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Psychoanalysis and the Question of Self

A Dialogue with Spiritual Traditions

Abstract: From a psychoanalytic point of view it is well established that an early development of a sense of self is crucial to a person’s healthy development. At the same time, the psychoanalytic process can to a large extent be described as a deconstruction of narcissistic and illusionary apprehensions of oneself. With this as a background, I want to discuss the notion of self within a psychoanalytic perspective in relationship to the meaning of self and no-self within spiritual traditions. The most striking similarity between psychoanalytical and spiritual practice is identified as the (controlling) ego’s surrender or letting go. The article ends with an attempt to characterize the self that is disclosed in the liberating experience of letting go.

In discussing the notions of self and ego from a psychoanalytic perspective in this article, I will not make any distinction between those two terms.\(^1\) The question of self and ego can be investigated from many different perspectives in psychoanalysis, and I will discuss them on the basis of primarily clinical experiences and in dialogue with the spiritual traditions represented in this volume. But to begin with I will say a few words about the development of the self in psychoanalytic theorizing.

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If we look at the beginning of psychoanalytic theorizing concerning the development of the ego or self, the received view was that the newborn has no experience of a self — a position that began with Sigmund Freud’s writings and continued with influential developmental psychological theoreticians such as René Spitz and Margaret Mahler. This view, that the neonate lacks an ego or self, was partly based on not granting the beginning of life any psychological significance, as well as on the idea that the unconscious, defined in accordance with Freud’s energetic model, is prior to consciousness. Consequently, hallucinations and hallucinatory gratifications are placed prior to an infant’s real relationship with the world. A psychoanalytic theoretician, specializing in psychological development, who broke radically with these mentioned forerunners was Daniel Stern. His theorizing did not base itself on biological processes in its description of the neonate’s life, nor did he give priority to the Freudian unconscious in comparison with consciousness in the description of the predicament of the newborn. For Stern, the newborn is directly situated in reality, dealing with real people, things, and events. In the beginning of life there are no psychological, wish-fulfilling, hallucinatory processes according to Stern (1985).

Stern’s theory of development concerns the sense of self. From birth there is the sense of an emergent self, meaning that the infant is ‘actively forming a sense of an emergent self’ (ibid., p. 38), which eventually results in the sense of a core self around the age of two or three months. The sense of a core self is constituted by the following four self-experiences: 1) self-agency, in the sense of authorship of one’s own actions and non-authorship of the actions of others; 2) self-coherence, which is the experience of being a physical whole with boundaries; 3) self-affectivity, which concerns the subjective experience of patterned inner qualities of categorical as well as vitality affects, and finally; 4) self-history, in the sense of experiencing endurance and continuity and that one remains the same in the flow of changing events and experiences.

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2 Joona Taipale (2014) has discussed the contrasting positions between Mahler and Stern in an interesting way, suggesting a reconciliation between them.
The Importance of the Sense of Self in Psychoanalysis

The idea that the infant starts its life without any awareness of itself must be conceived of as outdated. The development of human beings goes from a state of an extremely vulnerable and weak ego-structure to a less vulnerable and more solid ego-structure. A healthy development presupposes a building up of the self. Even if the self normally gets stronger when the child grows older, the psychoanalytic experience reveals that the weakness of the ego is structural, and the predicament of the ego makes Freud refer to a proverb which warns us about serving two masters at the same time: ‘The poor ego has things even worse: it serves three severe masters and does what it can to bring their claims and demands into harmony with one another’ (Freud, 1932, p. 77). And we learn that these claims, which come from the external world, the super-ego, and the id, are divergent and often incompatible. In Freud’s account there is a conflict implied between different intra-psychical agencies; we can talk about neurotic suffering due to unconscious conflicts. Prior to such a neurotic suffering, in which the ego after all has obtained a certain strength, one can talk about a deficit due to an insufficient containment in the early child–primary caregiver interaction rather than a conflict (cf. Killingmo, 1989).

