Journal of Mental Imagery, 1990, *14*(3 & 4), 197-204

Images of the Self in Zen Meditation

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A sign of progress in Zen meditation is the appearance of vivid imagistic sensations known as "makyo." These images reflect previously hidden or warded-off features of self structure that surface to the conscious layers of the mind. The activation of the observing self and the deautomatizing of habitual intrapsychic functions facilitates these imagistic experiences. In Zen meditation the images of makyo ultimately serve as stepping stones in the dynamic balance between the dissolution and integration of the self.

In an unreal green forest you are walking next to the old master. You reach a brook. The master touches your shoulder and you know he wants you to sit down. He points at a piece of cork floating past; it has been in a fire and half of it is black. Bits of it detach and disappear. "That piece of cork is your personality," he says. "It's getting smaller," you say, nervously. "Getting smaller all the time," he answers, "until nothing is left of it."

An image rises from the empty background of this page and begins this paper — an image from a story by Janwillem van de Wetering (1978) about his experiences in a Japanese Zen monastery. As suggested by the image — and by the title of Van de Wetering's book, *A Glimpse of Nothingness* — Zen training leads to a state of being in which all thought, memory, and emotion peel away. It is a state of egolessness, of no-mind and no-self.

The method for reaching this goal is a form of meditation known as "zazen." The instructions are deceptively simple: while sitting, with eyes slightly open, allow your mind to focus on nothing in particular. Ideas, feelings, and recollections will drift into your field of awareness, but do not let your attention attach to them. Empty your mind by letting go of all targets of consciousness. Although it sounds so simple, beginners often find that they last a minute or less before they realize their meditation has been punctured by a nagging thought, a worry from the past, a plan for the future, or any of a variety of mental preoccupations. Hungry for something, anything, on which to affix its attention, the beginner's mind only occasionally slips into periods of no-thought. Introductory techniques to

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remedy this problem involve concentrating one's attention on breathing and on a repetitive subvocal counting from one to ten. Once attention can be focused on these activities without distraction, the next step is to let go of that focus.

With practice, the distractions are overcome and the upper layers of the mind become still and quiet. At this point, when the meditation begins to deepen, the person often experiences vivid imagistic sensations known as "makyo." Kapleau (1980a) stated that they are most intense during the third day of sustained zazen, and that they are a sign of progress, of a ripening mind. These imagistic experiences cut across all sensory modalities — sounds, smells, tastes, kinesthetic sensations, and visual images, sometimes almost hallucinatory in quality. Meditators have reported hearing musical instruments such as flutes and pianos, feeling insects crawling over them, feeling that their bodies were levitating or floating. The sound of a nearby bell ringing may be experienced visually as waves of light. One meditator reported to me that he saw faces in the patterns of a rug — animals, people, a face of a baby that turned into an old man, a face of an angel that became a demon. For some people, makyo takes the form of childhood memories — pleasant, painful, or mundane — sometimes so vivid that meditators believe they are actually reliving those experiences. Crying, depression, elation, or other intense affects often accompany these experiences.

For some meditators, makyo triggers important personal insights and beneficial changes in psychological health. For others, makyo is a disorienting, disturbing encounter. Given the unique quality, intensity, and psychological impact of these imagistic experiences, we must address several questions. Why does zazen release these images? What role do these imagistic experiences play in intrapsychic dynamics? And finally, how does makyo influence the process of attaining a state of no-mind and no-self?

A Perspective from Self Psychology

I've chosen to explore these questions from the perspective of self psychology and the related field of psychoanalytic phenomenology (Atwood & Stolorow, 1984; Kohut, 1977). In contrast to classical psychoanalytic theory, which focuses on drives as the fundamental determinant of personality and psychodynamics, self psychology instead states that the most basic and most important feature of psychological functioning is the organization of experience within the superordinate structure of the "self." With this emphasis on the self rather than drives, self psychology represents a revolutionary movement in psychoanalytic theory that draws western depth psychology closer to Zen, the eastern equivalent of depth psychology that has always been concerned with the "self."

Stated briefly, self psychology maintains that the self is a "structure" created through the harmonious integration of cognitive-affective schem-

ata. Self structure is a structure of experience. An important feature of this structure is the organization of schemata into "self representations," which are cognitive-affective experiences of oneself — and "object representations," which are cognitive-affective experiences of significant others. Psychological health ensues from a self structure that is cohesive without compartmentalized or warded off aspects of experience; that effectively integrates the cognitive-affective schemata of self and object representations;and that maintains its continuity over time without disruption, so that one experiences oneself as existing from the past, through the present, to the future.

Images may be key building blocks of self structure — or, at the very least, imagery is a powerful and facile vehicle for representing the features of self structure and for contributing to its cohesion, integration, and continuity. As suggested by the aphorism that "One picture is worth a thousand words," multiple cognitive and affective aspects of self and object relationships can be condensed into a single image. Images can revive behavioral and psychophysiological processes as well as store a complex array of emotions: they are organizers of experience. Images serve as internal reference points for the sense of continuity of one's experience of self and objects across time.

