

V. Empty Willing: The Psychotransformative
Significance of the
Contemplative Gesture

When we analyze with all the tools modern psycho-
analysis brings us, we shall find ourselves pushed
back to the level of attention or intention as the
seat of will.

Rollo May, Love and Will

1. ATTENTION AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Without arguing about who is clever...
just do zazen. You will then naturally
improve.

Dōgen

a. The Question of Depth

Contemplative method, by the very fact of what it offers to man--the conformation of his living consciousness to Ultimate Reality (the Way, the Will of God)--claims to be a psychology of depth. Yet it differs starkly from the contemporary psychology that takes that adjective as its own in at least one crucial respect: contemplative method, as we have presented it through the writings of John and Dōgen, does not involve "the unconscious." More specifically, the psychotransformative paradigm behind contemplative praxis does not involve "bringing unconscious contents to consciousness." Neither John nor Dōgen pays particular attention to the examination or interpretation of the mind's autonomous productions in waking or dream life.

But neither does contemplative method spring to the usual alternative. It does not rely on conscious rationality over against an exploration of the unconscious. Rather, it stands a middle ground that refuses the lure of both. We have called this middle ground non-discursive attention. To understand its uniqueness, it will help us

to take a brief look at an operational paradigm of depth psychology.

Practitioners in the modern schools of depth psychology recognize two kinds of thinking, two languages, between which and by means of which psychic life is maintained. Freud's terms are primary and secondary process; Jung's non-directed and directed thinking. Primary process is the language or thought-process of the unconscious psyche. Like blood and breath it flows on ceaselessly beneath the surface skin of consciousness, a river of tendencies, impulses, predispositions, desires, anxieties and drives which influence and often determine behavior. Depth psychology attempts to alter behavior patterns by building bridges between secondary process (conscious rationality) and primary process though commerce on this bridge is conducted quite differently according to the different points of view of the schools.

For example, Freud saw primary process as basically unruly and chaotic, antagonistic to well-being, especially if left unconscious. Its instinctual demand and infantile character had to be tamed, educated and re-directed by the rational process if it was in any way to be turned from foe to friend. Jung, on the other hand, though warning of primary process' capacity to overwhelm and cripple conscious life, takes overall a more friendly view of it. Opposing Freud's tendency to see the psyche as an inexorable conflict of forces, Jung understands the domains of primary

and secondary process to be encompassed by a governing principle of equilibrium. Primary process is a friend to secondary process and, if consciously befriended, a boon to its life and creativity. It is a stream of affect, instinct and image that seeks somehow to describe and promote individual growth.

Despite different approaches, however, depth psychologists are united in their fascination with the vast, unexplored field of primary, non-directed mentation opened up by Freud's pioneering effort. It is little wonder that he, Jung and others invested all their creative energies in searching for the laws that governed this field. Nor is it surprising that their therapeutic, psychotransformative strategies came to rest on a single basic formula: the bringing of unconscious contents to consciousness. Different attitudes, as we have said, led to distinct ways of filling in the formula. Freud would defeat primary process, decipher its messages, explain it; Jung would befriend primary process, embrace its messages, consult it. Still, the "bringing of unconscious contents to consciousness" forms the strategic heart of each man's vision of psychological transformation.

The heart of the contemplative gesture, by contrast, is neither attention to primary process, nor reliance on secondary process nor any overt commerce between the two. It is, as far as we know, a form of mentation found nowhere but in spiritual tradition. This gesture, as we have argued

above, is the systematic, methodical use of non-discursive attention. It is neither primary process thinking nor secondary process thinking, but, as Dōgen calls it, non-thinking. The questions at hand are: is this gesture psychotransformatively effective--that is, does it alter the structural determinants of consciousness to a degree that merits the accolade "depth?" And, if so, how?

The answer to the first question from the camp of depth psychology, we might surmise, would be that it can do no such thing. Without an awareness of the unconscious or without a method of exploring and interpreting it, one is bound to be lived by it. The attempts of spiritual discipline to engender the "new man" without consulting the unconscious are attempts involving repression, regression and self-delusion on a grand scale.

