

## **PARADOX IN PSYCHOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATIONS: THE ZEN KOAN AND PSYCHOTHERAPY**

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Psychological transformations in psychotherapy spring from the encounter with paradox. The Zen koan, a seemingly nonsensical and self-contradictory statement, can serve as model for understanding this transformation process. Paradoxes exist within the personality dynamics of the individual as well as in the interpersonal relationship between therapist and patient, Zen master and student. Exploring paradox leads to the breakdown of rationality and intellect, a state of personal crisis, and the final act of "letting go" that precedes the freeing of the observing self and the insightful reframing of one's problems. Through the act of self negation, both the Zen student and psychotherapy patient tap a state of no-self that transcends paradox and is the source of spontaneity, empathy, and self-acceptance.

A paradox is a statement or behavior that is seemingly inconsistent, absurd, or self-contradictory—yet in fact true. It thrusts one, literally, into "non-sense" by challenging common-sense and violating one's basic assumptions about reality. Many paradoxes embody the self-contradiction that arises when a statement implicitly turns back and reflects on itself, asking whether or not it is to be taken as an example of the idea it proposes. The classic example is "Everything I say is a lie." If the statement is an example of the idea it asserts, it simultaneously affirms and negates itself. Paradoxical injunctions such as "Disobey me!" turn disobeying into obeying and obeying into disobeying when the command attempts to turn back and reflect on itself as a member of its own directive. This self-contradiction arising from the act of self reflection may take the form of a paradoxical conflict between different levels of self-examination. The statement "This sentence contains one error" is, on a manifest level, incorrect because there are no errors—but on a deeper level it is correct because it is incorrect in the estimation of its error, which in turn shows again that it is in error, and so on: it is simultaneously both correct and incorrect (Hofstadter, 1981). The paradoxical self-contradiction is rooted in the interpenetrating opposition of self-representations.

In Zen Buddhist training, paradoxes known as "koans" are presented to students to stimulate their progress towards the state of enlightenment called "satori". The student must produce a solution to the puzzle even though there seems to be no logical answer. Some koans are oneliner questions: What is the sound of one hand clapping? When the many are reduced to the one, to what is the one reduced? Without using your mouth, body, or mind, express yourself. Show me your face before your

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parents were born. Other koans are presented as a paradoxical situation that challenges the student to determine its solution or meaning:

—A monk asks the master if a dog has a self. The master replies “Mu!” (which translates as “not,” or perhaps more accurately as the prefix “un” or “non”).

—A man dangles over a deep precipice, hanging only by his teeth clenching the root of a tree. A Zen master appears and asks, “What is your true self?”

—A master holds a staff above the head of his student. “If you say this is a staff I will strike you. If you say it isn’t a staff I will strike you. If you say nothing I will strike you.”

—A man grew a goose in a bottle until it became too big to stay inside. If the bottle is smashed it will kill the goose. If nothing is done, the goose will smother.

The Zen psychology of the koan can serve as a model for understanding psychotherapy. It can reveal the various elements of paradoxical self-contradictions that underlie psychological transformations—including the shift in one’s perspective of reality, the conflict between levels of self-representation, the interweaving of self affirmation and negation, and the dynamics of the self that turns back to reflect on itself.

### *Entering the Paradox*

For no apparent reason, a bright student miserably fails an entrance exam into graduate school. A patient, who cancels every other session, claims that her psychotherapy is not going deep enough, so she wants to come less often. Like a character from a Woody Allen film, a lonely man states that he would never join any organization that would have him as a member. By highlighting these self-contradictory behaviors, the therapist presents to the client a paradox that violates logic. Although it may disturb the person, this personal paradox, similar to the koan, entices the curiosity, for the person realizes there is more going on below the surface than meets the eye. As Kapleau (1980) stated, the koan is like candy to coax a reluctant child, to stimulate the thirst for realization.

But the paradox ultimately frustrates and cracks open any intellectual attempt to resolve it, for the solution is not logical. The solution is an experience. As sophisticated as the person’s intellectualizations may be, they are an illusion, a defence. Rational explanations meet only silence or another question from the therapist and a nonsensical retort or flat-out rejection from the Zen master, as in the response “Mu!” At first this situation amplifies the person’s attempts to grip it cognitively. The struggle for a solution becomes an ordeal of “figurling out,” a crisis of thinking that lasts as long as the person persists in cognating an answer. The teacher has led the student down a blind tunnel, to the edge of a precipice, where the realization that intellect will not suffice forces the student to leap out of it. The koan is a trap that breaks the back of rationality—but one cannot get out of a trap until one first gets into it.

