'I Do Not Exist': Pathologies of Self Among Western Buddhists

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Abstract

This paper presents a clinical case involving a patient suffering 'depersonalisation' who had a psychotic episode at a Buddhist retreat. Recent writing on possible psychological risks of meditation has discussed problems of depersonalisation associated with misunderstandings of the Buddhist conception of non-self (*anātman*) and emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Drawing on the work of Winnicott and Bion, this article helps us to realise some of what is at stake in the failure to achieve and maintain an effective sense of self. What does Buddhist talk of non-self really mean? What conditions enable a creatively engaged and meaningful relational life, a sense of aliveness, human flourishing and a capacity for alterity?

Keywords Depersonalisation · Derealisation · Non-self (*anātman*) · Emptiness (*śūnyatā*) · Self · Alterity · Nihilism · Jung · Bion · Lévinas · Winnicott

'Eve'

Eve[1] arrives for her first session. I hear the gate open, close, then silence. I go to open the door in welcome, but intuitively hold back. There is a tentative knock so quiet that I would not have heard it if I wasn't already waiting by the door. I open it. Eyes downcast, she says very diffidently, 'well, … here I am'. Once inside she sits on the edge of the couch. Like a marionette puppet with no puppet master to hold her up, she crumples into the cushions. Her face has a haunted, hollowed out look, covering profound anguish.

Over the course of our analytic journey, her opening phrase 'well, … here I am' becomes something of a mantra, transmitting as yet unrealised poten-

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[1] All identifying details have been changed to protect anonymity Eve is an anonymous, fictionalised amalgam of patients suffering disorders of self.

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tial. Like the 'initial dream' which encapsulates the patient's psychological predicament, this simple phrase says it all. When she first came to see me, Eve was not 'well'. She had not been psychologically 'born', so she was not yet 'here' on earth. She felt that she was no more than an amoeba-like semblance of pre-life with no form, no substance, no past, no future, no sense of on-going being. She was skinless and porous—the emotional states of others passed through her like the tides of an ocean. She was not 'here'. There was no 'I am', no 'I and thou', no 'we', let alone any sense of being alive, real, interconnected with the world of others, let alone creativity, a sense of meaning, direction, or joie de vivre.

When, as a young adult, Eve found her way to a Tibetan Buddhist retreat, she initially felt great relief. Here was a philosophy that made sense of her states of non-being. Yet, due to excessive application of ascetic and meditative practices, Eve had a psychotic episode and was hospitalised. On discharge, she was advised to seek on-going psychological treatment. She sought me out as a Jungian because Jung, unlike Freud, did not dismiss spirituality.

'Eve' is representative of a number of patients suffering both derealisation and depersonalisation. They doubt the existence of the outer world (derealisation) and fear that they do not exist. In place of a sense of self, they have but an empty core inside (depersonalisation). Dugas, in 1898, applied the word 'depersonalisation' diagnostically to refer to 'a state in which there is the feeling or sensation that thoughts and acts elude the self and become strange; there is an alienation of personality; in other words, a depersonalisation' (Dugas and Moutier 1911, p. 13, in Sierra 2009, p. 9). For Dugas, the term 'personalisation' described the ability to attribute mental events to the self, that is, to 'personalise' (Sierra 2009, p. 9). Dugas in fact derived the term *dépersonnalisation* from the diary of the Swiss philosopher Amiel (1821–1881) who had written, 'All is strange to me; I am, as it were, outside my own body and individuality; I am *depersonalised*, detached, cut adrift' (1933, p. 275, in Sierra 2009, p. 9). Dugas and Moutier warned that as diagnostic term it should not be used literally but in a *style métaphorique*, to describe the subjective experience of feeling one does not truly exist and has no self.

Patients suffering depersonalisation may suffer what was termed nameless dread by Bion (1962) primitive agony by Winnicott (1974) or a black hole in the psyche (Clark 1983; Tustin 1988; Grotstein 1990). Such pathologies of self may lead to psychological forms of solipsism, terrors of non-existence and fears of alterity. Not only does such a person fear that 'I do not exist', there is a fear that 'others do not exist for me'. In addition, others, in their otherness, are experienced as threatening if not annihilating.

Philosophies, spiritualities and psychologies that seem to make sense of the experience of derealisation may be attractive to those suffering pathologies of self. Eve constructed a syncretic interpretation of Western existential, post-modern and neo-Nietzschean noble affirmation in the face of utter nihilism. This was combined with her own readings of Buddhist teachings on *nirvāṇa*, *anātman* and *śūnyatā,* which Eve interpreted as meaning, in turn, total extinction, non-existence and 'the void'.

Eve's existential predicament exemplifies a more general area of concern found in situations involving Western practitioners of Buddhism, whether in traditional settings in Asia, or Western settings ostensibly adapted to the Western mind. Have there been problems of translation in regard to Buddhist teachings on *anātman* (non-self) as implying the self is completely non-existent, and interpretations of *śūnyatā* (emptiness) as meaning all reality is non-existent, or void?

Such nihilistic readings may have adverse psychological consequences when they are used for defensive reasons to make sense of, yet thereby exacerbate, certain forms of psychopathology. In such situations, psychotherapy may be a useful adjunct to meditation practice, helping a meditator identify, resolve, dissolve and ultimately heal psychological wounds that obstruct realisation.

