

Conflict, the Unconscious, and Psychotherapeutic Method in Freud and Zen Buddhism

JOHN STEFFNEY

Conflict

THE FREUDIAN CONCEPTION of the self is based on conflict. Fidelity to a contradictory understanding of the self, Freud often speaks of an emotion coupled with—and in tension with—its opposite. One never fully loves, but to some degree and, at the same time, hates. And suffers from it—from the pull of opposing forces. Such is the nature of the ordinary self. The Zen self, however, is not enmeshed in this ambivalence and does not suffer from it. Zen love is not ordinary love bound up with hate but a love which transcends this duality, while embracing it. *Appreciative* of the duality of love and hate but not *enmeshed* in it, the Zen Self can embrace all existence, all reality, without discrimination. The Zen Self does not rebound between love and hate but enjoys the dynamic interplay, realizing ultimately that love *is* hate—not in Freud's conflicting sense but in a resolute sense—that hate is not a negative but a necessary dynamic of the ordinary self. Necessary but not negative, it adds color to the ordinary self. Still, having broken through the ordinary self, having transcended its dualistic mode, the Zen Self is untroubled and unaffected by hate or, more pertinently, the *duality* between love and hate.

Responding to the Christian shibboleth, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," Freud protests because of the rarity that one's neighbor would be so deserving, and because love is something one "ought not to throw away without reflection."¹ One loves one's

¹ All quotations from Freud are from *The Standard Edition of The Complete*

neighbor, Freud says, "if he is so like me in important ways that I can love myself in him; and he deserves it if he is so much more perfect than myself that I can love my ideal of my own self in him."² Freudian love treats the neighbor as an object that mirrors back individuality, or at least the aspirations of individuality—and accordingly is a very restrictive, narcissistic kind of love. Zen love, on the other hand, is not exclusive but radically inclusive. Since, in Zen, there is ultimately no dualism between oneself and one's neighbor, there can be no restriction in love. In a different—paradoxical—sense, one *could* say that in Zen one loves one's neighbor as oneself—not as an individual but as *all* individuals—and since the Zen Self is ultimately selfless, Zen love would have to be selflessly, or unselfishly, expressed. There is no demarcation between the Zen Self and others, and there can be no demarcation with regard to love.

Conflict in its extremity, according to Freud, is "obsessional neurosis"—a condition which is manifest in "the patient's being occupied with thoughts in which he is in fact not interested, in his being aware of impulses in himself which appear very strange to him and in his being led to actions the performance of which give him no enjoyment, but which it is quite impossible for him to omit."³ In an obviously less severe degree, this is fairly common. All of us are to some degree neurotic in that we do have difficulty ridding ourselves of troublesome thoughts and often undertake tasks more burdensome than pleasurable. We are constricted, not genuinely in command of our lives. A student does not seek out a Zen master in the way a neurotic will seek out a therapist, but some of these lesser degrees of neurosis can be motivating factors, tangential ones, rooted in the very nature of self-consciousness. When the student seeks out a Zen master, he is not hoping to be cured of neurosis but is more likely trying to resolve the most fundamental problem of himself—his very being—of which neurosis may be an extension. The Zen student, thus, does not have to be neurotic to receive attention from a Zen master (although he *may*

Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, translated from the German under the general editorship of James Strachey (London: 1974). *Civilization and Its Discontents*, XXI, 109.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, XVI, 258.

be), but it is more likely that he has a general, although be it a burning unrest about the meaning of his life, about the nature of his authentic self, about ultimately who he is. Although not necessarily neurotic, the student may nonetheless be haunted by the question of himself; and although not necessarily perplexed about *specific* acts he is doing that do not give him enjoyment, he may be perplexed about his actions in their entirety, in terms of their overall meaning and significance. So there is a connection, although not a direct one, between the intentions of the Freudian patient and the Zen student. But the connection is deeper still, in terms of therapeutic implications. If the Zen student happened to *be* neurotic, and if he were to realize the final Zen breakthrough, his neurosis would be cured—because what the enlightened student resolves is the very core of himself, the contradictoriness of self-consciousness, of which neurosis is a facet. Having resolved the very dilemma of self-consciousness, the student would necessarily have to resolve any neurotic tendencies. When one realizes the ultimate depth of oneself, all neurotic inclinations are eliminated. The neurotic, according to Freud, “ends up in an ever-increasing degree of indecision, loss of energy and restriction of freedom.”⁴ All the accounts of the Zen masters testify that they did not possess these neurotic characterizations. The masters, invariably, were incredibly decisive, not at all troubled by ambiguity, lively, quick-witted and utterly uninhibited, operating out of the spontaneous depths of the True Self.

