

Psychotherapy and Buddhism: An Unfolding Dialogue

by Janice Priddy

The Four Noble Truths in Buddhism

1) There is suffering; 2) there is the cause of suffering; 3) there is the cessation of suffering; 4) there is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.

1. Disease

There is suffering, unsatisfactoriness. This unsatisfactoriness refers to disease, discomfort, anxiety, disappointment, longing. It includes all shades and variations of psychic and physical states that are imperfect and discontented.

2. Cause of the Disease

The origin or cause of suffering is attachment to desire/craving.

There are 3 types of craving: 1) craving for sensual desires; 2) craving for being; 3) craving for non-being

3. Cure

There is the cessation of suffering/unsatisfactoriness.

4. Medicine

There is the way/the path that leads to the cessation of suffering. This is the Noble Eightfold Path.

- 1. Right Understanding, Right View**
- 2. Right Aspiration, Right Thinking**
- 3. Right Speech**
- 4. Right Action**
- 5. Right Livelihood**
- 6. Right Effort**
- 7. Right Mindfulness**
- 8. Right Concentration**

Why is there a dialogue happening between Buddhism and Psychotherapy?

- 1. Both address suffering**

Polly Young-Eisendrath offers a comprehensive description of suffering when she writes: “Both Buddhism and psychoanalysis have the goals of alleviating suffering. By suffering I mean specifically the Buddhist notion of dukkha, which is typically translated as “suffering” in English. Dukkha can be understood to refer

to a state of being off-centre or out of balance, like a bone slightly out of its socket or a wheel riding off its axle. A state of being in which we are out of kilter, a subjective disturbance that may be as mild as a momentary frustration or as severe as a depressive or psychotic state.” (Safran, p. 310)

Dukkha: another translation - pervasive unsatisfactoriness

Mark Epstein’s description of suffering: “All life is suffering, the Buddha taught in the first of his Four Noble Truths. Physical illness and mental illness are suffering, not to obtain what one desires is suffering; to be united with what one dislikes or separated from who one likes is suffering; even our own selves – never quite as substantial as we might wish them to be – are suffering.” (Epstein, p. 4)

Said in a different way by Ajahn Viradhammo: “What do you have that you don’t want, and what do you want that you don’t have?”

Ajahn Chah said: “My way of training people involves some suffering because suffering is the Buddha’s path to enlightenment. He wanted us to see suffering, its cause, its end, and the path leading to that end. This is the way taken by all the Awakened Ones. If you don’t go this way, there is no way out.” (Buddhist Calendar, May 2007)

2. **Both Offer Transformation**

“Both Zen practice and p/a challenge us to become aware of the complex systems that constitute our core beliefs and our patterns of relating. These patterns come vividly to life as we respond in our own characteristic fashion to the teacher and the analyst. Our inner distress will be reflected in our outer modes of attachment, expectation and defensiveness. With luck, and with a good teacher or a good analyst, the old systems are perturbed just enough to destabilize our old reflexive ways of thinking and behaving, and new patterns can then emerge, centered on a wholly new view of self, other, and world” (Magid, p. 139)

3. **Both are Non-theistic**

Both psychoanalysis and Buddhism are non-theistic. In the end, we each have to do the work ourselves. There is no higher being to rely on. One of the last counsels the Buddha gave to his followers was: “Be a lamp unto yourselves.”

4. **Both Require Rigorous Training for the Psychotherapist/Teacher**

In both traditions, it is understood that the teacher/psychotherapist has already and still continues to “walk the path”, thus being able to guide others as a result of rigorous training and experience.

Psychoanalysis and Buddhism: An Unfolding Dialogue

The Presenters' Goals

It is our goal to explore, with you, the following questions:

1. What does each tradition uniquely illuminate and what does each omit?
2. How can psychoanalysis help spiritual seekers?
3. How might contemplative disciplines such as Buddhism enrich psychoanalysis?

(Rubin, Jeffrey, "A well-Lived Life: Psychoanalytic and Buddhist Contributions,"
Psychoanalysis and Buddhism, p. 387)

Psychoanalysis and Buddhism: An Unfolding Dialogue

Differences

Goal in Buddhism

The final goal is Enlightenment/Nirvana/Nibbana (Pali)

However, what is enlightenment? Enlightenment is often described as the uncreated, unoriginated, unformed, the deathless. Buddhist practitioners are encouraged to enquire into the question, “What is enlightenment?” by investigating what it is NOT.

Traditional Definition: *Enlightenment is the realization of the unconditioned through the abandonment of self-centred craving. The realization of enlightenment is a transcendent insight.*

Contemporary Definition from Ajahn Sumedho: *“Enlightenment means getting away from the jungle. When we’re inclining towards enlightenment, we’re moving towards the peace of the mind. Although the conditions of the mind may not be peaceful at all, the mind itself is a peaceful place. Here we are making a distinction between the mind and the conditions of the mind. The conditions of the mind can be happy, miserable, elated, depressed, loving or hating, worrying or fear-ridden, doubting or bored. They come and go in the mind, but the mind itself, like the space in this room, stays just as it is” (Ajahn Sumedho, p. 34).*

Playful Definition for Buddhist practitioners: *“I don’t really know what enlightenment is or could possibly be; the only thing I hope for, and work slowly towards, is a process of gradual dis-endarkenment”* (Coltart, p. 175).

The end goal of Buddhism, enlightenment, may not be reached in this lifetime. Walking the path (the noble eight-fold path) that points the way to enlightenment is the process towards the end goal.

Ajahn Chah’s words: *“Even if it takes hundreds or thousands of lifetimes to get enlightened, so what? However many lifetimes it takes we just keep practicing with a heart at ease, comfortable with our pace.”* (Buddhist Calendar, April 2007)

Methods to Achieve the Goal

shift the locus of subjectivity from representations of self to awareness itself: to who it is that is thinking this, feeling this, experiencing this, having this sensation, behaving in this way (Safran, p. 65)

Awareness of negative mind sets: greed, hatred, delusion

Development of positive mind sets: the divine abidings – loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity

From Ajahn Viradhammo: The brilliance of Ajahn Chah's way of teaching was through his demonstration of the divine abidings (loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity). Within his/the open heart, there was profound peace and equanimity.

