

The limitations of conventional psychotherapy at the limitless horizon of transcendence

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Conventional psychotherapy has been established historically on the basis of a quite secular, anti-spiritual movement. Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis have rejected all religion, which they usually equated with Christianity or Judaism, and called the psychological and social structures produced by them pathological¹ – and with many of their observations, they were quite correct. However, they could not distinguish between certain perverted forms of established religious institutions on the one hand and the deep spirituality of the mystics on the other, and pathologized these flatly, too.² In addition, they created the ideological structure of psychoanalysis as their own pseudo-religion, with the same conviction of possessing a monopoly on truth as every religion to explain the whole world, or at least the cultural sphere created by the human mind. This has not changed in conservative psychoanalytic circles until today.³

Not much different it is with behavioural theory, whose creators were dedicated rationalists and scientific empiricists, and – as much as Freud – wanted to free humankind from the burden of absurd assumptions – in which some included the existence of a psyche in general. For others at least religiosity / spirituality had to be overcome as part of an irrational style of thinking. Albert Ellis – until a partial easing of its views in old age –⁴ always emphasized that he considered religion as an irrational and therefore potentially pathogenic or even patho-

¹ Cf. Freud, Sigmund (1999, Orig. 1930): *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (Engl.: *Civilization and Its Discontents*), in: *Gesammelte Werke*, XIV, Frankfurt: Fischer, 443; Freud, Sigmund (1999, Orig. 1927): *Die Zukunft einer Illusion* (Engl.: *The Future of an Illusion*), in: *Gesammelte Werke*, XIV, Frankfurt: Fischer, 367

² E.g., Alexander, Franz (1931): *Buddhist training as artificial catatonia*. *Psychoanalytical Review*, 18,129

³ Cf. the psychoanalytic journal *Psyche*, *Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse*, Sonderheft 9/10, 2009

⁴ Nielsen, Stevan L., Johnson, W. Brad & Ellis, Albert (2001): *Counseling and psychotherapy with religious persons*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum

logical belief system.⁵ It is not more than a marginal note that some psychotherapeutic systems owe their very being to spiritual traditions, especially Buddhism, which is – besides Marsha Linnehan's DBT – true for Gestalt therapy of Perls, but also systemic therapies, since the roots of system theory are closely related to Buddhist logic systems such as that of Nagarjuna, as Matthias Varga von Kibed⁶ – one of its prominent representatives – recognizes.

But the influences of spiritual thought to psychotherapeutic methodologies were still negligible in relation to their focus on the modern and post-modern, post-religious person. It is only logical to consider psychotherapy as the technological aspect of secular science in place of confessional and pastoral care as the technological aspect of religion. In other words: The social role of religion has in parts been transferred to psychotherapy, which as a competing "religion" under the popular label of "science" can behave as doctrinaire as religion did before. Psychotherapy makes sense only in a society that has not only lost its social cohesion, social support, orientation in values, the internal stability of its members, but also has no hope of transcendence.⁷ To date, the use of psychotherapeutic services is globally unevenly distributed, not only because in other parts of the world social systems including psychotherapy are not easily available, but undoubtedly also because there is no demand for a product as much linked to our society model.⁸

One reason for the incompatibility of psychotherapy and (if they still exist at all) non-westernized cultures is precisely the anti-spiritual and materialistic orientation of psychotherapy as a support for a type of human being that is deprived of its embedding in a spiritual cosmos. Psychotherapy is constructed to help people changing by themselves so much that they will cope with the demands of a partly inhumane civilization. It is in so far opposed not only to a social criticism that sees the problem in social processes instead of the individual, but is also opposed to an approach transcending these circumstances, as spirituality intends to do. For the psychotherapeutic intention to create the best life in *this* world, from the outset is born out of the limited perspective on this world.

