



## Article

# THINKING'S BAD RAP: THE USES AND MISUSES OF ZEN BUDDHIST MEDITATION IN PSYCHOANALYTIC THERAPY

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The author makes a distinction between the expressive Soto Zen practice of *shikantaza* (just sitting, only sitting) that was promulgated by Eihei Dōgen, (1200–1253) the founder of the Soto Zen Buddhist school in Japan and various instrumental/facilitative and “quietist” contemplative practices. Different contemplative practices reflect and express the underlying assumptions, guiding principles and goals of different traditions. How clinicians understand and relate to any contemplative practice will in turn influence how such practices influence the clinical encounter. Instrumental/Facilitative and “Quietist” assumptions and approaches to practice continue to exert an influence on the practitioner both consciously and unconsciously. The ensuing discussion describes and provides a review from a psychoanalytic perspective, the advantages and disadvantages of these different approaches to contemplative practice with a specific focus on *shikantaza* in relation to the psychoanalytic encounter.

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**KEY WORDS:** Zen Buddhism; Dōgen’s radical non-dualistic and all-inclusive perspective; contemplative practices; clinical uses and misuses of Zen Buddhism

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## INTRODUCTION

Because the psychoanalytic situation is a live and dynamic encounter, it includes various permutations of cognition and intuition; discourse and internal reverie; and both conscious and unconscious communications. The diverse range of any psychoanalyst’s listening stance has been described variously as a “bending toward,” “evenly-suspended-attention” (Freud, 1912); “vicarious introspection,” or “empathic attunement,” (Kohut, 1982); “intuition,” or “at-one-ment” Bion, (1970). How these often-subtle experiences are contained, processed, understood, transformed into language, and expressed, depends on the theoretical frame of reference internalized by the psychoanalyst. These various expressions of the basic experience of the

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psychoanalytic encounter are captured tersely, albeit enigmatically by this Zen *mondo* (encounter dialog), by pointing to one's relationship to thinking processes and to their expression:

*Once, when the Great Master Hung-tao of Yüeh Shan was sitting [in meditation], a monk asked him, "What are you thinking of, [sitting there] so fixedly?"*

*The master answered, "I'm thinking of not thinking."*

*The monk asked, "How do you think of not thinking?"*

*The master answered, "Nonthinking." (in: Bielefeldt, 1988, p. 188–189).*

What is the role of thinking and not thinking in psychoanalysis? What is this "non-thinking" that Yüeh Shan asserts that he is engaged in? When Buddhist concepts and practices are brought into the psychoanalytic encounter, what influences can be identified? How do they shape the ensuing encounter? This offering is intended to approach these questions by examining the perception and misperception of the role of thinking, and language as the expressive manifestation of thinking, in Zen study and practice. Such perceptions and misperceptions can engender an understanding (or misunderstanding) of how contemplative practices can influence the psychoanalytic encounter, specifically in relation to Bion's advice to tolerate sitting in the not-knowing of the session through the practice of "relinquishing memory, desire and understanding" (1967a, 1970), as his mandate is interpreted by psychoanalysts and psychoanalytically oriented therapists who work from the dual perspective of Bion's psychoanalysis and Buddhist study and meditation (also see Vermote, 2024, p. 565). Additionally, a correlate to be examined centers on one's perception of contemplative practices as either palliative and calming or insight-driven, on the one hand, and as instrumental or expressive on the other hand, as well as how they extend to the psychotherapist's listening stance and interventions. It is important to keep in mind that thinking is language-based, which when spoken becomes an external manifestation of thinking.

## TWO APPROACHES TO THINKING AND LANGUAGE

In critiques and devaluations, thinking and language are viewed as concepts and not as carriers of experience. For example, commenting on the dialog between Yüeh Shan and the monk as it appears in *Shinji Shobogenzo*, Dōgen's collection of three hundred koans, Looi asserts: "Abide in neither thinking nor not-thinking. Thinking is linear and sequential—a separation

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from the reality that is the subject of thought, and thus is an abstraction rather than the reality itself" (2009, p. 176).

From a non-dualistic perspective thinking and language are just as much an experienced reality as are non-linguistic or not-thought experiences. In this regard critiques of thinking and language center on their descriptive function, which is to describe an "ineffable" or "unknowable" ultimate reality. On this point Bion notes that: "... the language that psychoanalysts use to describe non-sensuous states, such as anxiety, is inadequate because it is derived entirely from sensuous experience" (1967b, p. 2).

From the Zen perspective the descriptive function centers on articulating enlightenment. For Bion the function is to describe the ineffable, emotional Truth of "O." In both cases, this critique of language fails to account for the performative and actional function of language in terms of the experienced and impactful reality of the moment. By contrast, Dōgen views language and thinking as an expressive and integral aspect of one lived reality. The failure to understand this non-dual orientation might explain the devaluation of thinking and language in relation to contemplative practices.

### TWO APPROACHES TO CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE

Despite an infinite array of contemplative practices described in the Buddhist literature, traditionally there are two basic approaches to eastern contemplative techniques. They include palliative or ameliorative practices and realizational or insight-oriented practices. Both have been described in Buddhist traditions as *shamatha* (calm-abiding) and *vipashayana* (insight).

#### **Beyond Insight and Calm Abiding**

Typically, *shamatha* practice generates the calmness and concentration necessary to engage in the insight practice. The Soto Zen practice of *shikantaza*, or "just sitting," the focus of this offering, combines the two practices into one as it developed out of the Chinese Chan practice of *mokusho* or silent illumination. Without the activation of both practices, realization remains out of reach. The traditional metaphor of a lantern and a flame depicts the necessity of both practices. Without the mantle of the lantern, the flame will be blown out by the wind. Without the flame, darkness remains.