But the record causes us to object. Certainly aberrant personalities dot the pages of religious history but generally speaking, the great contemplatives have offered images of the best that man can be. Regression and self-delusion probably attract little genuine love. Yet contemplatives and saints seem often to have been the magnetic center of great love and dedication, and remain to this day sources of inspiration. The ability of the religious will when joined to contemplative discipline to produce unusually deep transformations of the psyche is attested to by the psychoanalyst Medard Boss. Writing of his experience in India, he says:

...the Indian sages seem to have worked the miracle of truly freeing themselves from evil. I was forced to the conclusion that in them is nothing at all evil, covetous, destructive, fearful, guilty, or dark, to be consciously controlled and unconsciously repressed. No matter how carefully I observed the waking lives of holy men, no matter how ready they were to tell me about their dreams, I could not detect in the best of them a trace of selfish action or any kind of repressed or consciously concealed shadow life. They seemed to me to consist of pure love, which had long since redeemed in them all hate and desire (188).

Many great religious figures are not contemplatives in the practical, methodical sense here being investigated. Some have simply been possessed of an unshakable predisposition of the heart which results in a life of great creativity or outstanding service to mankind. Yet many others, like Catholic contemplatives and Zen Buddhists, take this predisposition of the heart as a starting point and from there endeavored to transform the structure of consciousness toward a new awareness, a new internal freedom and beatitude. We must take for granted that contemplative discipline can indeed issue in deep psychological transformation, but how does it work?

Depth psychology has taught us that meaningful psychological change occurs only as we become free of the conflicts and automatisms that have been etched into our psychic network. Whether we take Freud's "where id was there let ego be" or Jung's "walking through life" as opposed to "being dragged through," the goal of the work is to somehow get

beyond old, entrenched patterns of thought, behavior and emotive reaction which keep us on a psychic treadmill. The end of depth psychology is consciousness' right relation to its structural determinants and the personality's ability to be wholly and healthily in the world.

The operational paradigm of depth psychology is thus marked by a determination to clear vision. It is the determination not to cloud our vision with unconscious identifications, projections and compulsive acting out of what we see, but simply to see it clearly and relate to it rightly. Ann and Barry Ulanov compare the gradual process of freeing oneself from projection to Husserl's phenomenological epoche or "bracketing:"

If we could bracket all our preconceptions--lay them aside and look directly at what is before us--phenomena might be allowed to show themselves directly, in their and our immediacy. Depth psychology seeks to set aside the psychological blocks that efface such simplicity of vision, those neurotic biases, conflicts and problems which obstruct the bracketing and the freedom that it brings to contemplate the world as it is in itself (56).

Neither the phenomenologist nor the psychologist claims to arrive at the ding an sich; they claim only to erase certain modalities of phenomenal blindness. By such erasure, reality, whatever be its ultimate nature, is disclosed with purer accuracy to the inquiring mind and in more beneficent light to the undivided and unconflicted self.

Our reflection on the contemplative gesture shall continue along similar lines. This study attempts to keep the mystical experience and the claims surrounding it in the background. We have avoided the "peak experience" and turned our attention to the climb. Rather than attempting to explain the mystic's experience of the Absolute, we are taking a gentler approach, concentrating on how the practice of contemplation may be understood to erase modalities of human blindness, slash the cords of human bondage. In what follows we shall offer a psychospiritual understanding of contemplative method, seeking the answer as to how it makes its contribution to simplicity of vision, to the untying of psychological knots, to the undoing of the automatism and conflict in the self which place a veil between it and the world.

In our textual study of John and Dōgen we discovered two interrelated gestures comprising contemplative method--attention and intention. This section and the following one will consider each of these in turn. Propaedeutic to both treatments, however, is the task of marking out a broad philosophical horizon against which alone the fullness of meaning which the contemplative gesture has for man becomes clear. To this end we shall have to enter upon an excursus which is likely to seem an aimless digression. Indeed, some of the threads presently to be laid out will not be tied up until our final chapter. For this we beg the reader's patience.