Thus, we can roughly count on two levels of suffering in psychoanalysis that I would maintain require different aetiological explanations as well as therapeutic approaches. The earliest suffering has to do with deficits in the intentionality of consciousness/self-consciousness due to an insufficient containment and yields difficulties in affirming existence, in contrast to a neurotic suffering due to repressed unconscious intra-psychic conflicts. When it comes to problems in the sphere of consciousness/self-consciousness our interventions do not concern interpreting unconscious conflicts ‘behind’ that which is said or expressed as with Freud; here we are dealing with something more basic: what it is the patient experiences or attempts to experience (cf. Alvarez, 1992; Karlsson, 2010; Monti, 2005). The question concerning ‘what something is’ is the first question and it does not require the same developed psychic capacity as for example the question about ‘why something is’. Given that there is suffering that has to be understood on the basis of the structure of consciousness, phenomenology and its systematic and thorough excavation of consciousness becomes highly relevant for understanding the psychoanalytic field of investigation.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the question of the meaning of the unconscious in psychoanalysis. A few remarks have to suffice. Despite the fact of Freud’s claim that the unconscious is the distinguishing mark for psychoanalysis, its meaning is utterly unclear. It signifies differently between psychoanalysts as well as within one and the same authorship. When it comes to the relationship between consciousness and the unconscious, I would claim that consciousness is prior to the unconscious, both in time and from a (phenomeno)logical point of view, which I believe is...
The first task from a psychological developmental perspective is, thus, to build up a sufficiently strong ego-structure. Didier Anzieu (1989) has theorized about the earliest form of ego-experiencing. He elaborated a theory of a (psychical) skin-ego that is parallel to the biological function of the skin. The skin is original both as an organic and imaginary order. Anzieu’s description of the ego echoes Freud’s famous sentence: ‘The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego, it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface’ (Freud, 1923, p. 26).

The two most important factors in constituting the skin-ego are the function of the skin and the early care of the infant. The skin-ego maintains the psyche in the same way that the skin functions as a support for the skeleton and the muscles. Furthermore, the skin-ego is an interiorization of the primary caregiver’s concrete and physical holding and the way it supports the infant’s body. The primary caregiver in its holding and handling surrounds the infant with a kind of external envelope and a phantasy of a common skin can be created. Optimally this phantasy of a common skin is of such a character that it can keep the primary caregiver and the infant together and yet pre-figure their common separation. If the skin-ego is not sufficiently containing, sexuality may be too traumatic, in that it ‘remains true that genital or even auto-erotic, sexuality is accessible only to those who acquired a minimum sense of basic security within their own skins’ (Anzieu, 1989, p. 39). And another illuminating quote is the following: ‘The Skin Ego fulfills the function of providing for supporting sexual excitation’ (ibid., p. 104, italics in the original).

implied even in some of Freud’s writings (e.g. 1905; 1920). One way to describe the difference between consciousness and the unconscious is that the intentionality of consciousness entails a synthesizing, harmonizing, and structuring character, whereas the unconscious has a dissolving character; the unconscious is thus to be understood as being the opposite of meaning/intentionality/consciousness. It can be argued that the unconscious in its most radical version is a theoretical construction that thus never has been experienced or can be experienced, but is nevertheless needed for psychoanalysis in order to explain such suffering that is not comprehensible on account of consciousness.

Above I pointed out the relevance of phenomenology for psychoanalysis due to suffering that has to be understood on the basis of consciousness. In addition, phenomenology has a role in epistemologically clarifying the conditions upon which the psychoanalytic unconscious can be constructed.
Self and the possibility of no-self

A.H. Almaas (this issue) emphasizes that one must account for a primordial unconstructed phenomenological notion of the self, which is presupposed for a narrative, as well as other forms of self. On the basis of Dan Zahavi’s (e.g. 2011) explication of the minimal self, Almaas discusses the givenness of the minimal self in experience in terms of three elements. The first element is the first-personal givenness, implying that experiences are never given anonymously, but always belong to someone. There is a mineness to all experiences. The second element is reflexivity, drawing on the nature of self-consciousness. There is always an awareness of myself accompanying my being aware of an object. The third property is the unity of experience which is both synchronic and diachronic. The synchronic unity is a unity that endures over time while diachronic unity is limited to the moment, although it could be argued that in a strict sense there is no pure experienced now-moment without implying retention (that-which-just-has-been) and protention (that-which-is-about-to-come).

