

## **A Buddhist contribution to the psychoanalytic psychology of self**

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(Final version accepted 18 April 2003)

The author attempts to integrate the concepts of self used in psychoanalytic theory with the understanding of the nature of self as explained within the Buddhist meditative tradition. He divides different concepts of self in psychoanalytic theory into three major levels of consciousness and abstraction: self as experience, representational self and self as system. The representational level is defined as consisting of unconscious organizing structures of interaction: the system level is a hierarchically higher organization of representations, while the experiential level consists of the moment-to-moment flow of consciousness. He argues that for the sake of theoretical clarity these levels be differentiated in discussions of self. He then describes the Buddhist psychology of self and tries to show how this perspective can enrich psychoanalytic understanding of the experiential self and of narcissism, which in Buddhist language would be described as clinging to (seeking or avoiding) images of self that arise in the mind. Last, he describes a model of therapeutic development using different levels of self and the interrelationship between them, showing how psychoanalytic psychotherapy and Buddhist insight meditation emphasize different levels of self using complementary rather than mutually exclusive methods.

**Keywords:** Buddhist meditation, self psychology, psychoanalytic theory, narcissism

Since the introduction of Buddhism in the West, practitioners of both Buddhist meditation and psychoanalysis have struggled to understand the interrelationship between Buddhist psychology and psychoanalytic theory. Several authors have noted that the two theories, on the surface, seem to have completely opposite views of the self, psychoanalysts working to develop a strong and resilient sense of self while Buddhism teaches that freedom is found in the realization of selflessness (Engler, 1984; Epstein, 1988; Rubin, 1996). Different solutions to this paradox have been proposed: a developmental model in which insight into selflessness is only possible after the development of a healthy sense of self (Engler, 1984); a complementary view in which the two theories embody different observational stances (Rubin, 1996); and various analyses of the ego functions developed in Buddhist meditation as compared with psychoanalysis (Epstein, 1986, 1988, 1996). The present paper is an elaboration of these integrative efforts, especially building on the work of Epstein.

In order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the self in psychoanalytic theory and Buddhism, there is, in my view, a need to look very precisely at the meaning

and definition of the concepts of self used. Within psychoanalytic theory, the concept of self has been used for many different phenomena (Westen, 1990). In this paper, I will start by examining the concepts of self in psychoanalytic theory, arguing for a differentiation of these concepts on different levels of consciousness and abstraction. In the same section, I also discuss definitions of narcissism, a concept closely connected to self. Then I will briefly describe the Buddhist theory of self in order to show how this can enrich psychoanalytic understanding of the experiential self, narcissism and therapeutic change.

### **Psychoanalytic concepts of self and narcissism**

The concepts of self and narcissism have become cornerstones of psychoanalytic theory, yet agreeing on definitions has proved extremely difficult. Westen (1990) showed that the concept of self can have at least seven different meanings in psychoanalytic theory. The problem that arises when a concept is ill defined is that different authors mean different things by the same concept, causing misunderstanding and sometimes conflict. In this section, I will attempt to clarify the definitions of self by arranging the phenomena that the different concepts are pointing towards on different levels of consciousness and abstraction.

In this brief overview I have arranged the different phenomena that the concept of self refers to into three levels: self as experience, representational self and self as system. This overview is not intended to be complete (for a more complete review of the self-concept in psychoanalytic theory see Cooper, 1993), but my purpose is to show how some of the most common ways of using the concept of self can be differentiated into these three levels, and that this arrangement is useful when thinking about narcissism and structural change. After the overview of the self-concept I will discuss some definitions of narcissism.

#### **Self as experience**

Some psychoanalytic theorists speak of the self as an inner experience. Mitchell (1991) has contrasted and integrated two views of self in post-classical psychoanalytic theory that both seem to be experience-near, and at the same time contradict each other: the view of self as relational, multiple and discontinuous (in object-relations and interpersonal theories); and the view of self as independent, continuous and integral (in self-psychological theories). The former view sees the mind as inhabited by different selves and objects in interaction with each other, manifesting in different senses of self and ways of being in different relationships and at different times. The latter view, in contrast, sees the core of the self as a continuous line of subjective experience, and the superordinate human motive is self-integration. Mitchell shows that the view of multiple selves is dealing with the content of self-experience, which can change into very different senses of self, while the view of self as continuous is dealing with an experience of continuity despite the changes:

There is a sense of self that is independent of content, operating as a self-reflective function, providing continuity from one subjective state to the next. I can represent that enduring sense of self as 'myself' and assign it specific content, which my present experience can either

match or not match and which enables me to feel either very much ‘myself’ or ‘not myself’. But even when I am not myself, I experience a continuity with previous subjective states (1991, pp. 135–6).

The difference between the two views is that one view calls the content of experience ‘self’ while the other uses the word ‘self’ for the part that experiences the content. Both views would probably agree that, in one way or the other, an important goal of therapy or analysis should be to make the transitions between different contents of mind smoother so that the individual feels less fragmented and more ‘whole’. Bromberg (1996), speaking from the multiple-self view, calls this ‘standing in the spaces’ (between selves). This involves the development from dissociated selves that are experienced as completely separated to a capacity to negotiate the transitions between self states. A critical variable in this process seems to be the keeping of an ongoing awareness throughout the process of transition, something which I will discuss further in the context of Buddhist theory.

