

Self-Improvement Is Not Self-Realization

*Each of you is perfect the way you are . . .
and you can use a little improvement. ¹*

--Shunryu Suzuki Roshi

Spirit and spiritual practices invite us to taste, and ultimately awaken to what is unborn, untouched, changeless, timeless, whole, and ever-present. Spirit reveals the open, undivided Heart of Awareness that we share. It moves as a Love that has no conditions. The Source of what awakens in us is a Mystery. It cannot be known by the finite mind, yet is the *knowing* of all things. Awakening is not a process in time, but a revelation of the Timeless that takes us out of our identification with a time-bound ego imagined to be separate from life, world, other, the Divine.

Self-realization is not an accomplishment of egoic ambition or ego consciousness. What we most deeply are wakes up to Itself, seeing its own expressions everywhere. Once awakening has happened, embodying our realization is a process that requires continued devotion to Truth, and seeing from beyond ideas of a “self.” What we call “ego” is simply a movement of thought and not a separate “entity.” Seeing our inseparability from true nature, we realize there is no separate “one” to enlighten.

Psychotherapy deals with what is born and dies, suffers, is changeable, touched and often confounded by its human incarnation. It works to bring into the light, the dark, repressed or rejected aspects of the human psyche to heal us of our divisions. At its best, psychotherapy moves us toward greater wholeness, helps us develop compassion for our imperfections, and trust in our deep inner knowing. It values the wisdom of our bodies, and honors both the fragility and resilience of our human experience. However, psychotherapy generally attends to what it perceives to be a separate “self,” an egoic identification that is attached to a limited and false identity.

I would like to think that all psychotherapy points you within, in some fashion, toward your own knowing, your own truth, your own experience, your inherent worth and lovability. I would hope it also helps you develop faith in the process of your life and in your ability to know what is right for yourself. Of course, this may or may not be what happens.

Where there has been trauma, addiction, deep depression, relational wounding, or many other challenges in the human psyche, relationship with a caring, non-judgmental, skilled clinician can, indeed, contribute deeply to healing. There are many trained, ethical, and sensitive therapists who have made a tremendous difference in their clients' lives, and who work deeply attuned to where their clients' are in any given moment. There are other therapists who, like their clients, imagine they know how life should look, what you should or should not be feeling, what needs to be achieved in order to become a better "self," what goals you should aspire to, and are eager to give advice toward achieving them.

Psychotherapy has been both helpful and unhelpful

Psychotherapy has been both helpful and unhelpful in its years of existence. It has appeared to solve some problems and has created others. But for the spiritual seeker, psychotherapy does not usually address the main cause of suffering: one's identification with a false self rather than Who/What one truly is. The conditioned mind-body, including the feelings generated by beliefs and interpretations of its life, may imagine it is a flawed, deficient separate "somebody" in need of fixing, improvement, overhaul, or total transformation. Such negative self-judging beliefs create endless psychological suffering and unhappiness. They serve to maintain a separate identity—separate from the moment, from the wholeness of life, from Truth, God, others, even oneself. We are all familiar with the many judgments an "I" makes about a "myself," but who is who?

The deepest freedom and most lasting happiness cannot be attained by work on the body or the mind, yet it may be obvious, or at times necessary, in our relative lives, to "work" on both. It is a mistake, however, to imagine that psychotherapy is going to enlighten or liberate an egoic self. To the extent that the outcome of psychotherapy is a

greater ease in being yourself, and greater self-acceptance, I would say it has been successful. To the extent the outcome of psychotherapy is to give you many more ideas about yourself to worry about, I would say it has not.

Psychotherapy has become, at least in some locations, a blend of just about everything you can imagine—talking, drawing, dancing, visualizing, dramatizing, meditating, medicating, mediating and more. There is body-work, breath-work, behavior-work, cognitive-work, inner-child work, couples-work, family-work, group-work, grief-work, survivors-work, shamanic-work, and still appearing in ever decreasing circles of purists, analytic-work. The common idea, however, is that there is a separate self or selves, generally not imagined to be O.K. the way they are, who need to be improved and worked on, by oneself or a practitioner, in order to feel better and suffer less.

