

# **Zen Practice, Psychotherapy, and the Spiritual Unconscious**

Lawson Sachter

“One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light,  
but by making the darkness conscious.”

C.G. Jung

## **Organizational Overview:**

**Section I** presents an introduction to the unconscious processes brought to the surface through intensive forms of meditation, and so has relevance for psychotherapists and practitioners alike. This section also explores the ways in which fundamental differences between Eastern and Western psyches affect people’s experience and understanding of dharma practice. It also looks at the ways that this perspective calls into question the widely accepted notion of “spiritual bypassing.”

**Section II** introduces a type of psychotherapy developed by Dr. Habib Davanloo called Intensive Short-term Dynamic Psychotherapy (ISTDP). This experiential therapy is designed to give us direct access to the unconscious, and so has relevance for our lives and dharma practice in the West. This section also begins to look at the crippling role of guilt in Western culture, and the terrible impact repression and self-sabotage can have **in/on** our lives.

**Section III** offers a more in-depth examination of the intrapsychic dynamics that inform an ISTDP-based approach to psychotherapy. It includes descriptions and diagrams to help clarify some of the key points underlying Davanloo’s metapsychology of the unconscious, and begins to present an expanded paradigm for dharma practice in the West.

**Section IV** includes some personal reflections about experiences I went through many years ago, and how they have affected my understanding of the Western dharma and the whole field of psychotherapy.

**Section V** starts with a brief summary of some of the main points covered up to that point, and then touches into some of the broader relational insights that have arisen out of my work with others in therapeutic settings and during our Windhorse Zentensive Retreats. This section also looks at how I came to see dharma practice as the fourth point on the Triangle of Person – and how this insight led to a richer, more

*unified view of working with the depths of the unconscious in the midst of intensive meditative experience.*

**Section VI** explores the ways a more unified psycho-spiritual approach can help open us up to deeper levels of the psyche. Even on more cognitive levels, a simple understanding of the Triangle of Conflict can help bring clarity and focus to many of our experiences in meditation. The more fully this kind of understanding becomes integrated into our experiential understanding, and the more attuned we become to our own internal signaling systems, the smoother the meditative experience can be.

**Section VII** takes a deeper look into some of the central dynamics addressed in the course of the ISTDP process. It also explores the ways in which this intrapsychic work may offer a more embracing paradigm for dharma practice in the West. Finally, it touches into the possibility of expanding and applying psychotherapeutic skills to assist people in accessing deeper, non-dual states of being within the framework of sustained meditation practice.

**Soon to be posted:**

**Section VIII** looks in greater detail at the interface between the conscious and unconscious mind, and what we are able – and perhaps not able – to say about the complex nature of the repressive barrier. We'll also be exploring differences between "targeted" and "global" forms of mobilization, along with the role of thoughts and concepts, and our implicit sense of self. We'll also be exploring differences and similarities between interpersonal and spiritual forms of intimacy, and the central role of the Western punitive superego.

**Section IX** zeros in on what Jung refers to as "knowing by the unconscious." We'll also be touching into the remarkable power, which can arise collectively, of intrapsychic mobilization and the strength of the sacred alliance – core features in all our Zentensives, and throughout Davanloo's later explorative therapeutic work. Finally, we'll focus on ways that the practice of psychotherapy itself can be a form of meditation grounded in the fundamental affirmation of our own deepest nature.

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**About the Author:**

*As a bit of personal background, I'm a Buddhist priest, sanctioned Zen teacher, and licensed psychotherapist. For the past 25 or 30 years much of my work has been involved in exploring ways of bringing these threads together. For more complete information [click here](#). (or go to...)*

### ***Acknowledgements:***

*With much gratitude I'd like to thank my Zen teacher, Roshi Philip Kapleau, for the decades of support and training I received from him; and also Dr. Habib Davanloo for my psychotherapeutic training. I would like to acknowledge that this article has been written with considerable help from my wife, Ven. Sunya Kjolhede. Sunya was also sanctioned and ordained by Roshi Kapleau; together we co-direct a residential training center, Windhorse Zen Community, Inc. located just outside of Asheville, NC. My heartfelt thanks, also, to Lani Banner, for her consistent support and the significant contributions she's made throughout the writing process.*

*I'd also like to say that the ideas presented in this article find their actual expression in our Zentensive Retreats. Zentensives are meditation-based trainings that have been accredited for all mental health professionals by The Washington School of Psychiatry. These retreats are tailored for dharma practitioners and psychotherapists interested in working on the unconscious dynamics that arise out of intensive forms of meditation. For more information please click here (or go to...)*

### ***Financial Support:***

*Finally, I'd like to take this opportunity to ask you for your financial support. If you find something of value in this writing, and would like to contribute to our ongoing efforts, please go to:*

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*With much appreciation,*

*Lawson Sachter*

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## ***Section I: Introduction***

Intensive forms of dharma practice stir up the *whole* of the psyche – and as this unfolding continues, increasing depths of the unconscious become mobilized. It's a complicated, paradoxical, and mysterious process. Most practitioners are aware that dharma practice can arouse innate healing and compassionate energies. What is generally less clear is that meditation can also mobilize difficult and destructive forces that may have been buried away since the earliest years of one's life. As these repressed feelings and impulses become activated, so do the defensive systems that encase them. Taken together, repressed feelings and defenses form complex emotional systems that bind energy, and inevitably exert a powerful influence over us.

What has become clear is that many of these unconscious mechanisms that hold back feelings also function in ways that obstruct deepening dharma practice. Since the dynamics that lead to deeper meditative states are exactly the same ones that mobilize the unconscious, it can be helpful, if not essential, to cultivate a greater understanding of these subterranean realms. What's more, there are uniquely Western aspects to this process, and this is exactly why Dr. Habib Davanloo's work is so relevant.

Before we get to Davanloo's work, though, I'd like to cover some preliminary points.

The first thing to note is that many repressive mechanisms arise in early childhood. We wind up using them to deal with feelings and impulses too painful or threatening to be experienced directly at that time. Of course it's not that these repressed feelings evaporate – only that we don't experience them *directly*. Although

unconscious, these dynamics can still profoundly affect and influence our lives even many decades later.

Repression is often linked with feelings that arise out of early problematic relationships; they arise out of necessity and often out of considerable pain. To avoid experiencing these feelings relationally, we'll often turn them against ourselves. Later on we may also attempt to re-create similar dynamics through our interactions with others. These *relational templates* can manifest themselves in many different ways. We'll be looking at their relevance to dharma practice later on in this article.

Another issue we'll be dealing with is the artificial distinction so often drawn between psychology and spirituality, by both meditators and psychotherapists alike. To my mind this is a bit like arguing whether yoga should be considered a physical or a spiritual practice. The distinctions themselves create unnecessary complications; to categorize unconscious dynamics mobilized by intensive forms of meditation as "simply psychological" seems to me both dismissive and unfortunate. As an old Zen saying goes, "it's like snow in a silver bowl." Who can say where one begins and the other ends?

Looking back, I can see how, for me, that kind of splitting only got in the way both personally and professionally. With regard to dharma practice the question is quite simple: how do those of us raised in the West work most effectively with the unique obstructive forces we come up against in the course of deepening meditation practice?

### ***Spiritual Bypassing***

The notion of *spiritual bypassing* is a closely related subject here, and is based on the presumption that we can somehow work on so-called "spiritual" levels, while side-stepping "psychological"

ones. As widely accepted as this view is, my experience has been that it reflects a serious misunderstanding of the dynamics of the mobilized unconscious and, with that, the nature of Western dharma practice itself.

Buying into spiritual bypassing is a bit like claiming we can somehow “let sleeping dogs lie,” while at the same time poking them with a stick. Similarly, it’s as if a parent were to say, “I’m not going to pass any of my emotional stuff on to my children. I’ll just set all that aside and deal with it later.” The unconscious doesn’t work that way: not in our lives, not in our parenting, and certainly not in deepening meditation. Intensive meditation doesn’t just bring up the good stuff; it activates the *entire* psyche. After working with these issues for some time now, I’ve come to see that this notion of spiritual bypassing is not only misleading, but can be highly disruptive.

Taking this further: It’s clear enough that intensive meditation practices help to open the door to the shadow-like side of the psyche. But what’s often not so obvious are the many ways we can *use*, or *mis-use*, practice in the service of further repression. These repressive dynamics tend to build up over time, actually over years; if we’re not clear about the underlying issues, they can repeat themselves in ways that are difficult to grasp. As someone once said, “It’s not one damn thing after another, but the same damn thing over and over again.” And as is so often the case, this stirring of the pot brings up dangers and opportunities all at the same time.

Of course, we don’t practice in a vacuum – so much depends on our past history: how much has been buried away, and how accessible these unresolved issues may be. Our ability to work skillfully with this material depends to a large extent on our understanding of the unconscious, and our willingness to face and work through difficult feelings. Unfortunately, there are aspects of Eastern-style practices, especially those that have evolved within a

patriarchal, monastic context, that can easily wind up functioning in highly repressive ways for Westerners. I know all this firsthand.

### ***Cultural Differences***

This brings us to another core issue: the fact that there are profound differences between the Eastern and Western psyche, and that the deeper we go in practice, the more significant these differences become. This has been known in a vague way for some time, but more recently the extensive research underpinning this understanding has been pulled together by Richard Nisbett in his book, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently... And Why*. Nisbett writes,

My research has led me to the conviction that two utterly different approaches to the world have maintained themselves for thousands of years. These approaches include profoundly different social relations, views about the nature of the world, and characteristic thought processes. Each of these orientations—the Western and the Eastern—is a self-reinforcing, homeostatic system. The social practices promote the worldviews; the worldviews dictate the appropriate thought processes; and the thought processes both justify the worldviews and support the social practices.<sup>1</sup>

To be more specific, these studies reveal major differences in the ways people East and West pay attention to, and think about the world. Those raised in East Asian cultures tend to view the world more holistically, while we Westerners are far more likely to think more atomistically – in other words, in ways that analyze and fractionalize. Such differences are quite evident in, for example, our contrasting approaches in the field of medicine; they also reveal themselves in how we experience our feelings, and in our relationships with others. All these areas are mutually conditioning,

and therefore extremely difficult to pull apart; because of this I found Nisbett's writing to be especially helpful.

