

I. PSYCHOTHERAPY AND LIBERATION

If we look deeply into such ways of life as Buddhism and Taoism, Vedanta and Yoga, we do not find either philosophy or religion as these are understood in the West. We find something more nearly resembling psychotherapy. This may seem surprising, for we think of the latter as a form of science, somewhat practical and materialistic in attitude, and of the former as extremely esoteric religions concerned with regions of the spirit almost entirely out of this world. This is because the combination of our unfamiliarity with Eastern cultures and their sophistication gives them an aura of mystery into which we project fantasies of our own making. Yet the basic aim of these ways of life is something of quite astonishing simplicity, besides which all the complications of reincarnation and psychic powers, of superhuman mahatmas, and of schools for occult technology are a smoke screen in which the credulous inquirer can lose himself indefinitely. In fairness it should be added that the credulous inquirer may be Asian as well as Western, though the former has seldom the peculiarly highbrow credulity of the Western fancier of esotericism. The smoke is beginning to clear, but for a long time its density has hidden the really important contributions of the Eastern mind to psychological knowledge.

The main resemblance between these Eastern ways of life and Western psychotherapy is in the concern of both with bringing about changes of consciousness, changes in our ways of feeling our own existence and our relation to human society and the natural world. The psychotherapist has, for the most part, been interested in changing the consciousness of peculiarly disturbed individuals. The disciplines of Buddhism and Taoism are, however, concerned with changing the consciousness of normal, socially adjusted people. But it is increasingly apparent to psychotherapists that the normal state of consciousness in our culture is both the context and the breeding ground of mental disease. A complex of societies of vast material wealth bent on mutual destruction is anything but a condition of social health.

Nevertheless, the parallel between psychotherapy and, as I have called them,¹ the Eastern “ways of liberation” is not exact, and one of the most important differences is suggested by the prefix *psycho-*. Historically, Western psychology has directed itself to the study of the psyche, or mind, as a clinical entity, whereas Eastern cultures have not categorized mind and matter, soul and body, in the same way as the Western. But Western psychology has to some extent so outgrown its historical origins as to become dissatisfied with the very term “psychological” as describing a major field of human behavior. It is not that it has become possible, as Freud himself once hoped, to reduce psychology to neurology and mind to body. It is not that for the entity “mind” we can substitute the entity “nervous system.” It is rather that psychology cannot stand aloof from the whole revolution in scientific description which has been going on in the twentieth century, a revolution in which conceptions of entities and “stuffs,” whether mental or material, have become obsolete. Whether it is describing

chemical changes or biological forms, nuclear structures or human behavior, the language of modern science is simply concerned with changing patterns of relationship.

Perhaps this revolution has affected physics and biology far more deeply than psychology and as yet the theoretical ideas of psychoanalysis remain untouched. The common speech and the common sense of even educated society has been so little affected that it is still hard to convey in some nonmathematical language what has happened. It seems an affront to common sense that we can describe the world as patterns of relationship without needing to ask what “stuff” these patterns are “made of.” For when the scientist investigates matter or stuff, he describes what he finds in terms of structured pattern. When one comes to think of it, what other terms could he use? The sensation of stuff arises only when we are confronted with patterns so confused or so closely knit that we cannot make them out. To the naked eye a distant galaxy looks like a solid star and a piece of steel like a continuous and impenetrable mass of matter. But when we change the level of magnification, the galaxy assumes the clear structure of a spiral nebula and the piece of steel turns out to be a system of electrical impulses whirling in relatively vast spaces. The idea of stuff expresses no more than the experience of coming to a limit at which our senses or our instruments are not fine enough to make out the pattern.

Something of the same kind happens when the scientist investigates any unit of pattern so distinct to the naked eye that it has been considered a separate entity. He finds that the more carefully he observes and describes it, the more he is *also* describing the environment in which it moves and other patterns to which it seems inseparably related. As Teilhard de Chardin has so well expressed it,² the isolation of individual, atomic patterns “is merely an intellectual dodge.”