Although Freud reversed his position that anxiety is a transformation of libido—that “unsatisfied libido was directly changed into anxiety”⁵—and maintained rather that “the ego is the actual seat of anxiety”⁶ the ego nonetheless produces anxiety on the basis of its *relation* to the libido: “it very often happens that processes take place or begin to take place in the id which cause the ego to produce anxiety.”⁷ Although anxiety is no longer understood as redirected libidinous energy, the cause of anxiety stems from problems pertaining to the id, which is to say the id's conflict with the ego. Even though the theory of anxiety is modified, the problem is still sexual. Still, one gets the impression from Freud

⁴ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁵ *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, XXII, 82.

⁶ *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, XX, 140.

⁷ *Ibid.*

that though the problem can be identified as sexual, more pertinent is the *duality* between id and ego—that the ego itself is the problem. Without the ego—without its bifurcational relation to the id (or to anything)—anxiety would not materialize. Thus the ego as the “seat” of anxiety. In fact, on this basis Freud rejects Rank's theory that anxiety may be traced back to the birth trauma. Although birth is indeed traumatic, it is not the same anguish an adult experiences—this because the infant does not yet have an ego—and the infant's pre-ego state, therefore, though indeed painful, should not be characterized as anxiety. And although Freud makes the distinction between real anxiety and neurotic anxiety—“real anxiety is anxiety about a known danger”;⁸ “neurotic anxiety is anxiety about an unknown danger”—it would be better to describe real anxiety as “fear.” In fact, reminded of Kierkegaard and the existentialists, Freud distinguishes fear from anxiety: “Anxiety has an unmistakable relation to *expectation*: it is anxiety *about* something. In precise speech we use the word ‘fear’ rather than ‘anxiety’ if it has found an object.”⁹ Employing Freud's own distinction, then, “fear” would be a more appropriate description of real (comprehensible) dangers than “real anxiety.” It is not so much real, objectifiable dangers (fears) that have perplexed Freud's patients, so much as unknown, incomprehensible, unobjectifiable dangers. In fact, a transformation of anxiety into fear Freud suggests, is not of the goals of psychotherapy: “by bringing this danger which is not known to the ego into consciousness, the analyst makes neurotic anxiety no different from realistic anxiety, so that it can be dealt with in the same way.”¹⁰

Still, even this transforming anxiety into fear—would be unacceptable in Zen. Such a transformation would simply be the substitution of a more overwhelming (incomprehensible) dilemma into a less overwhelming (comprehensible) one. Because the ego suddenly *knows* what the problem is does not mean it is able to *resolve* the problem, no matter how rationally and rigorously it perseveres. In fact, in that newly transformed state, when the unconscious is conscious, Zen would say that the ego is still not fully conscious of its plight: of itself as the problem. Nevertheless, even if the ego does realize it is itself the problem,

⁸ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

this is not a *resolution* of the problem but only a *comprehension* of the problem. In order for the problem to be resolved, not merely comprehended, the ego must die to itself as ego, die to the dualistic matrix which it embodies, and must be reborn as the True Self, a Self that does not have itself in contrast to (or in fear of) anything else.

The difficulty Freud's patients faced—and what fundamentally makes them neurotic—is that they “cannot get free of the past.”¹¹ Bound to it, often obsessed with it, they are unable to live in the present fully. This is indeed a dilemma, and a pervasive one. One of the distinguishing characteristics of man is that he is the only organic being that has a history, a mental record of this own life and of the world at large. This is an asset, but also an enigma. Feeling guilty for something he has done (or even erroneously, *thinks* he has done), he may beleager himself by reliving that event repeatedly in his mind: and in so doing, unable to bring his full resources—his full being—to the present. In Zen, however, one is no longer a victim of the past. One lives in the present absolutely, as though the present were eternal. It is not that the past is obliterated in Zen—the Zen master is not outside of the human condition, he is very much in it—but the past is transformed so that it does not exist in *opposition* to the present. Freud's neurotics live *from* the past *to* the present, never letting go of the past, never giving the present its due. The Zen master, in contrast, lives *from* the present in such a way that *all* time—past and future—are embraced as one phenomenon. In this way, the Zen master can live in—and give himself to—the present completely. He can live in the present as though it were eternity, unperplexed about what *has* taken place or what *will* take place. Time, for the Zen master, is not debilitating but liberating. In fact, in Zen (fulfilling the Freudian therapeutic intent) one is not only free *from* the past, one is free *for* the present. Moreover—and this radically different than Freud—*free for all of eternity*.

Since conflict between reality and the id, according to Freud, is “unavoidable,” the task of psychoanalysis is not to eliminate conflict but to deal with it in a way that does not employ “the inefficient instrument of repression.”¹² Rather than allowing the ego to continue at the mercy of forces of which it is not conscious, psychoanalysis forces the

¹¹ *Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, XI, 17.

