the therapist. This path requires that one extend trust to the willing listener/confessor. It requires cultivating faith in oneself and in others, to act in new ways, take risks, face fears, and to seek the spirit of play and creativity. It requires developing a continuous, compassionate self-listening, an "evenly suspended awareness," which is available to reality in new ways. It requires developing empathy as a back and forth movement of awareness, from oneself to others.

As one notices that he or she is projecting past destructive relationships onto the therapist, non-judgmental awareness of this dynamic opens a new door to the present. The true self emerges from the ashes of the old, false one. As one explores the self in the presence of a compassionate therapist, one slowly "takes in" the presence of the therapist until that presence takes root as a healthier self-other image within the client. This invisible self-other image then takes on a life of its own, serving as an often invisible inner source of compassionate presence which is spontaneously shared with others.

## Conclusion

Each tradition suggests that we don't know who we really are and that by walking its particular path we might come to true-self discovery, wholeness and healing. Each one has characterized the true Self as relational and has suggested that the movement from a false, isolated self to an interdependent one is effected through the medium of intimacy with others. At the same time, these three views of the self do not exactly coincide in their fields of interest or in their language. Rather than seeing these differences as exclusionary--one or the other must be true and the other false-- it is much more interesting and helpful to see them as complementary. This effort of seeking complementary truths ought not to be taken for granted. It is a difficult middle way between mutual antagonism and competition on one hand, and the creation of a super-religion which attempts to meld all paths into one.

In the past ten years an increasing number of practitioners in each tradition have been "crossing over" to learn from the other two paths. It is not uncommon to see conferences of Christian therapists, Buddhist-Christians and Buddhist psychotherapists. Still, these gatherings take place at the periphery of American culture and do not involve mainstream Christians. For example, the 700 Club is a popular TV program for American Christians. One recent program featured a former Tibetan monk who converted to Christ, leaving behind, he said, "the darkness of Buddhism." More liberal Christians might value the spiritual diversity represented by Buddhism, but secretly believe that non-Christians are not "saved." In the 21st century we will be challenged to move our ecumenical dialogue from competition (or even of safe intellectual discussion) and into the riskier territory of joining in the practices and rituals of the other. Many spiritual seekers now feel called to sojourn inside the worldview of those that they might otherwise have instinctively rejected as "other." Seeking complementary truths must become a conscious commitment and guiding ethical principle for the multi-faith environment of the 21st century.

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What does a complementary view of our three great traditions offer each tradition? All three suggest that our true selves perceive reality in a way which transcends subject-to-object awareness. I am not simply here, over against a world out there. In the transition to the true Self I find that while there is something out there beyond me, the world is also somehow within me. Writers in each of the three traditions have used the concepts of false and true Self. In each tradition the true Self is described as deeper, larger, universal and interdependent with others. The concept of interdependence could very well be the elemental root of a new, more comprehensive paradigm for self-knowing and healing. In each tradition what is false is the illusion that “I” as an isolated ego live over against others who are completely separate objects of my awareness, needs and perceptions. In each tradition it still makes sense to say “I” and “me” and to trust that someone distinctive and preciously unique indeed exists. But each one suggests that when we look deep inside that conventional self we find others and perhaps even a sacred Other.

Christian contemplatives say that through a relationship with Christ, the interdependent self comes alive and connects us in a most intimate way with others, even our enemies. As St. Paul wrote, “For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (Romans 12:4-5). Many Christians even include the deceased in one’s inner community of prayer as “the communion of saints.” How close this view seems to Zen Master Akizuki’s statement that “all things and I are one body.” And how close to the view of relational psychiatrists like D.W. Winnicott who is supposed to have said “there is no such thing as a baby,” meaning that there is always a baby-with-mother. As the physical spaces between people dwindle on this planet because of technological improvements, it becomes more and more clear that our lives interpenetrate one another. The three traditions I have discussed each highlight a different and important aspect of that interdependent community.

