

## Immanence and Intersubjectivity

by Daniel Shaw, LCSW

Spirituality and psychoanalysis were not always, and are still not always, thought of as compatible. But to me, based on what I think of and experience as “spiritual,” they are inseparable. I have been asked to discuss Dr. Wallin’s paper, and I have also been asked to speak of my own spirituality in relation to my work. What I have chosen to focus on first are some of the similarities in our backgrounds, and the common themes that have influenced us both as psychotherapists. One similarity I recognize immediately is that David and I both bring to our work a desire for and a belief in freedom: freedom as a human right, freedom for ourselves as therapists in terms of the creativity we are capable of in our efforts to help - and freedom for our patients, from the tyranny of trauma and the fragmenting dissociation that is the result of trauma. The theme of freedom has run through psychoanalysis from the beginning. For Freud, freedom from misery meant becoming able to experience ordinary human unhappiness (Breuer and Freud). For Ferenczi, freedom meant healing traumatic experience (Dupont). For Erich Fromm, freedom meant finding faith in oneself rather than in false idols (Fromm). Hans Loewald (Loewald) saw freedom as the self-authorization one achieves when the individual recognizes she must cease to be simply the child of her parents, and take on the authority of an adult. In my work and in my reading of David’s work, I see all these kinds of freedoms as an integral part of what the analyst hopes the patient will be able to discover.

In terms of how I might differ in my approach from David’s, that’s a bit harder to get at. As I understand it, the mystical experience David shared with us involved a direct connection to something transcendent, an exquisite, profoundly moving broadening of his perspective

accompanied by an immensity of well-being and gratitude. Since then, he has been able to offer something of this broader perspective to his patients in a way that is deeply meaningful and healing.

For me, Spirit is immanent in the *human* spirit, as it can be experienced in the intersubjective intimacy that we call love – and as it can potentially be known in the therapeutic relationship. So yes, I am using the old transcendence – immanence debate as a means of speaking to what may in fact be some very subtle differences in our perspectives. More on that later. For now, back to the similarities.

Like David, I too was raised in a secular Jewish home, with parents who were politically to the left. Though the religious aspect of being Jewish was never given importance or emphasis in my family, the ethical and moral values of Judaism, conveyed mainly through my parents' cultural and political leanings, moved and inspired me. A memory of childhood Passover Seders comes to mind. While my dad's parents were still alive and well enough, we had the traditional Passover dinners with them, and as the story of the Jewish slaves escaping Egyptian oppression is told, my family always sang the Negro spiritual, "Go Down Moses - Let My People Go." My father would sing it very loudly, and when I was a bit older, I realized that he was trying to sound like Paul Robeson. That spiritual as sung by Robeson was a civil rights anthem in the years of Martin Luther King's activism. This was the best part of the seder for me – the song that cried out for freedom. Freedom from subjugation is a theme I have been drawn to again and again, in my life and in my work.

David speaks of developing a "masochistic" relationship to suffering, a compulsion to assuage the suffering of others, referencing not only his particular family situation, but a culture-

wide PTSD for Jews, “a centuries’ long intergenerational transmission of trauma.” I think this is exactly right. A significant trauma in my family was my mother’s undiagnosed and untreated OCD, which took the form of hoarding. Her problem grew progressively worse as I got older, and was the source of endless rages and tears, if any of us ever tried to throw anything out. As a child, I was deeply identified with her as the victim of my older sister and my father, and I was her staunch ally, her rescuer. Later, I came to a much more conflicted position, as I realized how trapped and destructive my mother had become, and how much my father too had suffered.

But it wasn’t until after both parents had passed away that I understood the intergenerational trauma that haunted us more deeply. I saw a Broadway production of *Fiddler on the Roof*, in 2004. Watching the scene where the Cossacks shoot up Tevye’s village, suddenly, I remembered the story my mother had told long ago: she was 3 years old, and she and her mother had run to a barn in their Ukrainian village. The Cossacks had swept in, looking for Jews, shooting and killing. The cow my grandmother and my mother were hiding behind took the bullet, and my mother and her whole family escaped shortly thereafter. Arriving in New York Harbor on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1918, fireworks were going off as the ship pulled in, and my three year old, terrified mother screamed “The Cossacks, the Cossacks” in Russian. In retrospect, her hoarding in later life became comprehensible, given how much unspoken, unprocessed loss, grief and terror she and all her family members had known and had always sought to forget. Escaping persecution, poverty, and starvation by coming to America was fortunate for many, but at the same time, traumatic.

So very much like David, the masochistic streak I developed early on was linked to Jewish themes of oppression, and to my mother's depressive suffering and the sense that I should be able to save her.

