Depth psychology, psychotherapy, and meditation

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Abstract

The attitude of depth psychology toward meditation is naturally related to that toward religion. It is therefore quite natural that the Freudians initially gave it little consideration, while Jung created with active imagination a particular form of meditation. In recent times, however, mainstream psychoanalysis has modified its ideas, parallel to the introduction of mindfulness by cognitivists.

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Psychoanalysis has sometimes been called a religion in a critical and provocative way. The possible consonance between the respective fields, however, deserves to be explored without preconceptions. It has long been noted that depth psychology has grafted its techniques into the groove of a tradition developing within the Church, referring in particular to confession and exorcism.

It was Jung (1929) who specifically noted that psychotherapy could use for its own purposes four methods, which he called confession, clarification, education, and individuation. The last three methods would be, in particular, the result of the contributions of Freud, Adler and himself, respectively. Confession, on the other hand, was based on the same principle proper to the Christian sacrament: the sharing of one's secrets is often entirely sufficient to offer psychological relief. It should be noted that the possible competition between confession and psychotherapy on this level was somewhat highlighted by Pope Pius XII (1953) in his opening address to the first conference of Catholic psychotherapists, when he stated that secrets revealed to the confessor should not be shared with others outside the confessional and therefore specifically not with an analyst.

The relationship between dynamic psychotherapy and exorcism is less direct and was first highlighted by Ellenberger (1970). He showed the unique similarities between the procedure of the exorcist priest and that of the modern therapist. Both go through a diagnosis (in the former case, verification of the real presence of the evil one) and a cure (in the former case, sacramental prayer), resorting to the trust that is established, on the part of the person needing the intervention in the one who performs it (i.e., in a form of transference). According to Ellenberger, the transition between religious practice and psychotherapy took place somewhat in a controversy between an exorcist and a layman: the eighteenth-century one between Johann Joseph Gassner (who believed in using exorcism also to cure physical illness) and Franz Anton Mesmer (who conversely resorted to so-called magnetization to intervene in place of exorcism; see also Foschi and Innamorati, 2022).

Further affinities are expressed in particular between prayer and meditation on the one hand, and certain techniques or practices peculiar to psychoanalysis, analytical psychology and other forms of psychotherapy. The existence of an affinity in these practices presupposes, certainly, that there can also be a similarity in terms of ends. The similarity has to do with the spiritual dimension of the human being. Before delving into all this, however, it will be appropriate to preface some remarks on how the relationship between psychoanalysis and religion has developed.

It is well known how psychoanalysis originally set as its goal an explanation, an interpretation of religions. As early as 1908 Freud (1908) compared religious rituals to the rituals of neurotics. With *Totem and Taboo* (Freud, 1913) he believed he could trace the historical origin of every religion to the consequences of the murder of the leader of the primordial horde by his sons, whose repentance would involve prohibitions and reparative rites. Above all, however, in 1927 Freud (1927) wrote *The Future of an Illusion*, where he precisely defined all religions as an illusion, as an obsessive neurosis of humanity, as a narcotic from which psychoalysis must free human beings.

Freud remained, of course, a child of his time and embedded in an Enlightenment and

utilitarian tradition, which saw the human being "as essentially competitive, isolated, and related to others only by the necessity of exchanging the satisfaction of economic and instinctual needs [...] Pleasure, for Freud, was relief of tension, not the experience of joy" (Fromm, 1960, 84).

However, some aspects of the Freudian view completely transcend Enlightenment and utilitarian thinking and bring it singularly closer to some aspects of religious mentality, and particularly the religiosity of Zen Buddhism:

(1) The most obvious aspect: the fact that conscious and rational thought no longer occupies the whole world of the mind but only a part, and from Freud's point of view even a rather limited part;

(2) The fact that knowledge about oneself cannot simply be information; the insight that constitutes the moment of authentic knowledge is something that also involves affectivity (insight in this appears comparable to illumination);

(3) The fact that "knowledge leads to transformation, that theory and practice must not be separated, that in the very act of knowing himself, one transforms oneself" (Fromm, 1960, p. 82; italics in the original text).

(4) "Freud had the courage to say that one could meaningfully spend years with one person, just to help this person to understand himself" (Fromm, 1960, p. 83).

