“That’s Me”

Self Psychology Meets the Buddha

(Draft for an undelivered Kohut Memorial Lecture)

On Sunday October 4, 1981 Heinz Kohut gave his last talk at the Self Psychology conference in Berkeley, California. It was the first and only time I ever saw him speak in person and I almost didn’t make it. That same morning, Richard Baker, Abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center was scheduled to at speak at the Green Gulch Zen Center in Marin County. I was torn, eager to hear both. I felt that I needed what both men had to offer and somehow I had to find a way to fit them both in. The talk at Green Gulch was to start early in the morning and I convinced myself I would be able to hear Baker Roshi and then drive back to Berkeley in time to hear Kohut. In a comedy of errors that almost proved tragic, at the last minute Baker's talk was cancelled and I rushed back to Berkeley to find that Kohut, because of his rapidly failing health had begun his talk early. I rushed in mid-way, in time to hear him talk about the curative power of empathy and to describe offering his patient two fingers to hold, which she grasped, he said, like an infant clasping onto the nipple of a dry breast. When he finished, and announced he knew this would be the last Self Psychology conference he would attend, I along with the whole crowd, was in tears. I went outside and stood on the steps of the hall as his got into his car, waved and was driven away. I bowed farewell.

In 1981, I was in the final year of my psychoanalytic training, but just beginning what is, by now, almost 40 years of Zen practice. My mad dash between Marin and Berkeley literally enacted the struggle I felt trying to inte-

grate these two sides of myself and my thinking. Both Zen and Self Psychology were, in a sense, marginal disciplines I was trying to bring together and into the center of my life. As part of my institute training, I had had very little formal introduction to Self Psychology theory, beyond a single class with Frank Lachmann, who discussed his recently published "Psychoanalysis of Developmental Arrests" (1980), which he had co-authored with his former student, Robert Stolorow. Kohut's work was not taught in any of my classes; it was what a small progressive cohort read on their own. But by 1984, when I published my first paper, "Some Contributions of Self Psychology to the Treatment of Borderline and Schizophrenic Patients," I was well on my way to teaching others what I managed to learn on my own.

My training institute, The Postgraduate Center for Mental Health in New York City, likewise had a strangely split nature. It had been established with the then progressive mission of providing analytic training to psychologists and social workers as well as physicians, but that meant giving them a thorough grounding in Freud and ego psychology. It was, paradoxically, the physicians who represented the liberal, if not radical wing of the institute. A few years before my arrival, Harold Kelman had led a group of his followers out of the Karen Horney Institute and established a semi-autonomous Psychoanalytic Medicine track within Postgraduate. As a physician seeking certification from the American Academy of Psychoanalysis, I was required to have the bulk of my supervisory hours with these fellow physicians, who from the outset provided a Horneyan critique of the predominantly classical methods taught in the classes. The Horneyans provided an additional advantage; many of them, including my own analyst David Shainberg, were deeply interested in Eastern thought. Shainberg himself was a devotee of the Indian philosopher Krishnamurti and helped organize numerous dialogues

between him and various analysts and scientists, preeminently the physicist David Bohm. Some of my supervisors, particularly Sarah Sheiner, had, along with Horney herself, taken part in meetings with D.T. Suzuki. For this generation of analysts, which included Erich Fromm and Richard DeMartino, as well as Horney, Zen Buddhism offered a powerful cross cultural challenge to the Freudian hegemony, demonstrating that profound transformations in character were possible outside the confines of traditional analytic theory and practice. Zen was a crowbar that could be used to pry open the closed system of classical analysis, letting in the fresh air blowing from the East.

These Horneyan mentors in one sense legitimized my desire to integrate Zen and psychoanalytic thinking, but in another, they offered a cautionary tale of marginalization. Having split off from a dissident group well outside the psychoanalytic mainstream, they became even more marginalized as a splinter group in a small institute far from the center (whatever that was) of the analytic world. None of them, as far as I remember, showed any particular interest in Kohut, who as far as they were concerned, was just starting to catch up with the critiques of drive theory Horney had made a generation earlier.