Perhaps most interesting and relevant here are the ways in which these differences manifest in terms of our sense of self, and the influence of cultural conditioning on self-perception. In many East Asian cultures, a person's identity arises much more directly out of one's relationships, which is now commonly referred to as an "interdependent" sense of self. The Western sense of self, on the other hand, has become one that appears to be increasingly isolated and disconnected, and so is generally called an "independent" sense of self. Joseph Henrich, author of *The WEIRD People in the World*, has written extensively about this subject, especially in terms of the ways an isolated sense of self has evolved over the centuries within the context of Western spirituality. (WEIRD is an acronym for Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic.) This book has affected me personally more than any I've read in decades – the implications of Henrich's work for dharma practice, as well as for the field of psychotherapy, are direct and profound.

In terms of intensive meditation practices, these cultural differences become particularly significant as they unfold on unconscious levels: as dharma practice deepens, it mobilizes a very different set of dynamics within the Eastern and Western psyche. For many East Asians<sup>2</sup>, mobilizing the unconscious brings up a kind of shame that is a relational, collective, and unifying force. This type of shame calls for a minimizing of one's self-importance, while at the same time fostering a sense of connection and harmony with the whole. Shame *in this sense* encourages harmony – it reinforces one's social obligations while affirming our interdependence with others. In this way it also echoes a number of basic Buddhist teachings.

For Westerners, on the other hand, intensified practice tends to stir up layers of guilt, or more accurately "*superego* guilt," which often manifests as negative self-judgments and a greater sense of



isolation and unworthiness<sup>3</sup>. As superego guilt becomes activated, it further reinforces the culturally conditioned and deeply internalized sense that we are lacking in some fundamental way – that there is something wrong with us and we don't deserve to have good things happen to us. Most of us in the West wind up having to deal with significant guilt-based obstructions in our practice. These issues are culturally specific, often based on repression, and certainly unique in the evolution of Buddhist teachings and practice.<sup>4</sup>

I've become increasingly aware that these intrapsychic differences have a depth to them which make them extremely hard to see. It's as if we can only begin to understand Eastern forms of shame, and by extension the East Asian experience of dharma practice, by trying to view them through the eyes of another – by somehow shifting from our self-centered perspective to a collective, relational one. Similarly, someone not steeped in Western culture from an early age can only begin to understand superego guilt, and by extension the Western experience of practice, from an independent, individualistic perspective. Because these differences run so deep, we might say that trying to grasp Eastern and Western experiences of practice is a bit like the proverbial comparing of apples to oranges. There are aspects of training that look quite similar, and yet they may function very differently.

As discussed above, shame functions to a large extent as a cultural and collective phenomenon, whereas guilt functions primarily as an individualistic and self-isolating phenomenon. Again, many sociologists and cross-cultural psychotherapists have written articles addressing this issue<sup>5</sup>. As a result of this conditioning, we naturally come to view ourselves, our practice, and each other through the rather limited perspective of our own culturally biased consciousness.

When we do step back to get a more global view, we can see these two aspects more clearly: On one side are Western values

primarily related to individual rights, self-autonomy and personal freedom – values that can easily lead us in narcissistic directions. And on the other side we find many core Eastern values relating to hierarchy, harmony, and selflessness – which can easily lead to all kinds of issues related to compliance and conformity. Since Eastern values are deeply entwined with dharma teachings, all this can create a significant "clash" for Western practitioners. This is no small issue in terms of both the teaching and practice of Asian traditions.

### ***The Mobilized Unconscious***

Now, to pull all this together into a more compressed form: What we've said is that the practices that lead to deepening meditative experience are the same ones that mobilize the unconscious. Further, resistances arising out of this mobilization can result in a range of difficulties, and the nature of these obstructive and destructive forces often can be tied to the repressive mechanisms that arose in the early years of our lives. Because Eastern and Western psyches are so different, especially in terms of the punitive superego, the dynamics stirred up through this mobilization are also often fundamentally different.

Oftentimes "traditional" dharma-based practices are not dynamically appropriate for working with the repressive forces of the Western psyche; they simply do not address these types of complications effectively, or in healthy ways<sup>6</sup>. Given the differences in cultural consciousness, it should not be surprising that certain aspects of dharma practice simply do not help people work through issues related to repressed anger<sup>7</sup>, or compliance-and-defiance, or many of the resistances connected to intimacy – all of which can present significant obstacles to deepening meditation.

And as noted above, I've often seen them make things worse. Dr. Habib Davanloo's metapsychology of the unconscious<sup>8</sup> offers us

the most comprehensive framework I know of for understanding many of these difficulties, particularly these superego-based issues, and because of its experiential nature it can fit seamlessly with our work on the mat.

## Section II: *Habib Davanloo and ISTDP*

In his earlier years Dr. Davanloo worked as a Harvard-trained psychoanalyst. During the 1960's he began to question the efficacy of this approach and so began to develop a radically new kind of psychotherapy called *Intensive Short-Term Dynamic Psychotherapy*, or *ISTDP*.<sup>9</sup> Davanloo's work doesn't try to soften or circumvent a person's defenses, as many other therapies do. Rather, it is designed to deal with them directly by turning the defenses back on themselves in ways that give direct access to the originally repressed feelings.

From one perspective we could say that Zen is about the direct experience of each moment, and that ISTDP is particularly focused on the direct experience of our *feelings* in the moment. When we consider what this means in terms of *unconscious* feelings, things definitely begin to get more complicated. These submerged feelings, particularly those related to anger and sexuality, often play a significant role in our relationships, and in our practice on the mat. How Westerners actually work with these unconscious dynamics is a real question, especially in light of the understanding that further repression only strengthens them.

What has become increasingly clear to me is that the ways our dharma practice unfolds – or perhaps, sadly, does not – often has a great deal to do with how we work with the forces locked away in these hidden realms. Our defenses can assume many forms, and for some people the forces of withdrawal and self-sabotage can become almost overwhelming. As Eric Clapton wrote in his autobiography, "I found a pattern in my behavior that had been repeating itself for years, decades even. Bad choices were my specialty, and if

something honest and decent came along, I would shun it or run the other way<sup>10</sup>.”

There are many further complications here too. Unconscious feelings often include not only such things as repressed grief, anger, sexuality, and guilt, but paradoxically we also repress positive feelings like gratitude, forgiveness, wonder, and compassion. On a deep level we may believe ourselves to be fundamentally undeserving – so that naturally we pull away from “good things,” which may seem somehow forbidden.

Sometimes we may allow ourselves to experience part of an emotion but not its depths – or we allow only the “acceptable” half but not the other. And when feelings become completely repressed, we lose sight of them altogether. No doubt some will disagree, but to me it seems unfortunate that as Westerners we engage in a practice that so richly stirs the unconscious, offering up all kinds of opportunities, but then fail to work with many of these underlying issues in helpful or transformative ways.

My sense is that unraveling these emotionally linked issues can become a truly vital element within the practice. For some, being able to work in this way is essential – not only because repressed feelings can play such a crucial role in slowing down or undermining our work on the mat, but also because they can relate directly and powerfully to the ways we fail to uphold the spirit of the Buddhist Precepts.<sup>11</sup>

My experience has been that it’s not so much our so-called “egos” which cause the ethical problems, but rather the depths of our unresolved conflicts. These buried issues give rise to unconscious needs, which then can fuel all kinds of unethical behavior. This has been most obviously true in terms of the destructive behaviors and relationships of certain dharma teachers, but it plays itself out in more subtle ways elsewhere as well.

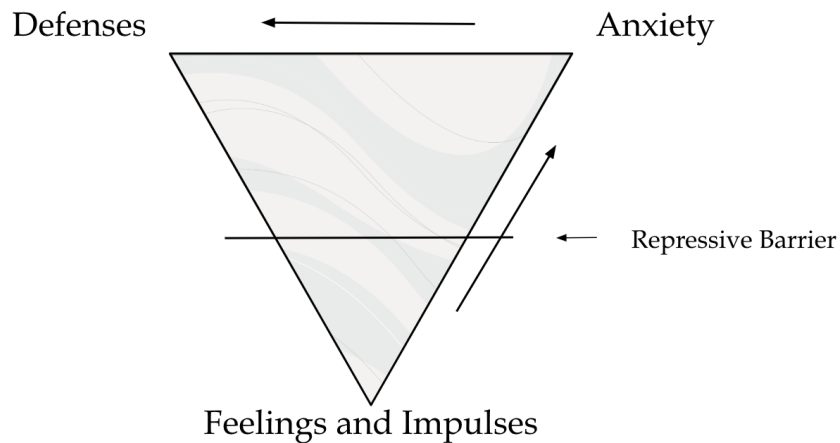
### ***Section III: Intensive Short-term Dynamic Psychotherapy***

What follows here is a brief overview of the intrapsychic dynamics that inform an ISTDP-based approach to psychotherapy. This, in turn, offers us a powerful way of understanding the shadow-side of deepening meditative practices. Davanloo's work, focusing as it does on direct experience, can help us find our way through some of the conceptual distinctions that get drawn between body and mind, thoughts and feelings, psychology and spirituality. In doing so it opens the way for a clearer insight into what's actually going on experientially and, therefore, psychodynamically. The following diagrams are based on the work that Dr. Davanloo has been presenting for many decades now. Some years back we added a few of our own to help clarify the ways his work applies more specifically to the unconscious processes that come up in Western dharma practice.<sup>12</sup>

#### ***The Triangle of Conflict***

The basic starting point for this model begins with a diagram called *The Triangle of Conflict*, a depiction created in 1952, which was based on the combined work of Henry Ezriel and David Malan.