Differences

Student-Teacher Relationship: Exploring Personal Histories

In the first part of my presentation I explore two major differences in the relationship between the student and teacher in Buddhism and the relationship between the client and therapist in psychotherapy. The first area examines the differences in attitudes towards exploration of the personal history of a student/client, while the second area reviews the complex challenges in the unconscious dynamics in the relationship.

A Truckload of Dung – Where Can I Dump It?

Since my experience has been exclusively with Theravadan Buddhism, I will be exploring this topic primarily from that perspective. Also, It must be kept in mind that the goals and the methods to achieve these goals are different from the goals and methods in psychotherapy.

The monks and nuns see their role towards the lay meditators as spiritual friends and mentors. However, for the sake of simplicity I will use the language of teacher/student when I am referring to the dyad between the monks and nuns and the lay spiritual seeker. The verbs they use for their role include “guiding, leading, suggesting, encouraging, and inspiring.”

A major distinction in the teacher/student relationship may arise from the differences in the cultural backgrounds and spiritual traditions of the Eastern Buddhist teachers and the Western meditators.

Jack Engler writes:

“When Burma’s most renowned scholar and meditation master, Ven. Mahasi Sayadaw, visited America in 1980, he held a meeting with Western insight meditation teachers about teaching. I remember Jack Kornfield asking in his intrepid way, ‘What do you do when students bring psychological problems to you?’ There was a hurried consultation with the other Burmese teachers and some evident confusion. He turned back to Jack and asked, ‘What psychological problems?’ At the end of his U.S. visit, he remarked on how many Western students seemed to be suffering from a range of problems he wasn’t familiar with in Asia. A “new type of suffering,” he said – “psychological suffering”! As is now well known, the dalai lama, too, on his first visits to the West, expressed shock at the degree of low self-esteem and self-hatred he encountered in Western practitioners.

Engler continues,

In the Theravadan Buddhist meditation centers where I practised in Asia, students typically do not present “psychological” problems to teachers. Why they don’t is a complex issue. If you observe teachers working with their students, it is clear that they don’t cue for personal issues or become involved in the content of students’ experience. Their emphasis is exclusively on noting objects of awareness simply in their arising and passing away.

But this phenomenon seems to be more than simply a difference in technique. Mindfulness as a rule does not seem to facilitate uncovering in a psychological or psychodynamic sense in Asian students as it does in Western students. This struck me in the accounts that very advanced Indian Buddhists gave of their practice. With one minor exception, their self-reports were notable for the ABSENCE of just the kind of material that emerges for Western practitioners when censorship is lifted. This may have more to do with a different self-structure or experience of self in those cultures than with how mindfulness is practised and guided” (Safran, p. 45, 46)

I had an alienating experience with a famous Burmese meditation master when I did a retreat with him in the early 1990’s here in Ontario. I remember how nervous I was when I went to my first interview with him. We had been given very specific instructions on what to say when we were in the interview. They

went something like this: I noted the arising of the breath. I noted the falling of the breath – and then you had to tell him how long you were able to stay with the rising and falling of the breath without losing concentration, and when you did lose concentration, how long it took before you were aware of losing it. Well, I have never been a great “Mindfulness of Breathing” meditator, so I didn’t have a great deal of concentrated awareness to report. Also, I had been told that it was his birthday that day. I sat opposite the Sayadaw on the floor, and before I knew what I was saying, the words, “Happy Birthday” popped out of my mouth. He smiled slightly, and then there was a pregnant pause, until I realized that I was supposed to start reporting my meditation practice to him. It was then that he placed a large bamboo fan in front of his face. My nervousness quadrupled. I couldn’t see him. I had to converse with him through this bamboo fan. Was there something wrong with me that he had to hold this fan between us? Did he do this with everyone else? Was it because I wished him a happy birthday? I felt so alienated from him. From my point of view, the interview disintegrated the moment he placed the fan in front of his face, and I continued to fall to pieces when my reporting was met with very few words from him. I spent most of that retreat dealing with intense feelings of anger.

I later discovered that the fan is called a “Dhamma fan” and is a symbolic reminder that the two people are going beyond personal histories, leaving personal histories outside the room, so to speak, in order to enter into a sacred space where the true nature of the mind can be explored. In retrospect, I wished

I had known about these cultural differences – not only the fan, but the limited lack of response from the teacher to the aspiring student.

Polly Young-Eisendrath, a Jungian psychoanalyst and Zen practitioner, writes:

“In all my experiences with Buddhist teachers in many traditions, I have not encountered even one who wanted to speak with me about the details of my own emotional or interpersonal background, UNLESS these were interfering with my practice. Rather, the focus of our encounters was my developing the methods of responding to all kinds of experience with attention and equanimity. These methods were carefully cultivated through instruction, encouragement, and critical feedback. Perhaps an analogy would be learning to ride a bicycle or to drive a car. We learn how to do these things in a safe environment (for example, a parking lot), trying to do what people in general have done to learn them. Our idiosyncrasies and limitations may enter in, but the focus is on the general method used to master the vehicle. This is analogous to Buddhist practice. Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, might be compared to solving one’s personal mysteries or puzzles in the context of becoming freer of their troubling effects. We cannot do the work of psychoanalysis without combing through the details of our personal idiosyncrasies and emotional life” (Safran, p. 328-329).

I feel fortunate because I have had the opportunity to train with teachers in these traditions who are willing to “hear” the personal problems of the students, and have the ability to help the student weave these problems into their meditation

practice. Ajahn Viradhammo tries to build a relationship of trust with the student by empathic listening, not making decisions for the student, and finally, by continually encouraging him/her to “hang in” with awareness. Also, since many of the lay Western Buddhist teachers have undergone intensive psychotherapy, they understand the importance of personal work.

Engler writes,

“It appears that many of these personal issues uncovered or confronted in Western mindfulness practice aren’t being healed simply by more meditation or other forms of spiritual practice alone. That’s hard to accept and not what those of us who were drawn to these traditions and their promise of total liberation may want to hear. But specific problems such as early abuse, addiction, conflicts in love and sexuality, depression, problematic personality traits, and certainly mental illness require specific attention, and probably ongoing personal, professional, and communal support to resolve. Problems in love and work, and issues around trust and intimacy in relationships in particular, can’t be resolved simply by watching the moment-to-moment flow of thoughts, feeling, and sensations in the mind. Thirty years of watching students try this approach bear that out. Kornfield notes that many students leave ashrams or monasteries or meditation centers after years of devoted practice and find, with a great deal of confusion and discouragement, even disillusionment, that they still have not faced the core anxieties and conflicts that constrict them” (Safran, p. 44-45).