How, then, can self psychology explain makyo? The meditative process of zazen can be conceptualized as a relaxing of conscious mental activity which then penetrates to unconscious defensives and repressive barriers, thus loosening and unwinding them. By "letting go" of any thought that enters their mind, meditators immerse themselves into a form of free association — as in psychodynamic therapies — resulting in a drifting of attention beyond the habitual censoring and regulatory restraints of intrapsychic functioning and into previously unconscious realms of self experience. As a result, pieces of self structure that were previously hidden or warded off, including self and object representations, bob up to the quieted surface of the mind in the form of makyo. Often they are imagistic symbolizations of toxic introjects or self representations that have been denied integration into the main body of self structure.

Consider the following Zen story. A student comes to his master, troubled by a vision that appears to him during zazen — a vision of a large, menacing spider. The hallucinatory image is so real and threatening that the student insists on bringing a knife to his next sitting. He intends to stab the insect when it again appears. Calmly, the master tells the student not to take a knife but rather a piece of chalk. He tells him that when he sees the spider, he should mark an "X" on its belly. The next day the student returns to the master and informs him that the spider did return, and that he marked it with the chalk as instructed. In reply, the master tells the student to lift up his shirt. There, on his stomach, is the "X."

This story, being itself an image, points to multiple insights into the

nature of zazen and makyo. Borrowing classic psychoanalytic symbolism, the spider may be the object representation of the toxic mother who narcissistically lures, ensnares, and devours the child. It may be the representation of the feared and hated aspects of oneself. Using religious symbolism, it may represent the student's concept of evil — or, in a Dostoevskian fashion, his concept of God. Whatever the experiential meaning of this hallucination, it is the projection into an external perception of something that is fundamentally a component of self structure. It's an intrapsychic attempt to objectify subjective experience. As Kapleau (1980a) stated, makyo is a condensation of "ma" (devil) and "kyo" (objective world). The meditator must recognize these imagistic experiences as devils of the objective world that only derive power from their roots in subjective meaning. The Zen master understands this, and this is his lesson to his student.

From a psychological perspective, personal insights and improvements in mental health after experiencing makyo may be the result of identifying, detoxifying, and assimilating these previously split off and isolated aspects of experience. One critical therapeutic effect may be the modulation and integration of affect that had been locked into these repressed representations. While participating in a clinical research group for studying mental imagery in psychoanalytic treatment, I once described zazen and makyo, wondering whether this phenomena was related to psychoanalytic therapy. Lloyd Silverman, the leader of the group, suggested that makyo were forms of implosive imagery that tapped and assimilated reservoirs of warded-off affect that were derived from trauma or unconscious fantasy — similar to how Silverman (1987) conceptualized the role of imagery in psychotherapy. Philip Kapleau (1980a, 1980b), a noted American Zen master, similarly described makyo as a type of "dredging" and "cleansing" process which releases stressful experiences that had become embedded in deep layers of the mind. In the case of meditators who react to makyo with excessive disorientation and a prolonged pathological disruption of psychological functioning, the integration of self structure may have been unstable prior to Zen training and deficient in the resiliency to endure zazen. As Kapleau states, zazen is not beneficial for everyone.

Beyond the Psychology of Self

These ideas about makyo uncovering problematic aspects of self structure, accompanied by the assimilation of affect encapsulated in those structures, parallels basic psychoanalytic concepts about the beneficial effects of images experienced in psychotherapy (Suler, 1989). However, this seems to be only a partial explanation of makyo. Not all of these imagistic experiences are psychologically toxic, nor do they all bear any obvious psychological meaning or symbolism. Although Zen masters

would agree that makyo can lead to personal insights and psychological growth, they nevertheless insist that the path of zazen necessitates going beyond makyo. Like any experience that enters consciousness during meditation, one must not dwell on them. One must let go.

Similar to the cork disintegrating in the currents of the brook, the self unravels during zazen. The images of makyo are bits and pieces of self structure that break away and disappear. In apparent contradiction to self psychology, which advocates the enhancement of the self's cohesion and continuity across time, Zen training instead encourages a de-structuring of the self and a breakdown of its continuity to the point where time is irrelevant.

Deikman (1982) described this process as "deautomatization" through the activation of the "observing self." By letting go of all targets of awareness, the meditator steps back from experiences into a self that simply observes without clinging, thus freeing the mind from those experiences and opening up other experiences that were previously unavailable to the observing self. Aspects and functions of self structure that were once regulated automatically, without conscious awareness or control, are now accessible to awareness. The meditator can be conscious not only of previously hidden self and object representations, but also the psychological processes that contribute to the construction of self structure. By unraveling and peeking below the structure of self and object representations, the observing self can witness the activities of such psychological functions as memory, attention, and perception. Often the awareness of these functions takes the form of imagistic experiences of light. For example, Deikman suggested that meditators who report seeing shifting movements of light patterns may actually be observing the process of attention moving from one thought content to another, or, in psychoanalytic phenomenological terms, from one representational feature of self structure to another. Similarly, as Deikman suggested, the experience of waves of light concordant with the ringing of a nearby bell may actually be the observation of the sensory-perceptual processes triggered by that bell, perhaps even of the neural activity itself.

