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A Western Psychologist's Inquiry into the Nature of Right Effort

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Abstract

Mindfulness-based approaches to psychotherapy and human change processes are gaining currency in Western settings. They offer a clear alternative to traditional illness-focused interventions by stressing the importance of human beings as aware, responsible, ethical, and self-regulating agents of intention and purpose. This paper explores some of the significant philosophical challenges that accompany the application of Eastern wisdom practices in Western settings. Special attention is paid to the notion that mindfulness practices require people to engage in what Buddhism recognizes as “right effort” in the service of establishing a productive and ethical orientation in the service of the resolution of life difficulties.

A Western Psychologist's Inquiry Into the Nature of Right Effort

Various Western scholars have tried to reconcile the split between Western and Eastern psychological theories and practices, but until relatively recently their work has carried little weight in Western clinical training and practice (Bankart, 2003). Perhaps this is because the Buddhist vision of psychotherapeutic change aims at a complete investigation of an individual's life paradigms or worldviews. It implicitly requires recognition that the world is in constant flux, that there is no permanent self, and that the things we believe we know about the world and our selves are largely illusions. It demands that we shatter our habitual ways of looking and knowing and that we adopt a rigorously moral and ethical way of speech, action, effort, and occupation. The solution to our suffering requires the transformation of our limited view of reality, in an existentially authentic way, applied to the totality of experience.

Moreover, Eastern teachings remind Western scholars and practitioners that a robust and true science of human behavior needs to engage in exploration of people's most profound yet sometimes mundane experiences. It must retain a clear appreciation for the importance of recognizing the individuality of such experiences and their place within each person's life (West, 1986). As D. T. Suzuki (1960) reminded us, "Zen is emphatically a matter of personal experience; if anything can be called radically empirical, it is Zen" (p. 132). Such self-knowledge is possible only when the identification of subject and object takes place; that is:

When scientific studies come to an end, and lay down all their gadgets of experimentation, and confess that they cannot continue their researches any

further unless they can transcend themselves by performing a miraculous leap over into the realm of absolute subjectivity. (p. 25).

After more than a quarter-century of exploring, practicing, and teaching Eastern psychology I am convinced that Eastern teachings and practices are so powerful and transforming that they are, in a very real sense, deeply subversive. This subversiveness is rooted, in large measure, in Buddhist awareness that there is a direct and abiding interconnectedness and interdependence among all things. David Barash (2001), a psychologist at the University of Washington, has argued that the Buddhist perspective is essentially that of a deep ecology of interdependence that applies to everything in this world.

There is no doubt that the implications of this worldview are profoundly political, and that they pose a direct challenge to both the political and the academic status quo. Imagine the revolution, for example, if all psychologists and psychotherapists recognized troubled young men as “wasted beings” and refused to see them as DSM categories, sociological victims, and gender outlaws. Imagine the revolutionary impact if Western practitioners who are so overwhelmingly oriented to idealized theory and purified research routinely came to terms with their clients’ practical day-to-day dilemmas, and centered their professional energies on concern for helping their clients foster ethical conduct, wisdom, compassion, and general wellbeing. As Robert Thurman (1998) has observed:

This is the messianic drive of the Bodhisattva; the spirit of love and compassion called the enlightening soul. It is not merely the wish that all be well with all

beings – it is the determinations that you yourself will assume responsibility for others. (p. 159)

The challenge to psychotherapists, of course, is in knowing how to incorporate this ethic of responsibility into day to day to work with clients; clients from a broad range of religious and secular backgrounds. I am in full agreement with Sloan et al. (2000) that prescribing religious practices in a therapeutic context raises innumerable ethical issues and is outside the bounds of any (Western) professional psychotherapeutic relationship. However I also believe that psychotherapy can not proceed without both client and practitioner paying close attention to issues of character, morality, and accountability; an intellectual and moral challenge of the highest order, demanding persevering courage, effort, and humility (Ragsdale, 2003).

Fortunately, according to Chappell (2003), traditional Buddhist teachings may provide the tools needed to help us meet this challenge. First, Chappell advises, any such discussion must occur through dialogue, mutual accountability, and complete transparency. This explicitly resolves the problem of a therapist imposing his or her own version of morality, religious beliefs, or worldview. Second, Buddhist concern for morality is not separate from orienting the client's search for wisdom [in Buddhist terms: "right understanding" and "right thought"] with the practice of developing mental culture through the practice of right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

The goal of their collaboration, therefore, is not the imposition of a therapist's personal religious practice or ideology, but encouraging the client to take responsibility for his own life (Khong, 2003). This process, Khong argues, is about the search for accountability, answerability, care, charge, duty and obligation. Its essence is the

immediate and full grasp of not just one's responsibilities, but the possibilities that open themselves up for investigation; the breaking away from the ontically familiar and routine by encouraging people to look directly at what is encountered, to permit the phenomenon to show itself for what it really is.