There is a major challenge here for Buddhist teachers. Frequently, the meditator's personal problems interfere with the meditation practice, and as a result, the Buddhist teacher often becomes the receptacle for these problems.

It is doubtful if the Buddhist teacher will feel comfortable or be skilled enough to delve into personal problems. As Engler noted, a student often begins to feel stuck in his/her practice. Repression, schizoid tendencies, emotional and physical trauma could be impeding the meditator's progress, and it is here that psychotherapy will be invaluable. However, will the meditator see these tendencies? Many people have chosen meditation as an escape from pain, hoping it will be a panacea for all their struggles. Meditation becomes a good excuse to withdraw from the world and avoid the pain of their personal lives.

Engler clarifies this view when he writes,

"The wish that spiritual practice could, by itself, prove a panacea for all mental suffering is widespread and certainly understandable. But it unfortunately prevents teachers and students from making use of other resources. And worse, students are sometimes led to believe by their teachers or their own superego that if they encounter difficulties, it's because they haven't practiced long enough or haven't been practicing correctly or wholeheartedly. The message too often is that the problem is in the quality of the student's practice rather than in the mistaken assumption that practice should cure all. This leads to needless self-accusation and guilt, compounding how bad they already feel" (Safran, p. 46).

It is here that the role of psychotherapy is invaluable to Buddhist meditation practice. As Polly Young-Eisendrath writes, *“Psychoanalysis was designed to transform individual pain and suffering, not to respond to spiritual questions”* (Safran, p. 306)

Differences

Student-Teacher Relationship: Unconscious Dynamics

Rubin states:

“While many contemplative traditions acknowledge that humans confront resistances to growth and have great difficulty changing, they tend to lack the comprehensive understanding of and systematic approach to unconsciousness that psychoanalysis offers.” They do not always appreciate “the way intentions and actions may have multiple unconscious meanings and functions” (Safran, p. 394).

I would like to draw on a simple example to illustrate this point. Monastics in the Theravadan tradition cannot handle money, and as a result, their work as teachers is not paid for by the student. However, there is the tradition of “donations” or “offerings” whereby anyone can freely give to the teacher, be it money, practical help, or personal requisites such as food, clothing or medicine. Ajahn Viradhammo asked me if this “free” spiritual counseling might have an impact on the relationship. Many responses came to mind, but I chose to discuss the “intent” behind the action since this is such a major part of Buddhist training.

Would the student then give because he/she felt guilty? Would the student go overboard in the act of giving? Would the student give according to his/her subjective evaluation of the relationship? In other words, what is the unconscious motivation behind the student's act of giving. Is the student clear about the intention behind the act of giving in response to receiving spiritual advice from the teacher?

Idealization in the Student-Teacher Relationship

I had the privilege of meeting Ajahn Chah in 1980 when I traveled to north-eastern Thailand on a pilgrimage with a small group of Buddhists from Perth, Australia. It was an arduous trip from Bangkok to the monastery, and we arrived early in the morning after an all night train ride. I vividly remember arriving at the monastery and being informed that Ajahn Chah had just finished his breakfast. All the activities of the day, meals and meditation, happened in a large meeting hall, and we were invited to join Ajahn Chah there. I was so excited to be in the presence of this renowned meditation master. Wasn't he going to just glance at me and instantly I would be enlightened?

I tried to compose myself by breathing deeply and sitting respectfully in the meditation posture. I was also certain that he would be able to read my mind, and even more frightening, know how many lifetimes I had lived and why I was still treading this path. Such delusion. On my pedestal he was higher than the

CN Tower. And then he did one small action that I will never forget. While he was glancing at all of these tired but aspiring pilgrims, he placed a piece of beetle nut in his mouth and vigorously began to chew it, like a cow chewing on its cud. His penetrating glance fell on me. I froze. I was totally exposed. And then to my amazement, he bent forward, and spit the huge wad of beetle nut into a spittoon. He then chuckled to himself. It's interesting what I did with this interesting scenario. I was not yet able to let Ajahn Chah fall off the CN Tower; instead I thought he was trying to teach me a lesson, in psychotherapeutic language, about idealization and projection.

In Buddhism, as in psychotherapy, the student frequently idealizes the teacher, What happens when students cannot bring to their teachers strong feelings they have toward them?

Polly Young Eisendrath, in her article, Transference and Transformation in Buddhism, writes:

"In Buddhism a teacher's unwillingness of inability to deal honestly with criticisms or shortcomings openly within the community can have a very negative effect on the transference in the student-teacher relationship. A collective experience that the teacher's authority is sacrosanct – never to be questioned on even practical issues, much less spiritual ones – will exaggerate and reinforce negative transferences in students.

The teacher, in turn, could mistakenly identify himself/herself personally with the powers of this transference...Such leaders may demand adherence to their particular ideas or become capricious in their influence because they believe that they personally have some unique powers or methods. The charismatic leader may also ignore certain ethical or social codes of decency, believing that he or she is beyond criticism” (Safran, p. 317).

In many Buddhist communities in the West, there have been countless examples of the misuse of power by a teacher. One book recommended to me which is a behind-the-scenes account in a Zen community in California is entitled “Shoes Outside the Door”.

I have lived in Theravadan Buddhist monasteries for short periods of time, and know how quickly unconscious dynamics come into play. This will be no mystery to those of you who lived in psychotherapy group homes.

A Personal Experience

When I was in the process of compiling this section on transference and countertransference, I suddenly realized how protective I have often felt towards Ajahn Viradhammo. Sometimes, when I have been privy to personal interviews or have been involved in group interviews with him, I have noticed the strong feelings in the room, and the potential transferences that may be developing. I

have often worried that he might not be able to protect himself. So I guess this is my stuff, right?

Yes, that's true – it is my stuff because very early in our teacher/student relationship I developed a strong positive father transference towards him, and the longings that ensued were often overwhelming. Fortunately I was aware of this transference and was able to talk to him about it. In hindsight, I feel fortunate to have been given the opportunity to work with these longings in two distinct ways – in my personal psychotherapy, and also in meditation.