### Transcendence

Now to the spirituality. David describes the numinous, transcendent experience of mindfulness he has had as a profound sense of "impersonal awareness," a variety of spiritual experience, not unlike one that William James might have described (James) in his classic study of religious experience, that is free of the "dense construct of history, identity, feeling, purpose." Beyond the capacity for mentalization that David describes as a key to the possibility of finding freedom from the constraints of an internalized past, David recognizes "mindfulness" as a further possibility for freedom – an experience of knowing and being that transcends the personal, that links all being to the pure consciousness that is the ground from which all individual consciousness springs.

David's experience of mindfulness has led him to a greater awareness and understanding of his involvement in enactments with his patients. He perceives that his Buddhist strand, an awakening to mindfulness, has blended with his Jewish strand, his identification with suffering - in such a way as to help him recognize when he might be overidentified with suffering, too immersed in the patient's suffering to allow either of them to imagine the possibility of transcendence. As I hear it, David's mindfulness experience supports his ability to deeply recognize his patients' suffering, at the same time that it allows him to step back, and give his patients a chance to step back, to recognize something transcendent, something that might help to restore faith in life and evoke compassion for self and others. This awareness David describes

seems to have been freeing, emboldening, and imbued with healing compassion. This is what I think psychotherapy can and should do – free, embolden, and ultimately, awaken compassion.

For many who have grown up knowing depressive suffering, an experience of transcendence, or even the idea of it, can be deeply appealing. No surprise then, that by the time I got to High School, Thoreau and Emerson were among my idols, though Walden Pond and Concord seemed a million miles from my Bronx apartment. So I was not entirely unprepared for my first extraordinary spiritual experience, but it certainly came as a surprise. As a struggling actor in New York in my 20s, I struggled a good deal more than I acted. There were some awfully low points: the short version is rejection, poverty, and loneliness. There was one day of despair when I just started walking, out of my tiny apartment and up Riverside Drive, until I found myself at Riverside Church. I was cold and I walked in to sit down. This was one of the few times in my life I had ever been inside a church. Alone in one of NY's most beautiful landmarks, the autumn sun streaming through the stained glass, a few things were suddenly happening all at once: I felt warm; my tears were falling; and I felt a strong firm hand clasping my right hand, telling me it would be alright. Not a real hand, not audible words – but then again, as real and as audible as could be. When I got up to leave, I was restored, for a while at least. And as I read the New Testament in the days that followed, I knew that The Comforter, spoken of in the Gospel of John, had come to be with me that day. I was amazed and moved, and I was very tempted to consider becoming a Christian. I got as far as reading a bit of Thomas Merton, and listening with rapture to Mahalia Jackson records and the Bach Cantatas. And over the years I have read a great many of the writings of the Christian mystics – but where I ultimately went in terms of religion was not what I would have expected. Here's what happened.

Not so long after my experience in the church, my luck changed, or so it seemed. I was cast in a show, an exciting workshop with some well-known people involved, where I got to sing and act and dance. It was a show, of all things, about an Indian guru, about his spiritual journey and his teachings, like a Hindu version of the musical *Godspell*. It was all some crazy cult nonsense, as far as I was concerned, and the show went nowhere, along with my acting career. But a few years later, at the end of another long bout of despair, I learned that the guru we sang and danced about in the show was in residence upstate, at his ashram, and that he was giving spiritual initiation. This was around 1980. I had by then sought help from two analytic therapists, candidates in training, I later understood. I left the one who was almost completely silent; I stayed for a while with the second one, and when I succeeded in getting a romantic relationship off the ground, she declared that therapy was over. So therapy ended, the girl soon broke up with me, I heard that the guru was upstate, and I decided to go.

I spent 13 years in all, calling first this man, and then after he died his female successor, my guru. My initial meditation experiences were literally electrifying, indescribably ecstatic, the most intense love and oneness I have ever known. It was only a few months before I sold my possessions and took off to follow the guru. For many years as a full time worker for the guru, on her world tours and in her ashrams in the U.S. and in India, I meditated and chanted daily, served in many managerial and teaching positions within the organization, travelled the world as a teacher and spokesperson for the guru, and worked my way up, closer and closer to the guru – the person I believed to be God incarnate.