⁵ Ellis, Albert (1980): Psychotherapy and atheistic values: A response to A. E. Bergin's 'Psychotherapy and religious values'. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 48, 635-639; Ders. (1980): *The case against religion: A psychotherapist's view and the case against religiosity*. Austin: American Atheist Press

⁶ Thus in a workshop at March 18th 2012.

⁷ You can learn, how much at least psychoanalysis and a consume oriented culture are interdependent, from: Zaretzky, Eli (2004): *Secrets of the soul*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

⁸ Cf., e.g., Kakar, Sudhir (1991): *Shamans, mystics and doctors: A psychological inquiry into India and its healing traditions*. Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press.

Because there is no other reality than this sensual material world, every problem has to be necessarily resolved in this reality's context. The conventional psychotherapeutic response to human problems thus implies a materialistic world view that is reflected in three aspects: (a) the individual is the creator of his/her problems, (b) or at least the entity that has to solve them, (c) and these problems have been solved only if a more satisfactory functioning in this world results; which implies that the goal of life is identical with the greatest worldly happiness of the individual (not even of the greatest number of persons).

(1) The Individual as the Creator of His / Her Problems

In spiritual traditions, the human being is embedded in a whole that does not depend solely on him/her. In this cosmos (Greek word for a beautiful composed world order), s/he receives by his/her religion a clearly assigned place. Much of what s/he encounters is his/her own responsibility because s/he has at least a limited freedom in almost all religious systems. On the other hand, the limit of this responsibility, depending on the religious interpretation of fate, is remarkable. In the Indian systems, the human conditions of existence are created by the karmic conditions that are caused by the individuals themselves. In most cases, however, this happened in other existences, so that one cannot speak of the same person being responsible for the karma experienced by him/her (at least in the Buddhist view the human being as the physical and psychological product of one moment in the "next life" is not the same but the result of the earlier person. "He" or "she" essentially has no previous life but an antecessor). The point here is the human being's dependence on a higher power – here called karma. In the polytheistic, shamanistic or henotheistic variants and everywhere where finite beings are accepted as a authoritative dimension beyond our senses, it is the game of gods or spirits, which arbitrarily restricts human freedom and is playing tricks on us. In monotheistic theories, it is either the way in which the divine has constructed the world (as in Deism; also that of Karl Barth and similar Protestant theologies), or It's direct intervention in our lives, being able to limit our freedom and confronting us with situations that we have not created ourselves and that we have to face as our fate.

So we see that the naive anti-spiritual conception that man is directly the creator of his happiness or unhappiness, is limited in all religious systems by the power that confronts us as what we do not have in our hands. Those who argue psychodynamically, will object that we may indeed believe that we have not produced our destiny, but that fate in reality is a product of our unconscious intentions; or following system theory: a product of a man-made environment in

which we participate ourselves. But even this argument cannot include the whole of what we experience, and is unable to answer whether there is meaning and intent, or futility and chance in the fact that we are exposed to the uncontrollable, an inbred disposition, not influenceable childhood conditions, not controllable social, physical, and biological events. While the scientific spirit of our times, allegedly so well-developed, is unable to grasp a meaning and can therefore postulate nothing but chance, the spiritual traditions found in all of these conditions of humanity a system at work, of which they once emphasized the one and then the other aspect conceptualizing it in different terms, but which was never constructed by imagination, but always from the deep insight of people who penetrated the enigma.

But if psychotherapy assumes that we hold our destiny in our own hands, then it disregards a basic human situation not different in post-Enlightenment, industrialized computer age than 2,000 years ago, telling us that humans never have their destiny entirely in their own hands as long as they are simply human. The perspective of psychotherapy, however, is always directed to the individual in his autonomous potency. Even where, as in the systemic perspective, the social network comes into play, the individual still is seen as responsible for it's fate. It needs to answer for what did not contribute to happiness, what was in the way for the career, for successful child rearing, or the joy of love. It cannot disencumber itself by a sentence like: "God has willed it so". Such a statement must be rejected by psychotherapists – as long as they remain loyal to their system – as an escape from responsibility, it would be absurd, out of place. But is it not a reality for a spiritual being that the divine wants it that way or another and that we are called to deal with it? Or that our karma predetermines our conditions in a way that we encounter and not produce consciously? The psychoanalytic search for causes in childhood may produce therapeutically useful constructions of reality, but being a post-hoc attribution on a non-reproducible, only remembered image of reality, it never leads to a greater certitude in gaining truth than the epistemologically equivalent attribution on karma or God.