The claim that in so far as there is experience, a minimal self is thus entailed must also, of course, hold for psychopathological experiences. Even in such a regressed state as psychosis, the ego is, by all means, much weakened, but it is not completely wiped out; it does not amount to a complete loss, something that Freud had learned from patients suffering from hallucinatory confusion (amnesia), who could tell after their recovery that there had been ‘a normal person hidden, who, like a detached spectator, watched the hubbub of illness go past him’ (Freud, 1938, pp. 201–2). The meaning structure of the psychotic experience is, no doubt, a radical breach with an ordinary/normal and intersubjectively shared life-world experience, but it would be wrong to describe it as lacking a minimal self (see, for example, contributions in Zahavi, 2000).

The claim that all experiences entail a minimal self runs counter to certain spiritual traditions, notably Buddhist ones, that reject the validity of the notion altogether. Almaas (this issue) describes one strand of Mahayana Buddhism in their belief ‘that recognizing the lack of inherent existence of self and all phenomena is the ultimate truth, the apprehension of which constitutes liberation. Emptiness is seen not as substratum but as the negation of existence that leaves no remainder. All of reality is then perceived as illusory appearance’ (p. 19). Not only is the notion of self an illusion; the quote also specifies
that the liberation consists of freeing oneself from the illusion of the existence of the self.

Before I discuss the deconstruction of the self, a few more words should be said about the psychoanalytic experience of the importance of building up a sufficiently strong self before a deconstruction of it is possible. Working, for example, with a severely traumatized patient in psychoanalysis the task would be to help affirm the validity of the experience; to affirm a reality that actually has taken place but which the person has not been capable of perceiving in a sufficiently intact manner (cf. Laub and Auerhahn, 1993). From this perspective the goal of annihilating the self in its most basic form is exclusively connected to extreme anxiety.

Traumatic experiences may manifest as negative self-experience; or as bodily suffering which replaces living through the emotional pain of the traumatic experience; as feelings of estrangement, or as dissociations, soul-killing shame, feeling threats of self-annihilation. Such negative self-experiencing can be contrasted with an affirming, non-traumatic, and non-conflictual self-experiencing characterized by spontaneity, feeling of being contained, feeling of faith, and legitimacy in one’s self-experiencing. In other words, the givenness of one’s self is very different depending on whether the self-experiencing is traumatic or not.

The Deconstruction of the Self

The self that is in focus in psychoanalysis is to a large extent a narrative self and presupposes the existence of the minimal self. Paul Ricoeur (1992) has suggested a notion of narrative identity constituted by a dialectic between two different notions of the same: sameness as idem-identity and as selfhood (ipse-identity). It is the dialectic between those two poles that can account for a personal identity that is not dependent on some unchanging core of personality. To the extent that the ego or self has obtained a sufficient stability and strength it can be subject to a kind of psychoanalytic deconstruction. The person that comes into psychoanalysis suffers from a distorted self-understanding, and (s)he does not possess a narrative understanding that can be completed in a good gestalt or formed in a coherent way. The dialogue between the psychoanalyst and the patient is a process of deconstruction–construction–deconstruction–construction, and so on, of meaning, and thereby opening up new horizons, that in turn enables
new reconstructions of the patient’s history and a new and more coherent understanding of her/his life.

What makes a person either a spiritual seeker or someone who embarks on a long, arduous, from time to time very painful psychoanalytic investigation is the suffering. Both psychoanalysis and spiritual seeking can be said to emerge from suffering: something is in some way not as it should be.