Wanting to suffer less is one way that we care about our life and experience, but we may not know that our desire to “get rid” of a feeling actually fuels it, that what we reject in ourselves we project to others, that the feelings we refuse will eventually return in order to be liberated back into wholeness. We may not realize that suffering is greatly lessened or totally transformed when we are *not* separating our self from the direct experience of what is at hand. It is not the experience, memory, or feeling that fuels the greatest suffering, but rather our self-judgment, separation from experience, and our story about how what we have experienced in life makes our *being* somehow inherently unworthy or deficient.

Flowing freedom or frozen concepts?

Much of psychotherapy, and much of the spiritual journey concerns itself with melting our frozen concepts or frozen experience back into direct experiencing. When there is no resistance to the natural movement of Life, we experience the flowing freedom of *Being* itself. Life moves spontaneously, directing itself, and continually harmonizing itself. However, when the mind makes a portion of life into a problem, most especially a problem called “me,” it freezes the living flow of Truth into concepts that are then imagined to be what life is about. As we live more and more from our concepts rather than the flow

of our essential Being, our minds, bodies, and lives can become rigid. What we imagine we “know” about life, what we imagine is the “truth” about our “self” then becomes a set of ideas, and the feelings that uphold those beliefs, rather than direct experience. Life becomes interpretations rather than intimate connection, fixed points of view rather than infinite viewing points, certainty rather than curiosity, judgment rather than openness.

Like water than has turned to ice, we may seem to have lost our freedom to move or respond spontaneously from the truth of our being. Yet ice and water, while different in form, are identical in essence. Each moment is nothing but the flow of Being. Even if our minds seem set and hardened by illusion, nothing is separate from our true nature. We actually come to Realization and we come to healing into wholeness through our illusions. Untruth is consumed by Truth; ice melts when exposed to the sun. In this case, the “sun” is the sun of our own awareness that both sees clearly and flows to meet its own expressions, whatever they may be, with love, warmth, and compassion. To bring anything into the Sun, the Heart of Awareness is to expose our illusions and our frozen concepts to that which can return them to our inherent wholeness and flowing freedom.

Even in the case of trauma, that has created the response of fleeing, fighting, or freezing, there is experience that lies frozen behind any of these moments of reactivity or defense. The experience often needs to be “melted” very slowly over time, so as not to create an “avalanche” that can re-traumatize an individual; but still, the movement is to bring us back into a sense of wholeness without identifying our entire sense of “self” with trauma or victimhood. Often body-oriented work within the context of a safe relationship allows the “thaw” to happen gently. We never need to “push the river.”

We are continually maintaining an egoic stance toward life, wanting to remain separate from certain experiences, attaching to others, and wishing to find ways to exclude some aspect of our wholeness from our life. Especially in the West, we imagine life should only be the good, the beautiful, and the true, rather than seeing that in Duality, we cannot have only one side of duality and exclude the other. All opposites define each other, and

continually trade places: day/night, health/illness, good/bad, expansion/contraction, clear/confused, etc.

Psychotherapy can help you see what your beliefs are, what your feelings are in any given moment, what kinds of situations, judgments, interpretations seem to trigger suffering whenever they appear. Psychotherapy can explore the stories you tell yourself about who you are and what made you the way you are. However, our identifications with those stories are part of what keeps us imagining we are a separate body-mind and not a manifestation of a sacred Mystery. We feel we are victims of life rather than its expression. You may be searching for the truth about your life or your parents or your relationship with your partner, but you are not searching for the truth about *who you truly are!* You may not be interested in that question, and that is fine. No one needs to be interested in that question. However, you probably would not be engaged with this subject matter if you were not.

Psychotherapist and client usually agree with the premise that there is a “someone” who was born into a certain family, enjoyed or endured certain experiences, of truth or betrayal, love or indifference, neglect or suffocation, nurture or abuse, and that because of those experiences became what he or she is today—well-adjusted or “screwed-up,” able to function in society or unable to function, able to have “successful” relationships or unable to be truly intimate, etc. There is never a moment when the basic premise is questioned, much less explored. Another premise is that peace or contentment comes from mastery or control over one’s life, feelings, relationships, reactions, etc. In other words, we imagine that if we could learn *not* to react or *to* react another way in certain situations, we would feel peace. *Then* we could accept ourselves. At times, this approach may seem useful or necessary, but at best it leads to only a conditional sense of peace.

There is nothing wrong with the movement to change our attitudes, life situations, actions or reactions; and change can be beneficial. But it is a mistake to imagine that substituting one set of thoughts for another can free us or create lasting happiness. Happiness is beyond thoughts or feelings. Happiness does not depend on creating one state

or another. States come and go. Find what does not. Here will be your contentment, happiness, freedom, and peace.