Triangle of Conflict (Ezriel, 1952)



What this diagram shows is that unconscious feelings, and the impulses that go along with them, exist below the *repressive barrier*<sup>13</sup> and therefore outside of our direct awareness. As these feelings get stirred up and begin moving towards conscious awareness, they generate anxiety. In response to this anxiety, defenses kick in. These defenses function in ways that serve to lower anxiety, and at the same time may give partial or indirect expression to the feelings themselves. As long as the underlying issue remains unresolved, these patterns will repeat themselves through the process Freud referred to as *repetition compulsion*.

### ***Mobilization and Repression***

Repressed feelings are feelings that have been pushed underground. Similar to repressed memories, their accessibility depends on a number of things including how painful or threatening they were, how often they were evoked, and how young we were when they were first formed. We all come to practice with some level of repression in place, and unless the resultant defenses are addressed, ongoing practice will tend to strengthen them as well as adding a few of its own. How these defensive structures affect the deepening process will depend on a number of things: how they

actually function, our understanding of the nature of the unconscious, and on how skillfully we work with them as they arise.

Unconscious feelings become mobilized in all kinds of circumstances. In times of great crisis, they can surface in ways that are crippling – the underlying emotional systems may get flooded, fall apart, or simply shut down. During dharma practice the unconscious also becomes mobilized, but for the most part this happens in ways that can be significantly beneficial.<sup>14</sup> We might say that mobilization and repression move dynamically with or against each other – one pushes up, the other pushes down. The question becomes, which side will prevail?

When worked with skillfully, mobilization inevitably leads to deeper practice, but when repression has the upper hand it blocks our energy and shuts down our feeling for life. A more compelling perspective here is that through skillful practice the repressive forces themselves become *transformed* into healing forces – something like the way that ice becomes water. In one sense they're the same, and in another they're quite different. The central point here is that by understanding how the underlying dynamics function, we can incorporate our work with them seamlessly into our dharma practice. What I've seen over and over again is that as someone becomes more deeply attuned to their own inner process, the obstructions themselves become doorways to greater freedom and understanding.

### ***Feelings and Impulses***

In simple form, feelings are internal experiences that combine three basic elements: a cognitive part, an energetic or neuro-physiological component, and an impulse to some kind of action. When a feeling is experienced freely these three aspects come together with a singular kind of power and authenticity. Jung has



written, “Where wisdom reigns, there is no conflict between thinking and feeling.”<sup>15</sup> Also, when we experience our feelings, directly and in the moment, they move through us freely. When we constrict, censor, or shut-down the process, we block the conscious experience of the feeling itself, and may wind up turning its energy against ourselves.

Working skillfully with this deepening mobilization is, of course, no easy matter. For most of us, perfecting repression has been the work of a lifetime; there can be all kinds of unknown feelings and unconscious needs swirling below the surface. One reason for this complexity is that unconscious feelings are usually embedded in larger emotional systems in which one feeling is linked to others. What this means is that mobilizing a particular feeling will indirectly mobilize others. These feelings and their corresponding repressive dynamics usually occur in a layered fashion, with the more accessible material resting closer to the surface, and the more entrenched and characterological material buried further down. More will be said about this point later. For now, it can be helpful simply to recognize that this layered quality often plays a key role in deepening practice – as we go deeper, we never know quite what to expect.

What is particularly important to understand here is that practicing with this kind of awareness does not involve psychologizing, or chasing after feelings or defenses. Such approaches only *disrupt* the process. The initial focus is simply on clarifying the ways that anxiety and defenses are manifesting themselves. As a simple example, we know that the act of looking away in an emotionally charged situation is commonly used as a defense. When questioned about it, people may get weepy, or come up with various explanations; if they do resume eye contact, they usually become uncomfortable. This discomfort is the anxiety; the looking away, weepiness, and rationalizations are simple defenses

being used to lower the anxiety. We don't necessarily know what the underlying feeling or feelings are, but what we do know is that something's there, and that it's being avoided.

This basic process can become intensely complicated, but generally speaking we can say that one of the ways the unconscious "communicates" with us is through these two interrelated points: anxiety and defense. These are not fundamental traits – they are symptoms arising out of repression. Once we reach a certain depth in meditation, the most common issues that arise for Westerners seem to include the sense that we are alone, unlovable, and unworthy. This mindset is actually a defense, not an identity; consequently, it's a hard pattern to work with *directly* because it is a symptom arising out of more hidden levels. What's obvious, though, is that as long as we're using practice to beat ourselves up, we're not really going to get anywhere.

When we come to see that the purpose of all these different repressive forces is to stifle our true feelings, then our relationship to the defenses changes and they begin to lose their power. It's essential to recognize, however, that the underlying feelings are still fully present, but existing and functioning on unconscious levels. Quieting the thinking mind through meditation, and understanding the underlying processes, fosters an experientially-based approach – one that avoids theorizing and instead deals directly with whatever is happening in the moment. Working in this way requires a real trust in the process, which fosters an intuitive openness as well.

Jumping ahead a bit, once the underlying feelings have actually been experienced – which in itself is not so easy – the related anxiety and defenses fall away. As the prominent therapist Frieda Fromm-Reichmann once wrote, "The patient is in need of an

experience, not an explanation.”<sup>16</sup> The same is true with any meditation practice.<sup>17</sup>

Authentic feelings have integrity and power. They connect us to the world and to each other, and so are essential in all the meaningful things we do. If we don't care about something, if we are detached and remote, unconsciously evasive or defiant, then really what's the point? "We may affirm absolutely,' declared the German philosopher Hegel, 'that nothing great in the world has ever been accomplished without passion.'"<sup>18</sup> While it's certainly true that some forms of meditation foster a detached attitude, Buddhist teachings are about truly coming to life, and opening the heart to our inherent compassion, as expressed in the vow of the Bodhisattva.<sup>1920</sup>

### ***Anxiety***

Unconscious feelings are not experienced directly; instead, what happens is that as difficult feelings move closer to the surface of our awareness, they generate anxiety. The more painful or threatening the repressed feeling is, and the closer to consciousness it comes, the greater the anxiety. This anxiety can be “channeled” into smooth or striated muscle, and it can also manifest itself through cognitive disruption. *Smooth muscle anxiety* has to do with things like GI tract disruption, *striated muscle anxiety* might manifest itself as a tightening in the chest, clenching the hands, or grinding one's teeth, and *cognitive disruption* usually involves an inability to stay focused, think clearly, or connect with relevant events or memories. The list of possible symptoms is a long one, and these examples barely scratch the surface.

Although we're not including a diagram of it here, Davanloo also describes a process he calls *Instantaneous Repression of Affect*. This occurs when an unacceptable feeling doesn't generate anxiety,

but rather goes directly to a defense. Anxiety functions as a signaling system for us, but there are also many instances where repression bypasses this point altogether. For example, we might be aware of some kind of crisis occurring in a person's life, or in our own, and on a gut level we know there should be some kind of strong feeling involved, but what we find instead is a numbness, or a collapse into hopelessness and despair. The feeling of anger will sometimes move directly into a depressive state, which in such cases is quite obviously a defense.

What we refer to as "stress" is often a sort of chronic anxiety held close in the body. It may have more to do with external conditions, or more directly with the repression of feelings, and most often it's both. In John Sarno's movie, *All the Rage*, he documents numerous cases where there's clearly a strong connection between repressed anger and back pain. As we can see in the clinician's handbook, *Hidden From View*, by Abass and Schubiner, a range of other physiologically-based symptoms may be linked to the repression of feelings as well. Certainly not all our ailments, not all our anxious and depressive states, not all our back pains grow out of the anxiety related to repression – yet in some instances the link is clear and direct.

### ***Defenses***

Defenses are the third element of the Triangle of Conflict. They're difficult to get a handle on because there are so many different kinds, and they exist on so many different levels. Speaking generally though, defenses lower anxiety, and sometimes will also indirectly express the underlying feeling.

Simple relational defenses include such things as automatic smiling or avoiding eye contact. Other common defenses involve

minimizing, rationalizing, shutting down, and compartmentalizing. Compliance and defiance are nearly universal, while more charged defenses include such things as projection, denial, paranoia, throwing tantrums, or becoming weepy and depressed. When we buy into our defenses, at some point they usually create problems, and whether we know it or not, we pay a price – sometimes a big one. When we know how to work with these energies, however, they can become open doors leading to deeper levels of understanding and freedom.

With meditative practices, working skillfully with these dynamics can be especially valuable in terms of resolving our characterological defenses. These are the ones woven into our sense of self, and so they function in ways that may not only block feelings and stifle the will, but they also reinforce the kind of narcissistic, self-other paradigm that's so pervasive in our culture. This level of work carries enormous significance. As Wilhelm Reich asserted, "If one neglects such character resistances, and instead follows the line of the material, such resistances form a ballast which is difficult, if not impossible, to remove."<sup>21</sup>

Unconsciously we tend to bundle these types of defenses together in ways that create a kind of emotional template, one that seems to tell us who we are and how we ought to live our lives. These deeply rooted defenses are also the ones that are the most difficult to see, both because they are so often formed at an early age, and also because they feel as if *they are who we are*. When we identify with them, when we believe in them too strongly, they have the potential of creating significant obstructions to deepening meditative experience.

Of course, our conscious sense of self is quite different from the shadow self, which does its best to remain hidden. As Jung says, "In each of us there is another whom we do not know."<sup>22</sup> Joseph Campbell speaks of this in his lecture series *Mythos*:

The shadow is, so to say, the blind spot in your nature. It's that which you won't look at about yourself. The nature of your shadow is the function of the nature of your ego. It is the backside of your light side. In the myths, the shadow is represented as the monster that has to be overcome, the dragon. It is the dark thing that comes up from the abyss and confronts you the minute you begin moving down into the unconscious.<sup>23</sup>

This “moving down into the unconscious” is clearly what happens with deepening meditation practice, and it can be both disturbing and enlightening to see how profoundly our lives have been shaped by experiences from the earliest years.