Considered in its physical, concrete reality, the stuff [sic] of the universe cannot divide itself but, as a kind of gigantic “atom,” it forms in its totality. . . the only real indivisible. . . The farther and more deeply we penetrate into matter, by means of increasingly powerful methods, the more we are confounded by the interdependence of its parts. . . . It is impossible to cut into this network, to isolate a portion without it becoming frayed and unravelled at all its edges.

In place of the inarticulate cohesion of mere stuff we find the articulate cohesion of inseparably interconnected patterns.

The effect of this upon the study of human behavior is that it becomes impossible to separate psychological patterns from patterns that are sociological, biological, or ecological. Departments of knowledge based upon what now appear to be crude and primitive divisions of nature begin to coalesce into such awkwardly named hybrids as neuropsychiatry, sociobiology, biophysics, and geopolitics. At a certain depth of specialization the divisions of scientific knowledge begin to run together because they are far enough advanced to see that the world itself runs together, however clear-cut its parts may have seemed to be. Hence the ever-increasing discussion of the need for a “unified science” and for a descriptive language

common to all departments of science. Hence, too, the growing importance of the very science of description, of communication, of the patterns of signs and signals, which represents and elucidates the pattern of the world.

Although the ancient cultures of Asia never attained the rigorously exact physical knowledge of the modern West, they grasped in principle many things which are only now occurring to us.³ Hinduism and Buddhism are impossible to classify as religions, philosophies, sciences, or even mythologies, or again as amalgamations of all four, because departmentalization is foreign to them even in so basic a form as the separation of the spiritual and the material. Hinduism, like Islam and Judaism, is really a whole culture, though the same cannot be said of Buddhism. Buddhism, in common with such aspects of Hinduism as Vedanta and Yoga, and with Taoism in China, is not a culture but a critique of culture, an enduring nonviolent revolution, or “loyal opposition,” to the culture with which it is involved. This gives these ways of liberation something in common with psychotherapy beyond the interest in changing states of consciousness. For the task of the psychotherapist is to bring about a reconciliation between individual feeling and social norms without, however, sacrificing the integrity of the individual. He tries to help the individual to be himself and to go it alone without giving unnecessary offense to his community, to be in the world (of social convention) but not of the world. A Chinese Buddhist text describes the sage in words that strongly suggest Riesman’s “inner-directed” or Maslow’s “self-actualizing” personality:

*He walks always by himself, goes about always by himself;
Every perfect one saunters along one and the same passage of Nirvana;
His tone is classical, his spirit is transparent, his airs are naturally elevated,
His features are rather gaunt, his bones are firm, he pays no attention to others.*⁴

From Freud onward, psychotherapy has been concerned with the violence done to the human organism and its functions by social repression. Whenever the therapist stands with society, he will interpret his work as adjusting the individual and coaxing his “unconscious drives” into social respectability. But such “official psychotherapy” lacks integrity and becomes the obedient tool of armies, bureaucracies, churches, corporations, and all agencies that require individual brainwashing. On the other hand, the therapist who is really interested in helping the individual is forced into social criticism. This does not mean that he has to engage directly in political revolution; it means that he has to help the individual in liberating himself from various forms of social conditioning, which includes liberation from hating this conditioning — hatred being a form of bondage to its object. But from this point of view the troubles and symptoms from which the patient seeks relief, and the unconscious factors behind them, cease to be merely psychological. They lie in the whole pattern of his relationships with other people and, more particularly, in the social institutions by which these relationships are governed: the rules of communication employed by the culture or group. These include the conventions of language and law, of ethics and aesthetics, of status, role, and identity, and of cosmology, philosophy, and religion. For this whole social complex

is what provides the individual's conception of himself, his state of consciousness, his very feeling of existence. What is more, it provides the human organism's idea of its individuality, which can take a number of quite different forms.