The distinction between self as content of experience and self as observer was made already by Richard Sterba in 1934 in his article about the ‘therapeutic dissociation in the ego’, which, in his view, was an effect of psychoanalytic interpretations and an inevitable development in successful analytic therapy. In Sterba’s view, this therapeutic dissociation cleared the way for the ‘synthetic function of the ego’ to assimilate and integrate the formerly unconscious material. What Sterba described is probably the same phenomenon described above by Mitchell and Bromberg, the difference being that Sterba is using classical structural theory and a spatial metaphor of mind as layered in space (Schafer, 1976), while the view presented above is more experiential and based on a temporal metaphor of mind as a process moving in time (Mitchell, 1995).

Recently, Fonagy and his co-workers (2002) have described the development of the capacity to observe and reflect on mental states of self and others. They distinguish between three levels in the symbolization of experience: primary experience, secondary representation of states of mind and mentalization—which is symbolization of secondary representation (Fonagy, 2003, personal communication). Secondary representations—in this context meaning representation of states of mind, not representation of self and other—are formed in childhood out of parental mirroring of primary emotional states. The internalization of parental mirroring into secondary representational structures available for cognitive reflection is the basis for the development of mentalization. If, on the other hand, parental mirroring is deviant, secondary representations will be either absent or distorted, creating intolerable gaps in the experience of self and a desperate search for alternative ways of containing psychological experience such as self-harm, aggression toward others, retreats into fantasy, drug dependence etc.

### **Representational self**

A very influential definition of self can be traced back to Hartmann (1950) and elaborated by Jacobson (1964). This view defines the self as the whole person, including the body and body parts as well as the psychic organization and its parts. As Westen (1990) states, this is the only definition of self that makes it meaningful to speak about self-images or self-representations. A self-representation can then be defined as an intrapsychic

representation of the person self. It makes no sense to speak about an intrapsychic representation of an inner experience or of another intrapsychic structure. In this view, the self is the real person and not a psychological construct, and the word ‘self’ is used as a referent or pointer when speaking about the person that is oneself. The self-representation, on the other hand, is a psychological construct, an intrapsychic structure representing the self.

The term ‘representation’ is often used quite loosely for phenomena on many different levels of consciousness and abstraction, which, in my opinion, has obscured the distinction between organizing psychic structures and the relatively fleeting images and ideas about the self that arise in consciousness from time to time. Sandler and Rosenblatt (1962) distinguished between a self-image, which is like a snapshot of the self in a certain moment, and a self-representation, which is an organization or schema made up of a multitude of images. Following Zelnick and Buchholz (1990) I define a representation as an unconscious organizing structure of interaction, which means that it is formed, functions and operates out of awareness. These structures are probably encoded as procedural memory (Lyons-Ruth et al., 1998; Fonagy et al., 2002), a kind of unconsciousness different from the traditional dynamic unconscious. A self-representation is thus an unconscious abstraction that is presumed to cause a particular experience of self in a given moment, much like a schema in cognitive psychology. The reason for making this differentiation is to distinguish conscious or preconscious ideas, fantasies and images about oneself (contents of the mind) from unconscious organizing structures.

Sometimes the images of self that arise in consciousness are very similar to the unconscious representation, and sometimes these images are highly distorted by defensive operations.

When an underlying representation is taken as an object of reflection it could be said to be made conscious, but actually the representation is still a structure that operates out of awareness. What happens when the representation is reflected upon is that the individual can now see what is structuring his/her experience and choose to act in a new way. This in turn creates a new experience of self that makes it possible for the organism to create new representations that can structure a new way of being (Stolorow and Atwood, 1992).

### **Self as system**

One of the leading contemporary psychoanalytic theoreticians, Otto Kernberg, has proposed to ‘reserve the term “self” for the sum total of self-representations in intimate connection with the sum total of object representations’ (1982 p. 900). The self in Kernberg’s view is a kind of overarching system of self-representations, and this self can be integrated, split, differentiated, undifferentiated and so on. As Westen (1990) has pointed out, this is actually a kind of circular definition (the self is the sum of self-representations, and self-representations are representations of the self). Even so, Kernberg’s view has been enormously influential and useful in psychoanalytic character diagnosis and therapy with severe personality disorders.

Kernberg’s self-concept is one further level of abstraction and thus further removed from actual experience. A self-image is a snapshot of the person self in a certain moment,

a self-representation is made up of several images, and the self (in Kernberg's definition) is made up of several representations. This hierarchical differentiation between the more specific representations of self in interaction with other and the overarching system of all representations of self in relation to objects is especially useful for the diagnostic understanding of the degree of integration or diffusion of ego identity. It is unfortunate, though, that the term 'self' is used to mean both the actual person and a complex system of representations, because of the confusion it creates. Other authors use the term representation to denote the higher organization of representations as well as the more specific ones, but this usage is also problematic in that it obscures which level of abstraction is currently implied in the use of the term. One way to solve the problem would be to use the term 'self-concept' for the overarching system of self-representations and 'object concept' for the overarching system of object representations.

### **Narcissism**

Closely connected to the concept of self is the term 'narcissism'. Reviews of the definitions of narcissism (Pulver, 1970; Stolorow, 1975; Westen, 1990) have pointed out that the term has been used for a number of phenomena not necessarily related to each other. I will not, here, go into the use of the term 'narcissism' for a sexual perversion (the original use), a developmental stage or a mode of relating to objects (see Pulver, 1970). My focus, instead, is the structural and experiential phenomena related to the self-concept that the term has been used for.