The crisis quickly spreads into other realms of one’s personality other than the intellect. During the Zen student’s meditation on his koan and the therapy patient’s

contemplation of his personal paradox, a variety of conflicting affects, ideas, and memories surface: the multiple components of one's self structure are jostled loose and forced to the surface, often in the form of intense images (Suler, in press). The paradox becomes all consuming; one's whole being enters it; the self is at war with itself as the conscious and unconscious realms clash. The koan becomes a desperate struggle around personal issues, including the personal conflicts that led the student to Zen. It is a struggle for one's very life. The student has entered the stage of the "Great Doubt," which corresponds to the dark nights of psychotherapy when despair, hopelessness, and exhaustion prevail. Kapleau (1980) uses the analogy of taking away a blind man's staff and spinning him around. The person is confused by and doubts everything—himself, the teacher, the validity of the learning process. As stated in Zen, "Rivers are no longer rivers; mountains no longer mountains."

One reaches a deadlock. The koan becomes a "red hot ball stuck in one's throat." It is a stage of intrapsychic freezing that precedes disintegration and reorganization (Kubose, & Umemoto, 1980). Western psychotherapists describe it as a "blocking" or "impasse" where there is nothing to be done or said. It is the condition of non-being, catastrophe, and oblivion that grounds existence—the crisis of doubt that precedes the conversion experience. A psychiatrist once asked a Zen master how he deals with neurotic people. "I trap them," he said. "And how do you do that?" the psychiatrist replied. "I get them where they can't ask any more questions."

From this deadlock of the Great Doubt springs a sudden insight that expands one's perspective of reality. The old assumptions and perceptions of oneself and the world—one's "old hometown" (Mountain, 1983)—are realized as illusions and are discarded. For the Zen student, the ontology of self and other is seen more clearly. For the psychotherapy patient, the unconscious distortions that warp perceptions are more apparent. The bright college student realizes he sabotaged the exam because he fears success will destroy his father. The patient who wants more from therapy and cancels her sessions realizes she dreads where the therapy is leading her and how her therapist will react to what they discover. The man who rejects any organization that would have him as a member discovers that he really hates himself.

The self-contradiction that led to insight loses its grip. The koan and the patient's personal paradox now can be left behind, like discarding a brick that was used to knock open a jammed door or a tissue that was used to blow one's nose and clear the head. The paradox was a finger pointing to the moon. It indicated a direction; it motioned towards another level of the self, something unverbalizable. It pointed to the unconscious.

The cracking open of the double-binding self-contradiction and the insightful reframing of one's crisis can only occur if, in the words of Zen, one "lets go of the hold"—also known as the principle of "wu wei," letting things happen of their own accord. Paradoxical therapists (e.g., Haley, 1963) have documented how a person's desperate attempts to control a symptom only perpetuates it. The insomniac who tries to force himself to sleep never will. The paradoxical intervention amplifies the

problem until the person finally lets go of it, allowing change to be spontaneous. So too the psychotherapy patient and the koan student are caught in a dilemma: the harder they try for spontaneity, insight, or enlightenment, the less likely they will achieve it. Like the student who is confronted by the Zen master's staff, they are caught in "samsara," the action of the grasping self that tries to get "one-up" (Watts, 1975) on something that is un-one-upable, that cannot be consciously grasped. Even the attempt not to grasp is just another form of grasping that blocks spontaneity and fulfillment, as in the compulsive person who forces himself to play. The final trigger for an experiential breakthrough is an un-self-conscious self-surrender, a relinquishing of control to the unconscious, to "something beyond" the conscious self. The tendency to cling to one's illusions and symptoms because they are familiar, out of a fear of the unknown, must be bypassed. Desperately hanging on the edge of the precipice, one must simply let go. Losing oneself is finding oneself.