Truth Beyond Happiness

All of us seek to be happy, and unhappiness is one of the chief reasons people seek psychotherapy or spiritual fulfillment. One of the deepest longings of the human heart is the longing for happiness; but in seeking happiness, we are often held captive by our own desire. We become a prisoner caught in a struggle between happiness and woe. We search everywhere for that elusive “something” or “someone” that will “make us happy” for all time and eternity, and repeatedly experience the misery of dashed hopes or unfulfilled dreams. We seek clever ways to hide our feared deficiencies, convinced that truth would be an enemy to our happiness.

What is truth? Honesty? Facts? A moral imperative? The sad story of unloving parents? Or is it something deeper, more ephemeral, something that leads us to itself, to an experience of ourselves, our essence? Truth may look unflinchingly at the stories we have told ourselves about who we are, but it ultimately leads us beyond them. Telling the truth maintains our spiritual integrity. Without a ruthless honesty, we stay stuck in our defenses against what is real, what is authentic. If we truly believed that knowing the truth would set us free, we would be seeking truth instead of looking for more and more ways to perpetuate our illusions. We might be seeking truth instead of a new relationship or more money. There is nothing wrong with either relationships or money, and seeking those things just happens as well, but neither a lover nor wealth can insure happiness or freedom.

Psychotherapy, for some, can be helpful in facing some of the truths about oneself, and we find great relief in simply being able to share what we may not have been able to share about the truth of our lives, our feelings, our doubts, our despair. But Truth is more than the truth about our experiences. What do you think would happen if you were to sincerely, earnestly desire truth for its own sake? If for a moment, your commitment was to

truth instead of happiness? The moment we really open to truth, it enters from the hidden recesses of our heart, leading us deeper and deeper to itself. It brings compassion, clarity and courage to bear on our pain, our confusion, our fear. Ultimately, it sets us free to discover that we ourselves are the truth we are seeking. Truth is more than the relative happiness we seek. Being the Truth that contains all, we can have whatever feelings, whatever mood, whatever experience is here without becoming a prisoner of what changes.

The illusion of “if only . . .”

For most, happiness is conditional. It is the happiness you imagine will be created by something external to yourself, the happiness you imagine would come “if only”—if only something, someone, or yourself would change. If only I could get a man (woman) to love me; if only I could land this job; if only I could control my fear; if only my father would stop yelling at me; if only my mother were less controlling; if only I had a different childhood; if only I weren’t stuck in this miserable city; if only I could be more confident; if only my boss were kinder; if only I had no responsibilities and could go off to India to seek a guru; if only I had *time* to meditate; if only my life did not demand so much; if only my children would behave the way I want them to; if only I weren’t ill; if only this country had better leadership; if only that jackhammer would stop interfering with my peace; if only I knew what direction my life should go; if only I could get life “right.” Every day in countless ways, we play the tape of “if only.” And many of these “if only’s” lead us to psychotherapy.

The ways we imagine happiness will arrive vary; some ways may seem quite perverted to the average way of thinking, but all beings wish to be happy. We protect ourselves or try to avoid pain because we want to be happy. We become addicted to substance or activity as a way of trying to avoid pain because we want to be happy. We eat or shop or drink to keep ourselves from feeling empty because we imagine “empty” means alone, unloved, unworthy. We seek more and more and better and better because we imagine it will make us happy. We rid ourselves of one spouse and look for another, end one job and begin another in hopes they will bring happiness. In truth, we do wish

ourselves well, because somewhere we truly love our Self. Even destructive acting out is a way of trying to feel less pain.

How does psychotherapy deal with your desire to be happy? Psychotherapy may involve itself with any of the above and frequently does. But *none* of the things listed above will bring the happiness we *really* long for, because *that* happiness is Uncaused. The happiness you imagine is created by circumstances is impermanent at best, and impossible to achieve at worst. Being caught between the desire for happiness and the fear of unhappiness, we experience a continual seesaw of emotions, thoughts, and actions. One moment we are happy; another moment we can feel devastated by a shift of mood or circumstance.