b. Man's Dual Ontological Motives

Throughout his "tenacious exploration of the universe of desire" (Ricoeur, 1970), and his wish to understand the energetic Force which called the tune of the psyche's dance, Freud sensed an interplay, indeed a conflict of opposing elements. Characteristically, he revised and reformulated his understanding with each new vista opened by psycho-analytic investigation. Freud first conceived the antagonists as the survival instinct, which acted on behalf of the individual, and the sexual instinct which acted on behalf of the species. Later, as Freud shifted his attention from mapping the unconscious to more existential concerns and a developmental psychology of personality, the ego was understood as the pitiable slave of two diametrically opposed masters, the liberal id and the conservative super ego. But as Freud's mind moved to and fro between consulting room and culture, between ontogeny and phylogeny, between individual and world, he caught glimpses of the systole and diastole of all that lives, the expansion and contraction that manifests itself in all creation, differing from one locus to another only in rhythm and intensity. Faced with the omnipresence and irresistibility of these seemingly antagonistic forces, Freud gave them mythical names: Eros and Thanatos. Six years before his death he described them, simply, in the following words:

...the instincts that we believe in divide themselves into two groups--the erotic

instincts, which seek to combine more and more living substance into ever greater unities, and the death instincts which oppose this effort and lead what is living back into its organic state. From the concurrent and opposing action of these two, proceed the phenomena of life which are brought to an end by death (1964b:107).

Freud was not the first to formulate a total process in terms of the action between two complementary or opposing forces. Already in 800 B.C. the Chinese had formed a consistent theory of universal process with the principles of yin and yang. But Freud was the first to set the formulation atop a mountain of clinical evidence. The obviously archetypal nature of the idea of dynamic polarity, linked with Freud's evidence and persuasiveness, was more than enough to keep the Eros-Thanatos formulation from being easily dismissed. Moreover, Eros--the synthetic, unifying force in nature--was empirically evident. Not so, however, with its negative counterpart. The negative complement was logically and psychologically necessary, but even early on, to men like Jung and Rank, the idea of a 'death instinct' was weird, indigestible.

As a force which, in Freud's words, "works silently within the organism towards its disintegration," Thanatos had at least some resonance with the second law of thermodynamics. But, as Koestler has suggested, the latter applies only to closed systems not to living organisms. (64n). Moreover, Koestler puzzles, it is hard to understand

how this silent disintegrative force is linked to overt aggression, a phenomenon for which Thanatos was also used as an explanatory principle:

Freud's death instinct which works so quietly within the organism, appears, when directed outward, as active destructiveness or sadism. How these two aspects of Thanatos can be harmonized and causally connected is difficult to see. For the first aspect is that of a physico-chemical process which tends to reduce living cells to quiescence and ultimately to dust; while the second aspect shows a coordinated, violent aggression of the whole organism against other organisms. The process by which the silent sliding towards senescence and disintegration is converted into the infliction of violence on others is not explained by Freud (64-65).

Koestler also marshals recent biological research into the protozoa to argue that neither senescence nor natural death are inevitable consequences of life qua life. In many primitive, multicellular animals senescence and death are absent. "Fusion" and "budding" leave no residue behind. In the long view of evolution, the phenomenon of natural, biological death is a relatively new thing. Koestler concludes that "Freud's primary drives, sexuality and the death-wish cannot claim universal validity; both are based on biological novelties which appear only on a relatively high level of evolution" (66).

Koestler, however, does not reject the idea of dual ontological motives. Far from being a mere debunker of Freud, he is interested in finding a formulation that can

claim universal validity. The phrase "dual ontological motives," we might add, is not Koestler's. It belongs to Ernest Becker. What is interesting is that, in quite independent works, Koestler, working from the outposts of biology and physics, and Becker, forging a synthesis between psychoanalytic genius and the insight of the western existential-theological tradition (1973) have arrived at virtually the same formulation. We find this convergence compelling. And because no human psychology, including the psychology of contemplation, should fail to take account of an interplay of forces that is found alike in protozoa, people and planetary systems, we are offering these "ontological motives" as a horizon against which we can frame our understanding of the contemplative response to reality.

A suggestive sketch need not detain us long. It begins with a reflection on the meanings of "part" and "whole." "Part" usually conveys the meaning of something fragmentary and incomplete, something which finds its existence or function only as part of a larger whole. "Whole" usually conveys something complete in itself, existing autonomously. These meanings of part and whole are ingrained in our speech and thought. But the more closely we examine the world within us and around us, the more we find that "parts" and "wholes" in any absolute sense do not exist--neither in the domain of living organisms, nor in social organizations, nor in the encompassing universe.