Seeing this, the psychotherapist must realize that his science, or art, is misnamed, for he is dealing with something far more extensive than a psyche and its private troubles. This is just what so many psychotherapists are recognizing and what, at the same time, makes the Eastern ways of liberation so pertinent to their work. For they are dealing with people whose distress arises from what may be termed *maya*, to use the Hindu-Buddhist word whose exact meaning is not merely "illusion" but the entire world-conception of a culture, considered as illusion in the strict etymological sense of a play (Latin, *ludere*). The aim of a way of liberation is not the destruction of *maya* but seeing it for what it is, or seeing through it. Play is not to be taken seriously, or, in other words, ideas of the world and of oneself which are social conventions and institutions are not to be confused with reality. The rules of communication are not necessarily the rules of the universe, and man is not the role or identity which society thrusts upon him. For when a man no longer confuses himself with the definition of himself that others have given him, he is at once universal and unique. He is universal by virtue of the inseparability of his organism from the cosmos. He is unique in that he is just *this* organism and not any stereotype of role, class, or identity assumed for the convenience of social communication.

There are many reasons why distress comes from confusing this social *maya* with reality. There is direct conflict between what the individual organism is and what others say it is and expect it to be. The rules of social communication often contain contradictions which lead to impossible dilemmas in thought, feeling, and action. Or it may be that confusion of oneself with a limiting and impoverished view of one's role or identity creates feelings of isolation, loneliness, and alienation. The multitudinous differences between individuals and their social contexts lead to as many ways of seeking relief from these conflicts. Some seek it in the psychoses and neuroses which lead to psychiatric treatment, but for the most part release is sought in the socially permissible orgies of mass entertainment, religious fanaticism, chronic sexual titillation, alcoholism, war — the whole sad list of tedious and barbarous escapes.

Naturally, then, it is being said that the need for psychotherapy goes far beyond that of those who are clinically psychotic or neurotic, and for many years now increasing numbers of people have been receiving psychotherapy who would formerly have sought counsel from a minister of religion or a sympathetic friend. But no one has yet discovered how to apply psychotherapy on a mass basis. Trained therapists exist in a ratio of about one to eight thousand of the population, and the techniques of psychotherapy are lengthy and expensive. Its growing popularity is due in large measure to the prestige of science and thus of the therapist as a scientific rather than religious soul doctor. Yet I know of a few reputable psychiatrists who will not admit, at least in private, that their profession is still far from being a science. To begin with, there is no generally accepted theory or even terminology of the science, but rather a multiplicity of conflicting theories and divergent techniques. Our knowledge of neurology, if this should prove to be the basis of psychiatry, is as yet extremely

limited. To make things worse, there is still no clear evidence that psychotherapy is anything more than a hit-or-miss placebo, and, save in the case of psychotic symptoms that can be controlled by certain drugs, there is no sure way of distinguishing its “cures” from spontaneous remission. And some of its techniques, including lobotomy and shock treatment, are nothing but measures of sheer desperation.

Nevertheless, the profession is on the whole a patient and devoted fraternity, receptive to all manner of new ideas and experiments. Even if it does not know what sense to make of it, an enormous amount of detailed information has been collected, and there is a growing realization that, to make any progress, psychiatry must ally itself more closely with neurology and biology on one side and with sociology and anthropology on the other. We must ask, then, to what other milieu in our society we can look for anything to be done about the distress of the individual in his conflict with social institutions which are self-contradictory, obsolete, or needlessly restricting — including, it must be repeated, the current notion of the individual himself, of the skin-encapsulated ego.

That many people now consult the psychotherapist rather than the minister is not due simply to the fact that science has greater prestige than religion. Many Protestant and Jewish theological seminaries include courses of instruction in “pastoral psychiatry,” comprising periods of internship in mental hospitals. Furthermore, religion has been so liberalized that in all metropolitan and in many rural areas one has not far to go to find a minister who will listen to no matter what individual difficulty with the greatest sympathy and generosity, and often with considerable intelligence. But what hinders the minister in resolving conflicts between the individual and social institutions is precisely his own role. He represents a church, a community, and almost without exception religious communities work to establish social institutions and not to see through them. This is not to say that most religious groups abstain from social criticism, since this would be very far from true. Most religious groups oppose *some* social institutions quite vigorously, but at the same time they inculcate others without understanding their conventional nature. For those which they inculcate they claim the authority of the will of God or the laws of nature, thus making it extremely difficult for their members to see that social institutions are simply rules of communication which have no more universal validity than, say, the rules of a particular grammar. Furthermore, however sympathetic the minister of religion may be, in the back of his mind there is almost always the desire to bring the individual back into the fold of his church.