Thus the therapeutic path offered by Eastern psychology to Western practitioners and clients is one which encourages an intention to follow the Buddha's noble eight-fold path – a code of conduct which encourages self-reflection and self-discipline, but which does not prescribe or proscribe any specific course of action beyond the general principles of avoiding harm, cultivating good, and taking responsibility for the welfare of all sentient beings.

How does this play out in the ordinary occupational duties of a therapist? First, it serves generally to inform the interaction between the therapist and the client. It provides a context for their discussions of important life events and choices. Second, it sets up a sort of intervention template for the process by which the client may seek to change her life in response to current demands and opportunities. Third, it constrains the therapist from offering well intended but essentially inauthentic solutions that may help the client to better conform to the demands of society, but which do not reflect any fundamental commitment on the client's part to assess and strengthen her character.

In actual practice this sort of therapy often looks much like Segal's Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002), Shapiro and Astin's (1998) Control Therapy, or Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) as developed by Stephen Hayes and his colleagues at the University of Nevada Reno (Hayes, Wilson & Strosahl, 1999). The fundamental difference between these and more purely Eastern

approaches being that a therapeutic intervention informed by Buddhist teachings places somewhat more emphasis on personal growth, character, and compassionate concern for self and others than their Western counterparts' more specifically targeted cognitive and behavioral emphases.

My principal focus as a psychologist is on the psychological and emotional challenges encountered by young men who are in transition between being boys and becoming men, a demanding developmental period that is no Sunday picnic in the park. The developmental psychology literature is abundantly clear on this point. The process of achieving a stable and socially acceptable masculine identity is a serious developmental challenge with serious consequences for current emotional well being as well as for the future stability and integrity of the adult self (Pittman, 1993; Harter, 1999). No matter how much we might like to see the late adolescent years as a sylvan time of relative freedom from the more oppressive aspects of modern middle class life, the barely visible work that is going on inside the emerging masculine self is formidable and relentless.

At any given point in time on any given college campus I would estimate that between 20% and 30% of the male students are in a state of acute emotional and psychological distress. Family issues, relationship issues, career crises, peer group crises, substance abuse, dilemmas of sexuality, and the many unfortunate consequences of poor choices keep the Counseling Center's docket full all year. It is obvious that the American college campus offers little shelter from the Buddha's first Noble Truth: *All life is suffering*.

This is the arena to which I routinely bring a practical day-to-day application of the wisdom of Eastern philosophy and mindfulness training. I have found that there is a

small treasure of foundational ideas that inform most of my efforts to help my clients grow into emotionally competent and socially responsible young men¹.

- 1) All suffering, afflictions, and defilements of mind (*klesha*) are ultimately removable.
- 2) The possibility of perfection exists; but purification requires letting go of attachment to the false but dearly held assumptions about reality (and especially the illusion of the bounded separate self).
- 3) Natural mind contains all the potential we need for enlightenment (the mind is naturally luminous). However, the power of discernment needs to be actively developed.
- 4) The Mind (and this is a process, not an entity or a location) cleans itself, just as a river cleans itself; but this is a deliberate and effortful process.
- 5) Our fundamental nature is aware and compassionate, but these qualities must be actively developed by all human beings.

The central lesson is that mindfulness is not a haphazard, casual, or accidental undertaking; it is both purposeful and effortful. The heart of the teaching is that the path to equanimity, compassion and wisdom proceeds from a well regulated life lived with intention, purpose, and integrity. Any person who seeks to pursue a deeper understanding of self and the world through mindfulness must live a virtuous life characterized by:

- ◆ Self reliance and acceptance of full responsibility for the self
- ◆ Self-discipline and adherence to a challenging moral code
- ◆ Personal effort and abandonment of excuse making
- ◆ Turning one's back on authoritarian teachings of all sorts

◆ Trust in the teacher

I emphasize to my students/clients that mindfulness practice reveals that true consciousness is the experience of loving-kindness which in turn reveals a causal chain interconnecting:

Introspection – Humility – Labor – Service – Compassion

Especially for Western students what complicates this is that all of this teaching comes, not as catechism to be memorized, but as a radical empirical reality that must be experienced by sincerely engaging in effective mindfulness practice. In a world full of noise, distraction, self-indulgence, alienation, and a certain pervasive and self-protective cynicism, the young person who aspires to wisdom must seek out opportunities to explore Mind. The ontological prerequisites for this endeavor include:

- ◆ Freedom from the wholesale, largely commercial, contamination of the senses, intellect, and the passions
- ◆ A psychological buffer zone – a place for introspection where he can rediscover connections between his body and his brain; his life and the life of all living things
- ◆ Encouragement to relax philosophically and mentally, adopting a passive receptive frame of mind; thinking clearly and then carrying this with him into his everyday life.