Each part we seize upon will be seen to consist of constitutive parts which then make that "part" a quasi-autonomous whole. Yet each "whole" is but a sub-whole of a larger, more encompassing whole in which it performs its function. The reader will admit that he or she is something of an autonomous whole, yet the 'partness' of an individual, both within the social organization and the biosphere, is obvious. As we descend into the living organism we find the same pattern. The body is not a complex chain of quarks (as of this writing, the closest physicists have come to "ultimate" particles) telling each other what to do, but a multi-leveled, stratified hierarchy of sub-wholes--the circulatory system, the digestive system, the autonomic nervous system, and so forth--which in turn branch into sub-wholes of a lower order, such as organs and tissues, down to individual cells, and the sub-wholes by which they are constituted.

Koestler has coined a term for these hierarchically arranged sub-wholes found throughout the manifest world: holon. A holon is a part of some larger whole, yet in its own right, a "stable, integrated structure, equipped with self-regulatory devices and enjoying a considerable degree of autonomy and self-government." Koestler says:

Cells, muscles, nerves, organs all have their intrinsic rhythms and patterns of activity, often manifested spontaneously without external stimulation; they are subordinated as parts to higher centers...

but at the same time function as quasi-autonomous wholes. They are Janus-faced. The face turned upward, toward the higher levels, is that of a dependent part; the face turned downward, toward its own constituents, is that of a whole of remarkable self-sufficiency (27).

The interdependent functioning of sub-wholes is apparent not only in the continuity of the life-process of an organism, but in cognitive and motor processes as well. Driving a car does not consist in the conscious activation of individual muscles in the driver's brain, but in the triggering of sub-routines, functional or behavioral holons like accelerating, braking, changing gears, and so forth. Chomsky's school of psycholinguistics understands the act of speech as a kind of spelling out of an intention or amorphous idea through a step by step activation of sub-wholes which terminate in the actual motion-pattern of the vocal chords.

Koestler's mentor in all of this is general systems theory which proposes that the more we understand of the interdependent parts of the universal continuum the more we see the stratified structure of sub-wholes co-operating in a chain of higher, more inclusive centers. Koestler's point is that whether we take the astronomer's view of the wheels-within-wheels display of solar systems, or the astounding complexity of a cell, or, between them, the undeniable wholeness/partness of the human individual, it should be at least conceivable that we are living in a

system of holons, a "holarchy."

Now, if we human beings are holons in the universal continuum, we too are Janus-faced entities. We too have a face turned upward toward the higher and more inclusive levels of the holarchy, the face of a subordinate part in a larger system, and a face turned downward to the holons of which we are composed showing us to be quasi-autonomous wholes in our own right. Not only "we" as whole organisms but every part of the "we" possesses this Janus-faced disposition. This implies, since we are living organisms in process, that every holon of which we are composed, including the holon that we are is possessed of two opposite tendencies or potentials. Koestler calls them the integrative tendency (or "participatory" or "self-transcending") to function as part of the larger whole, and a self-assertive tendency to preserve its individual autonomy. In other words:

The self-assertive tendency is the dynamic expression of the holon's wholeness, its integrative tendency the dynamic expression of its partness (58).

If the universe is a holarchy in somewhat the same manner as Koestler suggests, and if these two dynamic tendencies are simultaneously in act throughout the numerous dimensions of the holarchic order, we might very well suppose them to be deep-rooted dynamics within human beings. Indeed, the self-assertive tendency and the integrative

tendency, when moved from the cosmic to the psychological order, are Koestler's version of Freud's Eros and Thanatos. The crucial difference is that, in Koestler's formulation, the barren negativity of Thanatos becomes a creative negativity: the self-naughting involved in any genuinely integrative or self-transcending activity. It becomes the negativity through which the destructive potential of the self-assertive tendency is checked. In his own remarkable study of Freud, Ricoeur (1970), also pondering the oddity of a death instinct, puts it perfectly:

Do we not find [in the idea of Eros/Thanatos] the beginning of a genuine dialectic of desire in which negation is placed at the very center of desire? Are we not invited thereby to reinterpret the death instinct and relate it to the negativity through which desire, Eros, is educated and humanized? (482).