As an all-inclusive form of contemplative practice, as noted, *shikantaza* includes insight and calming within its scope. However, as an expressive practice, it embraces, yet transcends both. Rather than functioning as an

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either/or matter of insight or palliation, *shikantaza* is the prototype expression of the “infinite becoming” of the universe of all activity, described in the Zen literature as *zenki*, or total functioning. This all-inclusive/non-exclusive form of *zazen*, the general term for Zen meditation, as Heine notes, functions “... as eminently engaged with all aspects of reality of every occasion, based on enacting *zazen* in the broader sense of realizing nonthinking as the essence of past, present and future existence” (2020, p. 187). It would be instructive at this point to review both instrumental and palliative practices in turn.

### Instrumental/Facilitative

Some authors suggest (Epstein, 1984, 1988; Rubin, 1985) that the Theravada Buddhist practice of *vipassana*, or mindfulness meditation can enhance the analyst’s capacity for what Freud describes as “evenly-suspended-attention” (1912). Freud writes:

The technique, however, is a very simple one. ... It consists simply in not directing one’s notice to anything in particular and in maintaining the same ‘evenly-suspended-attention’ (as I have called it) in the face of all that one hears [and] The rule for the doctor may be expressed: ‘He should withhold all conscious influences from his capacity to attend, and give himself over completely to his “unconscious memory”.’ Or, to put it purely in terms of technique: ‘He should simply listen, and not bother about whether he is keeping anything in mind.’ (pp. 111–112).

While understanding the merit of the assertion that *vipassana* training can enhance the analyst’s capacity for attention, clinical and theoretical implications can be extended and deepened when viewed through the lens of Soto Zen Buddhist *shikantaza* practice and its underlying rationale, which can be simply stated as sitting with the goalless attitude of *mushotoku* or no gaining mind. That is, sitting without attachment, aversion or judgment to the rising and dissolving of all experiential moments. This is especially the case when integrated with an object-relations understanding regarding the communicative aspects of projective identification and the analyst’s internal experience of the transference and countertransference dynamic. A very different situation emerges that goes beyond the depiction of this recommendation as simply technical advice that fills in something perceived as “missing” in psychoanalytic training. That is, rather than idealizing states of attention and devaluing states of inattention, both are placed on equal footing. [For a detailed critique and review see Cooper, 2010]. For example, when noticing moments of inattention, as *shikantaza*

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practice confirms, that the analyst would benefit by simply noticing the experience and wondering about who the patient experienced as inattentive in their early life? When the moment is ripe, the analyst may raise this important question with the patient. Maintaining a neutral attitude toward both states of mind, the analyst will develop an experiential understanding of the analysand's internal object world and related feelings. How they manifest in the transference and counter-transference dynamic, and how they get played out in interpersonal relationships becomes clear over time. On this point, in a striking parallel, from a psychoanalytic perspective, Rosenfeld (1987) observes that:

I have found that patients respond to our interpretations not only as tools which make them aware of the meaning of the unconscious and conscious processes, but also as a reflection of the analyst's state of mind ...particularly his capacity to retain quietness and peacefulness and to focus on the central aspects of the patient's conscious and preconscious anxieties (1987, p. 31) [And] It is very reassuring for the patient if the analyst can succeed both in functioning well in his interpretive role and in retaining his quiet thoughtful state of mind (p. 40).

Further, and perhaps more importantly, the analysand will, over time, learn through direct experience that all seemingly intolerable states, as terrifying as they may seem, when faced directly, can be contained and eventually ameliorated by the analyst's capacity to hold and contain the experience by simply sitting in non-judgmental, non-reactive awareness and presence. As one continues to sit with what at the moment feels intolerable, one discovers that neither meditator, analysand, nor analyst will be destroyed. Both will survive. Experience consistently confirms that states of mind that were feared or imagined to be intolerable, begin to soften and exert less of a negative impact. This neutral stance toward *shikantaza* finds expression in Dōgen's *Zazen Shin*, "*Lancet of Seated Meditation*" (1241a):

Do not "value the distant"; do not despise the distant; become completely familiar with the distant. Do not "despise the near"; do not value the near; become completely familiar with the near. Do not "take the eyes lightly"; do not give weight to the eyes. Do not "give weight to the ears"; do not take the ears lightly. Make your eyes and ears clear and sharp (Bielefeldt, 1988, p. 191).

From Bion's perspective, one does not seek, or "desire" preferred psychological states such as attention. As he advises: "'Patience' should be retained without 'irritable reaching after fact and reason' until a pattern 'evolves'" (1970, p. 124). Whatever evolves into awareness, whether attention or inattention, Bion describes as "O" or the evolving emotional truth of the session.

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Following Dōgen's admonition, cited above, how does the analyst become "completely familiar" with states of mind of both attention and inattention from a neutral position? What internal object relations become activated and manifest that are being driven by states of attention and inattention at any given moment during the psychoanalytic encounter? What does the patient know about an inattentive object? How does the analyst remain "sharp and clear" about both experiences of attention and inattention as they ebb and flow? The potential richness and depth that such questions represent are simply lost when meditation is viewed from an instrumentalist orientation and utilized exclusively as a technique to enhance the analyst's capacity for evenly suspended attention. From this position of no gaining mind, as noted above, that guides *shikantaza* practice, it is important to not become preoccupied with or attempt to push the patient ahead with preconceived goals. Rather the patient should set the pace of the evolving psychoanalytic encounter. Rhode (1998) expresses this point clearly and succinctly with regard to Bion's "O" in relation to the notion of psychoanalytic "cure." He writes:

As the variable, 'O' activates a state of becoming unrelated to any claim to therapeutic progress or cure. From the mystical perspective nothing progresses or is cured. There is either an evasion or a recognition of 'O' by way of a becoming (p. 118). [Also see Cooper, 2020, for explication of Bion's "O"]

### Quietist Issues

Buddhist meditation has often been misconstrued as an exclusively quietist practice, useful for calming the mind or for stress-reduction and, as a result, is often applied in a pragmatically limited manner. This common, albeit erroneous view, of Zen Buddhist meditation is rooted in the principle that meditation and thinking are antithetical, and that thinking must be eliminated for the practitioner to be successful with meditation or to reach non-conceptualizable states of mind, for instance, as described as "Buddha consciousness," which Moncayo describes, in comparison to the Freudian unconscious as:

Buddha consciousness is a consciousness beyond ego consciousness that does not know that it knows. Thus, it is possible to argue that Buddha consciousness and the psychological position of the analyst both constitute variations of the seat of unknown-knowing (Moncayo, 1998, p. 407).

One implication of this point of view is that thinking becomes an obstacle to achieving this state of mind. For example, Izutsu views thinking as a major

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obstacle to realizational attainment. He advocates for "... a mistrust in thinking and an elimination of discursive thinking" (1977 pp. 147–60). However, Izutsu overlooks the different forms of thinking that are relevant to both Zen and to psychoanalysis. For instance, Kim notes that deluded thinking becomes "revaluated" or "revalorized" (2007, p. 121) through practice and hence shifts the impact of Zen practice in everyday relationships. Similarly, from a Lacanian perspective, Moncayo notes that "I make a distinction between a conventional and an emancipatory function of language and argue that the Zen critique of language only applies to the former" (1998, p. 384).

Izutsu's argument explicates a blanket devaluation of all thinking and therefore his comment serves as a typical example of a misguided critique of thinking. His view exemplifies a larger response to thinking in the history of Zen, as Abe observes: "In Zen, the positive and creative aspects of human thinking have been neglected and only its dualistic and discriminative aspects have been clearly realized as something to be overcome" (1970, p. 112). This negative attitude towards thinking flies in the face of the notion of *shōshiryō* or "right thinking," which as part of the Buddhist Eightfold Path,<sup>2</sup> which is foundational in operationalizing and clarifying, the fundamental tenets of Zen Buddhism through experience based on practice.

From the perspective described by what may be characterized as "anti-thinkers," thinking occupies the lowest rung on a ladder in a hierarchical progression of mind states. These factors have led Kim to assert, ". . . thinking has been almost incapacitated in the tradition" and as a result, "they are still odd bedfellows today more than ever" (2007, p. 79). However, typically, critiques and devaluations of thinking and language view them as concepts and not as carriers of experience. From a non-dualistic perspective thinking and language are just as much an experienced reality as are non-linguistic or not-thought experiences. The failure to consider this non-dual orientation might explain the devaluation of thinking and language in relation to contemplative practices.

From the psychoanalytic perspective, this long-held misconception overlooks the potential for deep psychic change. Further, this misunderstanding has permeated the popular culture regarding an accurate understanding of Zen meditation; a misunderstanding that has its roots in the early introduction of Buddhism in China and which ultimately gives thinking a bad rap. An elaboration of the history of this misunderstanding as well as a sampling of critiques, both historical and modern, will develop an accurate and complete picture of the purpose and practice of Zen Buddhist meditation based on underlying doctrinal principles as they may influence the approach to the psychotherapeutic encounter from a perspective that integrates sound psychoanalytic principles and Zen doctrine for

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psychotherapists interested in the use of the contemplative practices available in Zen Buddhism.

### ORIGINS

The relationship between *zazen* and thinking has been problematic in Zen Buddhism since its inception within the Chan tradition in China.<sup>3</sup> This problem has continued right through to the present day. This difficulty, as mentioned above, has typically been expressed in terms of the conflict between quietist and insight-oriented practices. On one hand, a misunderstanding of meditation creates the impossible expectation that thoughts must be eliminated. However, the mind is supposed to think. That is its function. This misguided misperception of Zen meditation often engenders negative self-judgments when the misinformed practitioner fails to eliminate thoughts. A preoccupation with this project of thought-elimination can interfere with realizing basic truths about oneself, one's relationship to others, and in this manner, while well-intentioned, such practices can function as a misguided form of resistance to deeper understanding and psychic transformation both in the therapeutic process and in contemplative practice.

This problem extends into the psychoanalytic situation when such practices are viewed as no more than serving a palliative function, such as has been suggested by Benson who places all such practices into the basket of the highly popular "relaxation response" (1975).

Fujita traces back this negative view of thinking in relation to Chinese Chan Buddhism to an incorrect understanding of the 5th Century first ancestor of Zen in China, Bodhidharma's practice of wall gazing, in terms of the difference between *zazen* (sitting) and *shuzen* (learning meditation). Fujita describes *shuzen* as a form of "meditation to attain a special state of mind referred to in Sanskrit as 'dhyāna'" (2011, p. 24).

In other words, *shuzen*, from this point of view, describes an instrumental or facilitative practice that is limited in scope by its focus on a specific goal. Drawing from its Indian roots, this goal can include the cessation of thought, the attainment of magical powers, or the induction of trance states. The practice thus becomes an instrument or a tool that is secondary to the projected goal, whatever that goal may be.