In the American ego-psychological tradition narcissism has traditionally been defined as libidinal investment of the self (Hartmann, 1950), and later more precisely as libidinal investment in the self-representation (Rangel, 1982). The meaning of 'libidinal investment of the self-representation' is somewhat different depending on what one means by libidinal investment and representation. 'Libidinal investment' is a term from classical libido theory, which is quite problematic when used in relation to narcissism (Pulver, 1970; Stolorow, 1975; Westen, 1990). There are two major alternatives to energy theory in this regard: one is to say that libidinal investment means positive affective coloring of self-representations, which is the same thing as equating narcissism with self-esteem (Pulver, 1970). The other is Stolorow's functional definition of narcissism as all mental activity which functions to 'maintain the structural cohesiveness, temporal stability and positive affective colouring of the self-representation' (1975, p. 179). Stolorow seems to be using the term 'self-representation' for the overarching system of representations here. Defined in this way narcissism is a structural property of the mind closely tied to the 'regulation' of self-esteem.

One problem with these definitions of narcissism is how to distinguish normal from pathological narcissism. Narcissism is either equal to self-love or to regulation of self-esteem in general. The Kleinian tradition, in contrast, defines narcissism as a pathological phenomenon qualitatively different from self-love or self-esteem (Rosenfeld, 1964; Spillius, 1983). Narcissism is seen as a structure based on a pathologically idealized self-image, upheld by omnipotent defenses, projective identification and denial of reality. In a person with a narcissistic personality disorder the narcissistic organization dominates all other parts of the personality (Rosenfeld, 1964). Rosenfeld (1971) also introduced the

aspect of destructive narcissism, a structure in which a destructive part of the personality attacking and devaluing the needy, dependent parts is idealized. This destructive aspect of narcissism is contrasted with the traditional libidinal aspect of general self-idealization. The Kleinian description of narcissistic organization is reminiscent of Winnicott's (1960) concept of a false self. There is, however, a difference in emphasis in that the function of the false self in Winnicott's theory is to defend against environmental intrusion, while the Kleinian concept of narcissistic organization has a more intrapsychic defensive function directed against dependency and the experience of envy.

### **The self in the Buddhist tradition<sup>1</sup>**

While psychoanalysis is primarily a psychology of the unconscious, the Buddhist meditative tradition deals mainly with the training and observation of consciousness. Both traditions have studied the self, but with different methods and from different vantage points (Rubin, 1996). Psychoanalysis has used the psychoanalytic method of free association in combination with the evenly hovering attention of the analyst, while Buddhism uses the method of insight meditation (Nyanaponika, 1962; Goldstein, 1993). Buddhist meditation deals with the training of awareness to be able to study the mind in great detail on a moment-to-moment level, which places the Buddhist psychology of self on the level of self as experience, as defined above. In this brief introduction I will first introduce some basic concepts from the Buddhist psychology of self: the three characteristics of existence, the process of dependent origination and mindfulness. Then I will try to show how these can be used to enrich psychoanalytic understanding of the experiential self and of narcissism.

#### **The three characteristics of existence**

Central to Buddhist thinking are the three characteristics of existence (Nyanaponika, 1962; Kornfield, 1977): *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness) and *anatta* (selflessness). In the Buddha's days there were various theories concerning the realization of an eternal soul or conversely the finding of freedom through the annihilation of the self. Both these approaches presupposed that an unchanging entity, a core self, existed. The Buddha found that, when the inner world is studied closely, all that can be found is a constantly changing flow and what is taken for an intrinsic self or soul is just the sum of certain factors of the mind that are all impermanent and in constant flux. He also found that attachment to any of these impermanent factors inevitably leads to suffering, so the way to internal freedom and happiness that the Buddha advocated was to learn to accept and live in the face of impermanence without clinging to anything.

#### **The cycle of dependent origination**

The emergence of a sense of self is described in the second of the Buddha's four noble truths, in the theory of dependent origination (Payutto, 1994). The theory is made up

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<sup>1</sup>When speaking about Buddhism I refer mainly to the meditative tradition called Vipassana or Insight Meditation practiced in Southeast Asia and India.



of twelve causal links, starting with ignorance (of the impermanent, unsatisfactory and selfless nature of reality) and ending with birth, aging and death. According to the Buddha, this process is the root cause of suffering and unsatisfactoriness in life. The standard interpretation of dependent origination is one of rebirth, but there is also another interpretation that focuses on the birth and death of the sense of self on a moment-to-moment basis. It is this latter interpretation that is of interest here.

The cycle of dependent origination is made up of the following twelve links:

- 1) Ignorance
- 2) Volitional impulses
- 3) Consciousness
- 4) Body and mind
- 5) The six sense bases
- 6) Contact
- 7) Feeling
- 8) Craving
- 9) Clinging
- 10) Becoming
- 11) Birth
- 12) Aging and death—resulting in suffering (Payutto, 1994).

Basically, this means that, in a moment when there is ignorance (of the nature of reality) in the mind, volitional impulses based on that ignorance will tend to be created. This will in turn tend to affect the nature of consciousness and the state of the body and the mind in that moment. This affects the six sense bases (mind with its thoughts and feelings being the sixth sense base in Buddhist psychology) to receive stimuli in a certain way. In the moment of contact between awareness and the inner or outer world (through one or more of the six sense bases and its stimulus) there will arise a pleasant, neutral or unpleasant feeling. With the arising of feeling there will arise craving; the desire to seek pleasurable sense objects and avoid unpleasant ones. When this desire becomes stronger it is called clinging, a kind of preoccupation that creates a fixed attitude and evaluation in the mind toward the object of desire or aversion. This conditions the mind to behave in certain ways or form certain beliefs (becoming), which is then followed by the birth of a sense of self—a perception of someone who acts, succeeds, fails and so on. With the arising of a sense of self there will inevitably be the experience of decline and death of that self, resulting in more or less subtle forms of sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair. Because of the changing nature and inherent complexity of reality there will be constant threat and anxious efforts to protect this self, resulting in contraction and the creation of defense around the perceived self (Payutto, 1994).