When I left, and fortunately my wife left when I did as well, I was in shock for quite a while, as I came to realize more and more fully how abjectly I had submitted myself to this

abusive, corrupt guru. Sadly, if I am really honest with myself, I knew the truth early on, but I didn't want to know that I knew. There were a great many kinds of dishonest and abusive behaviors practiced by the guru, of which I heard some whispers and saw some hints. But what I did see plainly was the cruelty – for months before I moved out of the ashram, I had been on the receiving end of it from my ex-guru and her appointed surrogates - the scathing public criticism and taunting, the public shaming and humiliation. It was treatment I had witnessed many before me receiving, and I always believed it reflected the guru's determination to help us along the spiritual path. Eventually, I was able to reflect on my own experience, and I came to realize that there was no genuine purpose to the public humiliation – it was simply an excuse for sadistic cruelty.

When I finally severed my ties with this group, I could feel myself coming out of dissociation, like coming back to life. I had tried so hard to murder my subjectivity and make myself the kind of object the guru would approve of and pay attention to. In this kind of relational system, only the leader is perfect, and no one else is, and to make sure that this is clear, the leader must continually bring followers up, raise their hopes of being favored, and then put them down (see Shaw, 2014). Initially, having experienced an indisputably ecstatic mystical experience connected to my ex-guru, I was at my most vulnerable. But it was a bait and switch. My pre-existing idealism and tendencies toward self-sacrifice, and the unhappiness in my personal life at the time, made me all too susceptible to exploitation. The leader I chose to follow led me to idolatry and masochism, perversions of idealism and self-sacrifice, and the opposite of what I now can thankfully think of as spiritual. This perversion of the experience of surrender into compulsive, masochistic submission, was brilliantly identified by Manny Ghent

(1990). Surrender in this sense would mean the opening of oneself to the sublime, spiritually and interpersonally; submission is a closing down, a negation of self.

As powerful and as beautiful as my experience in the church was, and as my experience of spiritual initiation in meditation was, for me, what has been the most meaningful and enduring change and growth I've known is the experience of finding, claiming and knowing myself as subject – and working out the difference between feeling like a subject, or feeling like I have to be the right kind of object for someone – a guru, a spouse, a patient, a friend, colleague – in order to feel like I am not alone. Bach (1985, 1994, 2006) has written extensively of this narcissistic problem – he describes the inflated narcissist who is fixed in his own subjectivity, and the deflated narcissist who self-objectifies, and automatically finds himself striving to be a gratifying object for another. The deflated narcissist is also hoping that the approval of others will quell his sense of unworthiness and unlovableness. Confused and unconscious about my own attachment narrative and family history, searching for a way to feel that I had a self I could feel good about, I ended up drastically objectifying myself in the hopes of being certified as good by my ex-guru, in whom I invested all goodness. I have discovered that many others behave similarly, with bosses and colleagues, parents, lovers, siblings. Many who enter psychotherapy know they are depressed, or anxious, but do not know the extent to which they have forsaken their subjectivity, and submitted to objectification as though that would be a way to finally feel good enough.

The many years of self-subjugation I experienced under the influence of an abusive guru have led me to deeply ponder the nature of being an authority figure, a teacher, a therapist. Based on my understanding of the trauma of objectification, I want to construct with each patient a way of being in our process so that neither of us has to feel negated or subjugated as a



condition of being in the relationship. In the psychotherapy context, I view the construction of intersubjective relatedness as necessary for therapeutic change and psychological growth. I am referencing Jessica Benjamin's (1988, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2004, 2009, 2009a) use of the term, in which intersubjectively constructed relationships reflect what she terms the lawfulness of the moral third. Benjamin speaks here of mutual recognition, the effort we make in relating such that we resist the pull toward becoming a dominator or a submitter, the pull toward falling into a mode of relating where one person must be the object of the other. Lawfulness in relating means that each person's value as a human being is recognized and respected; and that relating as two separate people, mutually recognizing their shared humanity, is what both emanates from and creates the space of the moral third. In this realm, the experience of being two opens to the thirdness of mutuality, because relating has not been forced into collapse, by one negating the other.

In one of Jessica Benjamin's earliest, seminal writings on the subject of recognition, she offers a list of near synonyms that capture what she means by the term:

“to affirm, validate, acknowledge, know, accept, understand, empathize, take in, tolerate, appreciate, see, identify with, find familiar, . . . love. . . What I call *mutual recognition* includes a number of experiences commonly described in the research on mother-infant interaction: emotional attunement, mutual influence, affective mutuality, sharing states of mind” (1988, pp.15-16).