Dōgen makes the distinction between *zazen* and *shuzen* very clear in *Fukanzazengi*, "Universal Principles of Zen Meditation" (1227a), his first piece written upon his return from his studies with Tendō Nyojō in China in 1227 and revised in 1233. He makes a reference to *shuzen* by asserting tersely, clearly and cogently, "The *zazen* I speak of is not learning

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meditation. It is simply the Dharma gate of repose and bliss" (Waddell & Abe, 2002, p. 4). Heine stresses this point from a perspective that emphasizes Dōgen's radical non-dualism. He writes, "For Dōgen, any apparent distinction between the polarities of thought and thoughtlessness, means and end, or dynamism and quietude is overcome by the refutation of deficient views that fail to reflect the unremitting practice of zazen" (2020, p. 93).

For centuries, in line with Dōgen, Soto Zen teachers have strived to expose and correct this erroneous instrumental and "quietist" view of zazen. For instance, the influential 17<sup>th</sup> century Japanese monk and Soto Zen reformer, Menzan Dohaku, asserts, "Arousing the mind to eliminate illusory thoughts is like pouring oil on a fire to extinguish it. The fire will blaze with increased strength" (Okumura, 1988, p. 42). Similarly, the contemporary Zen master Sekkei Harada (2008) writes:

I think there are many of you who think, "I must not think," so you suppress thought. This is the worst thing to do. You are suppressing the natural flow of the Dharma itself. Don't think of trying to suppress thought. By thinking, "Don't think, don't think," your essential nature is lost (p. 33).

Dōgen is without question one of the most outspoken critics of this "quietist" view with respect to his positioning of the terms used in the above opening *mondo* (encounter dialog) between Yüeh Shan and the nameless monk, *shiryo* (thinking), *fu-shiryo* (not thinking) and *hishiryo* (which has been translated as non-thinking, beyond thinking, without thinking, a-thinking, leaving thoughts alone, and beneath thinking) on equal footing. For instance, in the *Hossho*, (The Dharma-nature) fascicle of his Shobogenzo (1243), Dōgen writes, "The thinking and the not thinking are both the Dharma-nature" (In: Nishijima & Cross, 1997, p. 128).

This whole issue of the devaluation of thinking is poignantly summarized by Shiro (1997). He concludes, based on the examination of the historical Buddha's original concept of dependent co-arising, despite historical texts to the contrary:

... that Buddhism is the teaching of dependent arising, and that there is no awakening or enlightenment other than reflecting on or considering (manasikara) dependent arising. If this is true, then it is clear that any "Zen thought" that teaches the "cessation of thinking" (amanasikara, a-samjna) is "anti-Buddhist" (p. 250).

Shiro draws support for his critique from the 8th century Buddhist philosopher Kamalasila whom he quotes as writing: "If one can become a

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Buddha just by ‘not thinking’ (amanasikāra), then even unconscious or comatose people are also Buddhas” (Shiro, 1997, p. 249).

### DEVALUATION PERSISTS

Despite a consistent history of critiques and clarifications by Zen teachers over the centuries, whether explicitly or implicitly asserted, a devaluation of thinking still exists in many quarters. Part of the problem stems from how one “understands” or rather how one translates practice, which can be determined by unconscious factors that support rationalizations that then in turn drive inappropriate ideas about practice. As a result, such erroneous views can cause serious relational problems such as misusing the teachings to rationalize egocentric agendas or to enact cultish, abusive, or exploitative behaviors. Practitioners can fall into the trap of turning these misguided ideas about practice against the self and against others. Such ideas often operate subliminally in the background of consciousness and guide the practitioner’s experience of practice and resulting behaviors, often in extremely subtle ways.

Internally, misguided practices, driven by the false idea that the practitioner must eliminate thinking, can become coupled with an unnecessary, ongoing, and hurtful evaluation, frequently, as mentioned above, but worth reiterating, in the form of harsh, negative self-judgment, for the failure to stop thinking during zazen. For some reason that psychoanalysis describes, for example, as the unconscious operations of internalized persecutory early object images, individuals often attribute tremendous authority to judgments, forgetting that they are also just thoughts. Whether conscious or unconscious, the false quietist view that characterizes thinking, as an obstacle to realization must be overcome — not by removing the view—but by seeing through it.

Further, this misguided approach can engender a vicious cycle that causes and perpetuates the suffering that Harada alludes to in the above quote; in part because the attention is on the actual thoughts themselves rather than on the activity that occurs with one’s relationship to the thoughts. Internally, what object representations, self-images, and connected emotions are playing out? This false view of realizational practice is embedded in the culture and can be deeply ingrained and fixed deeply in the practitioner’s unconscious. Even though cognitively, one might “know better.” Intellectually, the view that thoughts should be eliminated can still operate to one degree or another unconsciously and influence how one responds to practice and how such misguided practice can function as an

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obstacle to the lived experience of what Dōgen describes in *Fukanzazengi* as “not meditation” but as *jijūyū zanmai* (self-fulfilling ease and joy).

This approach to practice, that is the attempt to eliminate thoughts or to focus exclusively on a specific object such as the breath, a body part, or a mantra, becomes a distraction from the actual practice of naturally just sitting and only sitting. From Dōgen’s non-dualistic perspective concentration on a particular object such as a koan, mantra, image, etc., functions on the basis of dualistic conceptions because it implies exclusivity. The notion of distraction also implies exclusivity as in distraction from “what?” It might be instructive to note or to ask, “what is the mind attracted to from moment to moment through the activities of grasping, clinging, pushing away or seeking to actualize or maintain preferred psychological states?” and simply notice what is in the forefront of consciousness at any given moment.