We have seen that psychotherapists focus entirely on the concrete, historical interpersonal aspect of this “world-withining.” Relational psychotherapy differs from both Christian contemplative practice and zazen in giving such detailed attention to one’s personal and interpersonal history. But it resonates with their view that the individual self is inextricably bound to others inwardly and in its social genesis and in its subjectivity. While Buddhists and Christians are aware of and value this interpersonal dimension, they feel compelled to look deeper and beyond, into an unseen, ultimate reality. Christians suggest that within the dynamics of interpersonal selfhood lies a divine trinitarian core that is transcendentally intersubjective. Vipassana Buddhists and most Mahayana Buddhists would agree that ultimate reality is radically interdependent, but they might balk at the suggestion that it is interpersonal or intersubjective. They would ask, “Who is seeing?” and then challenge the respondent simply to carry the question rather than to look for concepts to bind the resulting insight. Many Buddhists emphasize the natural processes which underlie subjectivity and personhood.

On the other hand, in this dimension of intersubjectivity, two of the Mahayana schools, Vajrayana and Pure Land, are exceptions which bring Buddhist experience very close to that of Christians. Pure Land offers Amida Buddha as an abiding Presence who eternally and unconditionally offers the unifying experience of Buddha-nature to everyone. If Amida Buddha’s “presence-to” is eternal,

then we have an interesting bridge to the eternal Christian Trinity. Tibetan master Sogyal Rinpoche, writing in the Vajrayana tradition, seems to imply that enlightenment is an impersonal event, like the shattering of a vase which then instantly merges the “inside” and “outside” spaces. On the other hand, his popular Tibetan Book of Living and Dying is chock full of intersubjective experience, whether it be the presence of the Buddha in the masters, the presence of the master within the student or the presence of deceased loved ones in our minds and hearts.

Relational psychotherapists also assume that the true Self does not see others as completely separate. Self-realized persons see that others are necessarily perceived through the lense of their own selves. In “working through” their past relationships they realize that what they once assumed was merely their own undivided subjectivity, is actually an inner community of presences, especially including their early caretakers. Mother and father are no longer only out there, but in here. In the true Self there is no longer a categorical separation between I and not-I. Thus, relational psychotherapists might agree with Christian contemplatives that our private selves and our everyday social reality is intersubjective. But they could not follow Christians into a transcendent dimension where even nature, the deceased and those not yet born share intersubjectivity. Psychotherapy makes no claims about ultimate reality, one way or another. It is always grounded in the physical world of concrete human relationship.

What do the three traditions have to offer one another? What truths and values in each one complement those in others, perhaps fulfilling or rounding out dimensions of the self which might be hidden or obscured in the other traditions?

Christian contemplatives might learn from relational therapists how it is that our past disordered relationships live on within us in spite of good intentions and even in spite of apparently diligent prayer. They might learn to acknowledge the existence of a personal unconscious and to respect the dimension of psyche as one possible location for God’s presence. Rather than rejecting psychotherapy as a secular practice, many Christians might consider that remembering the emotional details of early family dynamics while in Christ’s presence is a valid form of intercessory prayer, self-knowing and healing. Christian contemplatives might learn from Buddhists the importance of this present moment and the value of letting go of all thinking, images and concepts (sometimes including our concepts of Jesus and God) as a way to make fresh, joyous contact with our lives, with other people, with nature and with the real Christ. Of course, contemplative apophaticists have always spoken about the value of going beyond concepts and about how God is beyond all concepts and thoughts. But American Christian experience has been dominated by the evangelical “Crystal Cathedral” spirituality with its ostentatious, triumphal language and its rigid, judgemental, confessional boundaries. The tremendous popularity of Buddhism in America, especially among the young, reminds Christians of Jesus own simple approach to prayer and God-awareness (Matthew 6:5-8).