Spiritual awakening and psychoanalysis not only share the same ground for motivating one to enter a certain path, but to some extent they also go in the same vertical direction. If the direction can be said to be the same, the roads, however, are different and they do not go equally far (that said, without any evaluative significance). Another difference concerns their different ‘explanatory systems’: spiritual traditions tend to explain suffering in terms of ignorance, misperception, and sin, whereas psychoanalysis explains it in developmental psychological terms (cf. Welwood, this issue).

Welwood (this issue) draws attention to a ‘spiritual bypassing’ that works as a defence against suffering, whose genesis is to be sought in the psychical life. In such a case psychoanalysis can play a role in not only being a cure for the psychological problems but also enabling the person to engage in an authentic spiritual practice. Welwood makes a distinction between absolute and relative truth; absolute truth concerns ‘the divine beauty or larger perfection operating in the whole of reality’, whereas psychological, relative truth remains on the level of human concerns and suffering. It is important not to mix the two levels; the error that the spiritual bypasser makes is to neglect the human concern and the relative truth, by protecting her/himself behind a spiritual defence, such as, for example, detachment. But the person who remains on the level of relative truth can also make an error, and then (s)he judges the higher divine law on the basis of human faults and injustice. As a psychoanalyst, in the shadow of Freud’s biased attitude to religion, I think it is important to realize that one cannot

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4 John Welwood (see full version of his paper, available at www.the-self.com): ‘Since spiritual traditions do not generally recognize how the ego-identity forms out of interpersonal relationships, they are unable to address these interpersonal structures directly. Instead, they offer practices — prayer, meditation, mantra, service, devotion to God or guru — that shift the attention to the universal ground of being in which the individual psyche moves, like a wave on the ocean. Thus it becomes possible to enter luminous states of trans-personal awakening, beyond personal conflicts and limitations, without having to address or work through specific psychological issues and conflicts.’
only make the mistake of letting neurotic motives guide one’s religious beliefs but one can also make the mistake of letting neurotic motives guide one’s rejection of religion and spirituality.

If one accepts that the human being consists of body-soul (psyche)-spirit, \(^5\) one does not run the risk of turning psychoanalysis into an absolute system: if it would aspire to replace the meaning of religion it would become idolatry. \(^6\) Psychoanalysis can never say anything about the legitimacy of religion or the existence of God. In other words, it stays mute in front of the most important issue in our lives. This may at first sight appear as a serious drawback, but is, in fact, that which gives psychoanalysis its potential to be an open and critical investigation of one’s subjectivity. It is another question as to whether it has any significance if the psychoanalyst has a religious faith. To engage in an open, and many times frightening, exploratory process, I do believe that one is helped by having a faith that the basic structure of existence is good. ‘There is something inside all of us that we can trust, even if we can’t understand it; you can’t manipulate it either or make it happen, nor come into a deeper trust’ (Adyashanti/Praetorius, full version of paper, available at www.the-self.com).

A possible conclusion might be that if psychoanalysis can help in freeing spiritual practice from neurotic motives, spiritual faith can give us courage to get involved in a psychoanalytic exploration.

**Structural similarities between the two**

The liberated state depicted in the spiritual traditions is more radical, far-reaching, and exhaustive compared to potential goals in psychoanalysis. However, there are, in my view, no significant incompatibilities between psychoanalysis and the spiritual path. Without wanting to downplay the difference between the two that I just pointed

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\(^5\) Bernadette Roberts (this issue): ‘Holding man to being solely a union of body and soul is totally off the mark. The spirit is man’s true “spiritual life”, his mystical dimension beyond the soul’s faculties… A spiritual man, then, is really a contemplative man, the spirit raising him beyond himself to a dimension of existence apart from all he knows as his “body-soul-and-self”’ (pp. 90–1, italics in the original removed).