Benjamin asks, in her elaboration of concepts drawn in part from Hegel and Winnicott, how do two people “make known their own subjectivity and recognize the other's?” (1998, p.

xii). Bringing the importance of this deceptively simple question into sharper focus, she cites philosopher Richard Bernstein:

“Reciprocity must . . . be preserved as a condition of conceiving the ethical relationship, in which, as Bernstein (1992) says, both self and other ‘stand under the reciprocal obligation to seek to transcend their narcissistic egoism.’ For ‘without a *mutual* recognition of the *Aufgabe* [task/obligation] of searching for the commonalities and precise points of difference, without a self-conscious sensitivity of the need always to do justice to the other’s *singularity*. . . we are in danger of obliterating the radical plurality of the human condition.’ (p. 75).”  
(Benjamin, 1998, p. 100.)

In this model of mutuality, there is an understanding that both parties are supported and enhanced when they consciously attend to striking a reciprocal balance between giving and taking. But mutuality is not a simple achievement, nor is it easy to sustain without effort. As Benjamin shows, the “shadow” of intersubjective recognition and relating is complementarity: the sadomasochistic, domination-submission dynamic of “doer - done to” (Benjamin, 2004). Relating in this mode, each person fears the loss of superior power, and insists on the supremacy of their own subjectivity. Each becomes locked in to the conviction that they are the victim of the other, each feeling they must negate the other, or be negated. One dominates, the other submits, then the other one dominates, and the other other one submits... ad nauseum. Giving and taking is now based not on good will and gratitude, but on strategic calculations aimed at maintaining dominance, and at the deepest level, aimed at preventing being destroyed by the other – being the destroyer, not the destroyed. Failure of mutual recognition represents a collapse of

intersubjectivity that Benjamin likens to a kind of death. “Just as Freud posited an inherent conflict in intrapsychic life between eros and death,” Benjamin (1999) wrote,

“so [we can] posit an inherent conflict in intersubjective life between eros and narcissism, recognition and omnipotence. The tension that we ideally imagine between these continually breaks down and has to be accomplished over and over (p. 202)... It is the constantly renewed commitment to restoring ... intersubjectivity that allows us to get beyond a struggle of your meaning versus my meaning, to a sense of working together to transcend complementarity in favor of mutual recognition” (p. 208).

Benjamin is careful to highlight here that we cannot perfect an ideally intersubjective position and then live happily ever after in a Utopian relational world. Recognition is a “constantly renewed commitment” we make, working together, creating a dialogue with our others – parents with children, spouses, siblings, colleagues, teachers with students, analysts with patients – that moves us toward mutual liberation from the tendency to seek power and control through negation of the other, out of fear of otherness.

So to bring this around to David’s work: The essential teaching of Buddhism as I understand it is that wisdom and compassion for suffering are inseparable and are the goal of being human. I hear that David’s experience of a transcendent spiritual wisdom has opened up for him ways of being compassionate that had previously been foreclosed. Identifying with and witnessing suffering are crucial ways of being compassionate – but sometimes, compassion will mean helping our patient to recognize a stuckness in his victimization; or perhaps a tendency to negate the alive aspects of himself so as not to lose sight of the parts of himself that have suffered unbearably – as though being alive betrays and abandons the traumatized child in him.

Perhaps our compassion can extend to the various parts of this patient – his suffering, of course, but also his aliveness, creativity, resilience, and so on. We are not merely what has happened to us, I hear David saying; trauma can cause our victimization to be dissociated, but conversely it can cause our strong, healthy and vital self-states to be dissociated as well.

For David, the capacity to become the witness of one's own emotional states links to the sublime experience of transcendence he describes. For me, the way toward spiritual and psychological health need not be based on a connection to something that transcends the mind and the body. When we are relating to the Other – stranger, friend, patient – as a subject in his own right, we are expressing the human spirit immanent within us and all beings. For me, intersubjective relatedness in the analytic dyad is a powerful force, mutative for both analyst and patient. Finding a way out of transference impasses and reaching intersubjective connectedness is a kind of spiritual quest in psychoanalytic work. Succeeding can produce a profound, revelatory experience for analyst and patient.

An example of this kind of experience took place recently in my work with Elliot. I have seen Elliott for a 3 year period, followed by a one year hiatus, and now resumed for a year so far. Elliott grew up in a wealthy family, with his father almost constantly away on business. His mother was very charismatic and Elliott became what we eventually recognized was a kind of surrogate husband to her – but one that she could powerfully influence and control, unlike her actual husband. Elliot's father died of brain cancer rather suddenly just after Elliott graduated from college, and not too long after, his mother developed a form of cancer which slowly, over a ten year period, took her life. When I first saw Elliot, his adult life had all but ground to a halt

because he had been attending to his mother throughout her illness, as she pursued dozens of quack remedies, healers and other New Age practitioners.