(5) The fifth point of affinity concerns the technique in fundamental theory of Freudian analysis, which is admittedly also the most difficult to put into practice, and which has profound as little-noticed affinities with meditation: the technique of free association. It is difficult to put into practice because, various analysts have noted, in order for a person to really practice free association the analysis would have to be nearly finished. In the free association technique one should let one's thoughts flow freely, without directing their flow. Freud suggested telling the patient to act like a traveler who sits at the window of a railway carriage and describes to those inside the changing landscape before his eyes (Freud, 1964/1912). What interested Freud was the moment when the description of the panorama stopped, because that was precisely the moment when so-called resistance was enacted. That is, the patient resisted verbalizing the next association by making an excuse: usually related to content (i) trivial; (ii) embarrassing; (iii) related to the analyst. Analyzing resistance meant, from Freud's point of view, initiating the process of knowing one's unconscious.

(6) As Jeffrey Rubin (1985) noted, the attitude Freud (1912) asks of the analyst, so-called evenly-hovering attention, has clear affinities with meditation. It should be noted, moreover, that Freud apparently never delved into the meaning and practicability of this way of posing as listening, as if only experience could offer understanding. Nor does any attempt seem to have been made by his disciples to illuminate it, except for Bion's (1970) proposal of an analyst who listens without "memory, desire and understanding."

Actually, the fact that psychoanalysis offered a tool for spiritual understanding of man and could be disregarded from Freud's personal ideas about religion was gradually understood by Catholic circles, after an initial rejection of psychoanalysis, which went so far as to ask the fascist regime to ban the publication of the first Italian journal of psychoanalysis. The process had its crowning moment when Pope Paul VI (perhaps the most important and most underrated pope of the twentieth century) officially defined at his general

audience on November 7, 1973, psychoanalysis as something whose usefulness was worth recognizing. This acceptance was so profound that there was later, with Eugen Drewermann (1994), a theology using psychoanalysis and even the admission of a pope's recourse to psychoanalysis.

However, the limits of the Freudian position regarding religion had been recognized for some time, at least by a part of depth psychology, notably Carl Gustav Jung and Erich Fromm.

If religion was for Freud a neurosis of humanity, for Jung neurosis could sometimes be seen as caused by the absence of religion. Jung wrote, for example, as early as 1930:

Religions are the great healing-systems for the ills of the soul. Neuroses and similar illnesses arise, one and all, from psychic complications. But once a dogma is disputed and questioned, it has lost its healing power. A person who no longer believes that a God who knows suffering will have mercy on him, will help and comfort him and give his life a meaning, is weak and a prey of his own weakness and becomes neurotic (Jung, 1929).

Fromm wrote, 30 years later:

> In order to understand the individual patient – or any human being – one must know what *his* answer to the question of existence is, or, to put it differently, what is secret individual religion is, to which all his efforts and passions are devoted. Most of what one considers to be "psychological problems" are only secondary consequences of his basic "answer," and hence it is rather useless to try to "cure" them befor this basic answer – that is, his secret private religion – has been understood (Fromm, 1960, p. 91)

For both Jung and Fromm, the spiritual dimension of the human being assumes fundamental importance, and it is certainly not accidental that both devoted writings to Zen Buddhism (Jung, 1939; Fromm, 1960). These are, moreover, writings in which both simply gloss over contributions by Daisetz Suzuki, who was certainly the most active popularizer of Zen in the West in the first half of the last century. And both had the intellectual honesty to admit that their interest did not necessarily imply genuine understanding.

Jung, however, went further, proposing a technique, which he called "active imagination," and whose historical roots he felt could be found both in the Eastern tradition (Yoga, Zen and Chan meditation) and in the Western tradition, for example in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola. Specifically, Jung devoted seminar lecture courses to both Yoga (Jung, 1936b) and the *Spiritual Exercises* (Jung, 2023).

Through active imagination Jung proceeds to the extreme extension of the territory of analysis: not only beyond the boundaries of competence but also beyond temporal boundaries. For although this technique is learned during personal analysis, it can be used by the analyzand even after the relationship with the analyst has ended, and in any case it begins to find its natural space of application toward the end of the analytic relationship for two. It is, moreover, a relatively risky technique, because it artificially solicits, so to speak, the emergence of unconscious contents. Its use should therefore be reserved for those who are already familiar with such contents. The analyst who follows the analyzand on his first steps with active imagination must keep in mind that it can take him, as Jung himself says, "too far away from reality" (Jung, 1936a, p. 49). It may be noted, moreover, that the risk also somewhat unites related meditative techniques. Jung openly advised against

the practice of Yoga to Westerners (Jung, 1936b), who would have to embrace the doctrine of prana as universal breath in order to benefit from it: in his view, psychotherapy instead constitutes in itself the Western alternative to Eastern meditative practices (Jung, 1948). Ignatius of Loyola himself hesitated to publish the *Spiritual Exercises* because he considered essential his guidance for those who wished to undertake them (Liebscher, 2023).