¹² *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, XX, 204.

ego to confront them truly, "to overcome its inclination towards attempts at flight and to tolerate an approach to what is repressed."¹³ Flight from the problem (from the repressed) only intensifies the problem. One must meet the problem directly and accept the conflict between id and reality for what it is—an unavoidable dynamic in the psychic structure of a human being. Zen, by contrast, does not concur that conflict is unavoidable. As long as the ego remains in its ordinary state—whether repression is occurring or not—conflict will indeed be immanent. The ego's essence is conflict. But Zen proposes an alternative, a transformation wherein the ego and its conflicts can be transcended. The Zen master is unaffected by the split between the id and reality because, from his perspective, the split does not exist. From the Awakened perspective of the Zen master, from his radically undualistic realization, the repressor is the repressed. Phrased differently, id and reality are forms whose ultimate nature is formless, non-differentiated, and therefore without conflict. This is the heart of the Zen master's realization. He can watch the play of forms—knowing that they are ultimately formless, not really in opposition, not really in conflict—and not be troubled by them.

In Freud's psychology, the pleasure principle is the salient force in human life, the principle which "dominates the operation of the mental apparatus from the start."¹⁴ The fundamental need and desire, in other words, is to be happy; a need and desire, however, which is bound to be frustrated, because it is "at loggerheads with the whole world."¹⁵ What it is at loggerheads with, specifically, is the constant threefold threat of disease, natural catastrophe, and persecution by others—a threat so pervasive that Freud surmises, "the intention that man should be 'happy' is not included in the plan of 'Creation.'"¹⁶ From the perspective of the ego, Freud is right: the ordinary self cannot be truly happy. It must fluctuate—between happiness and despair, between the pleasure principle and the reality principle. With this, Zen has no dispute. In fact, the Buddha's first truth of the famous Fourfold Truths is that life is "suffering" (*Dukkha*).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁴ *Civilization and Its Discontents*, XXI, 76.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

FREUD AND ZEN BUDDHISM

But the difference between Freud and Zen is that whereas Freud accepts the human predicament and resigns himself to it, Zen offers a resolution. Although the ordinary self does indeed fluctuate between happiness and despair, there is a deeper Self—man's inmost essence—which is not subject to polarized shifts. In fact, Zen would say, in contrast to Freud, that it is not the pleasure principle which is dominant in human life but duality per se, and that a resolution to the conflict cannot be accomplished by excluding or even emphasizing (as has often been done since Freud) one component at the expense of the other. Zen transcends this dilemma by advocating neither the pleasure principle nor the reality principle, but speaks of a dimension of Joy that does not oscillate between happiness and despair—the Joy of the True Self, a Joy which may be compared to the calm and serenity of ocean depths, undisturbed by turbulences above. In this, the ordinary self is incessantly wavelike—noisy, agitated, disquieted—while the True Self rests very much alive but undisturbed. This is not to say that tempestuous waves are not a part of the ocean. They are. But the ocean, in its magnitude, is unaffected by them. Thus it is with the Zen Self. While the ordinary self acts out its wavelike restlessness, the Zen Self stays serene. In the case of the Zen master, therefore, it must be said that while mercurial tensions between happiness and despair may take place on the surface, the master, at heart, is unaffected by them. His deep oceanlike Self can embrace them, assimilate them, even appreciate them, while being thoroughly tranquil and at rest.

One explanation for the absence of anxiety after Zen enlightenment is this: in Zen, there is no super-ego. In Freudian psychology, even after the most rigorous therapy, the super-ego is still dominant in the psychic structure if only in the sense of opposing and exerting pressure on id and ego. Essentially moral—in a dogmatic, coercive way—the super ego is a constant inhibition of libidinous energies, stifling the ego's release or expression of those energies. In fact, the ego, often thought to be the strongest component, turns out to be the weakest component of all: bombarded by biological and instinctual pressures from the id, it is at the same time chastised by the restrictive mechanism of the super ego. Thus the ego's precarious seat, and thus its inherent anxiety.

In Zen, super-ego is a superfluous concept. Not that external laws and codes no longer exist. Surely the Zen master has to live "in" the world as the rest of us. The guiding force of the master's behavior,

however, is not the social canon but his own True Self, which is neither opposed nor not opposed to the social canon. The True Self or Unconscious in Zen is not a diffusion of wild, unruly impulses set in conflict with social scruples. Rather, the True Self or Unconscious in Zen is perfectly empty, but—because of this—perfectly free of expressing itself in all conceivable ways. Since the True Self is totally at peace (not having a “self” that can be thought of in contradistinction to any other self), and since it does not exist dualistically in relation to the super-ego, there can be no tension between the True Self and the super-ego. Moreover—this being crucial—the ego, the *transformed* ego (now the True Self or egoless-ego), is free, untaxed, at peace, since it is not enmeshed in the continuous battle between id and super-ego. In fact, in Zen, id and super ego are none other than the ego, just as the conglomerate—id, ego, and super-ego—are none other than the True Self.