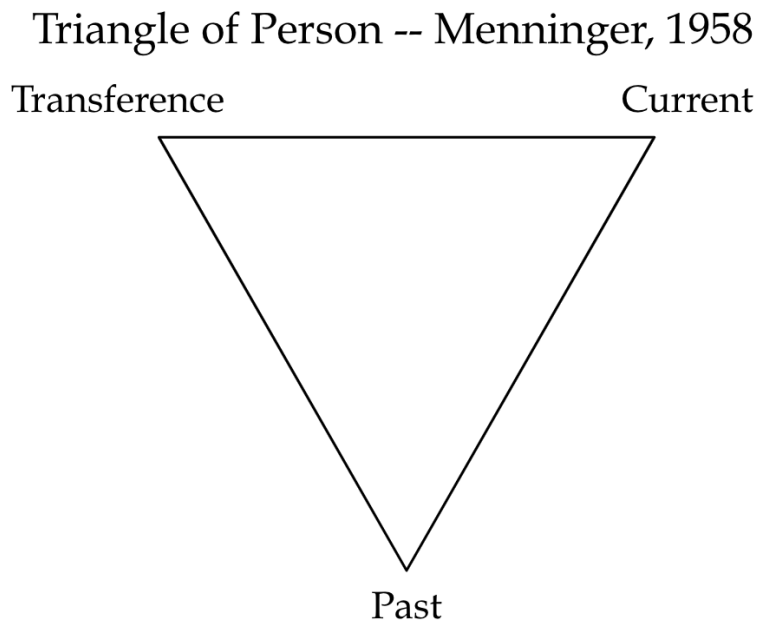
This “moving down” through the defenses is a complex and contradictory process. Some defenses function internally, while others operate on more relational levels. Some are more intellectually oriented, some are held in the body, while others are more connected to the heart. We also see that some defenses are more closely linked with feelings like grief, anger, sexuality, and guilt, while others have more to do with intimacy, vulnerability, and compassion. They may reveal themselves through all kinds of needs and desires, fantasies and dreams. Unfortunately, people sometimes get stuck in chronic and repetitive defensive patterns and so, like Sisyphus, they wind up spending their time trying to roll the boulder up the mountain over and over again.

In terms of defenses, it's easy to find simple ones related to anger. When someone says, for example, “I'm so angry I could cry,” or “I'm so angry I could scream!” then in spite of the *labeling*, we're not really in touch with the actual experience of anger at all. Rather what we're seeing is the buildup of the internal pressure of anxiety, and then the release of that pressure. It's the same when people smash things because they're “angry.” This buildup of tension, and

then its release is a dynamic commonly mistaken for the feeling itself. When these processes are understood through the Triangle of Conflict, however, we see them for what they are: mechanisms for *avoiding* feeling – in this case, anger. The *anxiety* is experienced as tension being held in striated muscles, and the tears or yelling are the *defenses* being used to lower that anxiety. After the tension is released, we feel better, but the underlying anger has not been experienced or resolved.

So, then the question becomes, what happens to the actual feeling itself? This is not a theoretical issue, and in terms of our lives it is best answered experientially. What we can say, though, is that with repression the energy is bound up; and when the old feelings do become activated, they can stir up old ghosts, leaving us feeling, in a sense, haunted. On the other hand, when the feelings rise up and are not repressed, their energy moves right through us – they are clarifying, empowering, and alive!

### ***The Triangle of Person***



The second of the diagrams we'll be covering here is referred to as *The Triangle of Person*. Karl Menninger came up with it in 1958, and he used it to help clarify the ways that similar patterns can repeat themselves in our past, current, and therapeutic relationships. Of course, transference and countertransference issues also arise in the teacher-student relationship, sometimes with even greater force than in a therapeutic setting. As is the case with traditional psychoanalysis, this is a process that can deepen over many years, and if the relational issues don't get worked through, they can create a minefield of unseen difficulties. This is true even when the transference is a positive one.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Combining the Two Triangles***

In bringing the *Triangle of Conflict* and the *Triangle of Person* together, Malan highlighted the ways in which the dynamics revealed through this first, primary triangle can reflect emotional patterns, or templates that wind up repeating themselves in and through other significant relationships. Looking more closely at



these issues we see that there can be both intrapsychic and relational aspects that evolve over time, and further, that the resulting conscious and unconscious needs may conflict with each other. A simple example here might be the ways in which our conscious need for closeness could in turn evoke unconscious resistance to it – all at the same time.

Davanloo refers to this need for distancing as *resistance against emotional closeness*, or RAEC. This kind of resistance can reveal itself in many ways, including these alternating push-me, pull-you relationships. In many ways dharma practice is about intimacy too, and our response to closeness often plays a central role in dharma training. We might see one kind of intimacy with our formal practice, and elsewhere a pulling back from our teacher, or others in our lives. It's noteworthy that many Western dharma practitioners, even those with many years of practice under their belts, may live with a real sense of personal isolation. Given this, it seems pretty clear that spirituality involves something more than personal intimacy. This is a complicated area, one which we'll be looking into in greater depth later on in the article.

In her book, *When God Talks Back*, Tanya Luhrmann takes a highly nuanced look at the complex ways this sense of aloneness, among many other things, has attracted huge numbers of people to the Evangelical religions – most of which encourage an unusually personal relationship with God. She writes, “The evangelical Christianity that emerged out of the 1960s is fundamentally psychotherapeutic. God is about relationship, not explanation, and the goal of the relationship is to convince congregants that their lives have a purpose and that they are loved.”<sup>25</sup> In part, this book is about helping us understand why, while so many other religions were losing congregants, the Evangelical churches were flourishing.

In *The Weirdest People in the World*, Henrich explores the question of aloneness in great depth, and links it directly to the

Marriage and Family Programs (MFP) established over many centuries by the Catholic church.<sup>26</sup> These policies have come to shape our contemporary Western world, for better and for worse. As with a number of the issues we've been touching into here, the actual experience of "aloneness" has a depth to it, and is often a big part of what brings people to therapy and dharma practice. In some of the dharma talks I give I'll bring up the question, "Could a Buddha ever be lonely?" – a topic which can bring up some interesting points of view.

Putting all this together, then, we can say that these issues have both *intrapsychic* elements, as represented by the Triangle of Conflict, and *relational* elements, as represented by the Triangle of Person. In a sense, there's a kind of *relational imprint* that forms through our early connections with others, and the transferential implications of these dynamics generally grow stronger over time. In other words, there may be an unconscious wish to establish new relationships that, to one degree or another, mirror earlier ones. The hidden feelings, impulses, and needs associated with previous relationships don't vanish; *they continue to exist and influence our lives from unconscious levels.*

A more complex example here would be with what happens when someone's unresolved Oedipal issues get stirred up through deepening meditation. This is perhaps not all that uncommon, and because it involves triangular relationships, the emotional systems that get activated can get pretty rough. On one hand the unconscious will be trying to meet the child-like sexualized feelings towards the mother-substitute; and on the other, there would be the competitive, vindictive feelings arising towards the father-substitute. These dynamics would be linked to early life experiences, and if a person was involved with intensive forms of meditation, we would expect those needs and feelings to become increasingly mobilized as the practice continues. These types of deeply

embedded issues tend to “leak out” in a person’s life, but whether someone actually tries to re-enact them with others no doubt depends on many factors.

Freud first spoke about this form of relational patterning in 1914 and referred to it as *repetition compulsion*. Later, Jung wrote the following: "The disastrous repetition of the family pattern could be described as the psychological original sin, or as the curse of the Atreides running through the generations."<sup>27</sup> The point is that we can unknowingly take on, or absorb, these patterns, and then wind up mirroring them elsewhere in our lives. Seeing into these types of issues not only helps to free us from their influence, it also prevents them from being transmitted through future generations.

### ***A Brief Summary***

To recap up to here: What we’ve been looking at are the ways that intensive forms of meditation activate repressed feelings, and then how the defenses linked to those feelings drain energy, block connection, and often obstruct deepening practice. By working through the crippling defenses, we get to the feelings, which are natural and empowering – they have energy and embody connection; they open us up.

These are *living* dynamics – so another way of thinking about personal feelings and defenses is to see them as energies, or like water and ice, rather than as fixed entities locked in time. Through skillful working, resistances can become transformed into openings, and initial openings can be transformed into still deeper ones. And at the very center of these relational systems are feelings related to forgiveness and love. It should be no surprise, then, that in working on these personal levels we naturally come to feel more open and connected to ourselves, to each other, and to the world. What also seems true and quite powerful, is the understanding that there’s

really a kind of endless opportunity unfolding through all of this work.

### ***Section IV: Some Personal Background***

My experience has been that people who take up a serious dharma practice come with a deep aspiration, and at the same time often struggle with some level of unresolved emotional issues. Perhaps not surprisingly, it's often the pain, unsettledness, and loneliness that play a role in bringing so many people to practice in the first place. What can sometimes happen, after an initial "honeymoon" period of practice, and especially in conjunction with extended retreats, is that deeper practice digs into the more heavily conflicted levels of the unconscious, which in turn call up more of the heavy-duty distancing and self-sabotaging types of defenses.

Over time this cyclical pattern of mobilization and repression can amplify the tension that exists between the part of us that wants

to go deeper, and the mounting resistance brought to the surface by the practice. Looking back to my 20's, there's no doubt that my dharma work was stirring up a range of personal issues that I got better and better at pushing away. For various reasons, and perhaps with some luck, I was able to steamroll over enough of them to break through the koan *Mu*<sup>28</sup>, and move ahead with my formal training, but definitely at a price. Unfortunately, few if any of those unconscious problems were truly dealt with until I encountered Dr. Davanloo's work.

Some background might be useful here. I had been studying ISTDP informally in the late 1980's when a friend, Zen practitioner, and therapist in training with Dr. Davanloo, kindly offered me the opportunity of doing an internship with her. I decided to go back to school to make that possible. It was a few years later, but still during my internship and while helping to run a seven-day sesshin<sup>29</sup> for Roshi Kapleau, that I experienced a pair of unlockings<sup>30</sup> that changed many things for me.