The technique of active imagination can be approached, in the closest approximation, to a "dream with open eyes" (Jung, 1955, p. 496), which, however, is controlled and oriented by the presence to oneself of the ego. The practicing subject is usually at a stage in his or her life in which confrontation with the unconscious has led him or her to know the unconscious part of his or her existential project has been at least partially known. If the alchemists' motto was "solve et coagula," the question of "solve" has already been addressed. It is now a matter of recomposing one's personality in a new and creative way, with a new synthesis of conscious and unconscious.

Active imagination helps to do this, through work on symbols. It is called "imagination" insofar as it is images or at any rate symbolic content that constitute the source material that will be the object of elaboration; it is defined as "active" precisely because of the participation of consciousness, which does not remain a mere spectator to the flow of images, as is the case in pure and simple fantasizing. Those who apply themselves to it generally focus on an affectively significant source material: this may be a dream, a hypnagogic impression, a situation thought of as possible; even a work of art, however, which has a particular evocative potential for those who want to use it for this purpose. Whatever the point of departure, it is paramount that it can be translated into an internal image (Jung, 1935). In general, when one's entire concentration has been fixed on an image reenacted in one's mind, such an image acquires a dynamic character by itself, that is, it takes on a transformation because, as Jung says, "the mere fact of contemplating it animates it" (Jung, 1955, p. 495).

What makes the practice of active imagination meaningful is the subjective awareness that "one's own drama is being performed on this inner stage" and then one "cannot remain indifferent to the plot and its dénouement" (Jung, 1955, p. 496).

The result should be the opening in one's mind of a virtual scene, on which consciousness finds its own location. One may or may not project an image of oneself onto the scene, but one must still be able to vary one's perspective of observation: that is, one must be able to explore the scene and interact with it. One must also try to maintain the state of mind felt in association with the source image in order to avoid distracting factors. A necessary complement to the actual meditation is the creation of a concrete element that reproduces what was previously produced. The medium is subjective; it can be, according to Jung something written, drawn, painted, sculpted or even danced (Jung, 1935). The essential thing is that a trace remains, because consciousness is always ready to repress what has emerged in confrontation with the unconscious.

Deep psychology, apart from Fromm and Jung, has gradually changed its attitude toward meditation, and Zen meditation in particular. Initially it was considered a subject worthy of interpretation (e.g., Hanly & Masson, 1976; Shafii, 1973) but certainly not of practice. Rather, the practice was considered

counterproductive (Alexander, 1931), or even dangerous (Lazarus, 1976; Epstein & Lieff, 1981). As early as the 1970s, however, that is, since the crisis of Freudian metapsychology and the gradual success of alternative forms of psychotherapy to psychoanalysis, the attitude of the psychoanalytic world began to change. Meditation could be seen as a technique that could be used "in an adjunctive fashion together with ongoing psychoanalytic treatment" or "as referral alternatives for patients unsuitable for psychoanalytic treatment, or patients completing such treatment" (Carrington & Ephron, 1975, p. 44). The relational turn in psychoanalysis may have deepened affinities with meditation, such that it has been possible to say that today's psychoanalytic practice can be considered akin to two-person meditation (Hoffer, 2020). Finally, it has been proposed that psychoanalysis and meditation could be practiced together, due to the possibility of covering each other's blindspots and mutually reinforcing their effects (Rubin, 2016; Cooper, 2023).

It is interesting to note that while depth psychology has progressively recovered the spiritual dimension of the human being and has in parallel developed modes of operation that can be seen as attuned to practices in the more general religious sense, the cognitive-behavioral current of psychotherapy has used the meditative technique of Zen by transforming it into so-called mindfulness. The first to propose the use of such a technique was Jon Kabat-Zinn (1982, 1990), who devised mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) a form of psycho-educational intervention that was aimed at reducing stress and pain in patients with chronic medical problems through not only meditation but also body scanning (focusing on different parts of one's body, from toes to head) and Yoga postures. Since Kabat-Zinn's conception of mindfulness, its principles have been used in various forms of integrated (i.e., hybridized) psychotherapy. Marsha Linehan (2014), in dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) paired it with behaviorist and cognitivist techniques in order especially to reduce self-injurious behaviors of borderline personalities. Steven Hayes (et al., 2006), in acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), aimed to use mindfulness to facilitate awareness and acceptance of one's thoughts and states of mind, in the context of an intervention designed to improve one's efficacy in order to achieve one's existential and work goals.

With these forms of psychotherapy, meditation completes its metamorphosis in a fully secular direction. It remains to be understood, however, whether setting aside the spiritual aspect of meditation is really an advantage.

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