Indeed, the super-ego is not only the objectifying part of the ego in Freud’s psychology, it is the part which, on certain occasions, “abuses the poor ego, humiliates it, threatens it with the direst punishments, reproaches it for actions in the remotest past which had been taken lightly at the time,” and generally places the ego “at its mercy.”¹⁷ It is precisely this threatening, reproaching aspect of the ego which Zen attacks head-on. One cannot browbeat oneself after Zen Awakening because the super-ego no longer exists. The ego no longer has itself as an objectifiable entity or as an entity that can condemn itself. Pure subjectivity, the True Self, can express itself freely, without condemnation. And in terms of another point Freud makes about super-ego—that “it is also the vehicle of the ego ideal by which the ego measures itself, which it emulates, and whose demand for even greater perfection it strives to fulfill”¹⁸—Zen would say that there is nothing outside of the True Self by which to measure itself. Rather, the True Self is the measure of all things, meaning that all things are possible by virtue of it. The True Self does not try to emulate anything because it has itself completely, and having itself completely, there is no point in it striving to attain anything. What can be attained, when the True Self is already—absolutely—complete? What can be striven for when there is nothing outside of the True Self for which to strive? Attainment and

¹⁷ *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, XXII, 61.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

striving in Zen are obsolete. And the ego ideal—the super-ego—itself is obsolete.

The Unconscious

One of Freud's notions that invites comparison with Zen is that the unconscious does not speak linguistically. Subliminal, it does not partake of syntactical structures but of the baroque patterns of dreams. In fact, in composing *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud had qualms about language itself with its linear progressions to portray the non-linear dimension of dreams. This recognition of the failure of language, however, brings Freud closer to the position of Zen. By recognizing a level of reality (dreams) that cannot be fully grasped by language, Freud is intimating a limitation on the part on the ego; and the failure of the ego in relation to understanding the unconscious is a statement about the self's inability to fully fathom itself. These notions—the mystery of the unconscious and the limitations of the ego—are similar to Zen. Still, it is a weak comparison—not only because Zen's Unconscious is more vast than Freud's in terms of "fathoms," but because Zen's Unconscious, though defying linguistic syntax, cannot be depicted graphically. The distinction between the Freudian personal unconscious and Zen's Unconscious is that whereas the former is objectifiable in terms of a representational scheme, the latter transcends objectivity and representationality, and can even be thought of as being prior to them, even more subliminal, as it were. And whereas the Freudian unconscious has "contents" in terms of repressed memories, Zen's Unconscious, though the well-spring of all possible contents and wishes, is devoid of them. Nothing can be said to be repressed because Zen's Unconscious is not a reservoir for memory. It is the empty source without which memory itself would not be possible. Nor can it be said that Zen's Unconscious contains wish-fulfillments. It is in fact wish-fulfillments, in their failed actualizations, that account for tension and frustration. In contrast to wish-fulfillments of the Freudian Unconscious, Zen's Unconscious is totally Self-Actualizing, meaning that nothing—no part of reality, no part of the self—is *not* actualized. And since Zen's Unconscious is totally Self-Actualizing, there can be no frustration, no inhibited desire.

Freud was not unaware that a transformation of the psyche, through

meditation, was possible—"it is easy to imagine, too, that certain mystical practices may succeed in upsetting the normal relations between the different regions of the mind"—but he did not see any value in such a transformation: "it may safely be doubted, however, whether this road will lead us to the ultimate truths from which salvation is to be expected."¹⁹ In this Freud and Zen are antithetical. Whereas Freud believes that such a transformation is fruitless, Zen maintains that it is essential if we are to fully realize ourselves. And whereas the intention of Freudian psychoanalysis is "to strengthen the ego"—"where id was, there ego shall be"²⁰—the intention of Zen is to break through the ego, to let it "die," and in its "death" to die of its dichotomy and its tension.