### *Paradoxes Within and Between*

Similar to exploring the koan in Zen training, psychotherapy probes the paradoxes of human nature. For example, symptoms are compromise formations that are both adaptive and maladaptive, that simultaneously reveal and disclose the unconscious resulting in a paradoxical meshing of seemingly contradictory ideas and affects. Obsessive-compulsives are controlled by their desire not to be controlled; masochists use helplessness to be powerful. Determining who is responsible for these symptoms also becomes a paradox. Your parents may be blamed, but they couldn't help themselves; you too are not to blame because you also are driven by your unconscious—but in therapy you are expected to take control of it. A patient once complained that he was not responsible for his problems because it was his unconscious that caused them. Capturing the paradoxical essence of human nature, the therapist responded "who's unconscious is it anyway?"

Although these paradoxes are relevant mostly to the psychotherapy context and may only be peripheral issues to the Zen student, they do tap the more fundamental paradox that is the essence of the koan and the underlying Taoist philosophy of yin and yang—that human nature, in fact all of nature, embodies the balance, inseparability, and interpenetration of opposites. This principle became a key feature of Jung's theory of personality and was also implied by Freud—as in, for instance, his concept of ambivalence, that contradictory emotions exist side by side in the unconscious. The personal paradox in psychotherapy arises from the self-contradiction of one side of the ambivalence being conscious, the other unconscious, and the two disparate levels of self in conflict with each other. Within the intrapsychic world A and not-A do not mutually exclude each other: psychological dynamics violate Aristotelian logic, which is why the koan is designed to break intellectualization. Instead, human nature follows a form of paradoxical reasoning in which all ideas, affects, and behaviors generate and sustain their opposites.

The self is a complex, changing constellation of forces, properties, and relationships. Paradoxes within it abound. The interpretations and interventions that con-

stitute psychotherapy—which often are forgotten by the patient, even though they were entirely effective—probe these various paradoxes within the realm of the individual's unique personality. Koans, like pieces of tissue or bricks that are used and then forgotten, reveal the underlying, more universal paradoxes within the transpersonal realm of the ontology of self and other. But these realms of the personal and universal, following the course of the yin and yang, are intertwined. The individual personality is rooted in the deeper ontology of self and the ontology of self achieves expression through the individual personality. Realization of paradox on one level invariably affects the other.

The paradoxes within the individual dovetail into the paradoxes between self and other. People use symptoms to place others into double-binds; they attempt to control or get "one up" on others without openly acknowledging the fact that they are being controlling (Haley, 1963). These double-binds often take the form of implicit or explicit demands for spontaneity and genuineness, such as "You ought to love me" and "Don't be so obedient." In psychotherapy the person plays out these paradoxical strategies to control the therapeutic relationship, often placing the therapist in a damned if you do/damned if you don't, the goose in the bottle dilemma. For example, if the therapist agrees with the patient's request to come less often, she will feel rejected and quit therapy; if the therapist suggests that the patient comes every week, she will feel pressured and quit therapy. Like the koan, interpreting this predicament points the patient to the unconscious where deeper, conflicted aspects of self contradict the conscious mind and give birth to the paradox.

In their relationship with patients, therapists amplify the paradoxes of control, spontaneity, and genuineness to the point where the patient relinquishes attempts to be one-up and discovers genuine spontaneity (Haley, 1963; Seltzer, 1986; Watts, 1975). A variety of such double-binds are presented. The therapist, being both detached and intimate, stands for autonomy, maturity, and independence, but encourages dependency and regression. Therapy is supposedly voluntary but missed appointments are interpreted as resistance. The therapist directs the patient to control the relationship but makes it appear that he is not being directive at all and that everything is the patient's initiative. In fact, the therapist's attempts not to influence the person become a profound form of influence that invariably directs the patient into the unconscious.

The relationship between Zen student and master also captures these paradoxes about control, authority, and spontaneity. The student believes that the master is implicitly demanding "Be enlightened!" which is as paradoxical as the therapist apparently demanding "Be genuine and spontaneous!" Like the therapist, the master refuses to give any answers, which frustrates the student to the point of crisis and self disintegration—yet the master is also a reassuring presence, the authority who's very existence proves that an answer exists, who acts as a container and holding environment for the student's psychological and spiritual storm. The master is the teacher but "Zen has nothing to teach." If the student says the staff is or is not a staff, or says nothing, the master will strike him. What can the student do? The staff, the Zen



symbol of control and authority, is elusive, unnameable. Who is responsible for one's situation in life, for one's psychological and spiritual problems? Who is responsible for having an insight? At the peak of this interpersonal paradox, if the student can let go of his illusions about self and other, about who controls whom and who gives insight to whom, then the source of spontaneity and genuineness is revealed.

