

Psychotherapy and Vedanta

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Ram: So perhaps one of your tasks at this stage is helping the person to sublimate the desire for objects into the desire for liberation.

Carl: I agree, this makes good sense. Psychotherapy generally sees the problem as one of misplaced or misunderstood desire. That we desire is understood by therapists as a fact... what we desire is the result of upbringing, experience and biology. It is certainly true that people approach a therapist because they “want” something they think they haven’t got – almost always, happiness. To sublimate desire for objects into desire for liberation could be described as liberation from desire, I think.

Ram: Yes. When the desire is flowing to an object, in this case the subject, the self, it can extinguish itself once and for all – because you are everything that you could ever want.

Buddhism, as perhaps you know, posits the Four Noble Truths, the first of which is that everyone here is suffering. The second is that desire is the cause of suffering. It goes on to say that the elimination of desire is the path and the cessation of desire is the goal. Vedanta asks, “What is the cause of desire?” after the second truth because trying to eliminate desire through practice (the Eightfold Path) turns out to be virtually impossible. Vedanta says that the cause of desire is ignorance of the fact that one is whole and complete, ordinary, actionless awareness. And it supplies a means of knowledge, a way to eliminate this ignorance, inquiry and the teaching tradition.

Carl: This is what psychotherapists could add to their thinking... I would guess that almost all of them don’t. It interests me that to some extent this seems to occur naturally for people who concentrate on their “spiritual development.” There does seem to me to be often the case that they give up the quest and remain satisfied with what is... although many have not realized the self.

Ram: You’re right. Perhaps I should have said “relatively” satisfied. You never stop wanting until you realize who you are. And then even if the wants persist as a kind of habit, they have no power to destroy your equanimity. And finally, you realize, as Krishna says in the *Gita*, “I am the desire that is not opposed to *dharma*.” So you get to have them back when you realize that they depend on you, but you do not depend on them.

Are you working on the right “I”?

Carl: I think in relation to therapy a very interesting process occurs, which I describe as a therapeutic crisis. Someone enters therapy because they think they are not okay – for a while they bask in the illusion that they “got” something from the therapist and they feel okay... then

something happens... the therapist screws up... isn't "sensitive" enough... the client gets disillusioned, and there is a situation where they have to take a choice: either they dump the therapist and look for another one... or decide therapy is not any good... or they confront and accept that whether they are okay or not is up to them. They realize the deception that is at the heart of the psychotherapeutic relationship, but find that realization as liberation from desire. Of course it requires a therapist who realizes that they have nothing to offer their clients, that that is okay and needs to be discovered by the client for this process to occur.

Ram: This is very interesting. It bears out the fact that happiness does not come from the outside and that the ego has no control of the results of action. I suppose you can't just unmask this whole process before you begin therapy and get down to why the person thinks therapy or anything else is going to solve the happiness problem – because it wouldn't be good for business. But on one hand, it seems like a responsible and compassionate thing to do, since the patient is going to realize that the whole business of seeking happiness in some relationship is not going to work – unless that relationship is with someone who knows the truth and is willing to help the person set his or her sights on it. However, usually people want what they want and will not listen to wisdom, so after I've tried to show them that the way they are thinking about the problem is faulty, I encourage them to go ahead pursuing happiness as they see fit – and when they realize that their approach doesn't work, suggest that they try the path of inquiry into the I. Disappointment can be very helpful in stimulating inquiry.

~ Ram