The Jewish-Christian idea of salvation means precisely membership in a community, the Communion of Saints. Ideally and theoretically the Church as the Body of Christ is the entire universe, and because in Christ “there is neither Greek nor Jew, bond nor free,” membership in Christ *could* mean liberation from *maya* and its categories. It could mean that one’s conventional definition and classification is not one’s real self, that “I live, yet no longer I; but Christ lives in me.” But in practice it means nothing of the kind, and, for that matter, one hears little even of the theory. In practice it means accepting the religion or bondage of the Christian subgroup, taking its particular system of conventions and definitions to be the most serious realities. Now one of the most important Christian conventions is the view of man as

what I have called the “skin-encapsulated ego,” the separate soul and its fleshy vehicle together constituting a personality which is unique and ultimately valuable in the sight of God. This view is undoubtedly the historical basis of the Western style of individuality, giving us the sensation of ourselves as isolated islands of consciousness confronted with objective experiences which are quite “other.” We have developed this sensation to a particularly acute degree. But the system of conventions which inculcates this sensation *also* requires this definitively isolated ego to act as the member of a body and to submit without reserve to the social pattern of the church. The tension so generated, however interesting at times, is in the long run as unworkable as any other flat self-contradiction. It is a perfectly ideal context for breeding psychosis. Yet, as we shall see, it would also be an ideal context for therapy if responsible religious leaders were aware of the contradiction and did not take it seriously. In other words, the minister might become an extraordinarily helpful person if he could see through his own religion. But his training and his economic situation do not encourage him to do so, and therefore the psychotherapist is in a more advantageous position.

Thus far, then, we have seen that psychotherapy and the ways of liberation have two interests in common: first, the transformation of consciousness, of the inner feeling of one’s own existence; and second, the release of the individual from forms of conditioning imposed upon him by social institutions. What are the useful means of exploring these resemblances so as to help the therapist in his work? Should he take practical instruction in Yoga, or spend time in a Japanese Zen monastery — adding yet more years of training to medical school, psychiatric residency, or training analysis? I do not feel that this is the point at all. It is rather that even a theoretical knowledge of other cultures helps us to understand our own, because we can attain some clarity and objectivity about our own social institutions by comparing them with others. It helps us to distinguish between social fictions, on the one hand, and natural patterns and relationships, on the other. If, then, there are in other cultures disciplines having something in common with psychotherapy, a theoretical knowledge of their methods, objectives, and principles may enable the psychotherapist to get a better perspective upon what he himself is doing.

This he needs rather urgently. For we have seen that at the present time psychology and psychiatry are in a state of great theoretical confusion. It may sound strange to say that most of this confusion is due to unconscious factors, for is it not the particular business of these sciences to understand “the unconscious”? But the unconscious factors bearing upon psychotherapy go far beyond the traumas of infancy and the repressions of anger and sexuality. For example, the psychotherapist carries on his work with an almost wholly unexamined “philosophical unconscious.” He tends to be ignorant, by reason of his highly specialized training, not only of the contemporary philosophy of science but also of the hidden metaphysical premises which underlie all the main forms of psychological theory. Unconscious metaphysics tends to be bad metaphysics. What, then, if the metaphysical presuppositions of psychoanalysis are invalid, or if its theory depends on discredited anthropological ideas of the nineteenth century? Throughout his writings Jung insists again and again that he speaks as a scientist and physician and not as a metaphysician. “Our

psychology,” he writes, “is. . . a science of mere phenomena without any metaphysical implications.” It “treats all metaphysical claims and assertions as mental phenomena, and regards them as statements about the mind and its structure that derive ultimately from certain unconscious dispositions.”⁵ But this is a whopping metaphysical assumption in itself. The difficulty is that man can hardly think or act at all without some kind of metaphysical premise, some basic axiom which he can neither verify nor fully define. Such axioms are like the rules of games: some give ground for interesting and fruitful plays and some do not, but it is always important to understand as clearly as possible what the rules are. Thus the rules of tick-tack-toe are not as fruitful as those of chess, and what if the axioms of psychoanalysis resemble the former instead of the latter? Would this not put the science back to the level of mathematics when geometry was only Euclidean?