The koan and the personal paradox in therapy are always a question. The student and patient look to the master and therapist for an answer. But the request is turned back. Asking the question implies that the person already has the answer. Returning the question reveals its source: the source of the question is the answer. When the insight occurs, the person knows it with certainty; acknowledgement from the authority figure is superfluous. The issue of control and authority is largely superfluous. The Zen student could seize the staff from the master, affirming that he ultimately is the authority on himself and responsible for himself, his spontaneity, his insights. While this is indeed true, the path of the koan runs deeper than this.

### *Beyond Within, Between, and Paradox*

Zen training points to a state of mind that transcends paradox, that is beyond the notions of "within" and "between" individuals. This state transcends the paradoxical futility of the self that attempts to step back and objectively gain insight into itself. It moves beyond the consciousness of a distinction between self and other. It is the conscious mind that has no content.

The koan moves one in this direction through the acts of negation or renunciation. As a paradox, it both affirms and negates the affirmation. When asked if a dog has a self, the master's reply "Mu!" undoes the concepts of dog, true nature, and "having," as well as undoes (un-asks) the question itself. It negates the questioner just as the master turns away from the questions, ideas, feelings, and other bits of self that the student offers as a solution to his koan. The crisis through which the koan leads the person entails the stripping away of the personality. The act of negating is the act of letting go of one's old ideas and attainments—a letting go of one's own identity. Van de Wetering (1974) tells the story of a student sitting by a stream with the master. The master points to a piece of burnt cork floating by. Pieces of it break off and disappear. "That is your personality," he says. "It's getting smaller," the student replies nervously. "Getting smaller all the time," answers the master, "until nothing is left of it."

Deikman (1982) describes this process of negation in terms of the "deautomatization" of the routine structures and functions of the "object self" through the activation of the "observing self." In both mysticism and psychotherapy, one acquires an awareness of the various aspects of self—one's behavior, personality, defenses, thought patterns. In mysticism, one even becomes conscious of the processes of thinking, attention, and remembering. Yet these are all features of the object self—the self of which one can be aware. Transcending it is the observing self that is conscious of these features of the object self. It is a self that is featureless, without boundaries or content—the self that is itself unobservable. It is the "observing ego" of psychoana-

lytic theory and the self described by Frankl (1967) that can become "detached" from symptoms, that leaves the psychological plane and enters the nonlogical space where meanings and attitudes about one's symptoms can be freely chosen.

In his landmark book on existential therapy, Yalom (1980) describes a "disidentification" exercise that hints at this observing self. One creates a list of answers to the question "Who am I?"—such as, "I am a student; I am a son; I am ambitious;" etc. Then, one by one, these answers are crossed off and one tries to imagine who one is if one is not that. When the last item is crossed off, who is left?

While clearing one's head through koans in Zen training and personal paradoxes in therapy, one encounters the same questions. Who is it that has this or that conflict, this or that symptom? Who is it that experiences this anxiety, this crisis, this paradox? Paradoxes point to a place where one can be free from these aspects of the object self and live within the observing self that stands beyond the paradox. It is the observing self that is the origin of the possibility for having a new perspective, of being able to see past the illusions and distortions of the object self. Zen compares this self to a mirror that reflects but is not altered by the act of reflecting. It is your face before your parents were born.

The final paradox in Zen, which points to the observing self in its purest form, is the state of mind in which the observing self observes itself, which cannot be observed. This is the consciousness of consciousness that has no content, the awakening in the un-conscious, a consciousness of nothing, as occurs when two mirrors face each other and when the eye sees itself. It is the true self in its most pristine state—a no-self and no-mind, a state of emptiness, void, enlightenment. But this no-self is not stagnant. It is a fertile void that holds absolute freedom and is replete with possibility and potential. Total negation paradoxically leads to complete affirmation, for the chipping away of the self by the koan allows the koan to sink to the level of being and willing in the purest form. This true self which is no-self is a state of completeness, the sound of one hand clapping, the place to which the one returns that transcends all polarities, contradictions and paradoxes of the self-good/bad, unity/disunity, assertion/denial, being/non-being. The goose is out of the bottle and the bottle is unbroken.

