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## **Not Knowing is Most Intimate:**

### **Psychoanalysis, Zen, and the Way of Not Knowing**

*Dizang said, "Where are you going?"*  
*Fayan said, "Around on pilgrimage."*  
*Dizang said, "What is the purpose of pilgrimage?"*  
*Fayan said: "I don't know."*  
*Dizang said, "Not knowing is most intimate."*

*-Book of Equanimity, Case 20*

Just a few months after beginning therapy with me, Eva faced a frightening series of events. First there was a shadow on a mammogram, then a series of tests, then a breast cancer diagnosis. A clinician herself, Eva is well able to identify and talk about the anxieties that come up during this process. She has practiced mindfulness meditation, and can often approach her psyche and emotions with nonjudgmental awareness. And yet, despite these strengths and skills, she finds herself terrified as she looks to an uncertain future. She feels completely out of control and in the dark about what is to come. She also feels complete panic when she considers the idea of death. "I used to think the goal was to find ways to feel more in control," she tells me, "but I'm starting to think I'd like to have a better relationship to the things I can't know or control. I don't know what will happen going forward, and I need to find a way to be okay with that." How might we understand Eva's request?

In his new book *The Trauma of Everyday Life: Perspectives from Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*, Mark Epstein explores how both psychoanalysis and Buddhism see trauma and suffering as inherent in our state of being. The suffering of loss, loneliness, incompleteness, and fear are unavoidable parts of life. Epstein talks

about our task as not transcending or avoiding this trauma, but rather moving into it as a way of opening our hearts and minds.

### **Practices of the Light, Practices of the Dark**

In this article, I'd like to explore another kind of experience that is taken up by both Buddhism and psychoanalysis, and one that is often experienced as traumatic: encounters with the unknown. We often experience the unknown as frightening and out of control, and so we do our best to either avoid the unknown or bring it into the realm of knowing. We prefer to reinstate our sense of knowing and control to developing a relationship to what is not known. And yet, so much of our work as psychotherapists requires that we cultivate an ability to tolerate the aspects of experience that remain confusing, strange, and unlit.

In both psychological and spiritual work, we find both practices of the light, and practices of the dark. Practices of the light are those in which we work with awareness, our more or less conscious mind, our thoughts, feelings, and patterns of relationship. In psychotherapy, these include working with cognitions, becoming aware of emotional states, and paying attention to the dynamics of our relationships. These are certainly essential aspects of most any therapy or analysis, and can bring real shifts in how we experience our lives.

In spiritual practice, mindfulness is currently a very popular practice of awareness. In mindfulness, meditators practice sustained moment-to-moment awareness of mental states and processes. Practitioners may attend to bodily states, and tendencies of thought, emotion, and evaluation. A common instruction is that when we inevitably find ourselves on familiar thought trains in meditation, we label "thinking" and return to awareness of the present. Mindfulness is an incredibly helpful practice that can bring us great relief from entrenched habits of the body-mind. It gives us a way to stay present, breath by breath, in the midst of all that life brings.

Both psychoanalysis and Zen are, most fundamentally, practices of the darkness. We hold as a core value the importance of being able to hang out with what is unknown, with the unilluminated facets of ourselves. In the process of doing this, we have to be willing to tolerate quite a bit of pain, confusion, fear, and

boredom. To practice in the dark, we practice staying present with what we don't know. This involves working with a pressure to know everything, to catalog the known world and then fix the painful part, for ourselves and also for others.

### **Psychoanalysis and the Unknown**

In psychoanalysis, we make a foundational place for the unconscious, that aspect of the psyche that is unknown to us. The idea of the unconscious has been richly developed in the psychoanalytic literature. In Freud's early thinking, the topographic model, contents of the mind that are disturbing are repressed, and these repressed thoughts and feelings form the content of the unconscious. In this model the unconscious is a sort of repository for forbidden wishes, often sexual or aggressive in nature (Freud, 1933). An early psychoanalytic idea is that the goal of treatment is to gain access to the repressed unconscious, through the use of free associations, dreams, slips of the tongue, and transference. Once we allow the unconscious to shine in the light of awareness, mourning and healing can happen.