In my personal therapy I discovered that I had retreated, at the age of 11, into a deep schizoid state. It took years of personal and group therapy, including long hours of sustained intensive work. Listening to the language of the body in an authentic movement group, to reach the wounded place and to allow the grief to emerge. It continues to be an ongoing process; just when I think the grieving is done and I understand everything about this personal trauma, something new arises. Recently many of us had the opportunity to meet Robert Stolorow. His candid and heart wrenching account of the states he entered after his wife's sudden death opened up more unconscious dimensions for me. He spoke a language that I had never been able to articulate when he described a grieving process that engulfed him at a conference 18 months after his wife's death. He wrote: There was a dinner at that conference for all the panelists, many of whom were my old and good friends and close colleagues. Yet, as I looked around the

ballroom, they all seemed like strange and alien beings to me. Or more accurately, I seemed like a strange and alien being – not of this world.An unbridgeable gulf seemed to open up, separating me forever from my friends and colleagues. They could never even begin to fathom my experience, I thought to myself, because we now lived in altogether different worlds” (Stolorow, 1999).

Like Stolorow, after my father’s sudden death, I too felt like an alien being in a world that moments before had been warm and friendly.

Stolorow theorizes:

*“Painful or frightening affect becomes traumatic when the attunement that the child needs from the surround to assist in the tolerance, containment, modulation, and integration of this affect is profoundly **absent**....an attunement cannot be felt by the traumatized person, because of the profound sense of singularity built into the experience of trauma itself.” (Stolorow, 1999).*

I strongly believe that meditation practice would have never touched that wounded schizoid place. I had to be in relationship with a caring, supportive therapist in order to break down that sense of singularity. I was finally provided the attunement that was lacking when my father died. I think meditation, a solitary practice, was only reinforcing the singularity.

However, when the schizoid place was eventually touched, and the repression around the death of my father lifted, I then began to feel powerful longings. I vividly remember walking past Jim Healy and Philip McKenna one evening during this period. On a leisurely stroll, they were deeply engaged in conversation when I passed them. They both warmly greeted me, saying “Hi Janice”. I think it was hearing them address me personally that sent me into a spin. I felt like my heart was breaking into a thousand pieces. I longed to turn around and join them, to just “be with” these wonderful men, my idealized father figures.

When these powerful longings arose in my meditation practice, Ajahn Viradhammo advised me not to avoid or try to get rid of the longings when they arose in meditation. Instead, he encouraged me to “be with” the powerful feelings with a sense of openness, calmness, and objectivity. “Welcome in the longings”, was his advice. ‘Bring the longings to consciousness, and then just wait.”

I followed his advice. At times the longings were overwhelming. They engulfed me. My heart felt like it was breaking wide open. The waiting was unbearable. Because I had a strong foundation in the meditation practices of concentration and choiceless awareness, I was able to stay with the unbearable. It felt like an eternity. And then something shifted; I became engulfed, not with the pain of the longings, but with a profound sense of peace. The longings had ceased. In their place was peace.

Why did this happen? I think it is because I had brought the longings fully into consciousness; I shared the longings with the teacher, I trusted the teacher's advice. I did not get caught up in my personal history during the meditation. I believe I was able to 'put aside' my personal history because I had explored it in my own therapy. Then I was able to experiment with these intense feelings in the safety of a meditation retreat.

I learned a profound lesson. Beyond the pain, there was a deep peace in my heart. I was resting in a place that was beyond feelings, beyond personal history. However, there is a misunderstood belief among meditators that one can just "let go" in order to achieve some peace and consequently gain profound meditative insights. For the majority of people, it is not that easy. The intensity of the traumatic experience must be appreciated; also the unconscious methods used to protect the meditator from the pain of the trauma needs to be uncovered. I believe I would not have been able to "bear with the unbearable" in my meditations if the trauma and my way of dealing with the trauma had not been explored in hours of therapy. It was only when I was able to "accept" the longings and understand their source that I was able to allow them "to be". "I" did not actively try to get rid of the longings. I waited, and they ceased. There was little sense of me being an agent in the ceasing of the affect.

I have digressed from the topic of transference and counter-transference, but I have not forgotten about the point of this personal story. Ajahn Viradhammo is

psychologically astute and emotionally balanced, and I do not think he would take advantage of anyone nor let anyone take advantage of him. However, I was aware of my vulnerability and my strong feelings towards him in the transference. I appreciate how quickly this could be turned into something else between a teacher and a student if one or both are not aware of the transference/counter transference dynamic.

There was humility in the manner in which Ajahn Viradhammo offered his advice to me. He did not pretend he knew more than he did, and I feel he was also open to learning from this experience. I did not say to him, "I'm having a strong father transference towards you." That psychoanalytical language would have removed me from the strong feelings I was experiencing, would have protected me from my own vulnerability, and alienated us from one another. But...I chuckled to myself a couple of weeks ago when I heard him relate this wonderful story:

When he first began to teach, he would always notice the big men (big blokes) in the audience who appeared to be bored, and was aware that he wanted to please them. He was puzzled by this. The "little blocks" weren't stirring this reaction. He began to notice the pattern – of trying to please these men, of trying to draw them out of their apparent boredom. It took some time before he realized that these men had become his father who he always wanted to please.

Once he “awoke” to this dynamic, he was not bothered by these “big bored blokes”.

I would like to conclude with Barry Magid’s words that succinctly and eloquently summarize the themes in this section of the presentation. He writes:

Jeffrey Rubins (1996) and Michael Eigen (1998), analysts with strong sympathies for meditation practice, are among those who have documented case after case of experienced meditators whose practice not only failed to adequately address core conflicts and deficits but actually reinforced existing defensive patterns. Too often, it seems that both students and teachers have mastered their pain but succumbed to their impulses, experienced a oneness with all beings but remained in conflict with their families, discovered the emptiness of self but continued to abuse their authority, found peace on their cushions but not in their lives. It is my hope that an understanding of transference and an appreciation of the role of empathy can transform the traditional student-teacher relationship. Good teachers of all persuasions, of course, operate with an intuitive feeling for their students’ transference needs and reactions, but they vary in their capacity to understand and deal with intense transference idealization, eroticized transferences, competitive or conflictual reactions, and the disappointment, rage, and withdrawal that can accompany transference disruptions. Likewise, they may underestimate the extent to which an apparently devoted student may spend years stuck in a role of compliance, having formed a morbid dependency

on the teacher or otherwise succumbed to some form of pathological accommodation, masochistically enduring a painful training solely as a way to maintain a tie to an idealized selfobject. Countertransferentially, coping with idealization, even when not erotically charged, is an ongoing challenge to the latent narcissism of any teacher. Empathy can ensure that a teacher will understand and respect the differing emotional needs, weaknesses, and strengths of different students and not impose a “one-size-fits all” discipline (Safran, p. 257).