The initial unlocking had to do with repressed grief growing out of my father's unexpected death, something that had happened during my first week-long sesshin almost 20 years earlier. The second experience, which broke through on the last day of that retreat, was much more intense. It had to do with the repressed rage that had roots stretching back to the very early years of my life.<sup>31</sup>

Because of these unlockings, my dharma practice opened and deepened in ways that were, at least for me, quite fascinating, and certainly very difficult to express. It wasn't a "getting" of anything, but more as if there had been something I hadn't quite been aware of, was no longer there. With the unconscious opening in this way I'd also say there was also another level of clarity, and of *dimensionality*, that arose, but again, it's not as if there was anything specific to point to. Perhaps more than anything, and no doubt most

importantly, I found myself with a much greater appreciation of the unknowable aspects of these transformational processes. Going a little further, for me this mystery connects up with an abiding faith in our own healing energies – a force that applies in very real ways to both meditative and psychotherapeutic approaches.

Shifting back again: Like many people going to retreats in those days, I was already pretty good at avoidance and denial, and the style of dharma practice I was engaged in helped me do them even better. For what it's worth, I was also pretty good at beating myself up. In terms of the training, part of the issue is there wasn't a clear distinction made between *disciplining* thoughts and feelings and *repressing* them. Repressing them meant using the practice to seriously cut them off, but that wasn't all – there was also the implicit message that practice itself, realization itself, would resolve all these types of complications. To be sure, kensho and satori experiences can lead to the most profound kinds of life change, but they do not necessarily resolve the intrapsychic conflicts of our past. What we see, in fact, is that these practices and experiences often open them up, and so the question becomes what's next? I do know that after spending a good deal of time studying Davanloo's work, the underlying spirit of my practice changed and that shift was no doubt an essential part of what led to the unlockings that followed.

I'd like to emphasize here that these unlockings occurred after almost two decades of formal Zen practice. During those years I had been meditating essentially every day, attended dozens of week-long retreats, and completed my formal koan and precept study. Even now, after some 50 years of practice, I can feel how powerful all that early training had been. I have profound gratitude for all that my teacher, Roshi Kapleau, did to help and inspire me and so many of us over all those years. So in writing about my early years of practice, I hope it doesn't all sound too grim. There were unhealthy elements for sure, but this was back in the 70's when Buddhism was

really just beginning to get a foothold in the West. The truth is all kinds of wild things were going on during those thoroughly difficult and exciting times. Our hopes and expectations were impossibly high, and practice took on that quality too.

So what I'm trying to get at is that my training experience back then was really mixed. The style of practice Roshi initially brought from Japan worked in profound ways to stir up the psyche – which is what it's supposed to be doing. Unfortunately, in many ways it failed to address the uniquely destructive superego forces that were stirred up for me and for many others as well. In later years, as I spent more time with him personally, I came to understand that he had a growing awareness of those obstructive issues as well.<sup>32</sup> Roshi had heard from some of his dharma students, a few of whom had been therapy clients of mine, how helpful the ISTDP work had been for their practice. At the time he was semi-retired and so wasn't going to be trying out new things, but he expressed considerable interest and encouragement in this new approach.

I see the failure to address these forms of repression as a systemic issue in Western dharma training, and one that's related in part to the differences that exist between the Eastern and Western psyches. My sense is we often don't fully appreciate how deep our unconscious issues can go, or just how disruptive they can be. The unlocking experiences I went through, unexpected as they were, clarified a great deal and, as mentioned, transformed the nature and depth of my understanding. These experiences were intimately tied to my Zen practice, and at the same time opened me up to a much richer appreciation of Davanloo's teaching. As a side note, they also made a significant difference during those early years of my ISTDP training.

I have no doubt that the deeper levels of practice-based understanding that emerged wouldn't have happened if I hadn't also been working to resolve the unconscious blocks that were coming

up. In the same breath, I believe that the depth of those unlockings wouldn't have been possible if not for my ongoing dharma work. In other words, in my experience it wasn't one thing or the other – this work is truly all of one piece. I'm quite sure this has been the experience of others as well, most notably for some of the psychotherapists who have attended our *Zentensives*<sup>33</sup> (but they would have to speak for themselves).

## **Section V: The Fourth Point on the Triangle**

To summarize up to here: Those personal experiences, along with several more decades of subsequent work with students and clients, have proven to me how directly the Triangle of Conflict relates to so many of the blocks that come up for people in the midst of their dharma work. It also has become increasingly clear how ineffective, and even counter-productive, certain traditional East-Asian based practices can be for many Westerners.

It wasn't until 2014, however, when I began working much more closely with other psychotherapists in these *Zentensives*, that I came to appreciate how deeply the currents of our unconscious relational patterns could be woven into the practice itself. This understanding actually came about quite suddenly in the midst of one particular dokusan.<sup>34</sup> It occurred because the person I was



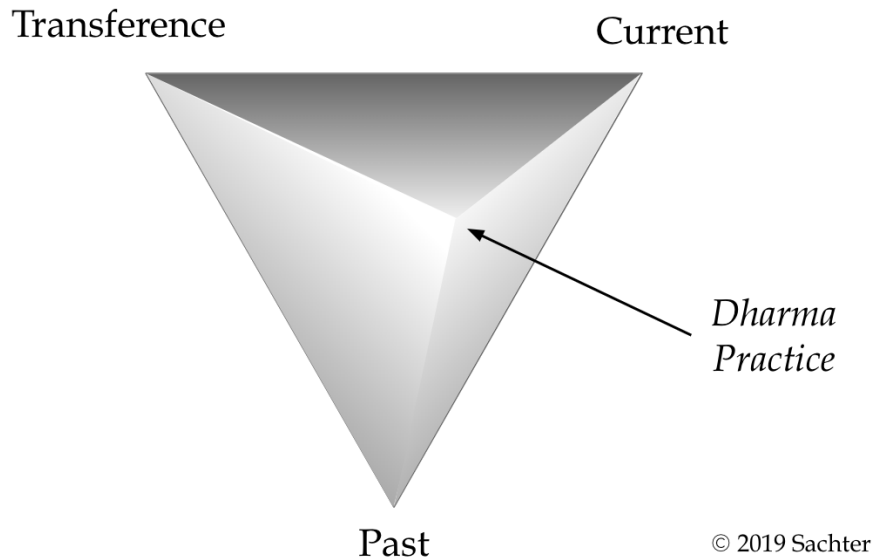
working with, a psychologist, was already so finely attuned to her unconscious. We were getting towards the end of one of our early *Zentensives* and because of the many days of sitting, this person was in a deeply still and inward state. During this dokusan she was fully concentrated, and totally immersed in her practice. At the time she was working on the koan *Mu*, and what I became aware of (though it would probably be more accurate to say what we became aware of together) was how strongly a transferentially-based relationship was emerging between her and her practice. Obviously, this wasn't happening in connection with another person, yet it was remarkable how closely her experience with *Mu* was mirroring patterns that could be seen in other significant relationships throughout her life.

In other words, it wasn't simply a matter of seeing the defenses as layered resistances, which is actually quite a bit to see. What was further revealed was that there was also a more hidden relational dimension where *Mu* was functioning quite literally as if it were a point on the Triangle of Person.

That's when I started referring to intensive dharma practice as *The Fourth Point on the Triangle*, and began working more directly with an entirely new dimension of the deepening process itself.

### ***Diagram of the Fourth Point on the Triangle***

## Meditation as the Fourth Point



I'm guessing that if you haven't sat through a longer retreat, this could be a fairly elusive point. So to put it another way: What became apparent in working with the person mentioned above was that as her thinking mind quieted down, the unconscious transference issues were emerging with increasing force and clarity. *This relational dynamic was a central part of the deepening practice itself.* It's as if the entire emotional template were coming to life – resurrected, in a sense, internally and on the mat. Just as Malan's joining of the *Triangle of Conflict* with the *Triangle of Person* shines a brighter light on the dynamic unconscious, seeing into the relational nature of dharma practice as a *Fourth Point on the Triangle* illuminates a deeper and richer aspect of dharma work itself.

This experience gave me a more complete understanding of, and appreciation for, the profound levels at which intensive forms of meditation can mobilize the unconscious. The mirror side of this understanding is the almost magical ways the unencumbered unconscious can foster the deepening of practice. Of course, there's

a good deal I don't understand in how these things work, but however it does, this insight has come to change the way I work with people – it's opened things up somehow. As a personal sidenote, that dokusan also brought about some significant insights related to my own earlier experiences – things that I just hadn't seen before.

## **Section VI: *Common Ground***

This article is geared primarily toward those raised within a Western culture who share an interest in the more hidden realms of the psyche. It offers a rough scaffolding for understanding some of the unconscious processes that govern so much of our lives, and especially those stirred up by intensive forms of dharma practice. The focus up to this point has been on the ways that deepening

meditation activates the Western unconscious, and from there it explores the dynamic tension that arises between activation and repression.

Hopefully what's clear is that looking at this unfolding process from a therapeutic perspective, meditation can help us gain access to much deeper levels of the unconscious. Equally so, looking at it from a meditative perspective we see that there are psychodynamically-based ways of working that seem to be far more effective in resolving certain dharmic obstructions than are usually found in traditional Eastern teachings and practices. Though we can always conceptualize the work using psychological and spiritual terms, I'd say that not only is it hard to know where to set the line, but also there's actually no place to draw it.

Part of the complexity has to do with the differences between how we talk about the process, and what actually happens. This material has been presented as if the unconscious unfolds neatly, almost politely, and in a step-by-step fashion. As you might imagine, however, the process itself is far less predictable, or comprehensible. We can say that deepening meditation activates deeper levels of the unconscious, and to the extent that we work through those intrapsychic conflicts, deeper levels of dharma practice naturally follow. Of course, the reverse also holds true. To the extent that our unresolved issues become activated, but are left unaddressed, those unconscious feelings *and their defensive structures* will still be functioning. Some of these defenses may not have much of an impact on our dharma practice, some may slow it down, while others may derail our efforts completely.