The happiness of not wishing to be somewhere else

We have all experienced moments of happiness when a desire was fulfilled and the mind was content. We imagine these moments were caused by something outside of our self. But the reason we are happy temporarily has nothing to do with what just happened. We are happy because temporarily we stopped wishing to be someplace else! Our mind rested for one moment, stopped its craving and straining for one moment, and we simply experienced our natural state. Yet we do not imagine that natural state is present Now. We imagine it only appears *when* something else happens than the moment we are in. However, as soon as there is experience of happiness, the mind usually begins to worry about how to “keep” this state of happiness, and thus begins the trip “down” from the “up” of momentary contentment.

Widen your desires

Some spiritual traditions tell us that the real reason we do not experience happiness is because we have desires. “If only” we could renounce our desires, we would live happily in desirelessness. *Who* imagines s/he can do away with desires? Freedom from desire, or non-attachment, is not something the ego can attain through “practice,” although we have

all seen people pretending to have no desires, pretending not to be “attached.” Quite frequently there is a lack of joy and spontaneity in those people who are “trying” to appear detached. Freedom from attachment arises *naturally* when one knows one’s true nature. It is not an achievement of the ego-mind. Egoic consciousness is not the agent of detachment, (nor is it the agent of freedom, love or acceptance). We must look to our true nature, the Heart of Awareness, for these by-products of Awakening. The truth of one’s eternal Being brings freedom from craving, the belief that if a desire is not fulfilled we will not be O.K. Tasting truth may actually widen our desires.

Since ego-mind is not in charge of whether such freedom appears or not, what can a seeker do in the face of desires over which he has no control? Realize that all desire is ultimately a desire for a deeper happiness. As Nisargadatta so beautifully expressed,

*Increase and widen your desires till nothing but Reality can fill them.
It is not desire that is wrong, but its narrowness and smallness. Desire is devotion. By all means be devoted to the real, the infinite, the eternal heart of Being. Transform desire into love. All you want is to be happy. All your desires, whatever they may be, are expressions of your longing for happiness. Basically, you wish yourself well.²*

--Nisargadatta Maharaj

We long for love; we long for happiness, but we do not imagine ourselves worthy of having such a thing, so we go for substitutions--imagining food, sex, money, power or approval will fill the empty spaces, or divert us from the pain of longing. Often, we do not see the sacred desire behind our longings.

Happiness lies within

Does anyone tell you where to find the happiness that is at the core of your longing? Does anyone truly believe it lies within? Does anyone know that it is the absolute *experience* when the mind stops believing in separation? Ah, you say, that is the domain of

the spiritual teacher. Perhaps it is, and it certainly is the case that most psychotherapists do not work from the perspective I am speaking from. But if you are looking for happiness, where do you imagine you will find it? *Who* is longing for it? When you trace this “who” back to its Source, it may seem unbelievable that you, who are Love Itself, imagine you must search for Love. You, who are Happiness Itself, without a cause, are searching for happiness in something as impermanent as a cookie or a new car. See the truth about your longing, and you may discover the truth about your happiness.

*Happiness cannot be found through great effort and willpower;
but is already present, in open relaxation and letting go.³*

--Venerable Lama Gendun Rinpoche

Changing a “me” vs. discovering who you are

Are you a solid someone, separate from all the other “someone’s” in the world? Are you separate from the food you eat, the air you breathe, the water you drink, the thoughts you think, the Awareness that makes it possible to be sentient? Does anyone really bother with the question, *Who am I?* Perhaps you say, “Leave that to the philosopher. I know who I am. I’m Jane Doe or John Smith, and I feel depressed or anxious or unfulfilled or whatever.” No one bothers to wonder *who* is identifying with this name, these feelings, these stories of a happy or a miserable childhood. The effort and energy seem to want to go toward changing the “me” you imagine you are. Now if this is what is obvious, this is just what is appearing. But did you ever stop to wonder if the basic premise is true? *Is* there someone who needs to change, feel differently, and if so, *who* is that?

In no way am I suggesting that if you are suffering from depression, anxiety, addiction, trauma, that you sit idly by if/when it is obvious to ask for help. I just want to inquire *who* is suffering, and *who* is doing something? But this question rarely gets asked in the psychotherapy hour. And indeed, were it to be asked, probably everyone would be confounded. And the reason is simple. We cannot “know” who or what we are like we can know of a body or the thoughts of a mind. And yet every day we imagine we know who we

are. We imagine we are a body/mind, separate from everyone and everything else, in this life either doing it “right,” or doing it “wrong.” We are a someone who just hasn’t been able to figure out how to consistently be happy; but if we just “work” hard enough or long enough, or if we just had the right techniques, or the right help, or the right parents, or the right lover, or the right job, we could figure out this thing called life and do it the right way so we could always feel happy and content. Oh, how we long for such a world, and how we judge ourselves when something else happens.