The Vast Spectrum of Human Connectedness

The Isolated Mind

Going it Alone

This coming summer I had an incredible opportunity to do a 12-day retreat with an exemplary Buddhist monk and teacher. For many reasons I decided to cancel my place on the retreat. I surprised myself; usually I can't wait to immerse myself into the sacred space of a retreat, despite the demands. However, in my mind's eye, I continued to see myself sitting on a meditation cushion, hour after hour, in solitude and silence, with minimal personal interaction. In the end, I decided I couldn't endure that feeling of aloneness for 12-entire days. I didn't want to “go-it-alone”.

In Philip Ringstrom's commentary on Magid's article in *Psychoanalysis and Buddhism*, he refers to the following personal account by Magid:

"Once when I was ending a visit to my Zen teacher, Joko, I suddenly found myself aware of her advancing years, and it occurred to me that any time with her might be my last. Becoming tearful, I said, 'I may never see you again.' She responded, 'I don't care if I ever see you again. That you know how to practice is what's important.' This brought me up short, but it has proved truer and truer to me over the years. When my wife Deborah was killed in a plane crash, I called Joko and thanked her for giving me the resources to go through the pain of that terrible loss. More and more, when someone would ask me what Joko would say about something, I simply started talking about it myself – there seemed no boundary between my sense of practice and hers" (Safran, p. 283).

Ringstrom questions Magid's perspective of "going it alone", and refers to a comment made by Magid at a conference on the Psychology of Self. During a discussion on Stolorow's paper on trauma, he reports that Magid said that "he never expected anyone to understand his experience and that he had to deal with it on his own. It was the resources Joko had taught him that he relied on to go through the pain of that terrible loss, not Joko herself or any other person." (Safran, p. 292).

Magid, in response to Ringstrom's perceptive challenges, replies:

*“Now that I’ve had a chance to read the published version of Stolorow’s talk, my reaction is somewhat different. I was particularly struck by this sentence: **“It is not just that the traumatized ones and the normals live in different worlds; it is that these discrepant worlds are felt to be essentially and eradically incommensurable”** (Stolorow 1999). The sense of living in a private world, one that is “essentially incommensurable” with that of others, seems a perfect description of the perspective of the isolated mind, which Stolorow and Atwood described, in part, as the belief that **“each individual knows only his own consciousness and is thus forever barred from direct access to experience belonging to other people”** (1992, 9). Now I would say that, in both of our cases, the trauma of a loved one’s sudden death precipitated a transitory re-experience of oneself as an isolated mind – although the immediate subjective experience of that isolation took on differing qualities that were co-determined by our own individual personal histories and our differing intersubjective milieus. Perhaps the next edition of the DSM-IV should find room for ‘Post-traumatic isolated mind syndrome’!*

He continues:

Likewise, my exchange with Joko, in which I tearfully expressed a fear that I would never see her again, might also be understood as a momentary return to an isolated mind perspective – precipitated here merely by the fantasy of her death. And her response, rather than insisting that I have the courage to go it

alone, was a reminder that in practice, there is no such thing as alone” (Safran, p. 296).

In many ways, I feel like I made the decision to cancel my place on the retreat from the perspective of the isolated mind. Ironically, I have experienced the opposite end of the spectrum in meditation retreats where I have felt lovingly supported and held by the other meditators and the teachers, have experienced the peace and clarity of a calm mind, and have momentarily touched on an open heart full of love, and a sense of interconnectedness with all beings.

Magid has coined the phrase “**psychoanalytically informed Zen practice**” (Safran, p. 280). Could we also consider the possibility of a “**Buddhist-informed psychotherapeutic practice**”? His idea has started me to think beyond the mere possibility when he writes:

We all need to learn to experience connection and interconnectedness on a spectrum that runs from intimate, one-on-one relating to an abiding grounding awareness of the fundamental interrelated and co-determined nature of all existence. Psychoanalysts and Buddhists have specialized in understanding the opposite ends of that spectrum. Perhaps the time has come for each side to develop a new appreciation for 1) the pole is has neglected and 2) for the entire spectrum of human relatedness and being.” (p. 298)

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Integration of Buddhism and Psychotherapy

by Diana Powell

My beginning practice:

I began meditating when I was 12, and loved the blissful states I could achieve. But I didn't begin formal meditation until my mid-twenties at a time when I felt lost and confused about my personal and professional life. My goal was to become enlightened and Jack Engler describes this goal perfectly:

The enlightenment ideal itself can be cathected narcissistically as a version—the mother of all versions!—of the grandiose self: as the acme of personal perfection, with all mental defilement and fetters eradicated—the achievement of a purified state of complete self-sufficiency and personal purity from which all badness has been removed, which will be admired by others, and which will be invulnerable to further injury or disappointment. “Perfection” unconsciously comes to mean freedom from symptoms so one's self will be superior to everyone else's, the object of their admiration if not envy.

I began studying with Steven, a Japanese Zen teacher and, in his eyes, developed into a gifted meditator. Not only that, I became one of his favourite students. Again, here's Engler's description of what can happen with a teacher:

Spiritual practice also offers the possibility of establishing a mirroring or idealizing type of selfobject transference with teachers that remains impermeable to reality-testing for far too long, especially in the case of Asian teachers who are often perceived as powerful beings of special aura, status, and worth. In their unique presence one can feel special oneself, thereby masking actual self-feelings of inferiority, unworthiness,

and shame or, even worse, feelings of being defective or flawed at the core (Engler, 2003, pp. 37-38).

But I also started to dissociate from strong feelings, and during arguments I remain unmoved by the discord. It was my tumultuous marriage that drove me into therapy, as I started to recognize my incompetence to deal with the emotional storm and resulting trauma. To add insult to injury, as therapy progressed I discovered that my ex-husband was not the sole perpetrator of my descent into shame and shock. The work of self-discovery and understanding continues.