This no-self also transcends the distinction between self and other that is the illusion of the rationalizing, discriminating mind. The koan reveals that the world is an interdependent whole, that the self is that whole, and that the self/other duality is false. Separation is experienced within union and union within separation.

By emphasizing this no-self and a mystical union of self and other, Zen seems to depart from western psychotherapy. Many writers have stated that psychotherapy is not designed to produce enlightenment. However, there are many indications that in-depth psychotherapy taps and utilizes the pregnant emptiness and self/other dissolution that is the state of no-self. Although they use a variety of technical and not so technical terms—such as unconscious undifferentiated ego matrix, symbiotic oneness, fertile void, blanking out, or simply "holes"—many therapists describe how their patients often contact an inner emptiness, oblivion, or boundlessness. Dangling over the abyss, frightened by it, they may at first attempt to fill the void with talking, acting

out, materialism, or more symptoms—but eventually they discover that an immersion into this emptiness reveals it as the source of insight, possibility, and spontaneity.

As a state of mind in which the self/other barrier dissolves, boundlessness becomes the source of empathy and the transformational merging of patient and therapist. A Zen story tells of a master whose first insight was his recognition that everyone he met had his own face. So too the psychotherapy patient, during the moment of empathic merging with the therapist, realizes the I in the you and the you in the I. The therapist also, in making an empathic interpretation that is truly rooted in his own experience, transcends the paradox of simultaneously forgetting and being aware of himself, of being both the patient and therapist.

The resolution of the personal paradox, like that of the koan, springs from this condition of merging. Winnicott (1971), who was most interested in separation as a form of union, described the “transitional object” as something that is both me and not me, a link between the subjective and objective, an intermediate zone that encompasses both external reality and one’s own internal capacity to create. He thought of it as a stepping stone to separation and individuation. The koan and the personal paradox in therapy are types of transitional objects that serve as stepping stones in the opposite direction—to the no-self that counterpoises and highlights one’s separation and individuation.

Like the koan, all forms of intensive psychotherapy deal directly or indirectly with the fear of the loss of self—whether it takes the form of anxiety about personal loss or injury, separation, or, ultimately, death. After all, the most basic paradox is that we are all born to die and that death gives life meaning. In his analysis of the existential therapies, Yalom (1980) discussed how death anxiety is a primary source of psychopathology and how “boundary” experiences, which involve the temporary loss of self, produce powerful psychological transformations. Paradoxically, psychological well-being and the integrity of self are generated from the oscillation and interpenetration of self and no self. Through the act of negation, the crisis of self, and letting go, the paradox immerses the individual into this existential awareness. A Chinese allegory tells of a monk who embarks on a long pilgrimage to find the Buddha. After many years, he crosses a wide river to the land where the Buddha lives. There is a corpse floating on the water. It comes closer. The monk loses all control and wails, for he recognizes the corpse—it is his own. That moment is his liberation.

The mystical qualities of the koan may strike westerners as bizarre, alien, irrelevant to their own lives. But the final outcome of Zen training is simple and familiar. Mountains are once again mountains, and rivers are rivers. “Zen is one’s everyday mind”: You eat when you are hungry and sleep when tired. Similar to the outcome of psychotherapy, one lives in spontaneity and accepts one’s predicaments and one’s life rather than blaming oneself or others. The solution to one’s paradoxical problem is to see that it is not to be felt as a problem—similar to Freud’s idea that psychoanalysis turns an extraordinary misery into an everyday suffering. As Watts (1975) noted, The Zen master too has shortcomings but has learned to accept them as perfectly and simply human, unlike ordinary people who are at odds with their humanity and are at-



tempting to be angels or demons. The difficulty, according to Watts, is that self acceptance can never be a deliberate act; it is as paradoxical as kissing one's own lips. The liberating realization is that one's self can only be genuine and spontaneous if one lets go of the struggles to own it as property. Like the solution to the koan, once grasped as ungraspable, the self becomes free to move on its own accord.

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