Here it may be helpful to keep in mind that Davanloo distinguishes between those layers of the psyche that are relatively easy to touch into, and those that are in realms much more difficult to access. He refers to this more hidden level as "the locked zone," which is a part of the psyche sealed over by particularly heavy

defenses. No doubt Freud was referring to this kind of resistance when, in 1940, he wrote, "For the moment we must bow to the superiority of the forces against which we see our efforts come to nothing."<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the contemporary Indian teacher, Eknath Easwaran, referring to our deeply conditioned personal tendencies, wrote: "Samskaras<sup>36</sup> are the key to character, but their root is deep below the level of conscious awareness. We see what they do, but we have very little control over the forces themselves."<sup>37</sup>

Davanloo's ability to work within this heavily defended area is what sets his work apart from that of so many others. For those of us who have seen his therapy tapes, what's vividly clear is that working with the locked zone is not simply a matter of accepting, allowing, or opening ourselves to feelings and defenses – rather, it involves addressing the resistances directly and quite often forcefully. This is not easy work, and it calls for a very different level of training and engagement.

Learning to become more fully attuned to the unconscious dynamics within ourselves during retreat-style practice can take some time – and yet having even a basic understanding of the *Triangle of Conflict* can be of real value. Getting some sense of the power of the unconscious, seeing into our own repressive structures, and beginning to differentiate between the three points on the Triangle of Conflict – feelings, anxiety, and defenses – can go a long way towards refining the ways we practice. Some years back one relatively new practitioner expressed his experience this way:

This [five-day Zentensive] was extremely important for me. After you mentioned in dokusan the way that our defenses continually work to divert anxiety, and therefore drive us away from our actual feelings, the whole nature of my practice shifted drastically. I was really caught up in my defenses. In fact, that was the primary thing I was doing in practice: hiding out.

Very deep, very needed shifts have happened in me since then. It's painful as hell to face this anxiety and the feelings underneath it, but my life has dramatically improved already (and this only after a few days of practicing in this new way). I'm excited – and terrified – of where this will take me.

At the heart of all Buddhist teachings is the understanding that we are all fundamentally whole and complete, lacking nothing. Unfortunately, vast swaths of Western culture do their best to teach us otherwise. The affirmation of our own inherent Original Perfection is an experiential truth; one which lies at the heart of the Buddha's own Awakening. And what's also true is that as Buddhism spread, it always adapted to, and merged with, the specific qualities and needs of each new culture it encountered. These days many Western dharma centers are in the process of exploring new forms of practice, ones that can work more effectively for those of us in the Western world.

This is vitally important work. As Westerners we tend to be particularly hard on ourselves, and aside from bringing up considerable pain, these dynamics obscure true understanding. My experience has been that people often tend to focus on symptoms, rather than the underlying causes. This means that they end up trying simply to cope with these difficulties rather than resolve them at a deeper level. ISTDP-based approaches offer us a chance to understand the repressive roots of those dynamics more fully, and to begin to address them more skillfully.

## **Part VII: *Further Explorations***

When I first started attending Davanloo's Metapsychology Conferences in Montreal he would hand-draw diagrams on a large sketchpad at the front of the room. There was one particular graph he often drew which consisted of three lines: the first showing the client's resistance against the therapeutic process, a second for the unconscious therapeutic alliance (UTA), and a final one for the rise in complex transference feelings (CTF). Davanloo would explain how these three lines represent the relationships between these

shifting energetic threads that would rise or give way as the therapy progressed.

This last line represents the mixed feelings (the CTF) people often come to experience towards their therapist. On one hand, the client is grateful, and appreciates the therapist's efforts to help free them from the destructive forces of their lives. At the same time, and perhaps for many different reasons, they're not. As the analyst David Pollens says, "What happens in therapy is that people come in asking for help, and then the very next thing they do is they try to stop you helping them."<sup>38</sup>

In many types of therapy, the therapist will attempt to work around this resistance in different ways. Freud himself tried techniques like hypnosis, free association, and dream work. Using an ISTDP-based approach, however, the therapist addresses the uppermost resistances directly, and then, following an intervention-response model, allows the process to unfold. Davanloo calls these steps the Central Dynamic Sequence.

As the therapeutic pressures increase so does the tension between the client's appreciation and resentment. As the core transference defenses are addressed, they often touch back into similar current and past relationships. This process is a bit like utilizing the forces of repetition compulsion, along with the Triangle of Person, but in a reverse direction. The essential point here is that within Davanloo's model it is the skillful engagement with this increasing tension that lies at the heart of the success or failure of the therapeutic process as a whole.

Davanloo would compare the rise in this tension to the fuel a jet needs to make it across the Atlantic. (At the time he was frequently traveling between Montreal and Europe.) He would talk about how, without sufficient fuel, the plane wouldn't be able to reach the necessary altitude for a smooth flight, and how at lower



altitudes the trip would be, at best, bumpy – if successful at all. The greater the energy, the smoother the ride. As part of this process, Davanloo has said, "Each time resistance is penetrated there is a marked and unmistakable increase in the strength of the therapeutic alliance."<sup>39</sup>

In terms of the earlier stages of therapy, then, this translates into being able to create a sufficient rise in the CTF to allow the unconscious to move through whatever resistances and feelings might arise – particularly those involving guilt. Davanloo refers to this kind of guilt as “the perpetrator of the unconscious” by which he means the type of guilt that drives the self-limiting and self-punitive forces so many Westerners find themselves struggling against. In a similar way, Freud said, "The ‘unconscious sense of guilt’ represents the superego’s resistance. It is the most powerful factor and the one most dreaded by us."<sup>40</sup> This is the kind of guilt that creates misery and perpetuates misfortune in people’s lives; it’s exactly this superego guilt that gets stirred up big-time for many Western dharma practitioners during retreats.

Davanloo would always take his time teaching about these dynamics, especially those linked to repressed anger and guilt, because resolving them can result in such dramatic and life-changing shifts in a person’s life. He also focuses on these feelings because learning to work in these areas is one of the most challenging aspects of this whole approach. It’s difficult for technical reasons, but also because it calls for us to reasonably address our own unconscious defensive networks. This is an essential part of our ongoing training. Obviously, therapist-based resistances can undermine any form of psychotherapy. But in terms of ISTDP, the truth is that one’s personal experience really helps, and it’s not always so easy to encourage someone else to do what we haven’t already done for ourselves.

This is also essential to the sequence as a whole, because it's only to the extent that the unconscious feelings, particularly guilt, have been "drained," that we're able to move ahead with the "working through" phase of the process. This later phase makes up another vital piece of the work, for it is during this stage that the core transformative experiences of forgiveness, re-connection, and love come forward to re-establish themselves in a person's life.

As a side note, there are some people who have criticized Davanloo's style because they are primarily aware of the challenging ways he can zero in on the defenses around anger. This is understandable, but having attended many Montreal Conferences, (and so having seen many, many hours of his teaching tapes), my experience is that his work is about so much more than this. It's true that his initial focus is on working with the resistances, which often does include tapping into issues of repressed anger – but that's just the beginning. The work is ultimately about restructuring the unconscious and helping us open our hearts. My personal conference notes quote him as saying, "The portraiting of love indicates the end of suffering." Though these may not be his exact words, this spirit is certainly consistent with all I've seen of his teachings. Helping someone touch into this depth of connection and caring is what the earlier phases are all about. Clearly this is the place where we feel most open – most embracing of ourselves, each other, and the world.

So as a quick overview, it is our work with the resistance that helps achieve a sufficient rise in the CTF which, in turn, helps give us access to the pathogenic zone. This in itself is a remarkable process. Then, once these complex feelings, including guilt, have been drained, the *working through* phase can move ahead on a relatively straightforward path. In simple terms, once the resistance is dealt with – which really means *converted* – then our genuine feelings, along with our own natural healing energies, will prevail.

Ultimately this path leads to the resolution of the intrapsychic conflicts, bringing us back once again to the caring and compassionate forces of the core bond. Restructuring the unconscious in this way brings about the kind of characterological change that allows for this re-connection to occur. It is this kind of fundamental change that lies at the very center of Davanloo's ISTDP.

But then, some people wonder whether anything further might be possible...



No doubt my background in Zen training has colored the ways I've come to see certain aspects of Davanloo's work. At the same time, I know I'm not alone in feeling that there's something implicit in his methods and insights that has the potential of drawing us into still deeper levels of awareness. I'm sure that was part of what I found so compelling about his work in the first place.

In its most basic form, ISTDP focuses on feelings and impulses that lie beneath the wobbly divide separating conscious from unconscious experience. On this level it's all fairly straightforward: our task is to find a way through the layered network of defenses and to release and transform the emotional truths lying buried beneath them. We know that once the specter of unconscious guilt falls away, and when we no longer identify with the self-isolating and self-critical forces, then deeper, more affirming levels of feeling and understanding begin to well up.

If we simply pathologize the unconscious, and see it only as a mass of dark, repressed material, then ISTDP-based therapy would only be about draining the pathogenic zone and getting to the underlying feelings. But if the unconscious is also, and perhaps

primarily, the abode of deeper truths filled with mystery and healing power – then this draining process becomes something of an initial step towards still greater understanding, freedom, and connection.

As mentioned earlier, Jung wrote, "The unconscious is the only available source of religious experience. This is certainly not to say that what we call the unconscious is identical with God, or is set up in his place. It is simply the medium from which religious experience seems to flow."<sup>41</sup> We might suppose, then, that as we move into deeper territories, beyond self-centered levels of individual feeling and impulse, we will begin to touch into realms of the spiritual.