Unconscious factors in psychotherapy include also the social and ecological contexts of patient and therapist alike, and these tend to be ignored in a situation where two people are closeted together in private. As Norman O. Brown has put it:

There is a certain loss of insight in the tendency of psychoanalysis to isolate the individual from culture. Once we recognize the limitations of talk from the couch, or rather, once we recognize that talk from the couch is still an activity in culture, it becomes plain that there is nothing for the psychoanalyst to analyze except these cultural projections — the world of slums and telegrams and newspapers — and thus psychoanalysis fulfills itself only when it becomes historical and cultural analysis.⁶

Is not this a way of saying that what needs to be analyzed or clarified in an individual’s behavior is the way in which it reflects the contradictions and confusions of the culture?

Now cultural patterns come to light and hidden metaphysical assumptions become clear only to the degree that we can step outside the cultural or metaphysical systems in which we are involved by comparing them with others. There are those who argue that this is simply impossible, that our impressions of other cultures are always hopelessly distorted by our own conditioning. But this is almost a cultural solipsism, and it is equivalent to saying that we can never really be in communication with another person. If this be true, all study of foreign languages and institutions, and even all discourse with other individuals, is nothing but extending the pattern of one’s own ignorance. As a metaphysical assumption there is no way of disproving it, but it offers nothing in the way of a fruitful development.

The positive aspect of liberation as it is understood in the Eastern ways is precisely freedom of play. Its negative aspect is criticism of premises and rules of the “social game” which restrict this freedom and do not allow what we have called fruitful development. The Buddhist *Nirvana* is defined as release from *samsara*, literally the Round of Birth and Death, that is, from life lived in a vicious circle, as an endlessly repetitious attempt to solve a false problem. *Samsara* is therefore comparable to attempts to square the circle, trisect the angle, or construct a mechanism of perpetual motion. A puzzle which has no solution forces one to go over the same ground again and again until it appears that the question which it poses is

nonsense. This is why the neurotic person keeps repeating his behavior patterns — always unsuccessful because he is trying to solve a false problem, to make sense of a self-contradiction. If he cannot see that the problem itself is nonsense, he may simply retreat into psychosis, into the paralysis of being unable to act at all. Alternatively, the “psychotic break” may also be an illegitimate burst into free play out of sheer desperation, not realizing that the problem is impossible not because of overwhelming difficulty, but because it is meaningless.

If, then, there is to be fruitful development in the science of psychotherapy, as well as in the lives of those whom it intends to help, it must be released from the unconscious blocks, unexamined assumptions, and unrealized nonsense problems which lie in its social context. Again, one of the most powerful instruments for this purpose is intercultural comparison, especially with highly complex cultures like the Chinese and Indian, which have grown up in relative isolation from our own, and especially with attempts that have been made within those cultures to find liberation from their own patterns. It is hard to imagine anything more constructive to the psychotherapist than the opportunity which this affords. But to make use of it he must overcome the habitual notion that he has nothing to learn from “prescientific” disciplines, for in the case of psychotherapy this may be a matter of the pot calling the kettle black. In any event, there is no question here of his adopting Buddhist or Taoist practices in the sense of becoming converted to a religion. If the Westerner is to understand and employ the Eastern ways of liberation at all, it is of the utmost importance that he keep his scientific wits about him; otherwise there is the morass of esoteric romanticism which awaits the unwary.