Suffering Calls Us Deeper

Often the very crisis or existential turmoil that brings us into psychotherapy can be a movement that is calling us to a deeper truth, a deeper compassion, a deeper opening. We do not choose to surrender; but often feel, in our suffering, we are *being* surrendered. We cannot experience true compassion without being open to suffering. And when we are at the end of our rope, do not know what to do, or where to go, or what will possibly bring relief or a moment of peace, we may be humbled to such an extent that we say “Help!” to the greater Reality, to God, or to its expression functioning as a psychotherapist or a spiritual teacher.

While desire is a longing for the Self, fear is an urge to protect the self. Both, in their way, arise from a love of our self. Fear is actually separation from the Self, but the movement is to “protect.” The urge to be safe and secure is one of the basic motivations of ego, which does not mean it is wrong. This is a deep biological and psychological need. In this phenomenal world, dangers, enemies, crime, inner demons, loss, and death appear. We do not realize, however, that they are *appearances*.

We do not experience what is beyond suffering because we identify solely with personhood and all its changing appearances of thoughts, feelings, ideas, judgments, stories, etc. Yet the open Awareness that is our natural state is not disturbed even when “disturbing” feelings or events arise. It is so intimate, so simple, so effortless, so ordinary

that we hardly notice it, and yet when we experience *being* that Awareness, we may begin to feel its expansiveness beyond the body-mind identification.

Direct Experience

Awareness moves as consciousness in the body-mind, but in itself, it has no boundaries whatsoever. Thus, when we invite our own awareness into a difficult or painful felt-sensation in the body, or into our emotions, there is direct experience of what is awake, as well as the moment itself. Immediately, there is a softening, a lessening of judgment, an openness to feel whatever is here. Transformation begins immediately—not because we are trying to rid ourselves of anything, but because we are no longer separate from the moment, separate from our being. Even if the moment is the feeling of resistance, we are able to feel the energy of resistance as simply what it is. We have allowed ourselves to have a moment unburdened from “shoulds” around our feeling state.

Think for yourself about the whole immense burdens of “shoulds” and “should nots” that you carry around. Is it any wonder why you cannot experience your Self in this moment? How can you be open to Life, to yourself, to what is unfolding when you continually make a judgment about everything and everyone, and then you imagine that your judgments are *true!* Judgments arise like anything else; but just because they are there it does not mean they are the truth about anyone or anything. Are you willing to question your beliefs? When we take to be a “truth” that we should not be feeling what we are feeling, what happens? We either feel bad about ourselves for feeling what we feel, or we pretend we don’t feel what we feel. We repress more and more, become more and more inauthentic, intellectualized, defended, rigid, imprisoned by our own ideas.

Ideas are not Truth

Most of us hold very tightly to our belief system, whatever that may be. We carry ideas about our worth, about why we suffer, about what illness, childhood trauma, or “failed” relationships may mean about who we are. We have ideas about how life is

supposed to look and who is to blame if it does not match up to our expectations. Ideas can be fascinating or boring, painful or liberating, reconciling or blaming, positive or negative, lofty or skeptical. They can seem helpful or hindering in our attempts to heal. But ultimately, ideas about truth are simply ideas and not truth itself. When we stop trying to fit our experience into some box or another that we can label and then judge to be good or bad, we begin to touch what is actually here now. A moment of touching *what is* with awareness and compassion is a moment of healing. And a moment without conceptualization is a moment in which our mind is restored to its natural openness and wholeness.

Psychotherapy can be a very useful tool in learning to be honest with yourself about what is coming up. If it also includes listening and allowing what appears to be here, then it is especially helpful. But if the questions around what is arising are “why” questions, they are engaging your ideas about yourself, and ideas about yourself are neither your authentic experience nor your true Self. Now ideas may need to be explored, but they are never the truth about *anything*. Can we actually be open to questioning all of our ideas and assumptions?

An idea about love is not love; an idea about freedom is not freedom; an idea about a flower is not the flower; and an idea about a self is not one’s SELF. While theories may be espoused by you *or* your therapist, no theory is Truth. But what is happening is what is happening. Finding answers to ego questions does not lead to the deepest freedom. Self-improvement is not Self-Realization. However, finding the source of the ego dissolves the questions! Finding out who thinks she or he needs to *improve* leads to inquiring into the Source of the “I-thought.”