Freud's thinking evolved to a consideration of what he called the dynamic unconscious (1915). In this model, the unconscious is not a location for repressed contents, but rather a psychic process. It is a mode of experience that works by different rules than those of our daylight, conscious mind. We can see unconscious logic at work vividly in dreams. In dreams, emissaries of the unconscious, anything can happen. Time and space and identity are pliable. Freud identified five characteristics of the unconscious: timelessness, displacement, condensation, replacement of internal by external reality, and absence of mutual contradiction (Freud, 1900, 1915). In other words, in dreams and in the unconscious mind, time is not always sequential, and space is pliable. We find time and space fantastically expanded, or infinitely repeated. We can fly, or become someone else, or move back in time. And so, Freud pointed us to the ways that as we turn our gaze toward the unknown, unconscious mind, we are not bound by the restrictions of our logical, conscious mind.

Later analysts took up the experience of the unknown in variegated ways. Many have been influenced by the ideas of Wilfred Bion, who put forth the importance of negative capability in psychic life. Negative capability, based on a turn

of phrase by the poet John Keats, is the ability to tolerate the pain and confusion of not knowing, rather than imposing repetitive or omnipotent certainties upon an ambiguous situation or emotional difficulty (Bion, 19xx, Symington, 1996).

Winnicott also kept a place for the unknown in his work, culminating in his positing a form of “communication that is forever silent, which he called the ‘incommunicado element’ present at the core of each individual” (Winnicott, 1963). And more recent psychoanalytic writers like Bollas, Ogden, Grotstein, Eigen, and Ghent have further explored the relationship to the unknown in its aspects as metaphor, faith, dreaming, surrender, and reverie (Bollas, 19xx, Ogden, 2001; Grotstein, 2000; Ghent, 1990; Eigen, 1981). Our relationship to the unknown is also a theme in the writing of Mark Epstein, and particularly in his book *Psychotherapy Without the Self: A Buddhist Perspective*.

### **Zen and the Vast Mysterious**

In the Zen tradition, the unknown is highly valued as a fertile place, and as a place of rest. In our tradition, meditation is a process not only of enlarging the zone of the mindful known. We also sit with all that we don’t know, all that is not certain, all that is beyond our control. There are a few reasons for this attention to what the old Chinese masters called the ‘vast mysterious. First of all, it is in alignment with reality. Most of what is happening in the universe, and even in our own heart-minds, is not known to us. According to physicist Richard Panek, 96% of the mass of universe is either dark matter or dark energy, which cannot be seen directly, as they neither emit nor absorbs light. We only infer them because of their functions, but scientists still don’t know what they are or how they behave. Panek describes this discovery as “The ultimate Copernican revolution. Not only are we not at the center of the universe, we’re not even made of the same stuff as the vast majority of the universe (Panek, 2011). And so it is important to come into relationship to the unknown simply because that is realistically most of what is around us and also what we are made of.

We also find that it is skillful to be on friendly terms with uncertainty and unknowing particularly at challenging times in life. When we or a loved one faces a frightening diagnosis, when the job or relationship we’ve counted on suddenly

dissolves, or when we take a hard look at some of the social and political challenges of our times, we find our way eased when we can allow for the comfortable presence of not knowing. It's also important to acknowledge the times that the unknown, dark place can be brutally shattering, and can lead to the transformation of the personality.

And, to do the work of psychotherapy, we have to be able to tolerate considerable not knowing. We often have to be patient in the dark, with a faith that something is happening, even if we don't see it. We spend many years training in skills, in ways to be helpful. What can be even harder to learn is how to tolerate the anxiety of not knowing, and the pain and confusion and joy that can come with it.

A final reason to cultivate a relationship to the unknown is that here we can find a place to rest. When we don't have to strain toward knowing or awareness or making sense of things, we can find a place of great peace and silence, a place where we can lay down all our efforts and striving.

### **Cultivating Negative Capability**

And so both Zen and psychoanalysis are, in important ways, practices of the dark. We seek not only various kinds of enlightenment, but we also submit ourselves to the process of endarkenment, of coming into relationship with the unknown. To be truly on these paths, we have to lie down in the darkness and experience not knowing, which can involve a lot of surrender, and perhaps fear.