\(^6\) Cynthia Bourgeault (this issue) points out something important in this context: ‘It’s important to keep in mind that contemplative practice is not an “uncovering technique” whose ultimate goal is the integration and healing of the smaller (egoic) self. It is rather a direct and immediate encounter with a deeper relational ground, in which one begins to directly intuit the presence of a larger “I”, which heals by relativizing the small-self hegemony and bringing it into relationship with that deeper ground’ (p. 50, italics in the original).
out, I nevertheless want to say that from a divine perspective psychoanalysis may be in touch with the same source as the spiritual tradition without knowing it or possessing the language of spirituality. I’m thinking of a sentence from St. Teresa of Avila (from Steinbock, 2007, p. 45): ‘For it is one grace to receive the Lord’s favor; another, to understand which favor and grace it is, and a third, to know how to describe and explain it.’

It is not an easy task to enter into a dialogue between psychoanalysis and spiritual traditions, and it doesn’t make it any easier that the same concepts and words used in the spiritual traditions many times have different connotations. My hope is to be able to capture a certain figure of thought that can constitute a common ground for psychoanalysis and spiritual traditions in order to present some reflections primarily based on psychoanalytic experiences.

I would like to maintain that there exist certain structural similarities between psychoanalysis and spiritual practice. Both of them can be said to partake of a vertical movement. This is accomplished by changing one’s ordinary attitude in life. To speak from the horizon of the phenomenological method, one can say that such a vertical movement brackets our ‘natural attitude’ in order to approach a level of meaning that is occluded in our ordinary way of being (natural attitude) which implies a self-objectification. However, psychoanalysis and spiritual practice break with this natural attitude in different ways: the means that the spiritual traditions have at hand is a radical and sudden cessation of the ego’s obsession with itself in favour of a meditative stance, whereas psychoanalysis can be said to break with the ‘natural attitude’ by means of its specific setting and not least of its basic rule, that is to say, the patient’s free association. Openness is a distinguishing trait for spiritual seeking as well as for psychoanalysis. The point of free association is the letting go of the controlling ego. The attitude of the psychoanalyst is described by Freud as ‘evenly suspended attention’, and by Wilfred R. Bion as ‘without memory and desire’. Such a psychoanalytic atmosphere reminds me of ‘the awakening’ in spiritual traditions: ‘…any kind of goal, any kind of objective, prevents you from being present in your experience and… the only thing to do is experience whatever is arising as completely as possible’ (McLeod, in Curtis Sensei, this issue, p. 64).

The characteristics of the ego that one is to be liberated from in spiritual traditions are, for example, a ‘boundaried egoic consciousness’ or ‘the egoic operating system’ with its identifications, fixations, and attachments (Bourgeault, this issue); or the ego meaning self-
concern or self-obsession, which is an ego that is closed, small, and isolated, and the lower form of the ego consists of aversion and desire (Adyashanti/Praetorius, this issue). The psychoanalytic counterpart to this self-obsessed ego could be the narcissistic ego — a self-inflated ego that protects itself from feeling empty (nota bene: not in a more enlightened way!) and worthless. This vulnerable narcissistic ego may very well be successful and admired in this society, but at the price of stifling a possible deeper joy.

The liberated state in which the suffering is overcome is described in many different ways in spiritual traditions, some of which are phrased in ways unfamiliar to the psychoanalytic language (‘non-dual consciousness’, ‘the operating system of the heart’, ‘no-self’) although the meaning of the liberation comes closer to how a psychoanalytic cure can be described. But psychoanalysis does not go as far as doing away with desire or the self. It would rather talk about sublimation of, for example, sexual or aggressive impulses, and acknowledging one’s subjectivity by making denied, foreclosed, splitted, and repressed sides of oneself one’s own.