All self-images are prisons

Many therapies work toward changing a negative self-image into a positive one. There is nothing wrong with doing this, but any “image” will eventually become a prison. A positive self-image may certainly be a more comfortable prison, but identifying with a self-

image will never feel truly fulfilling because it is not Who we are. Our ego, even the most polished, functioning ego, will always feel deficient in some ways because it is not who we are. The false self will always feel limited and limiting.

Self-esteem and self-worth

For most people, issues of self-worth and self-esteem become intertwined. However, self-esteem has to do with ego, with how we imagine we are seen by others and by our self, with how we have identified with the thoughts or judgments we have been conditioned to believe refer to who we supposedly are. Self-worth is our inherent worth as what we actually ARE—a manifestation of the Divine, an expression of Life itself. When we have discovered our true Self, we realize that just to BE is a blessing.

Can we investigate deeply who is this one we are constantly monitoring, constantly judging? When attention is continually using the light of Awareness to identify with thoughts, all manner of self-judgments arise. Returning attention again and again to what is noticing thoughts, emotions, and the movement of the moment, we see that gradually attention is not so drawn to the noise of the mind or emotion, but becomes more and more content to remain as the wordless Presence that notices.

It is very valuable to make distinctions between self-esteem, based on conditioned experience of how we feel seen or unseen by others, and that aspect of our own heart that has never truly totally and utterly believed what we have been told or are telling ourselves. There is a seed of love, a seed of beauty, a seed of inherent goodness and worth in each heart if we look deeply enough, and if we are willing to question our assumptions.

It is the Heart of Awareness that has the power to accept every bit of our experience. It is not the ego that learns to love a “self.” It is when we begin to feel, sense, receive, and engage with the Heart, that we can discover that Love is already present. Our true Light shines on all; its Love is indiscriminate but also wise, and the question of “worth” makes no sense whatsoever. Such a question does not even enter.

Conditioned mind is not the agent of love or acceptance

True acceptance requires us to dive deeper into the Heart of compassion. Nothing is as accepting as our true nature because our true nature never separates itself from the moment in order to judge it. Only a conditioned mind does that; then thought imagines “it” must learn to accept the moment. Minds “trying” to accept the moment can even believe that this means accepting abuse when everything inside is screaming to “get out” of a destructive or abusive relationship. We continually look to our conditioned mind to be the agent of acceptance or love. We are looking in the wrong place.

Accepting “what is” is not a passive stance

Likewise, we often imagine “accepting what is” becomes a passive stance in the world. It is not loving to allow another person to abuse power--aggressively, sexually, politically—not loving to ourselves and not supportive of the spiritual evolution of the supposed “other.” And yet, when we move from a deeper understanding of the “other,” we can say “no” when we need to from Love, the ultimate Power within. This is not power “over,” but comes from the strength of taking a seat in our true Self.

When we find out who/what we are, THEN we begin to see how acceptance happens naturally from what you truly are. When the wind blows, leaves move. What IS is never in resistance to its own movement. That movement is spontaneous, authentic, uncontrived, and does not depend on “trying.” Yet it moves from wisdom, not passivity.

Of the many surprising revelations that have appeared in living with the understanding of Who or What we all are, one of the most amazing is the simplicity of living when what arises is accepted fully. Such acceptance does not come from an ego “attempting” to accept things. And, what arises includes the action or reaction of the body-mind as well as those imagined “external” events that seem to impact our lives or our feelings. This way of living by accepting the moment as it is, is in no way a passive way of

living. There is an obviousness of response, action or inaction. In the Openness to what is, discriminating wisdom can also simply arise.

Psychotherapy can be an agent of postponement

Now, as helpful as psychotherapy can be, when it is needed and when one feels its outcome has been to further one's development, healing, love, acceptance and freedom, I want to mention one of its potential drawbacks for the spiritual seeker. When we buy into an idea that Awakening can only come when we no longer have any "issues," when we have finally gotten our lives "together," when we no longer have any negative feelings or beliefs—in other words, when we have perfected a "self"—we can use so-called methods of self-improvement as an agent of postponing looking into the real question of who or what we actually are.