My development as a Self Psychologist was nurtured through contact with the members of Kohut's circle I encountered at the annual meetings, but especially Anna and Paul Ornstein, whose indefatigable efforts at spreading the word through a seemingly endless round of lectures and workshops were the inspiration to so many of my generation. I was pleased to be able to enlist them, along with Marian Tolpin, Jim Fosshage, Sandra Kiersky and Donna Orange, as contributors to "Freud's Case Studies: Self Psychological Perspectives" (1993). In that volume, we re-examined Freud's classic cases:

Anna O., Little Hans, the Rat Man, Schreber, the Wolf Man and the case of an unnamed homosexual woman, endeavoring to disentangle theory from diagnosis and treatment from iatrogenesis. I entitled my re-formulation of the treatment of Serge Pankejeff, "Self Psychology Meets the Wolf Man, ironically echoing the old Hollywood comedies of my childhood, "Abbott and Costello meet Frankenstein (1948)." (Now it's the Buddha's turn…). In my Introduction, I compared our liberation from the strictures of classical theory to an escape from Procrustes bed, and half-jokingly suggested to the publisher that he illustrate the dust jacket with a cartoon of Heinz Kohut, as Dr. Van Helsing, driving a stake through the heart of Dracula/Freud.

For over twenty years, my life as a Zen student continued on a parallel track with my life as a psychoanalyst. When I first started out, as a fledgling analyst, I dutifully went to see my training analyst three times a week and to the zendo three times a week to meditate. Couch and cushion were intertwined in my mind from the outset. But how to conceptualize what was going on in each practice in terms that the other could understand and learn from was a lifework that I was just beginning.

Finally in 1999, my Zen teacher Charlotte Joko Beck formally gave me Dharma Transmission, the highest level of authorization as a Zen teacher in my own right. I think it is fair to say I became the first Self Psychologist to become a Zen master. (If people tell me that I don't look like a Zen master, I say, "There's your first lesson in Zen"). These days, many Western Zen teachers have backgrounds as psychotherapists, yet the combination of fully completed training in both psychoanalysis and Zen, or other Buddhist lineages, remains a rarity. Indeed, the interplay of psychotherapy and Buddhism in the West has taken a very different turn, one that has melded cognitive behavioral therapies with mindfulness techniques derived from Ther-

avadan Buddhist practices. In fact, I can remember being invited to address a conference on "Buddhism and Psychotherapy" attended by hundreds of practitioners of both disciplines at which I was the only psychoanalyst and only Zen Buddhist.

The confluence of the mindfulness movement with short-term cognitively based therapy brought about a mainstreaming of Buddhist ideas and practices that would have seemed remarkable to the generation of Horney and Fromm. Yet, it may turn out to be a case of be careful what you wish for. This is an integration that has in many ways further marginalized psychoanalysis as both non-scientific compared to so-called evidence based therapeutic approaches and at the same time reduced the cultural, ethical and philosophical richness and complexity of Buddhism in a rush to instrumentalize and often commercialize its techniques for the widest possible audience. In recounting my own efforts to integrate Self Psychology with Zen, I hope to provide a framework in which to appreciate the ways that a psychoanalytic perspective offers an entirely different bridge to Buddhist thought, one that by not rushing to instrumentalize meditation as a psychological or therapeutic technique, simultaneously does not require us to deracinate Zen, cutting it off completely from its religious roots.

The great 13th century Japanese Zen master Eihei Dogen, in offering an introduction to Zen practice, pointedly wrote, “The zazen (sitting zen) of which I speak is not a technique of meditation; rather it is the Dharma gate of joy and ease.” A great 20th century Japanese master, Kodo Sawaki, took it one step further declaring “Zazen is useless!” This uselessness is meant to completely undercut any conception of Zen as a means to an end, which is also why Dogen declared it is not a technique. Rather, the practice of just sitting is meant in itself, to fully express our enlightened nature. It is a radical