"Spirituality" is, of course, a highly elusive term, but one that most people agree refers to some sort of personal transcendence – of going beyond our usual dualistic constructions of self and other. "Our normal waking consciousness," wrote William James in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, "rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different."<sup>42</sup> Like James, Aldous Huxley was fascinated by these "entirely different" forms of consciousness. The title of his classic *Doors of Perception* harkens back to the words of William Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern."<sup>43</sup>

Certainly intensive dharma practice has the potential of opening us up to much wider vistas of reality and lasting personal transformation. Without dealing with the unconscious blocks, however, it's often not easy to enter deeper meditative states, at least not in healthy ways. And it is right here, right in the midst of practice, that the understanding and methods of ISTDP can be most

helpful in accessing and working through the deeper realms of a psyche activated and made more fluid by retreat-based practice.

It's no secret that personal change of any sort is not so easy to come by, and that change can take many forms. Gradual change involves various kinds of incremental processes, while sudden, transcendent experiences are distinctive, unexpected, and arise in the blink of an eye. Here we're talking about those "Aha" moments, about sudden unlockings, and also about still deeper kensho or awakening experiences. Such events emerge in different contexts, and take on different forms. Some come forth ephemerally, quickly fading into the mists, while others lead to lasting change. Some arrive "mixed with madness," and others come simple and clean.<sup>44</sup>

At this point I'd like to borrow a few key points from the book *Quantum Change: When Epiphanies and Sudden Insights Transform Ordinary Lives*. In this book William Miller and Janet C'de Baca sort through interviews they had held with volunteers who responded to a general query included in an *Albuquerque Journal* article about abrupt personal transformations. In the preface of *Quantum Change*, Miller, the author of some 60 books and creator of the *motivational interviewing* system, begins by sharing:

I spent my early career studying how to bring about gradual, step-by-step changes and how to make them last. That led me to studies of what motivates human change, why it happens. Now I was faced with one of the most fascinating puzzles of all—the nature of quantum changes. How were they connected to everything else I'd studied? *Why didn't they occur in my therapy office? Why did they happen to some people and not others? How enduring were their effects?*<sup>4546</sup>

*Quantum Change* explores the nature of deep personal change, and the differences that can be found between more gradual shifts, and sudden breakthroughs. In their writing the authors reserve use of the term “quantum change” for those types of experiences that result in a profound and fundamental insight into the nature of one’s relationship to the world, *and* that lead to significant and enduring transformation in their life. The book is packed with interviews and data from some 55 personal accounts.<sup>47</sup>

The first type of quantum-change shifts the authors cover are called “insightful” experiences. Here they are talking about life-changing openings, yet ones that still fit more comfortably within a “traditional psychological framework.” In terms of ISTDP, this would include deep unlockings. While such experiences can certainly alter the trajectory of a person’s life, generally speaking they are not *transcendent*. Although they may bring great clarity to the unconscious dimensions of a person’s life, they still do not shift the fundamental paradigm of how we experience ourselves in the world. This is not surprising given the usual limitations of the therapeutic setting, and it’s not to say that, with the right circumstances and context, further openings wouldn’t be possible. One thing that is clear is that such unlockings engender a remarkable intrapsychic fluidity that brings us closer to non-dual levels of awareness.

Miller and C’de Baca then go into considerable detail in terms of “mystical” types of quantum change. They write, “People who have a mystical experience often have a powerful and direct experience of unity with other people, with nature, with the universe, with everything. *It is as though the boundaries of individual identity drop away and the person perceives an interconnectedness of all being.*”<sup>48</sup> So here they’re talking about something that may include, but also take us beyond, psychological insight. They further

note that “Although they overlap, quantum change is a more inclusive much larger phenomenon than religious conversion.”<sup>49</sup> Clearly these authors are describing experiences that bring light to a very different level of awareness.

To put this in a more Buddhist framework, these are experiences where the illusory nature of a separate self falls away. Such openings take us beyond the world of words and concepts, and into the very heart of all true religious experience. As with unlockings, these openings may arise with different levels of depth and clarity, and may be deepened and refined indefinitely.

Stepping back a little, and speaking from an overly simplified perspective, we might say that while insightful types of openings tend to lead to changes in *character*, mystical or spiritual openings lead to changes in *consciousness*. The truth is that much of the time these different types of openings overlap each other. If we know how to work with them appropriately they can complement each other; if not, they may even be in conflict. We’ll be picking up on this point, particularly as it relates to different kinds of intimacy, later on.

*Quantum Change* does a wonderful job of exploring the similarities and differences of experiences related to the depth and nature of change. Miller and C’de Baca’s work also helps clarify the point that mystical types of quantum change are anything but *linear extensions* of other kinds of personal development. They are *not* part of a continuum, or the result of simply carrying one’s psychotherapeutic work far enough that it becomes “spiritual.” Rather the authors show that what occurs are seemingly mysterious leaps of consciousness, often complex and contradictory – and that they are surprisingly often linked to states of considerable suffering and loss.

This book does not, however, explore ways of fostering these kinds of experiences – for ourselves, or as part of our work with others. For me, this is where ISTDP and Zen can come together most powerfully, and where gradual and sudden shifts can become paired. Further, my take is that although these “insightful” and “mystical” experiences may arise in singular ways, they may also be interwoven in ways that are complementary, even symbiotic. In some ways these apparent differences evoke the old nature/nurture controversy – which reflects a limited perspective that becomes especially apparent when our interest is in working with the whole of the person.



<sup>1</sup> (Nisbett 7).

<sup>2</sup> This article uses terms like Asian, East-Asian, and Eastern somewhat interchangeably, and in a generalized way characterizes this cultural group as being different from Westerners. I struggled with how best to resolve the issue of this great over-simplification, but in the end have decided to follow Richard Nisbett's lead, coupled with his explanation. In the introduction to his book he writes, "I wish to apologize in advance to those people who will be upset to see billions of people labeled with the single term 'East Asian' and treated as if they are identical. I do not mean to suggest that they are even close to being identical. The cultures and subcultures of the East differ as dramatically from one another as do those of the West. But the broad-brush term 'East Asian' can be justified. In a host of social and political ways the cultures in that region are, in some general respects, similar to one another and different from Western countries. This will not satisfy some people who are highly knowledgeable about the East, but I ask them to bear with me." (Nisbett xxii).

<sup>3</sup> There are many different types of guilt. Here the focus is on superego guilt which commonly arises for Westerners when the unconscious becomes mobilized through intensified meditative practices. Davanloo speaks about this kind of guilt as "the perpetrator of the unconscious." A larger topic has to do with the type of guilt that permeates much of Western spirituality. This church-induced guilt has to do with institutional teachings, as distinct from the teachings of Christ; ones which often rest on the doctrine of Original Sin. Joseph Henrich's book does a remarkable job tracing the evolution of these teachings and practices, and their radical impact on the Western psyche.

<sup>4</sup> There are strong parallels between the cultural differences revealed in dharma practice, and those we find in the field of mental health. David Reynolds, a Morita and Naikan therapist, has written, "The Japanese therapies, in stark contrast to most Western approaches, put great emphasis on the person's social obligations, and little on resolving his inner conflicts" (Goleman 1986). It's noteworthy that both Morita and Naikan therapies grew directly out of Japanese Zen culture. Here we see quite clearly how the points that Reynolds makes about differences in therapeutic approaches apply at least as much to dharma practice in the West.

<sup>5</sup> As just two examples, see Daniel Goleman's: "In Japan, Gratitude to Others is Stressed in Psychotherapy," and also Asian-American psychotherapist Sam Louie's "Asian Shame and Honor: a Cultural Conundrum and Case Study." In his article, Louie writes, "This concept of shame is what undergirds Asian societies, families, and thus individuals. When it comes to Asian people, our cultures revolve around some aspect of shame. Asian identities are forged early on in childhood by learning that shame is used to bring about social order and harmony... Upholding this concept of cultural honor is what drives Asian relationships, thus shame and honor are inextricably tied together. They are the yin and the yang of Asian life" (Louie).

<sup>6</sup> As another example, Sharon Salzberg's conversation with the Dalai Lama reveals a great deal about differing understandings related to "self-hatred." A link can be found in our bibliography.

<sup>7</sup> Anger is certainly one of the most misunderstood feelings, one that takes on different forms in different cultures and at different times. For many Westerners, defenses against anger manifest themselves in destructive and self-destructive ways -- but when anger is experienced *authentically* it holds great power for change. Unfortunately, the experience of anger is often mistaken for things like tension, depression, explosive discharge, and withdrawal, but as we'll see, these are actually defenses *against* anger, not the feeling itself. This is a complex area, and because anger is often linked or fused with guilt, it can become especially difficult to address. I've come to refer to working in this area, at least as it relates to dharma practice, as *The Koan of Anger*, which at times becomes a central focus during our *Zentensive Retreats*.

<sup>8</sup> My primary background is in Zen, and I was ordained and sanctioned by Roshi Philip Kapleau some 25 years ago. However, my ISTDP training has been primarily with Dr. Davanloo. I began studying his work in the late 1980's, and have attended most of his Montreal-based Metapsychology Conferences since the early 1990's. I also received my personal therapy and supervision from people who were in training with him. Most of the ISTDP-based references in this article grow out of that training, and so they refer most directly to him and his work. For those new to this style of therapy, however, you should know that over the years there have been quite a few other therapists who have evolved their own versions of ISTDP, as well as other forms of Experiential Dynamic Therapy (EDTs) based on Davanloo's research. Unfortunately, I don't have a great deal of first-hand knowledge about how these newer forms differ from each other, or from Davanloo's original work, but am hoping that what's written here will be more or less applicable to them as well. Of course, my greater hope is that the spirit of meditation, and with it a sensitivity to deeper, non-dual levels of awareness, can become more universally incorporated into the field as a whole.

<sup>9</sup> ISTDP is a form of experiential psychotherapy developed by Dr. Habib Davanloo, Emeritus Professor of psychiatry at McGill University. This therapeutic approach is designed to help us gain direct access to the unconscious, and to resolve any intrapsychic conflicts lodged there, and which may be creating suffering for ourselves and others. The experiential nature of ISTDP makes it a good fit with many types of meditation; it can help to address unconscious difficulties that arise for Western dharma practitioners.