The issue of death and finitude

I am inclined to suggest that the most essential common trait in psychoanalysis and spiritual traditions, in their respective vertical movements, is the letting go of the (controlling) ego, to surrender oneself to something transcendent or something outside of oneself. Psychoanalysis as a mundane activity does not count on a higher divine transcendence, but the psychoanalytic process rests on the patient letting go of the controlling ego in its attempt to follow the basic rule (free association) as well as letting her/his experiences, feelings, phantasies, etc. be shared with the psychoanalyst. However, the models might to some extent vary: there are spiritual traditions that want to do away with the ego or self altogether, whereas psycho-

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7 The psychoanalytic notion of health should not be understood in a psychiatric and symptom-orientated way. Elisabeth Roudinesco has described the status of the cure in psychoanalysis as ‘an existential transformation of the subject’ (2001, pp. 34–5). And Donald W. Winnicott’s description of creativity and health is suitable to refer to in this context: ‘creativity’ for Winnicott does not concern artistic creativity or some kind of achievement, but refers to a kind of drive to health inherently belonging to human beings. It has to do with the ability for anybody to perceive the world as meaningful, which is synonymous with health: ‘It is creative apperception more than anything else that makes the individual feel life is worth living’ (Winnicott, 1971, p. 65).
analysis does not go that far in its deconstruction of the narcissistic or omnipotent ego. In psychoanalysis it is never a question of questioning the existence of the ego or self as such.

The above reflection leads me to the issue of death and finitude. What is more difficult and challenging for the (controlling) ego than facing death and finitude? Can death and finitude connect to a deeply experienced liberation, relief, peacefulness, and joy? Death and finitude are absent in the articles of the various spiritual traditions here. And given the enormous importance death and finitude have in life one can be surprised that they don’t have a more prominent place in psychoanalytic theory. For example, Freud (1923) tended to reduce death anxiety to castration anxiety.

Death is like a projection screen in the sense that it seems to be able to nourish the most various and opposite reactions. The spontaneous emotional reaction to death is probably that it exerts a destruction of meaning: it robs life of meaning. Whereas from a more reflective stance it can be argued that finitude is a prerequisite for experiencing meaning and meaningfulness. And from an intellectual, cognitive point of view it is impossible to imagine our own death. As a matter of fact, Freud paid attention to this when he stated: ‘It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death; and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators’ (Freud, 1915, p. 289). Furthermore, death gives rise to horrifying anxiety, but can also, as I will try to illustrate shortly, facilitate an experience of deep joy.

If we talk about death in a figurative sense it appears in enjoyable but very different contexts. We know from literature and in popular parlance how death and orgasm are likened to each other. In psychoanalytic theory we have Jean Laplanche’s original and interesting interpretation of the sexual drive (the libido), where the death drive becomes the extreme expression of the discharge of the libido, where the death drive becomes the extreme expression of the discharge of the libido, it is the least civilized, least socialized part of sexuality, and functions in accordance with the principle of free energy and the primary process (Laplanche, 1979). Laplanche’s death drive does not concern a biological, organic death, but has to be understood in a metaphorical, psychic sense. Thus the death referred to in the death drive is not the death of the organism, but as Laplanche stated ‘the death of this “organism” which, in human existence, represents the interest of the biological organism, that is to say, the ego’ (Laplanche, 1986, p. 14, italics in the original). From this enjoyable sexual pleasure we can move on to the liberation and deeper meaning of aliveness in life that
presupposes a sort of death and which is powerfully expressed in the Scripture: ‘For whoever wants to save their life will lose it.’

‘For whoever wants to save their life will lose it’, this sentence from the Gospels captures the profound point in self-surrender and the letting go of the (controlling) ego, and catches a deep existential truth. In what follows I will discuss the feasibility of realizing such a profound change of attitude in life that these words from Jesus promise, and I will partly do so from psychoanalytic experiences. The letting go of the (controlling, narcissistic) ego equals such an experience of profound relief, liberation, and enjoyment and yet is so amazingly difficult to obtain and, if obtained, to sustain for more than a moment. How is that?

The first thing one is struck by is that this difficulty relates to maintaining something profoundly liberating and enjoyable. It seems as if it is utterly difficult to contain that which is good. My associations go to the sentence from 2 Genesis 33:20 that no one can see the face of God and live. Thus, it is not only aggression, hatred, and pain that are difficult to contain but also their opposites, such as love, goodness, and enjoyment. In psychoanalysis one can discover many reasons for self-destruction, and difficulties in receiving that which is good and would give peace and rest, such as guilt, envy, and shame. However, here I want to draw attention to an existentially-based reason for the difficulty in affirming the half-filled glass of water instead of the half-empty.