The ways Buddhism and Psychotherapy are complementary

This is a quotation from Jeffrey Rubin's essay "A Well-Lived Life: Psychoanalytic and Buddhist Contributions"

Psychoanalysis and Buddhism each have something rare and vital to contribute to the challenges and difficulties of living in our world. The capacity of these two wisdom traditions to help us live with greater self-awareness, self-acceptance, care, compassion, morality, and freedom is essential in a world permeated by self-blindness, self-hatred, powerlessness, and alienation."

I will be talking about some of the ways in which the practice of psychotherapy and Buddhism are complementary.

The first is, they cultivate the ability to reflect on the self, and develop the observing ego.

Both develop greater self-awareness. Buddhism teaches several types of meditation, such as mindfulness or choiceless awareness, which is a careful, nonjudgmental attentiveness to whatever is occurring in the present moment. Rubin describes it as "the mind turning to investigate its own workings in an experience-near manner." The aim of this meditation is not to make something special happen – although that might occur – but to relate to our thoughts, feelings and sensations, no matter whether pleasant or painful, with a spirit of self-acceptance, tolerance and a sense of inner spaciousness.

Jack Engler, psychotherapist and professor at Harvard, writes that this kind of practice strengthens fundamental ego capacities. Formerly inaccessible thoughts, emotions and fantasies may arise. We cultivate the tolerance and capacity to be with a wider range of feelings. We may develop greater self-acceptance and presence to what happens in the present moment, as opposed to being caught up in regrets of the past and worries of the future. As well, meditation increases the ego's capacity to synthesize insights and experiences that might have previously upset us. While meditating, an inner conflict may suddenly become clear. Repression may be lifted so that we contact dissociated memories, suppressed affect, hidden grief or longings, or fantasies and images. Engler

writes, “Like psychodynamic therapies, mindfulness meditation is an uncovering technique based on the same procedures that guide psychodynamic inquiry: removal of censorship on mental content and affect, suspension of judgment, abstinence, and the injunction to observe experience while experiencing it.” Both meditators and clients are compelled to confront deep pain, confusion and tension.

In the same vein, both practices enhance the naming of emotions. Marsha Linehan, Professor of Psychology at the University of Washington, has developed Dialectical Behavioral Therapy, which combines cognitive behavioral therapy and Buddhist mindfulness techniques. She uses this therapy with clients suffering with borderline personality disorder. Because these clients often have trouble actually naming what they are feeling, mindfulness helps cultivate the capacity to name emotion, as well as develop attention to the present moment, to ease anxiety, and it helps them assume a non-judgmental stance towards themselves.

Of course, both practices endeavour to ease suffering, although psychologist Polly Young-Eisendrath describes a difference between them this way: Buddhism offers insight into the universal conditions and causes of suffering, such as striving for security, stability and ignorance, as well as our denial of impermanence and change. In psychotherapy we offer insight into the dynamics of personal suffering such as inner conflict, developmental arrest or longings, affect regulation and issues regarding the sense of selfhood such as continuity and cohesion.

But both rely on more than insight: the development of compassion for oneself and others transcends insight and interpretation. True compassion is concern and care that has within it the awareness of the actual present difficulty or pain.

The thrust of Buddhist philosophy as well as psychotherapy is **to explore our sense of agency through an examination of cause and effect.** In Buddhism, cause and effect is one of the meanings of karma; one of my teachers explained karma is like the wind and what happens depends on how we set our sail. There is a sense that karma is impersonal, contrary to the way it has been defined in the last decade or two by many new agers. It may be similar to “you reap what you sow”. In psychotherapy we look at

the way our clients feel they have agency, or do not, and explore ways of enhancing their capacity to act in the world.

Clients and meditation students are often disappointed to learn that these processes are not quick fixes. Some Buddhist teachers, particularly in the Zen and non-dual traditions, believe that if one's enlightenment is deep enough, our fixation on the personal self and its suffering will disappear due to a shift in perspective: one sees the illusory nature of the personal "self", its insubstantiality and that there was never a self that could be wounded. Doesn't this change one's relationship to personal experience? Engler and others believe this to be an idealized view, that in practice it rarely works that way. Ken Wilber, author and world-renowned philosopher, believes too that Buddhism aids spiritual development but that this is only one line of development in a person. There are many of developmental lines such as cognitive, physical, and moral. Growth in one line may not affect growth in another, and meditation does not affect the emotional line of growth.

This change of perspective occurs only if one has truly gone to the end of the path. Mindfulness shifts our relationship to our moment-to-moment experience. If pain can be held openly, clearly and compassionately, without our usual reactions, neither aversion nor avoidance will occur. Pleasure held mindfully will not result in clinging nor attraction. The problem is, how do we effect this change in perspective so completely that **every** moment is held in this fashion."

In the Theravad tradition, freedom from suffering is a process that happens in stages, much as the way change occurs in therapy. Suffering is generated by groups of unwholesome mental factors; they are extinguished progressively through 4 enlightenment experiences that occur in a specific and invariant sequence.

The first enlightenment experience extinguishes the group of factors that comprise core beliefs about the self. The most important of these is "the representation of self as singular, separate, independent, and self-identical. This is now recognized as illusory, a construct or representation only." But in the same way that insights made in p/t don't change a client right away, neither does this realization stop the meditator's reactivity, conditioning from the past and selfish behaviour.

The second enlightenment experience only weakens or modifies the set of deeply conditioned mental factors defined as desire for sense pleasure (or libido in psychoanalytic terms) and aggression towards others. The third extinguishes these factors.

The fourth enlightenment experience eliminates the last group of factors having to do with the pride of *I am* and the persistent tendency to compare self with others, considered the basis of all narcissistic striving.

This progression is similar to the changes that occur in therapy. Core beliefs and perspectives are easiest to change. Affective reactivity, which gives rise to motivations and drives, is more difficult to alter. But the most difficult aspect to transform are “narcissistic investments in the core sense of being a separate self.”

Both therapy and meditation use awareness as a healing force. Mark Epstein, a practising psychiatrist and assistant professor at New York University, and author of four books on the synthesis of Buddhism and psychotherapy, feels strongly that Buddhism has much to offer therapy clients. His latest investigation concerns “mother voidness” or shunyata, a Buddhist concept meaning voidness— the absence of absolute self in persons and phenomena – and how shunyata may be equated with the face of the mother. But before I elaborate on this, I need to explain the difference between the western and eastern perspectives of selfhood, and the types of self experience.