assertion that we do not need to change, fix or improve ourselves. Like Shakyamuni looking up at the morning star and exclaiming, “That’s me!” we may realize that we are just like that star, perfect just as we are, but with a perfection that is inseparable from being ever-changing. Thoughts and feelings naturally emerge like the twinkling of the star, and yet as human beings we just as naturally seem to resist the free flow of our thoughts and feelings, something that Freud in his own way also recognized. To leave ourselves alone, whether in free association or in just sitting turns out to be something we all find painfully difficult to do. Both Zen and psychoanalysis, I believe, share a foundational belief in the value of staying with moment to moment awareness, including an awareness of our attempts to control, deny, disavow, repress or dissociate painful aspects of that experience. Each practice offers its own form of container in which to safely stay with what we would otherwise reflexively avoid. It is perhaps a parody of meditation to imagine we practice in order to become calm , peaceful or even blissful. Though these states may occur, the deeply transformative power of sitting emerges when we are forced to confront all those aspects of our self, our fear, our anger, our vulnerability that we probably came to meditation to escape in the first place.

In 2002, I felt ready to spell out the ways in which I believed Kohut's Self Psychology was uniquely situated to enter into a dialogue with Zen practice. I was, in effect, thinking out loud, making explicit and external the dialogue that had been taking place silently inside myself all these years in which I tried to integrate and reconcile the two practices within myself.

I delineated four features of Self Psychology I thought most central to this integration:

1. Replacing a dualistic observational stance that presumed the possibility of an independent, objective observer with an empathic observer who enters into the world of the observed.
2. Acknowledging the impossibility of pure objectivity or neutrality and the inevitable impact of any mode of observation.
3.Reconceptualizing the structure of the mind in terms of a "self" that organizes experience around a person's own subjectively defined needs for attention, value, meaning, ambitions, ideals, self-esteem and emotional attachment rather than around the regulation of universal biological predetermined drives, fantasies and intra-psychic conflicts.
4. Recognizing that the "self" does not exist as a separate, fixed entity solely "inside" the person but is constituted relationally within an ever-changing selfobject or intersubjective field. (Magid 2002)

These four tenets were meant to describe the ways in which I viewed Kohut as offering, via the empathic stance, a mode of practice based on non-separation rather than Freud's Cartesian model of the separate, objective observer. Crucially, Kohut also offered a model of the "self" which was not a rigidly defined internal structure of the mind, but rather a locus of subjectivity constantly being created and recreated within a matrix of interaction, a self that can not be separated from its relational world, a self in other words, that was "empty" of any permanent or fixed essential nature as described in Buddhism.

Confusion about the nature of the self and whether Buddhism claims that the self does not "exist" bedeviled many early attempts at dialogue between psychotherapists and meditators. At the time, it seemed necessary to point out such seemingly obvious facts that when Buddhists spoke of "killing the

ego" they were not suggesting wiping out the "ego" of which Freud spoke. Enlightenment was not meant to entail the sudden loss of toilet training. Perhaps such confusion was, and to some extent, remains unavoidable given Western philosophy's own complicated and often contradictory attempts to define "the self."

Peter Hacker, a philosopher in the analytic tradition of Ludwig Wittgenstein, surveyed the origins and uses of the word "self" in English, dating back to the tenth century, where it was first employed as part of a reflective pronoun, such as myself, herself, himself, itself. It then evolved into an adjective, used to mean "the same" (as in "this self knight that"). One is tempted to say that the typesetter who first inserted a space into the pronoun "myself" turning it into "my self" has an infinite amount of philosophical confusion to answer for.

In any case, the use of "self" as a noun began in early Middle English, designating a person. By the eighteenth century, it was used to designate a person at a particular time, and hence that person's character or disposition. Thus, speaking of my feckless youth, I might refer to my former self, or recovering from an illness, being back to my old self. So far, this seems unproblematic. However, in Hacker's view, the prime instigator of our present muddles was John Locke, who stated in his "Essay Concerning Human Understanding" (1690): "Consciousness always accompanies thinking and ‘tis that, that makes everyone to be, what he calls *self* and thereby distinguishes himself from other thinking beings…it is by the consciousness it has of its previous Thoughts and Actions, that it is *self* to it *self* now, and so will be the same *self* as far as the same consciousness can extend to actions past or to come."

Thereafter, says Hacker, ""Self" rapidly sprouted definite and indefinite

articles, and singular and plural forms. It was conceived to be the subject of experience, the possessor of experience and the core of the identity of the person. Indeed, it was supposedly the reference of the first person pronoun, "I." " (2010) It was this self, that Hume famously failed to find on introspection, a failure that seems to been happily confused by contemporary Western Buddhists with a confirmation of Eastern assertions of "no self."