The correct intention centers on simply sitting and allowing what will emerge naturally, unforced, and unfettered without attachment, aversion or judgment. Just as eyes see, ears hear, nose smells, tongue tastes; mind thinks. So, there is no need to defeat thinking. The notion of calm or stillness within the rising and falling of mental processes, not an elimination of mental processes is the key. That is, as Dōgen emphasizes, it is one’s actions and relationships that are important. In other words, it is the practitioner’s attitude and relationship to thinking that is the issue. When the practitioner realizes this and can take the backward step, one’s naturalness, if you will, evolves and the deeper sense of ease and joy, which has always been present, becomes more obvious.

To understand the causes and condition as they relate to both an individual’s internal object world and how they manifest in one’s relationships and actions becomes a primary concern for both the insight-oriented Buddhist practitioner and the psychoanalytically-oriented therapist. One significant question becomes: Why would anyone want to shut down emerging material with temporarily beneficial palliative “quietist practices” at the expense of long-term realizational transformation?

Mitrani (1999) suggests one possible answer in terms of what the analyst is willing and able to accept and tolerate. Regarding a patient who she describes as “Hendrik,” after the legend of the flying dutchman, she writes:

Hendrik had been in numerous non-analytic therapies for nearly three decades and had yet to find who would ‘take a transference’: someone who might be willing to accept those painful and deadly aspects of his infantile experience and beyond ... (p. 48).

Mitrani describes what one feels left alone with what emerges that may be too much and therefore, generates various self-protective defenses on the

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part of both analyst and analysand. Hence, the potential for “realizational experience” to be shut down by the introduction of or shift to palliative practices. This shutdown results in a failure to digest and internalize the experience in a usable way. In other words, as Bion would describe as “learning from experience,” (1962), which he views as primary. This becomes manifest behaviorally by individuals who run from one therapy to another, perhaps rationalizing the shifts as “not a good fit with the analyst.” Similarly, by spiritual seekers who run from one so-called “powerful experience” to another. However, one question remains: If the experience was so powerful, dramatically life-changing, and personally transforming, how does one understand what happened to the experience, why does the individual have a need to continue to keep seeking and collecting new powerful experiences?

## SHIKANTAZA

Kim (2007) describes *shikantaza* as follows:

It is that seated meditation which is objectless, imageless, themeless, with no internal or external devices or supports, and is nonconcentrative, decentered, and open-ended. Yet it is a heightened, sustained, and total awareness of the self and the world. It seeks no attainment whatsoever, be it enlightenment, an extraordinary religious experience, supernormal powers, or Buddhahood.... It requires single-minded earnestness resolve and urgency on the part of the meditator (p.24).

This attitude and approach to practice parallels the psychoanalytic stance advocated by Bion (1967a) which he describes as

This procedure is extremely penetrating. Therefore the psychoanalyst must aim at a steady exclusion of memory and desire and not be too disturbed if the results appear alarming at first. He will become used to it and he will have the consolation of building his psychoanalytic technique on a firm basis of intuiting evolution and NOT on the shifting sand of slight experience imperfectly remembered which rapidly gives way to experience but neurologically certain decay of mental faculty (p. 138).

As a gradual evolution away from its Chan roots and touted psycho-physical benefits, described in various Chan writings, Dōgen’s *shikantaza* became clearly and fully the expression and actualization of full realization, described non-dualistically as *shusho ichinyo* (the oneness of practice and realization). From a contemporary perspective, this religious expression of

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realization functions similarly in stark contrast to the targeted use of mindfulness practices to actively facilitate cognitive-behavioral changes at the expense of any soteriological function. Ironically, such changes will occur over time, but they are incidental to and superseded by the expressive and realizational function of *shikantaza* as set forth by Dōgen.

In this regard, Dōgen's critique, of his "misinformed" contemporaries' quietist orientation to contemplative practice in *Zazenshin*, holds equal relevance to mental health practitioners who espouse and implement an instrumental (or quietist) approach to Buddhist meditation. He writes, "These texts were written by men who do not understand zazen, who have never experienced its true practice and do not participate in its unique transmission" (Dōgen, quoted in Bielefeldt, 1988, p. 198). Bion (1970) strikes a similar tone regarding the primacy of the authentic experience of psychoanalysis. He writes:

I doubt if anyone but a practising psycho-analyst can understand this book although I have done my best to make it simple. Any psycho-analyst who is practising can grasp my meaning because he, unlike those who only read or hear about psycho-analysis, has the opportunity to experience for himself what I in this book can only represent by words and verbal formulations designed for a different task (p. 1).

On this point Bielefeldt (1988) notes:

If *zazen*, as the *Bendo wa* informs us, is the practice of original enlightenment, it must be as natural as the Buddha nature itself—free from artifice, untrammelled by goals, unsullied by expectations: it must not be approached by our usual notion of spiritual utility (p. 139).

The reasonable parallel in terms of practice, as Dōgen asserts centers on the notion that it cannot be defiled by goals or desired outcomes. Hence, *shikantaza* practice is guided by the notion of *mushotoku*, or no gaining mind, which in contrast to an instrumental approach to religious practice, supports expressive practice. As I mentioned earlier in this paper, this is a striking parallel to Herbert Rosenfeld's observations (Rosenfeld, 1987, p. 40).

### TWO APPROACHES TO THE PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC ENCOUNTER

Similarly, there are two basic approaches to psychotherapy. One seeks to calm and relieve or remove behaviors and symptoms; the other seeks to

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develop insight into the root causes that the symptoms represent. For example, the former approach emphasizes the prescription of various stress reduction guided relaxation forms of meditation or cognitive strategies. In the latter approach one may be invited to sit with anxiety, or whatever troubling emotional state is present to see what evolves and to develop deeper self-understanding. The approach one takes will depend on one's perception of practice and how such practices are assimilated and accommodated internally by the practitioner. [Also see Cooper (2023), on assimilation, accommodation, with respect to the integration on Zen and psychoanalysis]. Meditation practices are influenced and reflect the underlying doctrinal foundations of the system within which the individual practices in. The point here is that the misconception of meditation as simply a palliative geared toward eliminating thinking limits the potential that meditational technology can offer to the psychoanalytically-oriented clinician.