The Western self: Engler describes the psychological self as “an autonomous individual with a sense of differentiated selfhood having its own nuclear ambitions, goals, design and destiny.” Anthropologist Clifford Geertz in 1979 described “the western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively against a social and natural background.” He points out that this self is considered quite odd compared to many of the world’s cultures.

The Eastern self: “In India and Japan, the sense of self is much more merged with others in a “we-sense” that is profoundly different from the separate, autonomous “I-self”

of the west. The self is felt to be embedded in a matrix of relationships and is defined by such. And we are not just in this matrix of human relationships but are in the more encompassing matrix of relationships within the world of nature, and ultimately the cosmos as a whole.” Some conjecture that persons in the East have a different self-structure or experience of self in these cultures.

Buddhist philosophy doesn't deny the importance of ego strength and healthy functioning in the psychological self. However, what it does criticize is the ontological self, that sense that there is an entity residing deep within us, a little person inside who makes our decisions, reflects on the world, and feels happy or hurt. Buddhists call this feeling of hurt, *injured innocence*, the feeling of "How could they do that to me?" and this experience puts us most in touch with the psychological self.

Of course, all of these are representations of self and it may seem that none is really important to our daily lives. But Buddhists say that how we represent ourselves to ourselves can have a profound effect on functioning and psychological health. Buddhism teaches that to represent oneself as existing independently, and to cling to this view, generates suffering, both for oneself and others.

Next I will briefly outline four fundamentally different kinds of self-experience. Each appears to embody a different core experience of selfhood. I am not going to spend much time describing the first three as most of you are quite familiar with them.

The first is self as multiple and discontinuous, best represented by object relations, interpersonal and intersubjective theory. We may experience ourselves quite differently with different others. The most extreme form of this is multiple personality disorder.

The second is self as integral and continuous. This self is cohesive, stable, has agency and worth. One experiences that “I am the same ‘me’ across time, place and state of consciousness.” This self-experience is particularly western. Psychoanalyst Stephen Mitchell wrote, “It feels as if our personal self is ours in some uniquely privileged way; we control access to its protective layers and its ‘core’; only we know and understand its secrets. It feels as if the self is not inevitably contextual and relational, but

has an existence and a life that is separate and autonomous from others. My innermost identity feels immutably and profoundly private.”

The third is unselfconscious experience: Author and professor of psychology, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has written books on this experience, which he calls “flow” and describes as the psychology of optimal experience. The sense of self falls away, and we become unaware of ourselves as an independent, separate entity. There are everyday experiences of this such as driving a car, helping a child with homework, and writing a presentation for the alumni association. As well, there are peak experiences when we feel completely alert, alive and at one with an activity, such as being deeply absorbed in a sport, playing chess or a musical instrument.

Experience is not structured or constructed in a subject/object way. This is non-dual awareness. According to the Bhagavad Gita, the knower, the known and the knowing become one. The ego functions as a synthesizing principle without organizing experience around a self. Self consciousness and anxiety disappear. Discrimination is improved, perception is heightened; we are focused and engaged while being relaxed and confident.

Non-ordinary states, such as mystical states of oneness, and expansion into silent and pure awareness, are also included in this category.

Buddhist teaching points out there are three problems with these types of unselfconscious experience. First, they are temporary and transient. Second, they are basically states of concentrative absorption; “they do not represent an enduring condition of liberation.” Third, states of concentration grounded mainly in absorption are considered amoral in nature. Concentration can be used for good or ill--one may become a saint or samurai.

On the other hand, unselfconscious experience can show us that we can function without a sense of “I”. One can think efficiently, without anxiety or conflict, without a self or I to think it. As well, natural and spontaneous compassion and joy are experienced in the absence of this particular self-representation. These are considered glimpses of enlightenment.

The fourth type of self experience is No self: The goal of meditation is to extinguish the sense of self as an independent entity, bringing an end to self-generated suffering.

There are two ways to achieve this. One way is to “shift the locus of subjectivity from representations of self to awareness itself: to who it is that is thinking, feeling, and having sensations.”

Freud noted the amazing ability of the ego to see itself as an object: “It can treat itself like any other object, observe itself, criticize itself.” But what Freud didn’t include in his theory was that the ego cannot observe itself as the subject of awareness. We are aware of only objects of consciousness, never awareness itself. And when we are aware of being aware, we have only taken reflexive awareness as an object of experience. In the act of being aware, we cannot become aware of the source of that awareness. Engler writes, “I cannot directly observe my observing self. If I try, it recedes each time I turn to observe it: I never catch *it*; I only turn the act of awareness into another object of awareness in an infinite regression.” In Zen it is said the eye that sees cannot see itself. It is impossible to observe awareness itself because we are that awareness.

[Diana led the group through a “Who am I” meditation – see last 2 pages]

The second way of realizing no self is mindfulness: focusing attention on the moment-to-moment experiences of self. The basic instruction is to observe every object of consciousness, such as the arising of thoughts, feelings and sensations, with no preference or choice and without judgment.

[Janice led us through a mindfulness meditation]

In this meditation the self cannot be found in any part of experience. What we find is thoughts, feelings and sensations arising and passing away. The analogy of a chariot is used to describe this. A chariot has no inherent existence or essence but is instead just a name given to a collection of parts and there is not a mysterious substance that lives independently of the chariot. The self, like a chariot, functions but cannot be found and

has no independent existence. According to Buddhist teaching, the state of no self is completely beyond coming-to-be and passing-away. It is not born and never dies.

Steven Mitchell wrote “one might argue that the feeling of continuity in self experience is thoroughly illusory”. He agreed with psychoanalyst Harry Sullivan’s view that “the idea of possessing a unique personal identity is a narcissistic illusion—the very mother of illusions.” He does acknowledge the useful and adaptive nature of this representation. However, what I find really interesting is that Sullivan also suggests that “in a situation with no anxiety there would in fact be no self-system at all.” He argued that the self-system is basically a “narcissistic structure that disappears if there is no need for self-protection.” He believed in the existence of relationships, but not of individuals.

Emmanuel Ghent, Clinical Professor of Psychology at New York University, agrees with this idea too, and states, “In a sense, it is the extreme of multiplicity, where the utter impermanence of moment-to-moment consciousness is observed so closely that the thinker of the thought disappears. The sense of no self is close to the total absence of defensiveness. If there is no self, there is nothing or nobody that needs protection.”