Anyone who has studied psychoanalytic texts has come across descriptions of how an analyst ideally functions. Freud recommended "evenly hovering attention." Bion noted the importance of being "without memory or desire" and having "negative capability." Winnicott and Milner stressed the importance of spontaneity and creativity. Modern relational analysts have written about the importance of realizing the multiplicity of the self (ref) and the need to work with paradox (ref.). One quality that many of these descriptions have in common is the capacity to not only dwell in the known world, but to be able to dip into the darkness, into the realms where ordinary certainties no longer hold sway, and where something new can be born.

Yet what is more elusive is how we learn and develop these capacities. We aren't taught these skills in graduate school, or even in analytic institutes. Certainly, one's own analysis can enhance these capacities. I have found that Zen koan practice, which I will briefly describe, explicitly develops these capacities in a systematic way.

So, what are koans? We usually understand things by taking them up to the top floor of the mind, the conscious mind of descriptions and categories, and finding a slot they fit into. Koans are meant to open a different way of being and thinking. Koans trade in metaphor, metonymy, ambiguity, and transformation. In taking up the koan way, we find that the koans become teachers in exploring these qualities in our own daily lived experience.

When Buddhism came to China in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, it came into intimate contact with the indigenous religion, Taoism. The result of this mutual influence was Chan, a school of Buddhism that emphasized lived experience over doctrine, and the primacy of teaching as a dynamic relationship and vehicle of awakening. In Chan, enlightenment is situated in relationship, and depictions of these encounters are passed down to us in the koans. By the time Chan was in full flower by the 9<sup>th</sup> century, it had become relied on by many people to help them through times of incredible social and political upheaval. Koans are records of moments when someone fell through a gap, a time when everything opened up. They also show us how we might undertake the same journey, in our own way. In this way they show us moments of awakening, and also show us how to cultivate such moments of our own, and then what to do with our awakening once we find it.

When we work with koans, we take them into our meditation, and also into our everyday life, so koan practice is not separate from the very fabric of our lives.

What are some ways koans cultivate modes of being that are helpful to the analytic therapist? First, they develop what the Buddhist scholar Peter Hershock calls "improvisational virtuosity" (2005), the capacity to respond naturally to the situations in which we find ourselves. Because we cannot predict what will happen

in any session, in any moment, we must have the capacity to respond with innovation. The old Chan teachers, who were also primarily concerned with how to respond skillfully to suffering, developed the koan way to practice playful improvisation. In the koan at the beginning of this paper, a monk and his teacher are engaged in an improvisational dialog that vastly expands the field of awareness. We can play along with their exploration of what it means to be a pilgrim, going around seeking something. But what if all we come up with in our searches is “I don’t know?” Dizang reminds us to settle in right there. “Not knowing is most intimate.” Their simple, honest conversation sets Fayuan free. In Chan, as in psychoanalysis, exchanges are not only verbal, and can involve somatic and active responses.

In Chan and psychoanalysis, freedom happens in the context of liberating relationships (Hershock, 2005). The relationship between Chan student and teacher is profoundly intimate. It is in the context of this relationship that awakening is gestated, born, and then developed and matured. Many Zen koans are actually dialogs between a student and teacher, a record of the exchange that lead to a moment of waking up. In analytic language we might say they are records of successful deep interpretations. But in Zen, as in psychoanalysis, so much of the practice has to do with developing relationships with teachers, students, and communities. It is part and parcel of Chan that we all wake up together.

Koans also take up the issue of how to respond to impossible situations, like psychoanalysis! Life has a way of presenting us with questions that carry with them knots of pain and confusion. Can I be happy? Why do I suffer? Who am I? What happens after we die? In our work, people bring us their biggest questions and most stuck places. In Chan, we take up such situations with koans. The koan way helps us work with the unpredictability of life, so we can approach it not so much as a problem to solve, but rather as a creative field that we seek to expand.

It is a central value of both Zen Buddhism and psychoanalysis that to live fully and effectively, it helps to come into creative contact with the unknown. In practice we find that this inevitably brings with it exploration of many layers of pain, confusion, fear, which is why we need dedicated forms for their cultivation. We find these arenas of contact in the consulting room, in the meditation room, and in the passionate pursuit of creative works.

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