Elliott and I had reached a point in our work where we had a coherent and persuasive narrative of his attachment and developmental experience. But our work was not leading Elliott to the kind of change he wanted. He was stuck in a dead end relationship with a woman he was not happy with; he came late to sessions, changed times often, sometimes forgot. He often began sessions in an annoyed, out-of-it state. It took me a while, but I went ahead one day and confronted him about this behavior.

He was immediately angry, and shouted, “Why don’t you tell me what I’m supposed to do? Why don’t you help me remember where we left off the last time? Why am I spending all this time and money, for what?”

I thought for a moment, and said, “what about my time? The time I spend waiting for you when you’re late; the time I spend rearranging your appointments. The time I’ve put in to help you understand all that’s happened to you? The time I’ve spent caring?”

Of course, I did exactly what critics of the idea of mutual recognition as part of the therapeutic process (Teicholz; Orange, 2008) would point to as a clinical error. I directly asked Elliott to consider me from my point of view, not just his. In retrospect, I understood that speaking to Elliott this way was unique in his developmental experience, where any expression of his anger would be met not with acceptance and a willingness to negotiate relationally, but with complete withdrawal. I hoped that what I said would be experienced by Elliott as my willingness to be real with him, and to stay in relationship without withdrawal.

Elliott was quiet for a short time. He then said, calmly now,

“I’m making you into my father. I’m angry at you for not advising me and teaching me – but he’s the one I’m really angry at, because he never tried, he never tried to connect with me. I got him to drive cross country with me, and he had the radio on constantly. If the station went out of range, and all we heard was static, he’d leave it on and listen to that rather than talk to me.”

Elliott was crying softly, acknowledging the anger and grief he felt about his father more deeply and fully than he ever had before. As we continued to work through Elliott’s pain, and to sort out the enactment we had been in, we continued in a very fresh, new way for both of us. We were connecting, each of us taking the other in more deeply, in a way that was moving and real for us both. No longer the objects of our frustration with each other, we were intersubjectively connected in a way that now allowed Elliott to feel my care and my attention; and for me to feel able to more freely respond to Elliott. Elliott’s new ability to use me led to his becoming more self-reflective, and more connected with himself.

Our experience was not, as I perceived it, one of transcendence as a means of gaining a broader, more nuanced perspective about what was happening for Elliott and for me. Rather, we collided (Bromberg); we hung in there through the mess (Bromberg) of our collapsed intersubjective relatedness. Out of our effort to be real with each other, we found ourselves with each other. I could be an analyst; Elliott could be an analysand; and our work opened up and became alive.

I bring my personal biases and beliefs about spirituality to my work, and David brings his. The inevitable personal biases of the analyst cannot be denied, and in fact can be a source of deep trust between analyst and analysand if openly acknowledged (Orange, 1994). The fruit of

David's transcendent experience is that he has deepened his empathy and compassion, as he has shown us in his work today. The transcendent aspect of consciousness can illuminate a way that we are more than merely our particular selves, our unfree selves. This kind of experience of oneness, of the interconnectedness of all being, can be deeply healing. But for me and others like myself, the transcendent experience ultimately became a way of feeling separate: as I chased after my concept of transcendence, I lost myself. The dark side of "enlightenment" is duality – in which the transcendent is viewed as the only reality, supposedly superior to the mundane, illusory, petty material world. Getting my feet back on the ground for me has meant working from the immanence side of the dialectic. As a psychoanalyst and in my personal life, the experience of intersubjective relatedness - a form of relating that is always seeking freedom from the domination and submission agenda, that allows us to experience ourselves as subjects in our own right, free of objectification, and free of the need to objectify others - has turned out to be my most valuable spiritual experience. When David speaks of the "caregiving/controlling" strategy from which he has worked to free himself, I know just what he means. From that place, the patient subtly becomes our object, the one we need to show us that we have been helpful, so that we ourselves can overcome the feeling of helplessness. Freed of that need to control, David and his patient broke through, from impasse to revelation. David and his patient each became free, more alive, more fully and truly themselves, subject to subject.

What David has helped me think about is how I have reconciled within myself the transcendent, mystical experiences of my 20s and 30s, with the disillusionment of my post-cult life and my subsequent embrace of the healing potential of relational psychoanalysis. My bias is on the side of immanence, a belief that intersubjective relatedness is a nurturing and healing

human capacity. But whether through awareness of transcendence, or awareness of immanence, the goal I think is the same: the deep recognition of our common humanity, recognition that lifts the burdens of shame, fear and aloneness that are the universal psychic wounds of the human subject.

A long time ago, I stopped wondering if I believe in God or not. The intimate, subject-to-subject experience, in which the human spirit in each of us can be most fully expressed, is sublime enough for me, for now.



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