Indeed we are. And it is Ernest Becker who responds to the invitation with the decisive psychological formulation. No one, it seems, needs to be convinced of the individuating, self-assertive force that pulses through all forms of life. Before Freud, Spinoza had given this force a powerful rendition in the term conatus, Schopenhauer in the term will. Becker is content to keep Freud's term, Eros. But he too is dissatisfied with both Freud's name and Freud's understanding of that mysterious countervailing force.

Both Koestler and Becker wonder why Freud did not reach for the obvious existential explanation of aggression: that it is a pathological extreme of the self-assertive tendency when frustrated or provoked beyond a critical limit. Such an explanation, as Koestler says, would not require the "gratuitous postulate of a death instinct for which there is not a trace of evidence anywhere in biology" (65). We may also note that sexuality in this new reading of the ontological motives is not to be classed under Eros at all. For Eros embraces the self-striving, individuation urge which at a pathological level becomes aggression. Sexuality, by contrast, is mainly in the service of the species, the larger whole. Sex is a specific manifestation of the agapaic, integrative tendency, the desire to submit, to merge oneself with the whole and only in connection with an individual's assertive desire, turned pathological, does it become a form of aggression. Ironically, this formulation echoes back to Freud's earliest formulation of the instinctual dualism as that between individual and species survival.

In any case, the idea of a "death instinct," says Becker, can be safely relegated to the dust bin of history" (99). Instead, Becker, standing on the shoulders of Rank and Kierkegaard, calls it Agape. Agape is that self-negating, self-transcending tendency which can be morbid and destructive if left unbalanced, but whose proper role in the heart of man is to shape Eros toward its true End.

Becker's Eros and Agape, cast in the language of depth psychology and the existentialist philosophical tradition, reads as a psychological instance of Koestler's more encompassing theory:

We...introduce a paradox that seems to go right to the heart of organismic life and that is especially sharpened in man. [It] takes the form of two motives or urges that seem to be part of creature consciousness and that point in opposite directions. On the one hand, the creature is impelled by a powerful desire to merge himself with the rest of nature. On the other hand he wants to be unique, to stand out as something different and apart....

We see...the ontological tragedy...so peculiar to man. If he gives in to Agape he risks failing to develop himself, his active contribution to the rest of life. If he expands Eros too much he seeks cutting himself off from natural dependency, from duty to a larger creation; he pulls away from the healing power of gratitude and humility that he must naturally feel for having been created (153-54).

If this is an accurate casting of man's psychological predicament at its most generalized level, then it follows that what is most fruitful and good for man would stem from a life that somehow harmonizes these two motives. Becker, like Ricoeur, argues that the potential for such harmony is available in a life of mature religious faith, though both admit that the religious way is replete with the kind of projective, self-deceptive pitfalls which led Freud to categorically dismiss it as illusion.

For the remainder of the dissertation, we shall be carrying Becker's thesis forward, though we shall be working with a very particular species of religious faith, namely, the contemplative gesture. Indeed, we shall imply that the contemplative gesture is the epitome of religious faith and, as such, holds forth to man the most perfect balance of the ontological motives he can achieve.

c. Man's Psychological Predicament: A Closer View

With our philosophical horizon in place, we may now descend to take a closer look at man's psychological predicament and how the contemplative gestures of attention and intention lead to freedom therefrom. The role of intention, or contemplative will, will be examined in the final section. The remainder of this section will concern itself with attention as a psychotransformative strategy.

The self-assertive motive in nature, so necessary to the individuation of living forms, is in self-conscious, reflective man prey to complication. For it thrusts upon him at birth the difficult project of achieving his own self-esteem. Difficult, because that unavoidable internal sense of being the center of things bequeathed to him in early years demands continuation and expansion in a world where he is decidedly not the center. The inescapable narcissism of the self-assertive tendency forms in the growing child a reflex that will shape the very structure of his consciousness: the denial of contingency. For in order to