The great difficulty in putting all this to the test is that none of this can be experienced and thus truly known and comprehended in the absence of significant sustained effort. Overcoming ignorance and illusion may be part of a natural process of mindfulness, but this process of discovery demands significant mindful effort and discipline; a simple truth that the Buddha taught 2,500 years ago.

For the young men I work with, however, the notion of “right effort” automatically means only one thing: the application of great force. Almost every time one of my students is courageous enough to try it I’ve eventually been told, “I’ve been sitting here like this for a week now. My legs are completely numb and I am in great pain. I’ve chanted every sutra in the book - and DAMN IT ALL, I AM **STILL** NOT ENLIGHTENED!”

I have, therefore, been increasingly intrigued by what Buddhist scholars have to say about the doctrine of Right Effort, and have distilled what I have learned into four distinct teachings. I increasingly find that the most useful and productive time I can spend with young men who are pursuing deeper knowledge of Truth through mindfulness is to focus, somewhat relentlessly, on the following aspects of their practice.

- A. Right Effort is first that which is opposed by sloth and torpor, agitation and ill will, discouragement, and lusting for pleasures. It is about virtue, character, and self-restraint.
- B. Right Effort means holding the intention to meet life as fully as possible. It co-arises with one’s practice, and it is nurtured by interaction with others engaged in similar pursuits.
- C. Right Effort is fundamentally qualitative; it is not understood to be a quantitative attribute of one’s practice. It is more correctly understood as *right-directed* effort. Thus the heart of right effort is equanimity and patience. When someone makes you angry, you must think: “Thank you, you are my teacher.”
- D. Right effort reminds us to direct our efforts towards all of the other seven “noble” paths.

In a recent article in the *American Psychologist* Tweed and Lehman (2002) attempted to explore the profound psychological significance of growing up in a Confucian, as opposed to our more familiar Socratic, culture. They point out that in Confucian cultures learning is effortful, and requires constant practice and single-minded effort. Moreover, significant learning requires strict behavioral reform - a deep internal transformation in which a person is actively engaged in the pursuit of virtue and strength of character. The will must be disciplined, trained, and exercised; this is the essence of Confucian child rearing practices. From a Japanese mother's gentle but persistent *gaman suru* [You must stick with it; try harder], a child's not investing Right Effort is never an option; nor is it something a child comes to only after he has addressed the emotional and psychological issues in his life. Right Effort is regarded as a requirement for living as a civilized human being. It is the very core of that supreme excellence found in men of perfect virtue.

The problem is that while I've taken some trouble to make all these ideas sound quite reasonable and matter of fact, the reality is that they largely contradict almost all of the philosophical foundations of contemporary self-building in Western culture (Bankart, 1997). In fact the deep ecological message that my special, isolated, autonomous, unique, and barely manageable self is an ignorant delusion it is not welcome news to many Americans. Moreover, the notion that supreme discipline in the service of mindful effort is required to comprehend the nature of reality can be a radically disturbing idea.

Much of this deep Buddhist teaching tends, therefore, to be perceived as quite alien, strange, and even "un-Christian" to young men who have been raised to be acolytes of a faith in the supremacy of a unique independent self that is rooted in extreme individualism. This is why I have argued elsewhere (Bankart, 2001) that the message of

Buddhism releases a demon, or perhaps a genie, that can subversively change the way a young man thinks, perceives, and encounters the world around him. Indeed, a serious encounter with Buddhism, especially during young adulthood, has the potential to cause one to question virtually everything about the struggle to achieve success, advancement, approval, wealth, and most of the other basic totems of successful upper middle class American existence. A doctrine that leads one towards openness, compassion, empathy, strength of character, and awareness is more or less in direct contradiction to a life based on competition, material consumption, Darwinian selection, and, in the words one of my students, "keeping the man with the rifle at my back happy." In the deep-seated Calvinism that is the Western equivalent of Confucianism in the East, pessimism, struggle, competition, and resignation are built-in to the human condition

Thus the deep subversiveness of the Buddha's message becomes even more apparent. And so we come to the heart of my paper, the practical dilemma of Right Effort, that simple two-word phrase that I have probably recited several thousand times in my *dharma* talks with my students and clients. *Most good things require effort!* "Of course you're still smoking (or mooning over lost love, or flunking out of college, or avoiding confronting your sexual orientation) - you haven't made a concentrated and dedicated effort to confront the source of your suffering!"

When all is said and done, when all the smoke and mirrors are discounted, when all of the latest "new" therapies have been trotted out - I think that most Western therapists would agree that virtually all therapeutic change is the product of effort, and usually hard and sometimes painful effort. In the West we call this effort **will**, and we

enshrine it in our temple of self-responsibility. In the wisdom of the East, it is at the heart of the human capacity for compassion, wisdom, and transcendence.

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Footnote

¹ My specific use of the word “men” and my frequent use of the masculine pronoun reflect the fact that almost all of my professional work is with men.