Time and time again, if we are honest, we see that we would rather be a flawed, deficient, unworthy "somebody" who could possibly become a perfected, worthy ego, than to let go of control and become what, to egoic thought, seems like being "nobody." When we have the direct experience of moving through the layers and energies of our confusion, anger, sadness, addictions, vulnerability and rage (rage is a great defense against feeling vulnerable!), we come to place of existential fear, which is a sort of "jumping in" place. It can feel like jumping into an unknown "danger," from the perspective of identified consciousness that is desperately trying to hold on to the idea of being a personal, separate identity. But rather than jumping into the Truth of what we are, we keep jumping out of the Fire that is trying to burn our illusions.

How many ways have you discovered to postpone delving more deeply into the truth you say you want, or what you have even tasted or awakened to? How many times have you decided to sit in silence, in meditation, perhaps, and ended the practice by following thoughts instead of becoming interested in the experience of Silence? How often have you decided that inquiring into the truth of who you are is pointless since you already "know" who you are? Egos have many ways of postponing their eventual surrender, but

even such surrender is not the action of ego. Still, what Sees clearly will observe these postponements—always one more thing to work on, to see, to do, to improve, BEFORE It is wise to be aware of this tendency. And no matter how many contractions we may seek to be rid of, if we attempt to work on each aspect of our conditioning “first,” we will miss the freedom that comes from discovering who you really are beyond thoughts and feelings. The human part of ourselves is a moment-to-moment expression of our divine Being. When we see it as such, our judgments, and thus our suffering, begin to melt.

Psychotherapy from a non-dual perspective

While it is beyond the scope or purpose of this article to delve into the exciting and developing mode of practicing psychotherapy from a non-dual perspective, I want to mention that there are increasing numbers of therapists who have experienced awakenings--partially or more fully--into the true Heart of Awareness. These are folks who are familiar with spiritual unfolding as well as skilled in their knowledge of psychological development.

In my own practice, I no longer believe that the person who walks through my office door should be any different. I do not have goals for that person. I do not see them as a problem to be solved. I do not know how their life *should* unfold; I only see what is happening in the moment. The moment will show us a great deal about past history, defenses, one’s stance toward the world, what has been refused or rejected, etc. We do not necessarily have to go back over history, although it may come forward as we explore the experience that is here now.

I generally ask a person early on, “What is the deepest desire of your heart?” This gives a sense to both of us of the deeper “rudder” of their existence. It often brings into consciousness a level of knowing, or a dimension of longing, that is deeper than the presenting “problem.”

I see the Light of our true Self in each person's eyes that I meet. Whether this is ever spoken is not important. That which sees Itself communicates Itself in all kinds of ways, known and unknown. Sitting as the Silence of our true nature, and not being frightened by what is arising in a client, the client's relationship to their own feelings or experience may begin to be questioned or may change by that fact alone. Clients may react in different ways when they sense or even acknowledge, "You don't seem threatened by my fear."

Below, from my practice of psychotherapy, is an example of how a session might unfold when both therapist and client move from an awakened or awakening perspective:

A male client arrived for his session describing an experience he had recently had of saying a very unloving remark to one of his roommates. Afterwards, he said he had been in touch with what Eckhart Tolle calls the "pain body." (Trapped energy that holds an almost autonomous identification split off from the total energy field).

My client told me his experience felt like "an energy field that follows the physical body around. It feels heavy but it's actually transparent. My mind is trying to figure it out, but this trying to figure it out defends against feeling into it."

I suggested he invite his simple awareness into the energy itself, letting himself BE the felt-sense of the pain body, directly experiencing its energy rather than trying to figure it out.

"When I am feeling into it, there is a sadness, but right below that, there is innocence, like the innocence of a kid--not wanting to lose that innocence but having to grow up, face disappointments, and life not being as we hope." (His parents divorced when he was young.)

I replied, "So, in that innocence there is a feeling of vulnerability?"

"Yes, the vulnerability is not knowing how my expressions of love or appreciation might be received."

At one point in our exploration, I asked if he were to visualize this pain body instead of trying to put it into words, what would he see?

“It’s like a balloon surrounded by puzzle pieces that don’t quite fit together. But there’s really no balloon. It’s empty inside.”

I asked if he were able to just let one piece of the energy puzzle reveal itself, what might want to be revealed?

Immediately he responded: “It’s joy—exuberance that has been held back in an attempt to stay safe!”