In "Ending the Pursuit of Happiness," (2008) I tried to offer a Wittgensteinian therapy for this confusion around self. Rather than seeing the self as an entity with a variety of characteristics, like the proverbial elephant discerned so differently by groping blind men, we need to return to the fact the word "self" is employed in a wide range of different circumstances and has many different usages. Wittgenstein (1953) called this situation "Socrates' Problem." Plato, in his dialogues, depicts Socrates searching for the meaning of "good." We use the word "good" variously to describe a good man, a good dinner, a good knife, a good day and so on. Mustn't there be some single form of "the good" (see how that definite article sneaks in…) that all of these have in common? Well, no. Seeing a substantive noun, says Wittgenstein, we are tricked into imagining there must be a substance, a thing, behind it. But neither "the good" nor "the self" is to be found as an object in isolation, existing apart from its myriad uses.

One follower of Wittgenstein, called the problem of the self " a piece of philosopher's nonsense consisting in a misunderstanding of the reflexive pronoun." (Kenny 1988) Galen Strawson (1999), on the other hand, a contemporary philosopher who has surveyed contemporary theories of the self, objected to this analysis that the problem of the self was an illusion, resulting from the misuse of language. "People are not that stupid," I imagining him harrumphing. But, the Buddhists might rejoin, they are that deluded.

Buddha's declaration that the self is "empty" is making a point strikingly similar that Wittgenstein made about the good. It is not Hume's skeptical point that the self doesn't exist at all, but instead that the self is not a "thing" with a single unchanging inner essence. Rather, it is exists as the very real, and often painful intersection of a myriad of constantly changing causal interconnections. Those who wish to cast Hume as a quasi-Buddhist should remember that Hume was also skeptical about the existence of causality, a concept at the very core of Buddha's teaching.

To understand the "self" is to understand the usage of the word within the full range of its seemingly contradictory manifestations. If instead, we seek to grasp its essence, its essential nature, we will find ourselves entangled in philosophical brambles with very real emotional thorns. These brambles are called in Zen *koans*, literally "public cases" that are purposefully intended to throw the student into the midst of a dualistic paradox or send her on a wild goose chase in pursuit of an imaginary "true self" or "buddha nature." "Show me your original face before the birth of your parents" one asks. What is our original face? Who we are "deep down," the real me, that somehow exists prior to and independent of our personal history (ie before the birth of our parents)? There is something in us that craves just this sort of answer to the question of who we (really) are. It tantalizes analysts with a mystical bent like Michael Eigen (1998) who mused that his British mentors Winnicott, Milner, Bion would appreciate this koan because they all " share a conviction that an original, naked self is the true subject of experience…and something originary shines through" (p.34) from our inner depths, something truer than the everyday face we show to the world. Yet Zen (and Wittgenstein) assert that our delusion consists of just this fantasy of an inner essence, and that realization will involve not one day plumbing the depths of

that true self but seeing that our quest has been misguided all along. If it turns out that there is nothing behind the curtain, if the world of appearances does not conceal a hidden reality, if appearances are not merely the shadow of a higher, transcendental reality, then they are not “mere” appearances after all and the whole appearance/reality opposition collapses. Rather than discovering a hidden “original” face, we find that the face of the present moment is the only face there is.

Wittgenstein likened philosophy to a therapy that didn't solve our metaphysical problems but dissolved them. In doing so, Wittgenstein comes the closest of any Western philosopher to Zen. As is the case when we "solve " a koan, it's not that we now have an answer; rather the whole framework in which we have posed the question has been dissolved.