Such a kind of experience can occur when the ego is able to get a glimpse of a blissful existence free from narcissistic strivings, such as achievement anxiety, rivalry, and comparison with others, and this blissful experience is even accompanied with the insight of how detrimental the narcissistic strivings are for oneself. Nevertheless, even under such circumstances, the narcissistic strivings and illusions are very difficult to give up. My point is that an effective obstacle for the ego to surrender, to letting go, is the difficulty to accept death and finitude. There is a way of activating oneself which possesses the quality of turning one’s back to death and finitude: one throws oneself into realizing projects and strivings to achieve that are narcissistically satisfying and give the illusion of an identity that would save one from

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8 From a psychoanalytic point of view one should differentiate between pleasure, in terms of discharge of tension à la Freud’s pleasure principle, and another kind of joy that is about feeling alive, the sense that life has meaning and is worth living.
the fate of being finite. Correspondingly, the letting go of the ego ‘risks’ uncovering our finitude, vulnerability, lack of control, and dependence. To turn this threatening feeling into something potentially positive requires quite a bit of psychical work in terms of containment of loss, mourning, and narcissistic humiliation.

Let me continue and consult a couple of examples in which the person very concretely faces her/his death, and which offer the existence of a relief and deep joy that seems to be very difficult to experience unless one really is or has been very close to one’s death.

The first example is an experience that is not too uncommon among people who suffer from a terminal disease, here represented by a Swedish news anchor, who died in amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) some years ago. She has, in a very naked and moving way, described this disease process. It is a description of anger, despair, sorrow, but also of a profound joy in the now that she never had been able to experience before (Lindquist, 2004). How is that to be understood?

The second example is from Tem Horwitz’s (1998) account of his death struggle after having gone into anaphylactic shock. First an extract from his concrete death struggle:

It is very difficult to describe time through this sequence. It ceased to be the medium through which I was moving. There was no forward, no backward, no future, no past — only a present that contained everything... There both was and was not an observer. There was no distinction between the me, the perceiver, and the it, the place... There was something basically wordless about the experience... It was some place, not ‘no place’, not an undifferentiated world of blackness, not a void, nothingness... Dying removed me from the clutches of time. There was no present for me — transient or otherwise — during this period. (Horwitz, 1998, p. 9)

After this death struggle, which Horwitz calls his ‘mini-death’, he felt an amazing lightness, and, a year and half later when he recounts this experience, he can still feel touches of that embrace in his daily life. Let me resume parts of his description that to some extent resemble a spiritually enlightened experience:

These moments were what they were. They lacked nothing. They were complete in and of themselves. I could conceive of no happiness outside of these moments... There was nothing that I wanted to do or felt that I had to do. There was no vestige of self-importance left. It felt like death had obliterated my ego, the attachments that I had, my history, and who I had been... I had no identity in death... Personality was a vanity, an elaborate delusion, a ruse... I was lodged in the present. I had caught a
glimpse of eternity, and I was content to dwell in its embrace… There was a lightness, which I have described, but there was also an indifference, a detachment from my world… indifference replaces other emotions, like anger and envy… Thoughts of death clarify and clear the blackboard of unimportant material… With less to cling to I felt surprisingly strong and considerably less vulnerable… I had witnessed how my life could end at any moment. It was this fact that gave pleasure to my daily life filled with its trivial actions… I was alive and living my life. I needed no more… Death adds a potency and concentration to life. It is a most reliable counselor. (ibid., pp. 10–13, 15)

Concluding Remarks

I have argued for the importance of ego or self in psychoanalysis. If the self was supposed to be absent in the neonate’s life in the initial psychoanalytic theory of development psychology, this definitely changed with Stern’s works, which also receive support from non-psychoanalytic academic research on child development as well as from phenomenological analysis of consciousness.