(2) The Individual as the Solver of His/Her Problems

The second basic requirement within modern psychotherapy's idea of man depicts the individual as autonomously responsible for the solution of his or her problem, even assumes that no one can solve the problem except the person who "owns" it. Accordingly, the therapist cannot resolve the problem of her clients, she can only contribute to the solution, but it is always and ever the client – or better: "the client system", conscious and unconscious parts – which decides

what effect the therapy has and what has none. The idea of man in modernity emphasizes individual freedom, and, of course, this remains valid in the psychotherapeutic situation as well. That means, therapy – like other services too – is an offer for an autonomous individual, which must be retrieved and wanted in order to be effective at the locus of change – which is within the limits of autonomy of the individual person. It is easy to deduce from this prerequisite theoretical concepts such as "resistance" justifying why the therapy (still) cannot work, and why – in the end – it is not the therapist, but always the client, who determines the success of the therapy. What also relieves the therapist...

It is, however, reasonable to cast doubts on this appearing model. In psychoanalysis, as early as in the 1930s extensions of the Freudian model of neuroses focusing on the individual alone have been conceived, which focused more on embedding the self in social contexts. Not only Alfred Adler, but with even greater emphasis on the social factor Karen Horney and the Fromms and finally with the most developed theoretical endeavour Harry Stuck Sullivan denied that individuals are islands that can be understood without their social relations. For Sullivan, it even has become questionable whether one can construct an individual without grasping his interactions with others as a direct cause of his being. Systems theory has carried forward this thought. The patient is becoming the index patient meaning that he was just indicating the problem within a particular system, the disorder being attributed to him within a social whole, but does not per se carry the disorder inside. And finally also in behaviour therapy, authors like Peter Fiedler say: Personality disorders are "personal attributions of interactional problems"⁹. All this implies – if developed consequently – that the solution of the problem may not lie solely in the individual, but the individual as a semi-autonomous part of a social field or network only partially can find the solution in itself. In addition to the treatment of the schizophrenic index patient, counselling their family members for good reason is required today as community psychiatric standard. Psychotherapy must even in the traditional therapy setting affect not only the client but also her living environment.

In the context of a spiritual worldview, these assumptions of a mere partial autonomy of the individual in determining and implementing solutions obtain yet another importance. The Catholic saint Ignatius of Loyola, for example, said: "Act as if everything depended on you and nothing on God. But trust as if everything depended on God nothing on you". This is more than rhetoric. It recognizes the fact that we do not have everything in our own hands, that we cannot be entirely the creator of ourselves, our destiny, and thus our problem solutions.

⁹ Fiedler, Peter (1997): *Persönlichkeitsstörungen*. Weinheim: PVU, 9; my translation.

From the perspective of us as psychotherapists, we may indeed attach great importance to focus the manageable, autonomously changeable things. But even then, we can not guarantee that our interventions give back our clients full autonomy over their lives – as if there were such autonomy at all. In a spiritual worldview, this full autonomy would not be possible within a limited world. Depending on the spiritual tradition it may be (as in the Far East), the ultimate goal, but before that stands the recognition of the human limitations by karma or samsara, in which s/he is captivated temporarily. In theistic religions, however, the human always remains dependent on the limiting power of God.