The cycle described above, with ignorance as the basic foundation, is what is called '*samsara*'—a process in which the individual is blindly being pushed by forces in the mind to continually recreate suffering and unsatisfactoriness. Dependent origination is not necessarily a linear sequence, but a description of factors of the mind tending to occur together. It is also not deterministic. At all steps mindfulness, or bare attention, can arise, and this special kind of attention has the power to break the chain and move into a different kind of process. This is sometimes called the cessation mode of dependent

origination, which is simply the negation of the model described above. In a moment when the mind is filled with wisdom of the way things actually are, none of the other links tends to follow. This is a moment of freedom, a going along with things as they are without holding on or resisting the flow of reality.

### **Mindfulness**

The Buddhist description of the path leading to the end of suffering, the ‘noble eightfold path’, is sometimes divided into three major aspects: wisdom, moral virtue and meditation (Nyanaponika, 1962). Meditation, the third aspect, consists of right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. Of these, mindfulness is usually seen as most crucial, because it is through mindfulness that wisdom can arise. Mindfulness is defined as bare attention, the ‘clear and single-minded awareness of what actually happens *to* us and *in* us, at the successive moments of perception’ (p. 30). Mindfulness is usually directed to the body, the breath, emotional states and the feeling tone (positive, negative or neutral) of experience. Wisdom is developed through observing the *dhamma*, the Buddha’s teachings (most importantly, the three characteristics of existence described above), directly within these objects of mindfulness.

## **Integrating the psychoanalytic theory of self with the Buddhist perspective**

### **The experience of self**

The Buddha’s intensive study of self-experience reveals that the experienced self, when studied closely in meditation, is actually a constantly changing flow where no stability whatsoever can be found. This is an even more radical assertion than to say that there are multiple selves—actually there are so many selves that each moment is a new one. Even the observing part of the self is found not to be an intrinsic self, because in states of deeply concentrated attention the observing and experiencing ‘selves’ reveal themselves to be just one continuous flow of aware experience. Dissociation, even in its therapeutic form (Sterba, 1934), is overcome in that moment.

Dependent origination can be seen as a preconscious process, in that it is usually going on outside of awareness but it is possible (at least for a trained mind) to direct awareness toward it. A crucial part of the chain is when craving and clinging arises. The Buddhist notion of craving is actually equivalent to the psychoanalytic pleasure principle (Epstein, 1996). The desire to seek pleasurable and avoid unpleasurable experience is thus also the basis for the arising of a sense of self on a moment-to-moment level. This is usually not recognized, because craving tends to turn into clinging so fast that it is not seen. The turning of craving into clinging is the moment when the individual identifies with the content of experience and thereby loses the observing stance of mindfulness. This could also be seen as an interruption of self-experience; the continuity of the experiential self is broken. An extreme case of this kind of identification with content is the mode of being that Fonagy et al. (2002) call psychic equivalence, in which mental states are experienced as having exact correspondence to outer reality.



### Narcissism

When self-images arise in the mind they are, according to the principle of dependent origination, subject to craving and clinging just like all other sensory information. The definition of narcissism as libidinal investment in self-representation could be interpreted on an experiential level to mean desire for images of self arising in the mind in a given moment. This interpretation is also close to the original myth of Narcissus falling in love with the mirror image of himself. The concept of craving adds that the reaction to images of self can also be one of aversion and fear as well as desire. In Buddhist terminology, these reactions are called craving for existence and craving for non-existence (Epstein, 1996). Craving for non-existence is a much more general phenomenon than the destructive aspect of narcissism described by Rosenfeld (1971). Destructive narcissism seems to be composed of a craving for existence as a destructive, omnipotent self in order not to exist as a dependent and envious self. It is also described as a highly pathological phenomenon, while craving for non-existence can vary in intensity from a very subtle aversion to a particular self-image to more extreme narcissistic reactions. Narcissistic rage (Kohut, 1972) is probably an expression of such a more extreme craving for non-existence as a particular version of self.

These images of self serve as guides for experience and action but are, at best, only partially true. Buddhist psychology emphasizes that identification with self-images through clinging leads to suffering. When the individual has identified with part of experience as 'self', there will inevitably be threats to this self because the concept is always a simplification. No concept can capture the flowing nature of reality and, if it could, it would be of no use because its function and use is in this very simplification. The more tightly the individual holds on to images of self, the more conflictual it gets if something 'not belonging' to the self-concept is experienced or implied by an outside observer (a 'bad-me' or 'not-me' experience in Sullivan's (1953) sense). When the cherished image of the self is threatened, narcissistic defensive operations are called upon to restore self-esteem. The degree of narcissistic vulnerability is thus directly related to the degree of clinging to images and concepts of self.

Severe clinging to extremely distorted images of self would, in psychoanalytic language, be termed a narcissistic disorder. Psychoanalytic theory would predict that clinging to grandiose images of self serves the defensive function of warding off other images of self as inferior or inadequate, structured by an underlying representation of self as desperately (and in vain) trying to get the acceptance and love from a critical or self-absorbed parental figure.