In a letter of December 5, 1927, Romain Rolland wrote Freud that he agreed with Freud's judgment about religion expressed in *The Future of an Illusion* but also admitted to a feeling which he described as limitless, boundless, oceanic²¹ and argued that one could be called religious on this basis. Freud had little sympathy with this, however. An oceanic feeling, according to Freud, is nothing more than an emotion that goes back to infancy, when the infant is unable to distinguish itself from the mother's breast, let alone the world, and Freud considered this nothing more than "regression"²² and "infantile helplessness."²³ This reduction of the oceanic feeling to regression and infantile helplessness, however, cannot be ascribed to Zen. Zen is not regression; it is maturation in the most poignant sense; not a return to a state in which one does "not yet have a self, but transformation in such a way that the self is present but radically altered to include what is ordinarily "not itself," a state in which the self may be said to interpenetrate and embrace all of reality. This is not the "not-yet" self-consciousness of the infant, but the all-encompassing consciousness of the True Self; not infantile solipsism in which the individual is not fully born, not fully human, but consummate humanness, humanness fully actualized, a humanness which Zen refers to as the True Man.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Civilization and Its Discontents*, XXI, 64.

²² *Ibid.*, 69.

²³ *Ibid.*, 72.

FREUD AND ZEN BUDDHISM

An essential component in Freud's understanding of the unconscious, his notion of sublimation, especially invites comparison with Zen, and as much as anything, sharply distinguishes him from Zen. If the object-choices of the libido (cathexes) are unavailable because of inhibitions from external pressures, whether they be physical or ideological, the ego (at the mercy of the libido) is compelled to improvise, to devise another object-choice or cathexis. This revision of an initial libidinal-instinctual need may recur until a satisfying object is found, although the modified object obviously can never fully replace the original. A certain amount of tension is immanent. Sublimation is simply a manifestation of the improvised, surrogational method of libidinous satisfaction, and it accounts for the most grandiose cultural achievement of mankind. Da Vinci's Madonnas, for example, as Freud understood them, are attempts at recapturing a lost intimacy with the mother that Da Vinci lost through separation at a young age. The transformation of this yearning for the mother, out of frustration, resulted in the sublimated, artistic image that Da Vinci portrayed, a reverential (divinelike) female in contrast to a worldly, earthly type.

Zen, by contrast, does not indulge in sublimation. Since Zen recognizes no chasm between the Self and the objects of the Self, that which the Self expresses is directly itself—not something transformed, not an artistic surrogate. In Zen painting, thus, what is painted is not an object to the Self as subject, but the Self expressing itself as itself, not a facsimile or a modified cathexis, but direct Self expression. From the Zen painter's perspective, the painting is not merely an arrangement of lines and contours—a spatial representation of the Self—it *is* the Self. The Zen painter *is* his painting. The act of painting is the Self expressing itself as a painting or, just as accurately, the painting expressing itself as the True Self. For this reason, Zen painting is extemporaneously swift in the making. Brushstrokes are not rehearsed, deliberated, or construed as an overall method. In Zen, reconstruction and revision are an anathema. They connote dissatisfaction. Rather than dissatisfaction—or even a sublimated version (quasi-satisfaction)—Zen painting is complete fulfillment of the True Self. Zen painting is not *wishful* but *actual*, an actualization of one's utmost Being.

Again discussing art in terms of sublimation, Freud writes that "it serves as nothing else does to reconcile a man to the sacrifices he has

made on behalf of civilization,"²⁴ but adds that this very sublimative process permits the artist to identify more fully with civilization by participating in its emotional content. All of this, however, is in contrast with Zen. First of all, in Zen there is no sacrifice. One can only sacrifice something one already "has." But the nature of the True Self is that it is formless, empty of forms—whether they be libidinal or ideological, tangible or intangible—that could be given up. And yet, in being formless the True Self is capable of—free to—take on all forms. Thus, one cannot talk about sacrifice in Zen or even about renunciation. On that basis alone, Zen art may not be classified as sublimation: it is not produced out of a state of repression but out of a state of unadulterated, uninhibited expression.

Another difference between Freud and Zen is that whereas Freud's may be described as an inductive theoretical approach founded on empirical observations, the Zen approach is radically intuitive and indifferent to theory-building. Still, some of Freud's greatest contributions are based on his own self-analysis, and this surely has a parallel with Zen, for in Zen there can be no knowledge independent of one's self. But the parallel is a weak one in that Zen delves deeper. Moreover, in Zen the student is not concerned with introspection for the sake of *comprehension* but for the sake of *realization*. Ultimately, Zen has no penchant for theoretical schemes, whether they be instruments of universal design or personal indices. Zen is not a tractatus but a testimony, based not on an intersplicing of abstractions but on a dissolution of them, on a sudden blaze of acuity.