A spiritual worldview, however, is not only limiting the individual's autonomy but at the same time expanding it into transpersonal realms. The mind clarifying itself, the mystic immersed in something higher, the person connected in prayer, in ritual to other dimensions and beings gains other than just the limited ability of problem solving, but something really beyond the limitations of their personality. If this is not confined to the effect on one's own mind but is an effect, like for example in prayer, outside of that, materialists like to denigrate this as "magical thinking" (which is in psychological terminology the type of thinking that is common to the superstitious as to children and mad persons). Spiritual persons experiencing these possibilities in their own lives, consider such defamation as absurd. There are other dimensions of reality, which we are able to join through certain rituals, inner states and altered states of consciousness and in which there are potentials for finding solutions that we cannot find in the purely material world. If today German hypnotherapists arrange joint conferences with Nepalese shamans, it may happen that they feel their own theoretical system begins to crumble: Is trance only effective because in it one's own unconscious is addressed directly? Or – as shamanism asserts – does consciousness reach quite different – transpersonal – dimensions and sources of power?

In shamanic healings, however, it is the shaman who reaches those worlds, which for the client naturally are not accessible. "How practical is such a therapy in which the client does not need to do anything and another person does all for my healing", I once heard a depth psychologist japing about shamanism. That is said wrongly: Psychotherapy always requires the consent, the approval, and confidence of the client. But then again, it is true that some spiritual systems (shamanism or the priestly religions with their rituals, their sacred power) do not consider it possible that anyone seeking help has precisely the same access to the mysterious as the experts. Spiritual expert systems of this kind actually take over a part of the individual's responsibility for her healing. From the perspective of such spiritual systems, it is clear that the "therapist" has to assist the "client"

with his or her own access to the transcendent. In severe cases, it is not enough that an individual confronts his problem himself. He needs the community of the worshipers or the healer; he needs the advanced guru or the Dharma brother or shaman, sharing with him/her a deep meditative state of mind or communicating a healing trance. And in contrary to what materialism considers as the spatial limitation of the local human psyche within the contours of the skull, one consciousness (of the priest, shaman) can positively influence another consciousness directly or indirectly (through a transcendent world).

Although other spiritual traditions (in Christianity, e.g., Protestantism, as well as Buddhist and Hindu schools that possess no priestly functions) reject the model of therapeutic assistance through human mediation, they do also imply that in the spiritual abolition of suffering transcendence is necessary: transcending one's own limited human state of being is promoted through supporting others at least in the beginning. This is the same principle that justifies psychotherapy in principle: What individuals alone cannot do, they can do jointly. This support of the spiritual system can come from a limited being, which already has some access to a spiritual reality, or from a higher reality itself, which is answering our call in mystical experiences. But in order to benefit from it and to overcome me and my suffering, I need to open myself for this reality. The goal of spiritual practice is to overcome the woeful state of our existence and arriving at the happiness of being different. But that presupposes our willingness to give us to the not-me. And therein lies the tension of a psychotherapy that seeks all attempts for a solution within the autonomy of the ego.

So modesty is needed. We as humans are not the sole creators of our lives and we are not our only saviours. Whether from theistic, animistic or Buddhist, Taoist Perspective: We are always reliant on the mercy of God, on the kindness of the gods or on the state of consciousness within us, which never can be called an "I". We are also dependent on the forces of fate, the favour of the circumstances to which we can and must only respond. We have to accept the gift that is in God's invisible but perceptible action, in the aid of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, the Ishvaras and Avatars, and is waiting for us in the gift of the Buddha-Dharma, the Torah or the wisdom of Lao Tzu. But we have to accept that we need help, as we need to realize that we ourselves need to do something to make this help being effective. Only the as-well-as of finding a solution inside and outside of ourselves will save us (just because on a certain spiritual level the difference between inside and outside may not longer exist).