The Buddhist notion of clinging could also be applied to images of objects. Images of objects can be desired or feared for different reasons, some of which are narcissistic in the sense that an object image is desired because it implies a certain wished-for self-image. An example of this is idealization, in which a (more or less distorted) image of the object is desired because it implies an image of self as part of the idealized object (filling a selfobject function). As in the case of idealization of the self, the desiring and seeking of ideal images of an object are probably caused by an unconscious representation of an object that is critical, dismissive or sadistic toward the self. This could be seen as either a defense against the pain of being dependent on a bad object (and the resultant

aggression against that object), or an attempt at resuming an arrested psychological development (by finding someone who is different and can provide something that has been missing), or both.

### **Truth and illusion**

The above formulations of narcissism as clinging to images of self can be seen as the workings of a false self-organization (Winnicott, 1960). True self-love would, in a Buddhist view, be the acceptance and tenderness for the self as it presents itself spontaneously in the moment (via body, emotion, thought or behavior). The difference is not in the content of the experiences, but in the quality with which they are met. Ideally, all mental content including grandiose images and feelings of omnipotence or worthlessness can be met with a tender, loving attitude. To meet experience in this way creates the kind of space in the mind that is necessary for playing in the psychoanalytic sense (Winnicott, 1971).

In the Buddhist view, truth is in the raw sensory experience of each moment. All concepts are, to some degree, illusory, at least if they are believed to be anything but concepts. Truth is found when the inner and outer world are met without resistance or elaboration. A sight is just a sight, a sound is just a sound, a feeling just a feeling and an image of a person just an image of a person. This could be compared to Winnicott's (1960) description of the true self as the sum of sensorimotor aliveness. Truth in Buddhism is also the truths of change, impersonality and unsatisfactoriness; and the seeking of something to hold on to for lasting satisfaction or attempting to find a core self is seen as delusion leading to suffering.

Giving up clinging is a work of mourning. Engler (1999) has described the Buddhist spiritual path as essentially a path of mourning the loss of illusory images of self. In the Buddhist meditative tradition, this is described as a progression through 'stages of insight', each involving the break-up of what was previously thought to be solid. Reactions to this process include attempts to recreate in fantasy what was lost, a sense of misery, disappointment and anger when the loss can no longer be denied and, finally, some degree of apathy and withdrawal from the world. Following this a stage of profound terror follows, often culminating in a phase called 'the dark night of the soul' by the Christian mystic St John of the Cross (Kornfield, 1993; Engler, 1999). The process is said to end with full acceptance of the ultimate impermanence and selflessness of reality.

### **'Primary narcissism' and the search for oneness**

Within psychoanalysis, meditation has traditionally been associated with a search for the resurrection of infantile 'primary narcissism' (see Epstein, 1990). The term 'primary narcissism' has been strongly debated and criticized, especially in its developmental sense (e.g. Balint, 1960; Stern, 1985). Still, regardless of the existence or non-existence of primary narcissism as a developmental stage, a consistent clinical observation has been that many severe psychopathological states involve regression to a state of undifferentiation; a fusion of self- and object representations (Blass and Blatt, 1996). This is seen most clearly in psychosis, but borderline and narcissistic disorders have also been associated with

unconscious fantasies of fusion with objects. Here, I shall confine myself to a discussion of this search for oneness in adults in an attempt to show how Buddhist theory and meditation can be of help to further understanding of the nature of oneness experiences, as well as in letting go of the desperate search for them (see also Epstein, 1990).

In the last few decades, there has been a shift in the way oneness experiences are viewed within psychoanalysis. There is now a clear recognition that these states can be healthy and progressive as well as pathological and regressive (Blass and Blatt, 1996). There is even experimental evidence of the adaptation-enhancing function of gratification of oneness fantasies (Silverman et al., 1982). Recently, Chirban (2000) has made an important distinction between the search for oneness and the experience of it. The search for oneness is characterized by a longing for romanticized fantasy images, while in the oneness experience there is a shift in consciousness and a feeling of full presence in the moment accompanied by a sense of merger with an object or with the environment. Modern psychoanalytic theories have stated that the healthy sense of self develops out of normative experiences of symbiosis and merger with the object (Mahler et al., 1975; Silverman and Lachmann, 1985; Blass and Blatt, 1996). To be able to experience both merger and separateness is necessary for development and healthy adult functioning.

Buddhist concentration practices involve keeping awareness steady on one object in order to achieve 'one-pointedness' and absorption into the meditation object. This oneness with the meditation object usually gives rise to states of profound bliss, happiness and tranquility, similar to what Freud (1930) called the 'oceanic feeling'. These practices are, within Buddhism, used for stabilizing the mind, in order to be better prepared for the insight meditation practices. Buddhist teachers clearly recognize the risk that the meditator will get caught in desire for these pleasant experiences, thereby losing sight of the true goal of letting go of the seeking for pleasurable and avoidance of unpleasurable experiences (Kornfield, 1977).

The distinctly Buddhist meditation is the mindfulness practice (Epstein, 1990) in which consciousness is allowed to flow more freely and attention is directed to whatever arises in the mind from moment to moment. Oneness experiences can occur during this type of practice also, but they are not sought and, if they arise, they are to be treated like any other mental content. This also means, for example, that if a craving for oneness experiences arises in the mind, this craving is itself taken as the object of observation. The craving is observed in its bodily and mental aspects, as well as in its ultimately impermanent (when it is observed over time it sooner or later changes into something else), unsatisfactory (its gratification cannot produce lasting satisfaction and, in itself, the feeling of craving is painful) and impersonal (the craving is just craving; it is not 'self') aspects. (This is a highly simplified description of the 'four foundations of mindfulness' (*satipatthana*) method, which involves many other aspects. For more details see Nyanaponika (1962).)