The psychoanalytic experience teaches us the importance of building up a sufficiently strong ego for a healthy development. The value of a caring and protecting environment cannot be underestimated in order for the self to grow and feel alive. The development of the ego or self is essential to psychoanalysis, both theoretically and in the clinical context, but is not an issue in the spiritual traditions although its importance for the human being is in no way denied as can be seen in contributions in this volume. Indeed as I described in reference to Welwood’s contribution: psychological, emotional difficulties can turn spiritual seeking into something harmful instead of letting us authentically be in touch with a divine reality.

The psychoanalytic process can be conceived of as a deconstruction of the patient’s self and self-understanding. Considered from one perspective, the psychoanalytic deconstruction focuses on the patient’s narrative self. However, seen from another perspective, the psychoanalytic work being done by the psychoanalyst and the patient uncovers a kind of self-experience connected to the ego’s surrender and letting go. As said, I think it is this aspect in the psychoanalytic process and interchange between the psychoanalyst and the patient which most saliently coincides with spiritual practice.

In an attempt to deepen the understanding of this phenomenon of surrender and letting go, I chose to refer to experiences in relation to that which I imagined to be the most challenging for the (controlling) ego, namely human finitude. As revealed from my examples, it seems
as if sustaining the proximity of death can facilitate an opportunity to open oneself to existence in an entirely exceptional way. I will end this article with some reflections on the kind of self that is involved in this experience of lightness and profound joy. One may ask: what characterizes the self that is disclosed in the liberating experience of surrender or letting go?

That there is a minimal self entailed in this kind of experience is self-evident from what has been said earlier in this article. However, this experience of lightness and profound joy is something much more than being reduced to a minimal self. Its character is not captured by means of a narrative self either; it does not possess the biographical structure as a narrative self. It shows itself rather as an unmotivated surge of joy and well-being; it is an experience which highlights my existence — that I AM. Let me try to sketch some traits constituting this type of self-experience.

Firstly, it is an experience of existence that is constituted in a spontaneous, pre-reflective living in the present. It is the spontaneous pre-reflective character that gives it a focus on the present and a strong affirmation of existence. There is a transforming power in the affirmation itself that can be seen in the psychoanalytic process, when affirming painful feelings and experiences. The affirmation of, for example, one’s vulnerability or the feeling of being very small in a situation can make up the difference between feeling lost, dis-integrated, and full of anxiety and being in touch with oneself, and feeling collected and present. My point is that there is a psychic growing in the affirmation itself. The affirmation of difficult and painful feelings is then not first of all a means of ridding oneself of something (that would be to reduce the affirmation to an instrumental value), but the ‘affirmation-in-itself’ entails psychical growth. I think that it is this quality in the affirmation that can explain patients’ common paradoxical descriptions in the course of the psychoanalytic process that they feel worse than ever and at the same time stronger than they have ever felt before.

Secondly, what stands out in this experience is that one feels joy, lightness, and security. This reminds us of Emmanuel Levinas’s ideas about the self and enjoyment. According to him, the original dimension of life is enjoyment. To despair of life can only be understood on the condition that life is originally enjoyment. Levinas writes: ‘Life is love of life’ (1969, p. 112, italics in the original). Everything that we are living from... food, drinks, ideas, sleep, spectacles, light, and so on, are not to be conceived of as something...
instrumental (they are not tools) that satisfy needs; his point is that the act in itself, the doing, contains enjoyment. The basis of the self is enjoyment. ‘Enjoyment is… the very pulsation of the I’ (ibid., p. 113). In other words, existence itself is inherently good.

Thirdly, the model of this experience of self is not a movement towards extinguishing or annihilating the self; instead, I think one can discern an experience of being contained by something transcendent and good. It entails an emptying, rather than annihilating, of oneself, in the sense that one is now able to receive and affirm existence in its pure form, existence when it is purged of aspirations and coincidences: affirmingly received as an unconditional gift.

References

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