It should be said that the Freudian unconscious is to be distinguished from Zen, not only because it is a personal, historical reservoir of buried memories dating back to infancy, because it exists dualistically in itself (*eros* and *thanatos*), and because it exists dualistically in relation to consciousness, but even when the unconscious becomes conscious, it dissolves itself as unconsciousness and becomes consciousness in the usual dualistic form. In other words, in the Freudian format, there is either unconsciousness existing dualistically in relation to consciousness, or there is a dissolution of unconsciousness wherein consciousness in its dualistic structure remains. In the Freudian scheme, there is no resolution to dualism. In Zen, however, the Un-

²⁴ *The Future of an Illusion*, XXI, 14.

FREUD AND ZEN BUDDHISM

conscious is such that it does not exist in a dualistic relation to itself, and does not exist in a dualistic relation to consciousness. When the Zen Unconscious is made conscious everything in the world is perceived as being separate and individual (having its own being) yet at the same time perceived as being everything else. Neither individuality nor sameness is eliminated. They are both paradoxically present—just as the Self which does the perceiving is present as itself and not itself.

The purpose of making the unconscious conscious, of course, is to overcome tension and anxiety. In the Freudian scheme, becoming conscious of a repressed problem is liberation from the problem. “Symptoms are never constructed from conscious processes,” Freud insists, and “as soon as the unconscious processes concerned have become conscious, the symptom must disappear.”²⁵ One exorcises the symptom—and the dilemma—by becoming conscious of it. Nonetheless, the dilemma exorcised is only one among many. Other dilemmas are bound to surface in time, and Zen would regard this as only a partial healing—not a healing of the entire being. The Freudian method cures the psyche piecemeal, not in its entirety. Rather than treating one symptom or one facet of self-consciousness, Zen attacks the root of the problem—self-consciousness itself. Once self-consciousness in its very nature is overcome, once the dualistic matrix of the self is transcended, neurotic symptoms are incapable of surfacing. This is true healing, healing of the whole being, healing from the greatest depths.

The ordinary self is rarely satisfied with an accomplishment. No sooner is one accomplishment realized—whether it be in the form of intellectual achievement, materialistic acquisition, or emotional peak—when the ordinary self catapults itself on to another. There is nothing necessarily wrong with this; it may be the ongoing dynamic of creation. Still, rarely is there total fulfillment in the individual accomplishment itself. Rarely can the ordinary self appreciate the achievement of a single act thoroughly, not simply as a transition to another. It is that tightly wound—near-bursting-at-the-seams—pace that Zen prefers to overcome, delighting in each act, each moment, as though it were eternal. It doesn't matter how objectively important the moment or the act, whether it be having a cup of tea or composing a magnum opus of a book. Zen mind is not driven, as the ego is, to racing ahead of itself,

²⁵ *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, XXII, 74.

to pursuing another venture. Nor is Zen mind ever bored. There is no fear of vacuousness; thus no need to leap on to something else to fill a void. An act is always a total actualization of the True Self. No additional act is necessary. Additional acts are embraced, but they are not *necessary*, and never performed in frenetic haste.

In the light of Freud's contention that the id "knows no judgments of value: no good and evil, no morality,"²⁶ one might be tempted to consider Freud's unconscious, at least in this respect, as paralleling Zen. Such a parallelism, however, would be unwarranted. Whereas Freud's amoral unconscious is blind, wild, and irrational—an "untamed passion"²⁷—antithetical to the moral claims of civilization—Zen's Unconscious is calm and serene, and though in one respect amoral, it paradoxically coincides with many of the virtues of civilization. Though transcending good and evil, and though unperplexed by them, the Zen master would not succumb to murder or theft. His Unconscious, unlike the Freudian unconscious, is not seething—"instinctual cathexes seeking discharge"²⁸—and does not strike out offensively or injuriously. The Zen Self is all other selves, and injurious or manipulative behavior would be pointless. Calm and complete within itself, but paradoxically all selves, hostile outbursts from the Zen self would be obsolete.

Zen is indeed different from Freudian psychoanalysis. Whereas Freudian psychoanalysis aims at uncovering earlier repressed experiences that may go back to childhood in order to break through the present fictions about oneself, gradually unveiling them by way of transference and dream analysis, Zen plunges deeper. Zen is not merely a recapturing of one's repressed historical past but a realization of—birth of—one's Self that transcends the bounds of finitude. In Zen, making the unconscious conscious is more than the realization of all that one is in one's historical finitude; it is a realization of what one is in one's trans-historical infinitude. In that, Zen not only attacks the *present* persona, the present fiction of oneself, the fiction that can be modified by reintegrating repressed past experiences into one's personality, it is a direct onslaught on the ego itself, a shattering of the ego's demarcation not only from its repressed past but from all of reality.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

²⁸ *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety*, XX, 221.