In order to understand the difference between regressive and progressive oneness, there is a need to clearly differentiate between the experience of oneness and reactions (i.e. craving and clinging) to these experiences. From a Buddhist viewpoint, no experience is problematic in itself; it is the reactions of craving and clinging that cause suffering. Reactions can vary from intense desire to revive the experience once it has disappeared to profound fear of the loss of self that oneness implies. Again, citing Mitchell:

The determination of emotional health as opposed to psychopathology, when it comes to narcissistic illusions, has less to do with the actual content of the illusions than with the attitude of the individual about that content. All of us probably experience at various times feelings and thoughts as self-ennobling as the most grandiose narcissist, as devoted as the most star-struck idealizer, as fused as the most boundaryless symbiosis seeker. The problem of narcissism concerns issues of character structure, not mental content; it is not so much what you do and think as your attitude toward what you do and think, how seriously you take yourself (1988, p. 194).

In severe psychopathology, however, things are more complicated. Clinging to oneness imagery can, in itself, function as a defense against, for example, aggression or sexuality, and primitive defenses such as denial, projective identification and omnipotent control can be used to preserve a clinging to oneness fantasy.

### **Relationality**

Reviewers of an early version of this paper hint at the risk of Buddhist psychology and meditation being used as a schizoid defense against object relatedness. Meditation is formally practiced in isolation, and some people seek this type of practice in the hope that they can escape the inevitable pains and frustrations of interpersonal relations. Kornfield (1993) describes his own initial attraction to meditation in such terms. But this is not the way Buddhist meditation is supposed to be used. The formal practice in isolation is used to train attention, concentration and inward listening to be applied in all situations in life, especially in relation to other people in order to be more involved with them, not less. Buddhism and meditation can, of course, be used defensively in other ways as well, but a discussion of this is beyond the subject of the present paper.

Even so, the intrapsychic focus of Buddhist psychology is enriched by the relational dimension of psychoanalysis, which, in my view, adds (at least) three important aspects to the purely experiential self theory. First, it shows how the self-concept (self as system) develops out of interactions with caregivers in childhood and with attachment figures throughout life. This developmental view will not be pursued further here, because Buddhist psychology has little to offer existing psychoanalytic developmental theories. Second, the experiential self can never be understood in isolation, it is always affected by the interactional field of the moment. The third aspect that the interpersonal dimension adds is the outside observer perspective. It is extremely difficult for the individual to get an 'objective' view of his/her self over longer periods of time without the help of an outside observer. The objective observer perspective, as captured in psychoanalytic theory, is a very useful tool for diagnostic and therapeutic purposes. The outside observer can also help in the restoration of mindfulness and reflective functioning when the individual is lost in identification with the contents of mind. Psychoanalytic theory would also predict that the strongest clinging to concepts of self (or other) occurs when an unconscious affect-laden representation of self with other is activated.

As Rubin (1996) has pointed out, the psychoanalytic and Buddhist theories of self are derived from different observational stances: the Buddhist from a 'microscopic' stance and the psychoanalytic from a 'telescopic' stance. Rubin also states the dangers involved in overemphasizing one stance over the other. Overemphasizing the Buddhist view can

lead to denigration of the value of concepts and of seeing patterns over time, while overemphasis of psychoanalytic views can lead to reification and an illusion of stability. A more conclusive theory of self needs to take both perspectives into consideration, and the individual should optimally be able to switch between experiencing the self as a fluid and ever-changing process, and reflecting on what representations are structuring experience on an unconscious (representational) level and how the representations can be construed into an overarching self-concept (system level). The experience of fluidity leads to increasing flexibility and capacity to adapt to changing circumstances, while the structuring activity of representations and overarching self-concept gives stability and a sense of meaning and coherence. This leads to a view of self-development in which both representational change and concepts of self are used as well as insight into selflessness.

### **An integrated view of therapeutic change**

#### **Experiential level**

The sense of continuity of the experiential self is, in Buddhist meditation, strengthened by the constant attention to primary bodily and emotional experience, as well as ruptures in self-experience, in formal meditation as well as in daily life. The process of free association resembles mindfulness practice in many ways (Epstein, 1996), in that the patient is encouraged to observe and accept everything that comes up in the mind. One difference is, of course, the presence of a listener in the process of free association, while, in mindfulness meditation, the meditator tries to perform both the function of the listener and the one listened to. One way to view the moment-to-moment therapeutic process is to see it as a kind of mindfulness exercise in which the patient tries to express the content of self-experience without judging or suppressing anything. The therapist calls the patient's attention to ruptures in the free associative process through interpretation or metacommunication, thereby restoring the continuity of the experiential self (Safran and Muran, 2001). The therapist's unconditional acceptance of the content of the patient's experience can be internalized into self-acceptance by the patient. This is probably achieved both through identification with the therapist's kind attention into a more accepting attitude toward the self (Benjamin, 1996) and through the background sense of letting go into a 'holding environment' (Winnicott, 1965).<sup>2</sup> The therapist's active confrontations and interpretations can also be internalized into a self-analytic function (Kantrowitz et al., 1990), so that the patient can continue to work with ruptures in experience on a moment-to-moment level in daily life.