Ultimately, in the process of deautomatization, the observing self lets go of makyo, the imagistic operations that create makyo, and the surrounding psychological activities that support those operations. What then is left?

To answer this question and to understand the role of the observing self in meditation, consider the following analogy. Imagine a person sitting in a movie theater, watching images being projected onto the screen before him. The person, who represents the observing self, is the spectator of the images of makyo that move across the surface screen of the mind. If he follows the instructions for zazen, he will let go of each image, allowing it to pass away, perhaps to be replaced by another image. By freeing himself

from the projected images, he also frees himself to observe the outline of the screen itself, the walls of the theater, and the projector that casts the images onto the screen — just as the meditator can observe the psychological structures and mechanisms that produce and contain makyo or any other content of conscious thought.

Yet, the observing self is not limited to this scenario, for now imagine that the person can step back from the theater itself to observe himself sitting in the theater, watching the screen — or imagine the next step, that the observing self moves even further away, to observe the person observing the person in the movie theater. We can imagine the observing self, ad infinitum, stepping further and further back, observing the observing of observing, to a point where the movie theater and the screen images dissolve into the background — the point where all that remains is observing.

So, too, the meditator steps back from experience into the process of the observing self. By letting go the images of makyo and all contents of objective awareness, by stepping back from the act of seeing, the meditator attempts to root himself into the very source of the act of imaging and seeing. The observing self ultimately seeks the ground from which the image springs — and when that goal is attained, the duality between the imager and the imaged, observer and observed, subject and object, dissolves. We often speak of "images in the mind's eye," a metaphor that parallels the analogy of the person watching the images on the theater screen. Zen also speaks of the "eye that sees itself," which captures the paradox of the observing self observing its own act of observing — which is the folding of observing into itself. In that state of awareness, self structure dissolves, just as the features of the movie theater fade somewhere along that chain of watching the watching of the person in the theater. Deikman (1982) suggested that this dissolution of the structures of the self is accompanied by the release of intrapsychic energy that was infused into those structures — which, perhaps, accounts for the sensation of a diffuse, boundless light, as reported by experienced meditators. In electronics, an analogous situation arises when a video camera, connected directly to a tv monitor, is pointed into the screen of that monitor. Essentially, the camera is "seeing" the very act of its own "seeing" — and the screen glows with white light.

Is this then the final goal of zazen — to pass beyond self images and remain immersed in a state of mind where the self evaporates? Though zazen strives for the breaking away of the structures of the self through the release of makyo, it is a misconception that the ultimate goal of Zen training is to remain embedded in no-self. Instead, the objective is to facilitate a balance between self and no-self, to enhance the fluidity and flexibility in self structure that permits it to oscillate between dissolution and reintegration — and through that reintegration attain higher levels of harmony and cohesion.

In his Stein Image Experiment, Ahsen (1987) poetically captures this dynamic in his description of the intertwining of focus and periphery, recall and forgetting, vividness and unvividness. Subjects can easily focus on a clear, crisp image of a colorful stein that had been placed before them, but surrounding that image, not as easily noticed or identified, is a peripheral field of vagueness, fuzziness. When subjects delve into that realm of unvividness, they discover that is is a mythological sea of previously undetected sensations, emotions, and imaginings. Unlike the focused image of the stein which appears stark, rigid, and bound, the periphery feels magical, free, mysterious — as having a hidden strategy or intentionality. By being fluidly amorphous and accommodating, the periphery nourishes the center stein image. The center focus arises from the fertile ground of the periphery; it is a manifestation and a condensation of the periphery; it expands into the periphery. The vivid and the unvivid are interdependent. In the terms of self psychology, the bold relief of an imaged self or object representation flows from and dissolves into the multiple self and object images that drift through the peripheral realms of self structure.

In zazen, the meditator's mind wanders between focus and periphery, vivid and unvivid, allowing new representations to emerge, crystallize, coalesce with other representations, and recede to the background. Makyo are a rigid point of focus that highlight a reified aspect of self-structure — an objectified aspect of self that may refuse to yield to the periphery. They may become, as Ahsen (1987) would say, a form of torture that conforms to the objective world's demand for specificity and clarity. But ultimately, when zazen progresses, the images of makyo dissolve into the peripheral ground from which they came. So, too, the focus of the mind's observing eye on the center image dissolves into the background and periphery of the image — and, finally, into the emptiness of no-mind to which the periphery itself fades.

Realizing the emptiness upon which psychological structures are built brings new vitality and definition to those structures. That emptiness serves as a reference point, a center, a grounding for those structures — just as an image arises from and is supported by the vague periphery and blank background upon which it is built. In its statement "All emptiness is form and all form is emptiness," Zen points to this inextricable intertwining of psychological structures and the experiential void that underlies them — not a void that is stagnant and dead, but rather vibrant and intentional. The ultimate goal of Zen training is the enhancement of the flow between these two polarities. The images of makyo serve as way-stations in this process, as stepping stones or imagistic roadsigns of self experience along the path between self and no-self.

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