FREUD AND ZEN BUDDHISM

Psychotherapeutic Method

A parallel exists between Freud and Zen in terms of deception on the part of the individual seeking to be healed/enlightened. According to Freud, the therapist “cannot count in the slightest on the patient’s collaboration and compliance”; moreover, “he is ready to place every possible difficulty in the way of your common work—in a word, that he has no wish whatever to be cured.”²⁹ Paradoxically, although the patient wants to be cured, he will use every means at his disposal to resist cure, out of fear of facing up to what has been repressed. In the therapeutic situation, modifying the repressive mechanisms the psyche is not easy. The similarity with Zen in this respect is that though the Zen student seeks enlightenment, his ego will fight, assiduously, to preserve itself. Though in one sense the ego is prepared to solve its plight, wants to resolve the inherent contradiction of itself, it is afraid to let go of itself, even though “letting go” is essential. For this reason, Freudian psychoanalysis and Zen Awakening are often lengthy and painstaking.

Another interesting similarity between Freud and Zen in the therapeutic account is miniscule details having illuminative value. Freud notes that it is often from “small pointers”³⁰ that a young man may conclude he has won a girl’s favor. It may be a mere glance, unnoticed by others. And thus in psychoanalysis Freud cautions, “so do not let us underestimate small indication; by their help we may succeed in getting on the track of something bigger.”³¹ With this in mind, Freud goes on to examine parapraxes—slips of the tongue, seemingly insignificant gestures, lapses in memory, and the like—conditions which proved to be revelatory in the psychotherapeutic process. Freud’s concern with “apparent trivialities” also has a place in Zen. Truth is not something that is always acquired expectantly, after a logical, systematic process; nor is it always a grandiose disclosure. Many times the most mundane, ordinary event may be the catalyst or even the actual transmission. In Zen it may be the fall of a raindrop, the kicking

²⁹ *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, XV, 27.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

of a stone, or the movement of a leaf that gives the whole show away. After maybe a half a decade of intense meditation and *sanzen* with a Zen master, the most simple occurrence might be responsible for the final breakthrough. The difference between Freud and Zen, however, is that whereas Freud's "apparent trivialities" disclose only the individual's disposition (perhaps the repressive character of his psyche), trivialities in Zen are keys to ultimate reality. In fact, they *are* ultimate reality.

But there is a more significant difference between Freud and Zen in dealing with the patient/student. Freud was very much concerned with the problem of the patient deceiving the therapist, and with innovating techniques for preventing this deception. Thus Freud's insistence that the therapist sit behind the patient, out of the patient's range of vision. As Henri Ellenberger explains, "It is as if each role of Freudian technique [in its evolution] was devised to defeat the cunning of these patients. The specific setting (the psychoanalyst seeing without being seen) deprives the patient of an audience and of the satisfaction of watching the therapist's reaction."³² Contrary to the Freudian approach, the Zen master in a meeting (*sanzen*) engages the student face to face. There is no need for the master to avoid eye contact—or to devise means of counteracting deception—because the master cannot be deceived; not by anything—gesture, eye movement, or speech. The master knows immediately whether or not the student is enlightened. If the student is enlightened, he is a mirror of the master's own Self-Awakening and the master knows it instantly. If the student does not mirror back the master's Self-Awakening or Mirror-Nature, nothing the student does or says can convince the Master otherwise.

Not only must the therapist avoid eye-contact, he must be cold, disinterested, and calculating. He must not reveal any emotion to the patient, other than mirroring back the patient's predicament. The therapist and the patient are not on equal footing—the therapist always the master, always in the driver's seat—and the therapist reinforces this with a businesslike, matter-of-fact attitude. Although the Zen master is also in control, surely in the driver's seat in relation to the student, the master does not follow Freud's cold, calculating method. There are

³² *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* (New York: 1970), p. 522.

FREUD AND ZEN BUDDHISM

times when the master may be cold and calculating, if the occasion warrants it; other times, however, he may be sprightly, cordial, humorous, sometimes downright silly. In other words, the master will use any and every means possible to get the student to break through the barrier of the ordinary self. In this sense, Zen is more spontaneous and more flexible than Freudian therapy, not subservient to a preordained scheme. In fact, it is the very idea of a scheme—of a definitive, restrictive method—that Zen tries to break. If the master is to signify anything it is not methodlike restrictiveness but multifariousness, conveying to the student that life is much more—vastly more—than he ordinarily perceives. And in terms of the Freudian therapist being a mirror of the patient's difficulties, Zen assumes a different stance here as well. The master is not a mirror of the student's difficulties; he is a mirror of all of life in its infinite possibility. The master does not mirror the student's dilemma, he mirrors ultimate reality.