Buddhist meditation tries to achieve something similar to a holding environment in the emphasis that mindful attention to momentary experience needs to be a kind of attention, an attitude that is sometimes practiced in its own right in the form of '*metta*' or 'loving kindness' meditation. While attachment to concepts and images of self is seen as causing suffering, loving and compassionate feelings toward the self are encouraged and practiced. This is probably especially important for Westerners, because it seems like Westerners in general approach meditation in a much more self-critical way than Asians do (Epstein, 1996).

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<sup>2</sup>See also the concept of transmuted internalization of the selfobject transference (e.g. Stolorow et al., 1987).

In the process of structural change, mindful attention to ruptures in experience helps by loosening identification with content (letting go of clinging to images of self) and thereby making the individual more open to let conflicting or repressed experiences into awareness, but it also provides a sense of continuity, despite the changes of the contents of mind, that makes change less frightening. The individual can ‘go to pieces without falling apart’ as Epstein (1999) puts it. Pure ‘insight meditation’ probably has more of a destabilizing effect on the psyche, which is why it is generally not recommendable to individuals with too grave structural deficits (Engler, 1984; Epstein, 1986). The ability to tolerate a sense of disorganization is probably a necessary prerequisite for representational change to occur. As Bowlby states,

Just as a child playing with Meccano must destroy his construction before he can use the pieces again (and a sad occasion it sometimes is), so must the individual each time he is bereaved or relinquishes a major goal accept the destruction of a part of his personality before he can organize it afresh towards a new object or goal (1961, p. 335).

In Bion’s (1963) formula  $Ps \leftrightarrow D$ , this is the movement  $D \rightarrow Ps$  into a state of disintegration and fragmentation characteristic of the paranoid-schizoid position without resorting to primitive omnipotent defenses.<sup>3</sup>

### Structural level

The interpersonal situation of psychotherapy allows for the deeper investigation of unconscious structures that is characteristic of the psychoanalytic method. This is done by making inferences from the manifest content of the patient’s associations and, because unconscious representations usually have interpersonal content, transference interpretations are the most powerful ones. Reflecting on the representations of self in interaction with others that structure experience makes alternative versions of reality possible. The person can then consciously let go of old patterns in order to find new ways of being alone or with others. The letting go of old ways of being, with attendant images of self and other, brings about a temporary state of disintegration (the  $D \rightarrow Ps$  movement in Bion’s formula). This state of disintegration has to be tolerated until a new state of integration can be reached ( $Ps \rightarrow D$ ). The movement back into a depressive position is accompanied by a work of mourning old self- and object representations (Klein, 1940; Horowitz, 1990).

The work of mourning ends with reorganization and the slow creation of new representations of self and object (Bowlby, 1961; Horowitz, 1990), which makes the new way of being feel more natural and stable. The creation of representations of experience seems to be an inherent function of the organism, a view supported by modern infant research (Stern, 1985; Beebe and Lachmann, 1988) and neurophysiology (Churchland, 2002). The new ways of being are (hopefully) more gratifying, so that the new representations are used more often and the old ones fade away, returning only in states of stress in the form of regression. With time, though, the new representations might themselves be reflected upon as in more subtle ways imprisoning or restricting, and so the process starts over again

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<sup>3</sup>This link with Bion’s formula was suggested by an anonymous reviewer.



with letting go of old ways, acting in new ways and the creation of new representations. This process of continually creating new representations of self and others makes the overarching self-concept (system level) increasingly complex and nuanced (through the act of reflection), something that has been shown to be an important part of therapeutic development and mental health (Blatt et al., 1997). Research on structural aspects of representational change has shown that developmentally higher levels of concepts of self and significant other means being able to see the way concepts of self and other are interdependent and in constant construction and revision (Diamond et al., 1995).

### Conclusion

My conclusion is that the three levels of self—self as experience, representational self and self as system—all need to be taken into consideration for a more full psychology of self. For clarity, it would be practical to separate the concepts and call the actual person ‘self’ (following Hartmann, 1950, and Jacobson, 1964), the overarching system of representations of the self ‘self-concept’ and the experience of self ‘self-experience’, ‘sense of self’ or ‘experiential self’. Buddhist theory and practice can further clarify the nature of the experiential self, especially by showing the fleeting nature of inner reality and the suffering involved in clinging to images and concepts of self (narcissism). It also provides a way of training the mind to let go of the clinging to concepts to make experience more fluid and the self-concept more flexible and complex to be better able to adapt to an inherently complex and changing reality. Psychoanalytic concepts of representations as unconscious organizing structures show why development is a slow process and why the individual repeatedly keeps falling into the same interpersonal patterns. Combining the different levels of self and their interrelationship gives a more complete theory of self and structural development.