But today, past the middle of the twentieth century, there is no longer much of a problem in advocating a hearing for Eastern ideas. The existing interest in them is already considerable, and they are rapidly influencing our thinking by their own force, even though there remains a need for much interpretation, clarification, and assimilation. Nor can we commend their study to psychotherapists as if this were something altogether new. It is now thirty years since Jung wrote:

When I began my life-work in the practice of psychiatry and psychotherapy, I was completely ignorant of Chinese philosophy, and it is only later that my professional experiences have shown me that in my technique I had been unconsciously led along that secret way which for centuries has been the preoccupation of the best minds of the East.⁷

An equivalence between Jung’s analytical psychology and the ways of liberation must be accepted with some reservations, but it is important that he felt it to exist. Though the interest began with Jung and his school, suspect among other schools for its alleged “mysticism,” it has gone far beyond, so much so that it would be a fair undertaking to document the discussions of Eastern ideas which have appeared in psychological books and journals during the past few years.*

The level at which Eastern thought and its insights may be of value to Western

psychology has been admirably stated by Gardner Murphy, a psychologist who, incidentally, can hardly be suspected of the taint of Jung's "mysticism." He writes:

If, moreover, we are serious about understanding all we can of personality, its integration and disintegration, we must understand the meaning of depersonalization, those experiences in which individual self-awareness is abrogated and the individual melts into an awareness which is no longer anchored upon selfhood. Such experiences are described by Hinduism in terms of the ultimate unification of the individual with the atman, the super-individual cosmic entity which transcends both selfhood and materiality. . . .Some men desire such experiences; others dread them. Our problem here is not their desirability, but the light which they throw on the relativity of our present-day psychology of personality. . . .Some other mode of personality configuration, in which self-awareness is less emphasized or even lacking, may prove to be the general (or the fundamental).⁸

It is of course a common misapprehension that the change of personal consciousness effected in the Eastern ways of liberation is "depersonalization" in the sense of regression to a primitive or infantile type of awareness. Indeed, Freud designated the longing for return to the oceanic consciousness of the womb as the *Nirvana*-principle, and his followers have persistently confused all ideas of transcending the ego with mere loss of "ego strength." This attitude flows, perhaps, from the imperialism of Western Europe in the nineteenth century, when it became convenient to regard Indians and Chinese as backward and benighted heathens desperately in need of improvement by colonization.

It cannot be stressed too strongly that liberation does not involve the loss or destruction of such conventional concepts as the ego; it means seeing through them — in the same way that we can use the idea of the equator without confusing it with a physical mark upon the surface of the earth. Instead of falling below the ego, liberation surpasses it. Writing without apparent knowledge of Buddhism or Vedanta, A. F. Bentley put it thus:

Let no quibble of skepticism be raised over this questioning of the existence of the individual. Should he find reason for holding that he does not exist in the sense indicated, there will in that fact be no derogation from the reality of what does exist. On the contrary, there will be increased recognition of reality. For the individual can be banished only by showing a plus of existence, not by alleging a minus. If the individual falls it will be because the real life of men, when it is widely enough investigated, proves too rich for him, not because it proves too poverty-stricken.⁹

One has only to look at the lively and varied features and the wide-awake eyes of Chinese and Japanese paintings of the Great Zen masters to see that the ideal of personality here shown is anything but the collective nonentity or the weakling ego dissolving back into the

womb.

Our mistake has been to suppose that the individual is honored and his uniqueness enhanced by emphasizing his separation from the surrounding world, or his eternal difference in essence from his Creator. As well honor the hand by lopping it from the arm! But when Spinoza said that “The more we know of particular things, the more we know of God,” he was anticipating our discovery that the richer and more articulate our picture of man and of the world becomes, the more we are aware of its relativity and of the interconnection of all its patterns in an undivided whole. The psychotherapist is perfectly in accord with the ways of liberation in describing the goal of therapy as individuation (Jung), self-actualization (Maslow), functional autonomy (Allport), or creative selfhood (Adler), but every plant that is to come to its full fruition must be embedded in the soil, so that as its stem ascends the whole earth reaches up to the sun.

* Under the heading “Contributions from Related Fields,” the recent *American Handbook of Psychiatry* (New York: Basic Books, 1959) contains full articles by Eilhard von Domarus on Oriental “religions” and by Avrum Ben-Avi on Zen Buddhism.