<sup>10</sup> (Clapton Front Flap).

<sup>11</sup> The Precepts are the ethical teachings of Buddhism. They give voice to the ways a Buddha would live and reflect the interdependence of all existence. Whereas the Ten Commandments are *proscriptive*, in other words they tell us what we can and cannot do, the Precepts are *descriptive*, and reveal the way a fully Awakened being would naturally respond to the circumstances of their lives.

<sup>12</sup> We have a fairly extensive slideshow with dozens of diagrams and other images that illustrate ways that the unconscious operates. They also show some of the links between Zen and ISTDP, and how helpful certain meditative practices can be in accessing a range of unconscious material.

<sup>13</sup> The *repressive barrier* is the theoretical dividing line between conscious and unconscious awareness. When feelings and impulses are repressed, and so pushed below the repressive barrier, they still exist and continue to have an impact on our lives, often destructively, from outside of our awareness. We'll address this highly complex subject more fully later in this article.

<sup>14</sup> Meditation practices are supposed to be beneficial for all practitioners and for the most part, they are. There are, however, cautions and contra-indications that meditation leaders should be aware of, particularly in terms of intensified practice. Generally speaking, intensive forms of dharma practice are self-selecting endeavors: for those who suffer from severe mental emotional challenges, the extended stillness and silence of retreats simply evokes too much anxiety. But there are some who are able to manage, but only up to a point, and who even may be drawn to the shadow-side of practice. This article is about the ways that retreat-style meditation practice mobilizes the whole of the psyche, including the unconscious. Obviously, conditions like psychosis and schizophrenia raise serious concerns, as do severe Trauma-based issues. Those who suffer from depressive, manic, bipolar, and developmental issues also often need special consideration. People who struggle with fragile and borderline tendencies and other kinds of structural deficits may also be at risk from the activation of unconscious material; and for someone going through a life crisis, an intensive retreat may be clarifying and healing – or just overwhelming at that particular time. It seems to me that dharma teachers who offer intensive forms of training, and who may be working closer to the edge than most therapists, should be at least as well

trained in screening procedures and real-time assessments.

<sup>15</sup> (Sreechinth).

<sup>16</sup> (Fromm-Reichmann).

<sup>17</sup> This is another of those sensitive points. Davanloo would often say that “interpretation is the greatest defense of the therapist.” But he also emphasized that after an unlocking, or other opening experience, that it was important to review the whole process in detail. As he writes in *Unlocking the Unconscious*, after an unlocking, “...it does not end there. It must be followed by a long phase of consolidation, in which every aspect of transference, whether already touched on or not, is systematically analyzed, over and over again” (Davanloo 50).

<sup>18</sup> (Friedrich, et. al. 124).

<sup>19</sup> Bodhisattvas are enlightened beings who have deferred their own full awakening for the sake of helping others. Bodhisattvas may personify certain qualities – for example Kannon is the Bodhisattva of Compassion, while Manjushri is the Bodhisattva of Wisdom. There are many others. The Bodhisattvic Vow is the vow to save all beings, meaning to bring them to full awakening, before oneself.

<sup>20</sup> As one example, "The Buddha was once asked by a leading disciple, 'Would it be true to say that a part of our training is for the development of love and compassion?' The Buddha replied, 'No, it would not be true to say this. It would be true to say that the whole of our training is for the development of love and compassion'" (Feldman 19).

<sup>21</sup> (Reich 241).

<sup>22</sup> (Sreechinth).

<sup>23</sup> (Acorn).

<sup>24</sup> Just as in a classical psychoanalytic setting, the transference and counter-transference dynamics related to the student-teacher relationship will evolve over time, sometimes resulting in a kind of transference neurosis. Obviously, if left unaddressed, these types of issues can lead to all kinds of hidden obstructive states in the practice itself. It might be noted that in terms of therapy, Davanloo distinguishes between “transference feelings,” and “feelings in the transference,” an important point that applies equally to the teacher-student relationship. As a personal note, during the earlier years of my dharma work I came to relate to my teacher in certain ways as if he were my father. Though overall the transference was very positive, at the same time it held me back because the practice wasn’t thoroughly my own.

<sup>25</sup> (Luhrman 296).

<sup>26</sup> Henrich writes, “The MFP is a mixture that peppers a blend of old Roman customs and Jewish law with Christianity’s own unique obsession with sex (i.e., not having it) and free will” (Henrich 175). Further he points out, “To anyone other than an anthropologist, this might all sound boring or inconsequential, hardly the spark that ignited the blaze of Western civilization or the source of a major shift in people’s psychology. However, by looking more closely, we can see how the Church’s policies threw a barrage of monkey wrenches into the machinery of intensive kinship while simultaneously catalyzing its own spread. We’ll first look at how the Church dismantled traditional marriage, then consider how it sapped the vigor of Europe’s clans and kindreds, and finally see how it got rich on death, inheritance, and the afterlife” (Henrich 167).

<sup>27</sup> (Sreechinth).

<sup>28</sup> A koan is an enigmatic Zen anecdote, dialogue, or question used to help focus the mind during periods of meditation. By unifying the forces of concentration, inquiry, and faith, koans help to foster deeper meditative states, and to free us from the limitations of conceptual, dualistic thought. Some koans like “Mu” and “Who,” are worked with as “breakthrough koans” because they help foster an initial kensho, or awakening experience. Once a breakthrough koan has been resolved, people may go on to subsequent koans that help to deepen, integrate, and refine an initial opening experience. There are several collections of such koans that can be worked through with a teacher. There are also what are called “genjokoans” or “life koans” which more formally combine our life circumstances with dharma practice. Dan Leighton, editor of Hongzhi’s *Cultivating the Empty Field* writes, “We may see genjokoan as a technique to work through our own conditioned dusts to the original boundless field and its expression in our lives. It is an aspect of turning the light within to illuminate ourselves, and so, perhaps, allow the dropping off of body-mind” (Leighton xlii).

<sup>29</sup> In our Zen Kapleau lineage, *sesshin* are 3-to-7-day retreats during which participants engage in silent meditation for many hours each day. These retreats also include formal and informal talks, dokusan, and chanting.

<sup>30</sup> The term “unlocking” refers to the sudden breakthrough of long-repressed feelings that may include deep, visceral experiences of grief or anger. These feelings may be more fully connected to a current relationship, or linked in daisy-chain fashion to previous relationships.

<sup>31</sup> Though the fact that rage came up so strongly might indicate otherwise, the truth is I was actually very close with both my parents, and they couldn’t have been more supportive on a personal level. At the same time there were significant family difficulties related in part to my father’s WWII PTSD. These problems affected us all, and so (as a family) we went through some pretty rough times. The point is that the feelings of love and anger were both very true and present. It’s also worth noting that after the rage, guilt, and other feelings and memories passed through, I was able to experience a much deeper sense of connection with them both.

<sup>32</sup> His interest was always in establishing a strong Western dharma practice, and so he would ask all kinds of questions about the work I was doing with his students.

<sup>33</sup> *Zentensives* are meditation-based retreats offering advanced levels of training for mental health professionals and experienced dharma practitioners. They offer participants the opportunity of working directly with both the healing and destructive forces that become mobilized during extended periods of meditative practice. These retreats have been professionally accredited by *The Washington School of Psychiatry*. For more information, please go to [www.windorhosezen.org](http://www.windorhosezen.org).

<sup>34</sup> Dokusan is a confidential, one-on-one meeting with a dharma teacher in a formal setting, during which a student may bring up any question relating directly to their meditation practice. Topics might range from issues connected with posture, to exploring ways of working in the midst of practice with disruptive life circumstances, to still more subtle concerns related to the underlying spirit of practice itself.

<sup>35</sup> (Freud 243).

<sup>36</sup> “*Samskaras* are the subtle mental impressions left by all thoughts, intentions, and actions that an individual has ever experienced. Often likened to grooves in the mind, they can be considered

psychological or emotional imprints that contribute to the formation of behavioral patterns...; they are said to be the root of all impulses, character traits, and innate dispositions” (Yogapedia) According to Buddhist teachings, the samskaras comprise one of the five skandhas, or constituents of personality.

<sup>37</sup> (Easwaran 62).

<sup>38</sup> (Burkeman).

<sup>39</sup> (Rathhauser).

<sup>40</sup> (Freud 223).

<sup>41</sup> (Sreechinth).

<sup>42</sup> (James and Kuklick 349).

<sup>43</sup> (Blake).

<sup>44</sup> In this article we’re talking about sudden experiences that lead to personal transformation – to a sudden uplifting shift in consciousness. It’s worth noting that similar openings occur in other areas – creative, scientific, and so forth. At the same time there are sudden shifts that can carry us into deeply painful states, things like psychotic breaks and other types of terrifying experiences. As with psychedelics, there can be good trips and bad trips, and many that straddle that line. The underlying mechanisms may even be similar, but the impact on one’s life quite different.

<sup>45</sup> (Miller and C’de Baca 6).

<sup>46</sup> In the preface to *Quantum Change*, Miller notes, “A year ago I would have said I had never had an extraordinary experience like Scrooge’s – a sudden mystical encounter that transforms personality. I had had mystical experiences, but never one that triggered a personal metamorphosis. Since the idea of studying quantum change first took hold years ago, I have had the privilege of speaking to many people who have had such turning points, but until a year ago I would have said it was not an experience that I knew fully from the inside” (Miller and C’de Baca xi). Miller notes that many people do report having had *short-lived* mystical experiences, ones that quickly fade into memory; however, he doesn’t go into the question about how we might foster such openings, or how to keep them alive?

<sup>47</sup> This article will not be going into any depth about psychedelics which can, of course, facilitate a range of opening experiences on both psychological and spiritual levels. This is a fascinating and hopeful field of exploration, but one that lies outside the scope of this article.

<sup>48</sup> (Miller and C’de Baca 83)

<sup>49</sup> (Miller and C’de Baca 6).