The ideal of the self-made man creating himself to almost one hundred percent and thus pulls the strings for the solution to his problems one hundred percent by his own active work, this illusory picture is challenged by spiritual

traditions. Even if (as in many parts of Buddhism, Hinduism, or Taoism) it is not divine grace but our own efforts that lead to salvation, the place of the saving action is transferred from the level of a secular problem solution to a transcendent state, from which then the worldly problems can be solved. This forces us to a double humility that is alien to the modern self-made-man: to accept humbly what is unchangeable, what is determined from somewhere else, and not only to seek the solution in the will and zeal of the ego. Humbly accepting what fate has given us, and what we cannot change in this life, what has to be borne, for many moderns seem almost grotesque. In psychotherapy, it seems to have no place at all: instead of acceptance, as psychotherapists we always demand an attitude of actively changing unpleasant situations. But sometimes it is essential to come to terms with realities instead of succumbing to societal suggestions that everything is possible if we try just hard enough (as in terms of the gross national product).

In contrast, spirituality always demands an attitude of humility towards the wider context of a whole world in which that what happens to us and what we get possesses meaning because it is based on a world *order*. We can also talk about unconditional trust and devotion, if we emphasize the active attitude with which we are looking for transpersonal assistance. Even in a-theistic Buddhism (for example, in devotion to the teacher in Vajrayana Buddhism), this attitude is considered a key entry in the spiritual practice, because the channel opens up here, connecting with the transcendent sphere.

(3) Functioning in This World as Goal for Problem Solution and Life

In the most prominent country of self-made-man strongly influenced by a Calvinist mentality, i.e., the United States, there seems to be no contradiction between the pursuit of worldly success and the grace of God. In an actual spiritual worldview, however, be it Christian or other, worldly and spiritual success can never be equated. This is also true for psychotherapy. The psychotherapeutic model in fact reflects the secular conceptions of modernity, where the reduction of all targets on the worldly success is obvious. Almost all problems of psychotherapy clients revolve around questions that will not be raised in a very decidedly spiritual context in the same form: "Why can't I assert myself (my ego)?" would have to be spiritually translated into the question: How can I let go my ego and then "enforce" what my inner mission, my true nature or my spiritual worldview demand from me? "How can I get rid of my fear of large places or in front of other people or of illness" must be translated within a spiritual worldview into the question: "How can I find so much confidence in the Divine, in the

Other (or according to the far eastern view:) how can I, find as much distance to this samsara / Maya, to the apparent reality of this world, that such fears are not important to me any more, cannot hinder me any longer?". Not "What is the remedy for this mania" but "How can this divine frenzy (Greek: mania) be transformed into its transcendental space, into a mystical ecstasy?". Not: "How can this fear of narrowness while riding on a subway train be annulled", but: "Why is here an individual squeezed into a vulnerable little ego and can not open to his real self?" Not: "How can this obsessive brooding, this Generalized Anxiety Disorder be stopped", but rather: "How can the human condition of being trapped in permanent immanent thoughts, fears, hopes, passions – the normal or exaggerated brooding be overcome?" Spiritual contexts give ordinary "disturbances" a new meaning. In the spiritual context, something is true that Mark Twain is reputed to have said: "When we remember that we are all mad, the mysteries disappear and life stands explained". The mystery do not disappear because the spiritual person is mad, but because we are all so crazy to keep this world for a very real one and view the transcendent world as something mysterious that seems unreal to us. If we have once seen through our everyday madness as separated from the divine essence, nothing in this world seems normal to us and therefore nothing is mysterious any more. Then the perspective on the abnormality of mental disorders changes, too.