Relational therapists might learn from Buddhists that the self is very much more interdependent than they thought and that within the self one might find not only one’s own family of origin but all sentient beings, all elements in the cosmos and finally the eternal Buddha-nature. They might discover a larger Self and a Buddha-mind which include but also transcend our previous intimate interactions. Relational therapists might learn from Christians that the historical self’s interpersonality is but one

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small echo of the larger Self's cosmic relationship to another Subject. If they look into their own experience with a Christian contemplative faith, they too might find that eternal Subject who has always loved them from within and through the subjectivity and love of their primary caretakers, teachers and mentors. They too might learn to perceive a vast eternal consciousness and subjectivity living deep within the consciousness and subjectivity of each unique person, an awareness which is unconditioned by one's concrete historical relationships.

Relational therapists might also learn from both spiritual traditions the value of practicing virtue and focusing on the happiness of others rather than oneself. For example, all three traditions affirm the value of non-judgmental awareness. However, though relational psychotherapists say that judging is often a defense mechanism (projection, idealization, and so on), they are not authorized within the confines of their own quasi-scientific teachings to declare not judging a virtue that ought to be pursued for a higher purpose. Relational psychotherapists in dialogue with spiritual practitioners might notice that the most beautiful virtuous acts often happen in persons who have let go of their psychological selves and allowed something greater, something unconditioned, to come through them. Truly virtuous acts have a certain recognizable quality which seems to transcend the individual person who does them. When spiritual persons are asked, "Who is it that acts virtuously," the Buddhists reply that it is not the conventional "I," but rather the Buddha-nature shining through the "I." And Christian contemplative reply that it is "Not I, but Christ in me." For Christians and some Buddhists, compassionate presence and the virtues which follow are qualities of being which are passed on from an ultimate ground of intersubjective Presence, rather than something invented by each individual person in the moment.

Buddhists might learn from Christians that the overcoming of subject-object duality in the realization of emptiness is only one aspect of another great awakening, that of Subject-to-Subject trinitarian presence. Even while some Mahayana Buddhists make an important distinction between eternal and conventional truths (The Doctrine of "Two Truths"), they often imply that the conventional self is simply a hindrance. These Buddhists might learn from relational therapists the importance of having a conventional self, even if it is in some sense ultimately "empty." Many Buddhists label all attachment as bad. They might learn to see how our earliest emotional attachments are the necessary food for the nourishment of a healthy, free, relational self. Buddhists might then learn to emphasize more clearly the importance of family life as a compassionate nesting ground for the development of true selves who are not afraid of intimacy.

Most Buddhist Masters and Christian contemplative saints were celibate monks or nuns. Thus, both of these traditions benefit by hearing from psychotherapists about the important role of sexuality in psychological wholeness and also how specific behavior patterns in intimate family life can detract or enhance spiritual life. Both Christian contemplatives and Buddhists might learn from relational therapists to beware of "spiritualizing" everyone's problems, and instead help them to notice that some of their problems in relationship might call for concrete relational acts such as sharing opinions and feelings, speaking the hard truth, setting emotional boundaries and challenging political and ecclesiastical authority. Meditation, contemplation and prayer must never be substitutes for dealing with others in a straightforward manner or hiding out from the world.



From all three traditions we learn that individual selves are complex mysteries of co-presence. In a sense we are never alone, but exist in a vast interconnected web of relationships which transcend time and space. The spiritual traditions suggest that we live within a great Mystery which in some way “seeks” our liberation and happiness, whether we call that God or the Buddha-nature. Family, neighborhood, international, global and cosmic interdependence is not something we need to achieve. It is something that we are, and in our deepest selves we feel called to participate in it more completely.

As we move into the 21st century we need what the Buddhists call “Big Mind,” and what Christians call the “Body of Christ.” We need big hearts, big empathy, big joy and a moment-to-moment readiness to welcome everyone and all of creation into new life on this planet. We need to accept the natural desire of our Big Selves who enjoy birthing a love that is greater than ourselves. On some level, all three of the traditions we’ve considered would applaud our decision to carry this simple, quiet chant into our everyday lives, at home, at work and in nature: “I am in you and you are in me.” All three traditions, Buddhist, Christian and psychotherapeutic, suggest that the question, “Who am I?” cannot be answered apart from “Who are we?” In a dramatic break from all previous human history, it is now clear that that “we” is all of us.