## DOCTRINAL INFLUENCES

Doctrinal differences and the associated contemplative practices can account for the differences between dualistic palliative and non-dual insight forms of meditation in terms of how they are integrated into approaches to psychotherapy. On this point, regarding Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhism and East Asian Zen Buddhism, Davis (2013) notes:

The Theravada tradition has maintained that such states of meditative concentration (P. *shamatha*) are merely preparatory to the more analytical forms of insight meditation (P. *vipassana*) which lead to liberating wisdom (P. *panna*). The Zen tradition, by contrast, holds there to be a more direct relation between non-discursive meditative concentration and enlightenment (p. 199).

For example, in the former palliative approach, one technique that is commonly encountered in the Theravada—mindfulness tradition, centers on the practice of replacing negative thoughts with positive thoughts. For instance, the teachings advise substituting loving kindness for hatred and generosity for greed. These approaches seem compatible with cognitive behavioral technologies that address negative self-defeating thoughts and habits by actively identifying them and consciously replacing them with positive life-affirming thoughts. This parallel might go a long way to explaining why mindfulness practices have been well-integrated into cognitive behavioral technologies.

In contrast, the Soto Zen practice of *shikantaza*, just sitting with whatever arises without attachment, aversion or judgment is compatible with sitting

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without memory, desire or understanding as Bion advocates, borrowing the notion of “negative capability” from the poet John Keats, Bion quotes Keats, “I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (1970, p. 125). This point might explain, in part, why Zen Buddhist principles and practices have been very well received by psychoanalytic practitioners who are interested in the integration of the two systems (Alfano, 2005; Bobrow, 2010; Cooper, 2010, 2018; Magid, 2002; Moncayo, 2012).

### RADICAL OPENNESS

By way of comparison and/or contrast between the psychoanalytic encounter and the practice of *shikantaza*, or “just sitting” as promulgated by Dōgen, a multiplicity of mind states requires attention and acceptance. In short, from Dōgen’s radical non-dualist perspective, this means that everything is included, nothing is excluded. This is addressed in psychoanalysis, through continued dialog with the caveat as Freud asserts: “It will be seen that the rule of giving equal notice to everything ... that he should communicate everything that occurs to him without criticism or selection” (1912, p. 112). Similarly, Zen promotes simply sitting without attachment, aversion or judgment with respect to all mental states. In both practices the mental states will vary radically from the peaceful calm state of mind that has erroneously characterized Zen practice, through utter chaos and meaninglessness that Kim (2004) describes as, “zazen for Dōgen was ultimately the expression of an eternal quest for the meaning of existence, which was, paradoxically enough, meaningless—it was living the meaning of ultimate meaninglessness. This is Zen” (p. 63).

Regarding the reality of the multiple states of mind that can occur in psychoanalysis Viera de Camargo (2022) notes:

In reality, over the course of analysis (as of life), we go through many different types and qualities of states of mind and emotional experiences. I consider it important to have contact with pain, anxiety, transformations in hallucinosis, ecstasy, and aesthetic emotions, among others. It is also important to experience disappointment, hatred of analysis itself, boredom, and disenchantment with psychic life and analytical work in order to avoid establishing an idealized relationship whereby psychoanalysis itself is felt to be an access route to paradise (p. 65).

Term “Zen” and the practice of “zazen” can be substituted for the term “psychoanalysis” in the above quote with complete relevance. With these

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points in mind, I am reminded of the Tibetan teacher Chogyam Trungpa's (1976) comment in the opening of his book *The Myth of Freedom*:

Many people respond to Buddhism as if it were a new cult which might save them, which might enable them to deal with the world in the manner of picking flowers in a beautiful garden. But if we wish to pick flowers from a tree, we must first cultivate the roots and trunk, which means that we must work with our fears, frustrations, disappointments, and irritations, the painful aspects of life. . . . But according to Buddha, we must begin by seeing the experience of life as it is. We must see the truth of suffering, the reality of dissatisfaction. We cannot ignore it and attempt to examine only the glorious, pleasurable aspects of life ... So all sects and schools of Buddhism agree that we must begin by facing the reality of our living situations. We cannot begin by dreaming. That would be only a temporary escape; real escape is impossible. In Buddhism, we express our willingness to be realistic through the practice of meditation (p. 1).

This willingness to be real with ourselves whether in Zen or psychoanalysis is contingent on allowing all mental states, such as those described in the above quote, and addressing what arises rather than cultivating the illusion of a firm ground of knowing to stand on, which ultimately can be quite limiting. It is necessary, as Bion notes, to tolerate the impact of the groundlessness of the experience of not-knowing, which in terms of Buddhist emptiness, Kim (2007) describes as follows:

In this light, I suggest readers to imagine a person who is being suspended in a vast expanse of empty space that holds nothing whatsoever in any direction. However far one may look, there is nothing to secure a foothold or handhold on, just empty space itself. Empty space has no foundation, no substratum, and no boundary; it is absolutely void and boundlessly open. ...The situation of being left high up in midair is indeed terrifying and maddening existentially, for knowing that things, ideas, and values have no self-nature and that there is nothing whatsoever to cling to is an unbearable threat to our whole way of life. It deconstructs our conventional worldviews so relentlessly that nothing is left to rely on and feel certain of. And yet, this is precisely what practitioners must grapple with (p. 44).