On a spiritual background so it can never be the goal to see the madness of a successful life in this world as the final goal. However, the goal must be to overcome superfluous craziness that hinders spiritual progress. But someone can be crazy in the eyes of the world and yet be well on the spiritual path (as well as s/he may be crazy and very far from any spirituality, too!). Therefore, the objectives of the spiritual and the psychotherapeutic path are different. But they are only where they are perceived as the last, as the final goals. If a spiritual psychotherapy would become aware of its function as an auxiliary instrument to the last, spiritual goal, then it would serve for the spiritual progress by defining worldly functioning as an intermediate target only and sometimes even obviate this interim destination. Because from a spiritual perspective on some concerns of suffering people, the answer is not the ever better adaptation to the objectives of this society, but also a transcendence of these concerns. We can try to supplement our low self-esteem by identifying its causes or cognitive schemas, and then in turn become more popular with others, but we can make our self-confidence dependent from the love of God or see it as a lack of insight into the non-separated existence of our ego. The goal depends on the positioning of our own system of values that can be determined from materialistic-hedonistic barbarism, or from spiritual quest and tradition.

Psychotherapy, however, is not an opposite of the spiritual path. Psychotherapy can help to achieve spiritual goals. It is important to refocus on the basic psychotherapeutic goals. These enable us to open up to greater degrees of freedom, to take decisions and to have one's own life on one's command unobstructed from neurotic or psychotic barriers. If a person with an existential tedium, a person unable to enjoy or with repressed sexual desires comes into therapy, it is the goal of therapy to put him in a position to see the world in all its facets, to feel and to dispose of his own sexuality. As spiritual teacher, A. H. Almaas emphasizes that (I would say, especially modern Western) subjects have to unfold the hidden potential of their true nature before they are capable of higher mystical experiences. However, it cannot be the measure of the success of spiritually oriented therapy that a person is able to perceive greater external success or greater sexual fulfilment. When their inner conflicts are resolved, they may as well decide to live in renunciation, an ascetic life. To judge about this is not the therapist's job.

It follows from the foregoing that spiritual seekers need a different psychotherapy, which differs from the conventional psychotherapeutic view in the mentioned three points. Such transcendental psychotherapy, firstly, sees the causes of the client's problems not alone in his supposedly free will (which itself is only a construct) but also in the limits that are imposed on him by the Transcendent (be it in the form of karma, a deliberate influence "from above" or any other law or entity). This disencumbers the suffering person in parts from blaming himself for his suffering, while it never completely absolves him or her of the responsibility to contribute to the alleviation of it. On the other hand, this responsibility is also limited where the individual must trust on higher support, possibly mediated by other people, because s/he sees his/her own limitations. To respect these limitations, to bare them and learn confidence in the benevolent work of a higher power is one subject of this new type of psychotherapy.

Thirdly, suffering has to undergo a re-evaluation where it results from a discrepancy compared with worldly goals. Much of the suffering of today's clients cannot be understood from a detached point of view, because it results not from the necessities of life such as in earlier and other cultures (e.g., lack of food or shelter), but results totally from a discrepancy to the conditions of our own society: We shall not have any physical pain, shall always be strong and smiling, powerful, and career-oriented, achievers and high earners. We shall have no fears and feel not only safe by protection of (then compulsive) rituals. We shall not feel strong emotional fluctuations or (as children) have the need for physical movement with which our environment cannot deal, so that the symptoms be-

come still stronger. We shall this, we shall that, but if we do not function, we go to a psychotherapist to become "healthy" again.

From a spiritual perspective, it is not about meeting the demands of a society running out of hand, but only that individuals find to themselves and the transcendent within themselves; neither can it be the aim that the individual believes to become happy by adapting cultural promises of happiness, but that s/he is put in the mental state to be able to practice spirituality in order to fulfil the promises of happiness of his / her own spiritual tradition. It can not be just a matter of helping people to have sex, wealth, power and an indefinitely satisfied ego, but rather to accompany them on the path of renunciation, turning inside, meditation and contemplation, discovering God and living the divine. A psychotherapy that is open and tolerant for the spiritual concerns of people can make this shift to the philosophical conditions of the psychotherapeutic settings – this does not even require an explicitly spiritual or transpersonal psychotherapy. It only requires the willingness of the therapist to take spiritual concerns of clients seriously and to observe them in all steps of the therapeutic process.

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