

You Do Not Have to be Good: Psychotherapy and Spiritual Practice

(An integrated approach to healing the spirit, by Donna Martin)

Here is a poem called Wild Geese, by Mary Oliver (from her book, Dream Work, 1986.)

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

It has been pointed out to me over the years of studying eastern spiritual practices, especially yoga and Buddhism, that as people in our western society rely less and less on religion to "care for the soul" or heal their spirit, we are more and more in need of psychotherapy to attend to the emotional pain and distress that cause most of our suffering. We may try to use a psychotherapist the way someone in India, for example, might use a spiritual teacher or guru. We use support groups to provide the community and sangha that is otherwise missing from our western lives. We want to be free of the stress and chaos of our lives, mostly when we experience transition and loss – the loss of a loved one, of our health, of a job, of a relationship, of our identity and our security as we have imagined it.

After three decades as a yoga teacher I realized that what yoga seemed to offer most of my students, beyond ways of releasing the tension in the body that was causing them unnecessary discomfort, was better ways to handle stress generally. I became a counselor and psychotherapist and discovered that most of my clients were suffering from the isolation our culture cultivates through its focus on individuality. Many of them wanted to hide the shame of feeling like they couldn't handle their stress. This sense of shame makes people embarrassed to talk to their friends about the emotional suffering they feel. It makes them avoid asking for help until things are really falling apart in their lives.

I discovered, as a psychotherapist and as a teacher, that the bottom line for most, if not all of my clients and students was a sense of fear and shame about not being good enough, smart enough, or strong enough, to handle the difficulties in their lives. The only thing wrong with people, I decided after years of psychotherapy practice, is the idea that something is intrinsically wrong with them.

This is an idea that is not found in all cultures. It may be the real dis-ease, at least emotionally, that psychotherapy in our culture must address. Unfortunately, many psychotherapy methods collude with this delusion and attempt (in a well-meaning but spiritually impoverished way) to help someone find out what's wrong with them and to fix it. Unfortunately, if this is the basis of psychotherapy, it can go on and on for years.

What psychotherapy needs to do for the average person who is emotionally distressed and needs support to successfully move through life's most difficult situations is a combination of two things:

1. First and foremost is the realization that there is nothing inherently wrong with them. They are fine. The story line that holds them in the grip of the question, the fear, the shame of "what's wrong with me?" is just that – a story. A myth. A construct. A wrong idea.
2. And secondly, they need some tools, a model, and some new experiences for healthier ways to meet the challenges of life... ways to be with the most emotionally distressing situations and not fall apart or lose themselves.

Daniel Goleman's book, **Destructive Emotions**, quotes the Dalai Lama and other Buddhist teachers who explain that Buddhism sees emotions as destructive when they disturb a person's equilibrium. Destructive emotions disrupt equanimity and therefore create delusions. They interfere with our ability to see the true nature of reality... *"Fundamentally, a destructive emotion – which is also referred to as an 'obscuring' or 'afflictive' mental factor – is something that prevents the mind from ascertaining reality as it is. With a destructive emotion, there will always be a gap between the way things appear and the way things are."* (Matthieu Ricard)

So the goal of Buddhist psychology and practice, like western psychology, is to cultivate the possibility of emotional balance, mental clarity, and well-being. In fact, Buddhism goes beyond western psychology up till now in aspiring to something more than the absence of mental afflictions... in actually believing in the possibility of cultivating several wholesome states that lead to happiness. In **Destructive Emotions**, Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard again is quoted: *"We speak of four things to cultivate: love, equanimity, compassion, and rejoicing."*

Now the latest research in neuroscience is exploring a somewhat new understanding (for western psychology) of what is being called "neuroplasticity"... which is the possibility of the brain to change throughout our adult lives.

Research conducted by Dr. Richard Davidson at the University of Wisconsin is demonstrating that repeated experience modifies the brain. It confirms something written by the Dalai Lama in his book, the **Art of Happiness**: *"The systematic training of the mind, the cultivation of happiness, the genuine inner transformation by deliberately*

selecting and focusing on positive mental states and challenging negative mental states, is possible because of the very structure and function of the brain. But the wiring of our brain is not static, not irrevocably fixed. Our brains are also adaptable." What Buddhism has understood for a long time, Western science and psychology is now discovering to be true.

Jeffrey Schwartz, M.D. and Sharon Begley, in their book, **The Mind and the Brain: neuroplasticity and the power of mental force**, (ReganBooks, New York, 2002) describe how neuroscience now shows that the human mind is an independent entity that can shape and control the functioning of the physical brain.

"The adult brain can change. It can grow new cells. It can change the function of old ones. It can rezone an area that originally executed one function and assign it another. It can, in short, change the circuitry that weaves neurons into the networks that allow us to see and hear, into the networks that remember, feel, suffer, think, imagine, and dream...

Through the mental act of focusing attention, mental effort becomes directed mental force. ... it is now clear that the attentional state of the brain produces physical change in its structure and future functioning. The seemingly simple act of 'paying attention' produces real and powerful physical changes in the brain."

This is exciting news for all of us. It is moving western psychology closer and closer to a more spiritual appreciation of the person as a whole being, and moves psychotherapy in the direction of a more experiential and relational approach to supporting change in how we, as human beings, live our lives. This new approach to how psychotherapy can address modern problems is explored in the book, **A General Theory of Love**, by Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon (Vintage Books, New York, 2001)

"As individuals and as a culture, our chance for happiness depends on our ability to decipher a hidden world that revolves – invisible, improbably, inexorably – around love. ... Psychotherapy changes people because one mammal can restructure the limbic brain of another... When a limbic connection has established a neural pattern, it takes a limbic connection to revise it." ... And here's the key:

"Therapeutic techniques per se have nothing to do with results. The person of the therapist is the converting catalyst... the agent of change is who he is... if therapy works, it transforms a patient's limbic brain and his emotional landscape forever... what we do inside relationships matters more than any other aspect of human life."

So psychotherapy, personhood, relationship, spirituality, neuroscience, compassion, and emotional well-being come together in the new millennium. Let's hope the result will be more peace, love, and happiness throughout the world. May your inner goodness radiate through the way you live your life.

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