### Translations of summary

**Ein buddhistischer Beitrag zur psychoanalytischen Psychologie des Selbst.** Der Autor versucht, die in der psychoanalytischen Theorie benutzten Konzepte des Selbst mit dem aus der buddhistischen Meditationstradition hervorgegangenen Verständnis der Natur des Selbst zu verbinden. Unterschiedliche Selbstkonzepte der psychoanalytischen Theorie werden drei Ebenen des Bewusstseins und der Abstraktion zugeordnet: Selbst als Erfahrung, repräsentationales Selbst und Selbst als System. Die repräsentationale Ebene besteht aus unbewussten interaktionellen Organisationsstrukturen; die Systemebene stellt eine hierarchisch höhere Organisation von Repräsentationen dar, während die Erfahrungsebene durch den unaufhörlichen Bewusstseinsstrom konstituiert wird. Der Autor plädiert dafür, der theoretischen Klarheit wegen in Diskussionen über das Selbst zwischen diesen Ebenen zu unterscheiden. Die buddhistische Psychologie des Selbst wird im Anschluss daran beschrieben, und der Autor versucht zu zeigen, wie diese Perspektive das psychoanalytische Verständnis des Erfahrungsselbst und des Narzissmus bereichern kann, der in der Sprache des Buddhismus als (suchendes oder vermeidendes) Festhalten an Bildern des Selbst beschrieben würde, die in der Psyche entstehen. Abschließend wird ein Modell der therapeutischen Entwicklung beschrieben, das mit Hilfe der verschiedenen Ebenen des Selbst und ihrer wechselseitigen Beziehungen zeigt, dass psychoanalytische Psychotherapie und buddhistische Einsicht/Meditation keine einander ausschließenden Methoden darstellen, sondern unterschiedliche Ebenen des Selbst betonen.

**Un aporte budista a la psicología psicoanalítica del self.** El autor intenta integrar los conceptos de self que usa la teoría psicoanalítica con la comprensión de la naturaleza del self tal como la explica la tradición budista de la meditación. El autor divide los diferentes conceptos de self de la teoría psicoanalítica en tres

grandes niveles de conciencia y abstracción: el self como experiencia, el self representacional y el self como sistema. Al nivel representacional se le define como formado por estructuras inconscientes organizadoras de la interacción. El nivel de sistema es definido como una organización de representaciones jerárquicamente superior. Mientras que el nivel de la experiencia comprende el flujo de conciencia de momento a momento. El autor argumenta que la claridad teórica exige diferenciar estos niveles en las discusiones sobre el self. Luego describe la psicología budista del self e intenta demostrar cómo esta perspectiva puede enriquecer la comprensión psicoanalítica del self de la experiencia y del narcisismo, que en el lenguaje budista podría ser descrito como aferramiento (buscando o evitando) a imágenes del self que surgen en la mente. Por último, el autor describe un modelo de desarrollo terapéutico que emplea diferentes niveles de self y la relación entre ellos, y demuestra cómo la psicoterapia psicoanalítica y la meditación budista del insight enfatizan diferentes niveles del self usando métodos complementarios antes que métodos mutuamente excluyentes.

**Une contribution bouddhiste à la psychologie psychanalytique du self.** L'auteur tente d'intégrer les concepts relatifs au self utilisés dans la théorie psychanalytique à la compréhension de la nature du self telle que celle-ci découle de la tradition méditative bouddhiste. Les différents concepts du self de la théorie psychanalytique sont divisés en trois niveaux principaux de conscience et d'abstraction ; le self en tant qu'expérience, le self représentationnel, et le self en tant que système. Le niveau représentationnel est défini comme constitué de structures inconscientes organisatrices de l'interaction ; le niveau de système est une organisation de représentations hiérarchiquement supérieure, alors que le niveau de l'expérience consiste dans le flux de la conscience au fur et à mesure qu'elle se déroule. L'auteur propose, dans un but de clarté théorique, que ces trois niveaux soient différenciés en tant que « discussions » (questions) du self. La psychologie bouddhiste du self est décrite par la suite, et l'auteur tente de montrer comment cette perspective peut enrichir la compréhension psychanalytique de l'expérience du self et du narcissisme, ce qui, en langage bouddhiste, serait décrit comme une affinité (recherchée ou à éviter) avec les images du self qui émergent dans l'esprit. Enfin, un modèle de développement thérapeutique est décrit, utilisant différents niveaux du self et leurs interrelations, montrant comment la psychothérapie psychanalytique et la méditation de l'insight bouddhiste soulignent différents niveaux du self, en utilisant des méthodes qui sont plutôt complémentaires qu'exclusives l'une de l'autre.

**Un contributo del buddismo alla psicologia psicoanalitica del Sé.** In questo lavoro si tenta d'integrare le concezioni del Sé impiegate nella teoria psicoanalitica con la comprensione della natura del Sé all'interno della tradizione di meditazione buddistica. Le diverse concezioni del Sé nella teoria psicoanalitica sono divise in tre livelli principali di coscienza e astrazione: il Sé come esperienza, il Sé come rappresentazione e il Sé come sistema. Il livello della rappresentazione è definito come consistente in strutture organizzative d'interazione inconse; il livello del sistema è un'organizzazione di rappresentazioni gerarchicamente più alta mentre il livello dell'esperienza consiste nel flusso di coscienza istante per istante. Si sostiene che, nella discussione del Sé, questi livelli vanno tenuti distinti per chiarezza teorica. Quindi l'autore descrive la psicologia buddistica del Sé cercando di mostrare come questa prospettiva possa arricchire la comprensione psicoanalitica del Sé esperienziale e del narcisismo, che nel linguaggio buddistico sarebbe descritto come uno stare attaccato (cercandole o evitandole) a immagini di sé che sorgono nella mente. Egli descrive infine un modello di sviluppo terapeutico utilizzando i diversi livelli del Sé e i loro rapporti reciproci, e mostrando come la psicoterapia psicoanalitica e la meditazione d'introspezione di consapevolezza buddistica sottolineino i diversi livelli del Sé utilizzando metodi complementari anziché metodi che si escludono a vicenda.

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