We might say the problem of dualism --an abstract way of referring to the problem of a separate self -is one that we each have to solve for ourselves. No philosopher or therapist or teacher can simply present us with the answer, declaring the problem has already been solved. Despite our intellectual rejection of Cartesian dualism, despite our affirmation of the intersubjective nature of all experience, the pull to view the self as a private, inner structure or state of consciousness, by definition unknowable in its essence to others is very strong. See for instance this quote from Gerard Manley Hopkins:

"When I consider my selfbeing; my consciousness and feeling of myself, that taste of myself, of I and me above and in all things, which is more distinctive than the taste of ale or alum, more distinctive than the smell of walnutleaf or camphor, and is incommunicable by any means to another man….Nothing explains it or resembles it, except so far as this, that the men to themselves have the same feeling." (Toibin 2015 p9)

Hopkins' sense of the singularity of his "self" (or his "selfbeing’) has an

immediately recognizable ring of subjective truth. Yet it is a "truth" contradicted by both self psychology and Buddhism. For what Hopkins describes, is quintessentially, what Stolorow and Atwood (1992) called an "isolated mind," a mind essentially inner, private and unknowable to others, who in turn are equally unknowable by us. Stolorow and Atwood lay blame for this fundamentally deluded perspective squarely at the feet of Descartes, yet as the Hopkins quote reveals there is something about the subjective "innerness" of experience that we cannot say is simply wrong. No matter what we come to understand about the interconnection of all beings, it still simply "feels like" I am "inside" my body, looking "out" onto the world. There is a story that Wittgenstein once asked a colleague if he could explain why people persisted for so long in believing that the sun revolved around the earth. Not knowing how to answer, the colleague stammered, "But that's just how it looks." "How," countered Wittgenstein, "would it look if the earth resolved around the sun?" Obviously, just the same, since it does. But that knowledge does not, even after centuries of acceptance, alter our immediate felt experience as we watch the sun "moving" across the sky, rising and setting. Likewise, I would maintain that "insideness" is an irreducible part of the subjectivity of human consciousness, one that persists in the face of a more sophisticated understanding of selfobjects and complex systems. It also persists in the face of even powerful momentary experiences of "oneness," which give rise to character changing realizations of identity with others or with the whole universe.

Some may wonder whether it is necessary to go down this particular philosophical byway, yet I have found it impossible to discuss Self Psychology and Zen without some version of the problem rearing its head. Self vs No Self is still being presented as if there were a clear juxtaposition of op-

posing points of view being offered. Doesn't analysis strengthen the "self" while Zen seeks to eliminate the "self?" Some version of that question keeps popping up, as if the meaning of "self" was identical in both contexts. Yet it should be obvious that the Dalai Lama displays all the hallmarks of a cohesive self, despite having attained what Buddhists would call "no self." Manifesting such a level of wisdom and compassion goes beyond what we normally call self cohesion to a highly remarkable capacity to respond to life's vicissitudes in a manner that deploys the full range of his self-affirming values and ideals. This illustrates the way the maturation of our selfobject needs can be described as a progression from specificity to non-specificity (Magid 2002) . That is, in states of great narcissistic vulnerability, a potential selfobject must display a high decree of often exquisitely attuned empathy in order to function as a selfobject for that individual. As development or treatment progresses, there is an ever-increasing capacity to experience a stable, ongoing selfobject function despite what hitherto would have been traumatic misattunements or disruptions. The boundaries of what counts as "good enough" gradually expand and become less brittle. As, say, the idealizing selfobject transference is gradually internalized as stable values and ideals, more and more experiences can be selfobject experiences in that they offer the opportunity to exercise those emergent capacities. Someone like the Dalai Lama is remarkable in being able to respond to situations –like the decades long exile of his people and unending personal vilification by the Chinese government - that would for most of us provoke, hurt, disappointment or even rage, with renewed wisdom and compassion. One way of understanding this response would be to say that for him, virtually all experiences are selfobject experiences, ongoing opportunities to eudaemonically exercise his deepest values, ideals and capacities.

It is ironic, that Self Psychology, which conceptually may be uniquely positioned to create a bridge to Buddhism, is equally uniquely named in such a way as to foment misunderstanding. Self Psychology in particular offers a lightening rod for these sorts of questions and misconceptions about the self. But perhaps as Stephen Mitchell (2000) remarked, in order to be part of the solution, we first have to become part of the problem.