It is important to understand that the Zen "method" is not a method in any orthodox sense. The usual notion of a method is a conceptual procedure, usually quite systematic, for attaining a goal, whether the goal be tangible or intangible, concrete or ideational. But since Self-Awakening in Zen transcends ordinary conceptual processes, the method for actualizing Self-Awakening must also be outside the boundaries of conceptualization. In other words, the "method" of Zen for arriving at the non-dualistic dimension of Self-Awakening cannot itself be dualistic, cannot be thought of as contradistinct to any other method. In order to realize the Self in Zen, a Self which is undivided, the "method" for that realization must itself be undivided. This is the thrust of Tokusan's famous remark, "Whether you speak or remain silent, either way thirty blows for you." As soon as one thinks one has a definitive method, a conceptually formulated procedure for realizing the Self in Zen, one has missed the mark; for it is only by stepping outside of the bounds of conceptually formulated procedures, outside of the ego itself in its inherent dualism that the realization of Self in Zen can take place.

Ultimately, not only is there no method or way to Zen, it is the unique Zen "method" or methodless-method that only by relinquishing all possible conceivable methods can Self-Awakening be realized. The dilemma of man—a dilemma built into the structure of his ego—is that he thinks there is something special he has to do, something specific he

has to attain. But the paradox is that only by emptying his mind of specific methods and goals can he "truly" be himself. What is necessary, therefore, is a not-doing, an erasure or dismissal of all so-called methods or goals, so that that which is not bound up with the ego and its conceptualizations will burst forth, an erasure which might be referred to as transconceptual or even aconceptual. Emptied—freed from—categorical structures, the problem of "where" man is or where he is going becomes a false one, a problem, fabricated *by* the ego as it flounders in dualism, in the dualism of itself.

In terms of this unlearning, one of the salient aspects of what one might refer to as the Zen psychotherapeutic is dialogue, the ritual of questioning and answering (*mondo*)—which may be compared to the Freudian therapist attempting to awaken the patient to a truth of which he is not conscious, except that in Zen the awakening is more radical. The catalyst for this awakening is an "impossible" problem (*koan*) its purpose being to jar the student out of the straitjacket of ordinary consciousness. And yet what the student gets from a koan once it is finally resolved is not really an "answer," not an answer that can be formulated intellectually. Not the *answer*, but the *mode of being* of the answerer is what is significant in Zen. Almost any answer will do, as long as the answer does not issue from ordinary consciousness. At stake is not an intellectual "solution" but the student's being. Although extensive lists of answers to koans have been recorded, they are meaningless until they spring from the "right" (Zen) mode of being. In the way that one human being can recognize another, without the other person having to speak, the Zen master can perceive, immediately, whether or not the student is enlightened. Responses to a koan are infinitely variable. What is not variable is the mode of being—the genuine state of Zen awakening—out of which one may respond.

It must be understood that enlightenment itself is abrupt, sudden, the unfolding of an entirely new mode of consciousness—no "levels" or "stages" that may be gradually acquired. In this, Erich Fromm's statements that one does not have to choose between "full enlightenment and nothing", and that "in Zen there are many stages of enlightenment, of which *satori* is the ultimate and decisive step"³³ are completely off the mark. Fromm supports this by alluding to a remark

³³ *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*, p. 138.

Suzuki supposedly made to him in private, that "if one candle is brought into an absolutely dark room, the darkness disappears, and there is light. But if ten or a hundred or a thousand candles are added, the room will become brighter and brighter. Yet the decisive change was brought about by the first candle which penetrated the darkness."³⁴ First of all, Suzuki has never *written* anything to this effect, and since he has always been a proponent of sudden enlightenment, it is difficult to imagine him making that statement. Even if he did, it was probably soteriological—to make Zen more accessible for Fromm. In any case, there are no stages to Zen enlightenment and Fromm's effort to translate Zen enlightenment into a gradualism is probably based on wish-fulfillment, a hope of embracing Zen—recognizing its value—for Western psychotherapy. Unfortunately, this embracement breaks down. Zen does not come piecemeal, but fully, all at once, without transition. Secondly, the analogy of a candle illuminating darkness is erroneous. Zen enlightenment is not light illuminating darkness, light "coming into" darkness, but darkness turning into light. In *satori* nothing comes in from the outside. There is no "addition" of light (or anything). *Satori* is a *total transformation of darkness itself*, ushering *from* darkness, not *to* it. Therefore, just as ordinary consciousness is not something that happens gradually but is suddenly a reality, and just as the development of the self in self-consciousness does not happen gradually but is suddenly a reality, Self-Awakening in Zen is similarly not gradual but all at once, totally, completely manifest. And just as consciousness and self-consciousness cannot be conceived as additives to darkness or to non-conscious reality but only as "births" or uniquely manifest dimensions, Self-Awakening is not an additive but a sudden uniquely manifested reality.

³⁴ *Ibid.*