My own practice (Cooper, 2009) experience during a *sesshin* (extended silent retreat) experientially verifies the truth of Kim's suggestion. In terms of what can be described as passion and rage oscillations:

I feel the bubbling over, watch the volcanic eruption, watch self, selves, others, form, melt crystallize, shatter in permutations of liquid psychic lava, emotional upsurge and outflow. Prolonged zazen increases the capacity for handling geometrically increasing intensities. ... Continued sitting brings into the present situation an awareness of inner obstructions and dissolves anger, which, if

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suffered, transforms into passion. Passion of forms and images swirling, spewing multi-colored mind flowers, that blossom and melt away to the limits of what I can take and then back to breathing and sitting, the ringing bell. Up and slow walking once again.

I sit with rage and find myself opening into passion. Rage, passion's seal, and signpost, opening and/or closing—lock and key. Can rage intensify and burn through enough of me to reveal itself as passion? Can one grow through rage, past rage's destructiveness until it burns itself into passion? From this zafu (meditation cushion), if I embrace the horror and disturbance of felt rage, I can embrace the enlivening fires of passion. I swallow fire and dream rainbows. The deadliness of rage can feed the aliveness of passion. Raging passions, passionate rages. The serpent swallows its own tail and dissolves into infinity. Rage feels tense, tight, constricted in my body, nerves, muscles, bones, joints. The ache intensifies. Each heartbeat ripples through my body into the limbs, joints, to the ends of my fingers and toes. ... Permutations of lived passion: for peace, creature comforts, foods, Eros, connectedness, aliveness, flesh pleasures, music, passion for writing, painting, creating, and destroying, orgasmic passions, kitchen sink passions, dish washing, garbage collecting and removing. All of it! ... passion that oscillate between work and play, love and hate mutually consumed and consuming. Play transforming to work, work becoming play. Love and hate passions that become split asunder, dissolve and merge. (Adapted from: Cooper, 2009, p. 227 – 228).

I wonder, is this the process that Bion describes how *beta*, his term for the raw data of experience, transforms into what he describes as *alpha*, or the basic elements of thought through the process of alpha function? It feels like being on the precipice of the unknown, the formless, emergent unknown; what Bion describes as potentially engendering *emotional turbulence* and *catastrophic change*; that change always comes with a feeling of danger and potential catastrophe as the individual relinquishes the safety of well-habituated anchors. I look up and watch the rising sun reflecting on the lake outside the zendo window. Suddenly all is calm. I write a poem (alpha function at work) (Cooper, 2009).

*From this zafu<sup>4</sup>  
Just past the open window,  
Between bare branches  
The rising dawn sun shimmers  
On a wind-rippled lake. (p. 227–228).*

### THE CHALLENGE

The challenge for both the psychoanalyst and for the Zen practitioner alike, is to sit in the not-knowing of the moment with whatever arises into

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consciousness without attachment or aversion; without grasping after anything without pushing anything away, and without judgment. If one can persevere with Bion's recommendations to relinquish memory, desire and understanding and tolerate the not-knowing of the session or engage with Dōgen's teachings to *thoroughly investigate* all mind moments with equal attention, sitting in the still-still state, the potential for transformation is available.

In any case, it should be clear from the above quotes and the narration of my experience that Zen meditation is not simply a matter of locking into a calm peaceful surface, which might more accurately be understood from the psychoanalytic perspective as a resistance to the truth of being, that it has come to be misconstrued as in popular culture.

In contrast to the range, diversity and intensity of feelings and thoughts described in the above narratives, in popular culture there is a definite bias and an emphasis on the calm surface of meditation and an often-wholesale disregard for the truth of our own thinking and perceptual processes and their products. However, as tension builds up, as it often does, the Zen practitioner simply continues to sit. Guided by *mushotoku*, or no gaining mind, the practitioner permits whatever emerges into awareness without judgment, attachment, aversion or seeking a preferred psychological state. Similarly, hopefully, the analysand continues to talk without censorship. In this manner, over time, difficult psychic states begin to soften, and both the Zen practitioner and the analysand form a different relationship with internal processes and with others. The response to allowing and being with all these emerging, crystalizing, and dissolving mind moments, one begins to tolerate the evolution of thinking processes as they transform from deluded thinking into authentic thinking, which Kim (2007) describes as thinking that becomes "revaluated" (p. 21) or revalorized" (p. 121) in a manner that engenders "right action" (121).

## THOUGHTS AND DŌGEN'S NON-DUALISM

From Dōgen's radical non-dualistic and all-inclusive perspective, thoughts arise and must be tolerated. Some thoughts punish, humiliate, persecute, and disturb one's sense of well-being. Some thoughts depress, discourage, and interfere with the ability to function. Other thoughts can take the form of fantasies and seduce the practitioner into states of imagined or felt ecstasy, dreams, or seemingly other-worldly visions of the sublime. Still other thoughts can engender "the easy and pleasant practice of a Buddha, the realization of the Buddha's Wisdom," as Dōgen (1227b) suggests in *Fukanzazengi* (In Yokoi, 1976, p. 46). The Zen practitioner alternates

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through a continuum of infinite states between terror and delight. Dōgen poignantly describes these alternating thought processes associated with a non-exclusive ongoing awareness free from attachment and aversion. From this perspective, such experiences take the dryness and the seemingly non-decipherability out of Dōgen's (1244) teachings as for example when he addresses the radically non-dualistic and all-inclusive approach to *shikantaza*, he writes in *Zanmai-ō-zanmai*, "*The Samādhi That Is the King of Samādhis*:"

Just in the moment of sitting, investigate whether the universe is vertical, and whether it is horizontal. Just in the moment of sitting, what is the sitting itself? Is it a somersault? Is it a state of vigorous activity? Is it thinking? Is it beyond thinking? Is it doing something? Is it not doing anything? Is it sitting inside of sitting? Is it sitting inside of the body-mind? Is it sitting that is free of "the inside of sitting," "the inside of the body-mind," and so on? There should be investigation of thousands and tens of thousands of points like these. Sit in the full lotus posture with the body. Sit in the full lotus posture with the mind. Sit in the full lotus posture being free of body and mind (p. 281).