Self Psychology is also uniquely positioned to be attuned to Buddhism's presentation of the interdependency or interconnectedness of the self along with all other phenomena. After Kohut, we no longer describe the self as something located "inside" the person, whether as a psychic structure or a locus of subjectivity. By coining the word "selfobject," Kohut typographically expressed the essential inseparably of the self from its surround. Perhaps, in doing so, he has quietly atoned for the sins of the typesetter who first inserted the space between “my” and “self.” With the contemporary interpenetration of self psychology with systems theory and other psychoanalytic theories of intersubjectivity and relationality, we are becoming increasingly sophisticated in our capacity to conceptualize the ways in which all self experience is relationally constituted.

Ironically, Kohut’s insistence on the selfobject as function rather than person may have impeded the development of classical self psychology’s evolution from a one person to a two person model. Kohut, himself firmly committed to the former, used the terms “selfobject function, " or "selfobject experience,” to refer, not to a person, but, rather, to the other’s provision of an essential, stabilizing, constitutive function for our well-being. Thus, Wolf (1988) articulating the classical self psychology model, explicitly affirmed that *selfobject* is an “intrapsychic experience and does not describe the interpersonal relationship between the self and other objects.” (p184.) It be-

came essential for the relationally attuned self psychologist (Magid and Shane, in press) to revise this classical self psychological construct in order to achieve a psychoanalytic situation in which there are two people, each with separate and individual subjectivities. Only in this way, by changing the analyst from serving a function to being established in his personhood, can a truly relational self psychology be effected.

One consequence of this relational turn in self psychology has been to significantly broaden the meaning of empathy. For some patients, respecting the developmental legitimacy of the patient's emergent grandiose self experience, and maintaining an attentive, non-intrusive presence, might, consistent with Kohut's teachings about the classic mirroring transference, be sufficient. But it is also true that many patients require a far more actively engaged level of responsiveness than is conveyed by mirroring alone. It has perhaps been insufficiently appreciated that along with the empathic stance, Kohut (1959) decisively shifted the locus of therapeutic action from the accuracy of the analyst's understanding to the patient's subjective experience of feeling understood. And in the post-Kohutian evolution of self psychology, there has come to be an ever expanding understanding of the range of what some patients require from the analyst in order to feel understood. For many patients, the analyst's visible facial and gestural display of feelings and reactions is a primary indicator for the patient that his/her story has had an impact. This understanding parallels Benjamin's (1988) depiction of the dialectical interaction between mother and infant that developmentally gives rise to the emergent sense of self and other. Figuratively, I am the one who makes Mommy smile, Mommy is the one who makes me smile. Fonagy (2003), too, theorizes about what he terms marked mirroring in this same vein. Registering for the patient not too much, and not too little, but just the

right degree of response has great importance to the patient, serving as an indicator that the patient has been understood. This element, inherent in the reciprocity and mutuality of a two person process, a contribution of Relationality, had never been conceptualized in Kohut's Self Psychology. Moreover, within the expanded framework of relational Self Psychology we can comprehend an additional dynamic regarding the patient's urgent need not just to feel understood, but also to make the analyst feel, via enactments, either that which he himself either feels, or is fearful of feeling, and to render the analyst just as frustrated, angry, confused, or aroused as he is. And it is vitally important that the analyst can tolerate, and show that he can tolerate, those same feelings. The analyst thus both models, and, in serving a selfobject function, enables, the patient's capacity for containment of affect. Envisioned in this way, as an expansion of the basic empathic need to feel understood, the need for impact encompasses much of what had hitherto been attributed to projective identification.

In my experience as a Zen teacher, and from my conversations with fellow teachers, I believe this is an area where relational self psychology has gone beyond traditional Buddhist understanding. Traditionally minded teachers are not prepared to acknowledge the impact the student may have on them, for many thus withholding a vital level of intimate connection. Nor are they prepared to acknowledge the impact their own personal subjectivity has on the student. This can take many forms, but most basically involves the teacher's capacity to admit being wrong, of being empathically mistuned or attributing to the student's "egoistic attachment" any reactive distress precipitated by the teacher's actions or misunderstanding. Unfortunately, too many Westerners, eager to encounter an "enlightened master" (and perhaps especially an exotic Asian master) have been all too willing to accept unem-

pathic, unskillful, and sometimes outright ethically inappropriate behavior as all part of the "teaching." It is time that dialogue between Self Psychology and Buddhism become truly two way, with each prepared to see itself through the eyes of the other.

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