Now I’ll return to Mark Epstein’s idea of “mother voidness.” The core psychological insight of the Buddha is *shunyata*— the absence of absolute self in persons and phenomena. Shunyata may also be translated as the womb of compassion; voidness or emptiness – but not as in a vacuum. Instead, the void is full, like a seed which swells to make room for nutrients and growth.

While many people have fear or apprehension when they first hear this concept, the actual discovery of *shunyata* is often compared to the joy of being reunited with a long lost friend or relative. “I was like a mad child long lost his old mother,” begins one famous verse, written by a student of the seventh Dalai Lama, which goes on to equate voidness with the face of the mother. While psychoanalysis has done much to clarify the sources of dissatisfaction in early childhood, Epstein says Buddhism teaches something equally profound—how to overcome this dissatisfaction through insight into the true nature of the mother. He feels this teaching connects to the work of psychoanalysts like Winnicott, and the concept of “good-enough mothering.”

Epstein uses the work of another psychoanalyst Peter Fonagy, to make this connection. Fonagy, Professor of Psychoanalysis at University College London, writes on affect regulation and mentalization defined as the ability to understand oneself and others by inferring the mental states that lie behind overt behavior. Empathy is a form of mentalization. Another example is witnessing, and in therapy it allows the client to have a sense of agency. Witnessing allows the client to internalize the statement, "I am valued because one chooses to imitate me and have me 'in their brains' so-to-speak". The word "imitate" is used to convey the idea that infants are born with an innate desire to imitate a social partner. Imitation is the seed that will eventually bear mentalizing fruit.

Representations of emotions cannot emerge without interaction with another person who mirrors the infant's experience, and the infant then internalizes those reflections of his experience. Fonagy describes how a mother facilitates the development of mentalization in this way: an infant is full of feeling but doesn't know what he is feeling. The mother must communicate these feelings back to him, name the emotions, but do it not too seriously so that the infant is not overwhelmed by the emotion and is able to digest it. The mother makes meaning of the baby's emotions. Fonagy calls this "mirroring with a twist:" mom adds a second emotion or irony, which allows the baby not to panic. The parental attunement to emotion is similar to what the infant is feeling, but different – it's called a second-order representation and is essential for affect regulation. But some mothers may be unable to mirror her infant, and may instead concretize, dissociate, or panic when faced with her baby's feelings. If a mother's attunement is not congruent with the infant, he then organizes internal experience by internalizing the mother's defences, as Winnicott noted in 1956. These second-order representations of internal states are by definition "alien." They do not match the constitutional state of the infant self. Consequently, the self-organization evolves in a somewhat flawed manner.

Epstein believes that meditation on shunyata or no self may enhance mentalization. As I said earlier, one of the ways of realizing no self is through choiceless awareness. As emotion arises, we note it and name it. This doesn't remove us from our feelings but does contain it. Epstein feels that the voidness can function as the mother who mirrors emotion and adds irony. So meditation is like the mirroring mother: there's a slight distance from our feelings but we're not dissociated from them, a kind of second-order representation.

Now, I just want to add that I don't completely understand Fonagy's work, nor am I sure if I've really understood Epstein's new theory. There's nothing in print yet, so my information is gleaned from his past teachings in conferences.

I'm now going to lead you through a meditation where I'll simply "describe" the nondual Self right now as it is immediately seen. You will hear the word God and if you find that hard to relate to, just think of God as being a higher power or your higher self. Also, this was written by Ken Wilber to be read to yourself with your own name to be inserted in various places as you read through it. So what I'm going to do is insert some of your names instead. And when you read the word "self," it is capitalized, the self that is never born.

Simply relax your mind and listen. What you have been seeking is literally and exactly That which is hearing this right now. That Self cannot be found because it was never lost: you have always known that you were you. X arises in the space of I AMness, arises in this vast spaciousness. I am not talking to X right now, I am talking to *you*. That which is aware of X is this ever-present Self. This Self is God, who is aware of X and aware of these words. *The real you* is not X. *You* are what is aware of X. What is aware of X is an I AMness that itself cannot be seen but only felt as an absolute certainty, I AM that I AM eternally, timelessly. The only thing you can ever remember is something that this Self did. You cannot reach out for it because it is that which is doing the reaching. You cannot see it because it is doing the seeing right now, which means, everything simply arises in its awareness. You are that One. You have always been that One. There is only that One.

Do not pretend you are finding that One. Do not pretend you have forgotten that One. The only thing you have ever known, the only thing you can ever remember, the only thing you are actually feeling right now is that One arising within your Self—the *simple feeling* of Being.

Your body is in this room, but both the body and the room arise in your awareness. All arises in this I AMness, which is not a thing or a person, but the openness or clearing in which all things and all persons are arising. This vast spaciousness is your Self, and is what you have always been. Before Abraham was, I AM. There is only this now-ness of the Self that is hearing this in this very moment. There is no past and no future in this never-ending now. There is only this ever-present, unborn, undying radiant beauty that is aware of these words and the universe. X is in the universe; the universe is in *your* Self. Therefore, *be* this ever-present Self who is hearing. Let X come into being, remain

a bit, and pass: what has this to do with *your* Self? All objects arise, remain, and pass in the spaciousness that is aware of this moment, and this moment, and this moment. Yet you have never actually felt the present come to an end because it *never* does. Now and now and now is all you ever know, and this now-ness is simply another name for the Self.

That there is literally nothing outside your Self means there is literally nothing that can threaten it. Because you are already and always one with That which is hearing this right now, you know peace right now. And because you know the Self or God, you know you are finally, deeply home, a home that you have always known and always pretended you didn't.

So pretend no more. Confess that you are God. Confess that the Witness of these words, is the one and only true Spirit that looks through all eyes and hears with all ears and reaches out in love and compassion to embrace the very beings that it created itself in an ecstatic dance. And confess that you are literally the only One in the universe: there are no others to this One. There are indeed others to X, but both X and the others arise in the awareness that is hearing this, and this awareness has no other because all others arise in it.

Ps. Do you realize, deeply, that the one who is hearing this is the one who wrote it? The Self is not hard to find, but impossible to escape. So drop all this fuss about finding and losing, and simply be the One in whom all worlds are now arising. So go outside and look at the beautiful world arising within your very own Being, and then, go have a beer or something....

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