But no matter where the thoughts go, no matter what emerges, as sitting in *zazen* without attachment, aversion, or judgment continues, the body is still and, in this way, contains whatever one may be thinking. In this way sitting engenders a pure receptiveness and readiness and a lived immediacy to the presently fully experienced moment.

Eigen's (1985) commentary on Bion's "faith in O" closely parallels the meditative experience from a psychoanalytic perspective. He writes:

Bion describes how uncomfortable one may be in this open state. One must tolerate fragmentation, whirls of bits and pieces of meaning and meaninglessness, chaotic blankness, dry periods, and psychic dust storms. Yes, Bion also suggests that such states can be trancelike and akin to hallucinosis (pp. 326–327).

### ***Shikantaza* as the Practice Expression of Dōgen's Non-dualism**

*Shikantaza*, or just sitting, the practice of *zazen* advocated by Dōgen (1231), as noted above, is foundational and functions as an expression of the Zen practitioner's original realization. For instance, in the opening lines of *Bendowa*, "*A Talk About Pursuing the Truth*," (In Nishijima & Cross, 1994), he writes:

For enjoyment of this samādhi, the practice of [za]zen, in the erect sitting posture, has been established as the authentic gate. This Dharma is abundantly

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present in each human being, but if we do not practice it, it does not manifest itself, and if we do not experience it, it cannot be realized (p. 1).

In this regard, Dōgen describes the relationship between practice and realization as *shusho ichinyo* (the oneness of practice and realization). Despite his insistence on this point, thinking is often considered to be unreal and is typically minimized and therefore, inconsequential, or even viewed as an obstruction to religious unfolding. For example, commenting on the dialog between Yüeh Shan and the monk as it appears in *Shinji Shobogenzo*, Dōgen's collection of three hundred koans, Loori asserts:

Abide in neither thinking nor not-thinking. Thinking is linear and sequential—a separation from the reality that is the subject of thought, and thus is an abstraction rather than the reality itself (Loori & Tanahashi, 2009, p. 176).

The advice to “Abide in neither thinking nor not-thinking,” is well-taken and points directly to the heart of *shikantaza*, just as Dōgen describes it from his radical non-dualistic perspective. However, the instruction is qualified with a critique and devaluation of thinking and, although not explicitly stated or even intended, could generate the inference that thinking should somehow be eliminated because, from Loori's perspective, it is “unreal.” It is important to keep in mind that from Dōgen's radical non-dualism, which is reflected and expressed in *shikantaza* practice, that abstraction is also suchness, an aspect of the currently manifesting reality. As unreal as thoughts are, they can exert very real reality consequences, especially when taken as real without question. The unconscious enactment of transference and countertransference dynamics that can manifest during the psychoanalytic encounter and that can engender a negative therapeutic reaction and derail the treatment dramatically, or if properly understood, can contribute to furthering the treatment, both possibilities exemplify this point.

## ONE REALITY

Regardless of the perceptual alterations encountered, such as between the dualistic orientation of relative being and the unitive experience of absolute being, our lives are lived as one reality, described by Dōgen in the *Bussho* (Buddha-nature) chapter of *Shobogenzo* (1241b) as “Total Existence is the Buddha-nature” (Nishijima & Cross 1996, p. 2).

It is when an individual takes either the relative or the absolute exclusively as the whole reality that problems ensue, especially when those thoughts are projected onto the world and its objects of perception, such as when false inferences become enacted. For example, considering the

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relation between form and emptiness, traditionally, Mahayana Buddhist teachings emphasize the negation of form as the key to realization, hence, the devaluation of thinking processes. However, in a radical shift, Dōgen argues that realizing the true reality of being requires the simultaneous awareness of form and emptiness. Therefore, form is not negated. Form and emptiness both affirm and negate each other as two aspects of one reality. Form as manifested in thinking and language requires acknowledgment and transformation, not elimination.

### CONCLUSION

Contrary to the bad rap that thinking continues to receive regarding contemplative practices, thoughts and thinking processes certainly have positive uses. Making the distinctions and discriminations that derive through linear thinking, for example, contributes to healthy boundaries and to solving the many challenges and problems faced in daily life. Within the psychoanalytic encounter the thinking that is required for self-reflection contributes to personal insight and psychic change.

Getting lost in the absolute can result in unhealthy and dangerous choices including inappropriate boundary violations. We are all one, but we are also unique and separate and many instances that occur in everyday life requires that separations remain intact; that differences are respected and honored; that healthy distances remain in place, while at the same time, realizing the fundamental interconnectedness of all beings.

### NOTES

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2. Eightfold Path: Right Understanding, Right Thinking, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.
3. “Zazen,” or sitting meditation functions as a general term for many distinct forms of Zen contemplative practice including: *kanna zen* (koan contemplation), *susokukan* (breath-counting meditation), *zuisokukan* (Breath following), and *shikantaza* (just sitting), which is the focus of this discussion.
4. Meditation cushion.

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