Following this visual, I asked him what it might feel like if just one puzzle piece of energy, experience, beliefs, were to fly off, like part of a protective heat shield on a space capsule, then what?

He smiled and said, “It feels like I don’t know how to ‘be.’ But, maybe that’s like when we were kids and could just be however we were in the moment.”

We talked about the possibility that “not knowing how to be” might be a description of a kind of freedom. *I said, “In the Truth of what we are experientially, one moment, I am the Absolute, the Mystery that is ‘No-thing’ in itself, but includes billions of galaxies. The next moment I am the pain in my knee. The next moment, there’s an ‘I love you.’ The next moment, an unloving remark made to a roommate. Our freedom is not a freedom ‘from’ life, but the freedom to BE the moment of expansion or contraction, and the freedom to explore it. But, like your balloon, it’s empty inside.”*

Healing into Being

By inviting the client to “be” their direct experience rather than trying to run from it, there is a healing into Being. Often folks who have no prior spiritual experience or even interest, can quickly begin to see that there is a freedom in their own awareness, that what is aware in them is not threatened by the mind’s anxieties or the body’s contractions, that this awake aware beingness can intimately hold anything that is arising.

Life is not what should be or could be, what should have been or what could have been. Contrary to what the thinking mind would have you believe, Life is not what you think about or how you judge it, although thinking and judgment occur. The thinking mind can create its *experience* of Life by its thoughts and judgments. However, without believing our thoughts and judgments are “truth,” Life is simply an expression of the unnameable *What Is*. Healing is not so much something that is done but rather something that happens, not so much an achievement as an unfolding of Consciousness or Life itself toward its natural state. Our true nature *is* the natural state of being Whole.

Healing thus concerns itself with removing or letting go of obstacles to realizing that natural state. We are never separate from our natural state, and thus healing is available at any moment. The healing I am speaking about is not a healing of a body or mind separate from the Wholeness that is manifesting every moment. When we experience Being whole, we are healed.

*Joy and anger, sorrow and delight, hope and regret, doubt and ardor,
diffidence and abandon, candor and reserve: it's all music rising out of
emptiness, mushrooms appearing out of mist. Day and night come and
go, but who knows where it all begins? It is! It just is! If you understand
this day in and day out, you inhabit the very source of it all.⁴*

--Chuang Tzu

© Dorothy Hunt, 2017

Notes

1. Shunryu Suzuki, *To Shine One Corner of the World: Moments with Shunryu Suzuki*, edited by David Chadwick. New York: Broadway Books, 2001, 3.
2. Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, *I Am That*. Transl. by Maurice Frydman, revised and edited by Sudhakar S. Dilkshit, Durham, North Carolina: The Acorn Press, 1973, 211.
3. Venerable Lama Gendun Rinpoche, from *Free and Easy—A Spontaneous Vajra Song/ a spontaneous talk/instruction on Happiness*.
4. Chuang Tzu, *The Inner Chapters*, transl. by David Hinton. Washington D.C.: Counterpoint, © David Hinton, 1997, 19.

About the Author

Dorothy Hunt serves as Spiritual Director of Moon Mountain Sangha, teaching in the spiritual lineage of Adyashanti, who invited her to share the Dharma in 2004. She is the founder of the San Francisco Center for Meditation and Psychotherapy and has practiced psychotherapy since 1967, though now semi-retired from that practice. Dorothy is the author of *Only This!, Leaves from Moon Mountain, Ending the Search: From Spiritual Ambition to the Heart of Awareness* (Sounds True, Spring, 2018), and a contributing author to *The Sacred Mirror, Listening from the Heart of Silence* (Vols. 1 and 2, Nondual Wisdom and Psychotherapy), and the on-line journal, *Undivided*. Her poetry has been published in several journals, and she is a featured spiritual teacher in the book, *Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Wisdom*.

Dorothy has a long and deep connection with the teachings of Ramana Maharshi and the path of Self-Inquiry, as well as the nondual teachings of Zen, Advaita and the Christian mystics. In meeting Adyashanti, she was invited beyond identification with either the absolute or relative dimensions of Being, finding freedom in what is timelessly awake here and Now in each one of us, regardless of the changing faces of experience. She lives in San Francisco and is a mother and grandmother. Dorothy offers satsang, retreats and private meetings in the San Francisco Bay Area, Sonoma, California, and elsewhere by invitation.

For more information, please visit www.dorothyhunt.org