This relates to another issue concerning situations where Westerners attend large Buddhist retreats in which personalised psycho-spiritual care may be lacking. Traditionally, a Buddhist master would know the student well and carefully select appropriate teachings and practices according to a disciple's psychological, physical and spiritual predispositions, proficiency and maturity. For example, teaching emptiness or *śūnyatā* to someone who is not ready can be extremely harmful. As well as being detrimental for the student, it puts the teacher at risk of a major ethical infringement.[2] Skilful means and discernment are required in knowing how best to help a given person on their path to enlightenment.

Here, there might be a fruitful discussion to be had about the notion of self and non-self in both Buddhist and Western traditions, indeed a huge topic. I do not intend to take this on in full here, but I shall explore to some extent the relationship between Western philosophies of self and psychological pathologies of self as they are lived. I will refer to certain Western philosophers who have sought to transcend the problems of self-centric philosophy, focusing on the ethics of alterity of the philosopher Lévinas (1906–1996). Alterity for Lévinas goes beyond appreciation of difference, diversity or otherness. It is about venerating the enigmatic sanctity of another as a being whose nature remains beyond the grasp of comprehension, yet who is also intrinsically worthy of solicitude and care.

Alterity as a term avoids reification, the other *qua* other is not a concrete, unchanging, independent entity who I can self-centredly position in relation to myself. There is also inner alterity, the recognition that we too are unknowable, beyond ideas and concepts, forever in a dynamic process of change, not a fixed state of being. Alterity resonates with Buddhist teachings on non-duality and *anātman*, views that transcend self-other dualities but instead emphasise interdependence, impermanence and inconceivable ineffability beyond name and form.

Recognition of alterity is a hard-won developmental achievement. Drawing on the psychoanalysts Donald Winnicott and Wilfred Bion, I trace some of the conditions

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[2] Those who have taken bodhisattva vows incur a major root downfall if they teach scriptures relating to *śūnyatā* to those who are not ready, causing them to be terrified and then fall away from the path (Goodman 2016, pp. 64–65). The bodhisattva vows derive from the Ākāśagarbha Sūtra via Shantideva's Shikshasamuccaya. A bodhisattva is one who, out of compassion, undertakes to bring all beings to the state of perfect Buddhahood.

enabling a creatively engaged and meaningful relational life, a sense of aliveness, human flourishing and a capacity for alterity.

Analysis: A Relational Affair?

Jung saw a person's life-task as involving self-realisation, which involves the gradual bringing together of disparate elements of the psyche into an integrated unity of wholeness, which he called 'individuation'. Yet Jung also saw individuation as inherently relational and intersubjective. He said, 'for two personalities to meet is like two different chemical substances: if there is any combination at all, both are transformed' (Jung, CW 16, para 163). Embedded in Jung's observation are implications concerning intersubjectivity, interdependence and the centrality of relationship in the human condition.

Within the psychoanalytic tradition, contemporary relational psychoanalytic approaches emphasise the centrality of internalised and interpersonal relationships in human development. Here, we might mention the Object Relations School, Attachment Theory, Field Theory, The Relational School, the Conversational Model, Intersubjectivity Theory and Infant Research.

The Object Relations School signalled a move away from classical Freudian drive theory towards a relational and developmental view of self. Ronald Fairbairn said that 'close relationships [are] the ground of the self'. The task of therapy was to liberate a patient from a closed intrapsychic system into an open, interpersonal one (Fairbairn 1952, p. 109). Winnicott, Bowlby and Bion also underscored the primacy of relationship in the development of self. Bion said that 'an emotional experience cannot be conceived of in isolation from a relationship' (Bion 1962/1983, p. 42). Bowlby argued that the child is relational from the beginning of life and that 'attachment behaviour is held to characterise human beings from the cradle to the grave' (Bowlby 1979, p. 129). Attachment theory focuses on how unconscious internal working models of relationship develop out of interactions with caregivers. The Relational School of Psychoanalysis, which integrates British Object Relations theory with American interpersonal psychoanalysis, also draws on social constructionism and intersubjectivity theory in philosophy as well as intersubjective infant research. Analytic Field Theory, deriving from parallel traditions in Latin America, North America and France, focuses on the dynamic interplay between intrapsychic and intersubjective processes in the constantly evolving and interdependent co-creation of subjectivity.

In regard to possible confluences between Western concepts of self and Buddhist teachings on *anātman*, the significance of the relational turn in psychoanalysis is the move away from earlier models of self which tended to construct the self as an isolated, intrapsychic, independent subject as master in his or her own house. Instead, there is recognition of interdependence rather than independence, intersubjectivity rather than the isolated self, selving as verbal process not noun. The recognition of the unconscious, (as process not as a reified entity), has led to the decentring of the subject, the acknowledgement of how much we do not know about ourselves or others, how much remains hidden. Who we are at a given point of time is not only in

constant flux from moment to moment but emerges and disperses, is created and destroyed, in a constantly co-evolving, co-emergent dynamic of co-being.

Despite the relational turn in psychoanalysis, does it reach beyond the goal of individuation and self-realisation for one's own sake, that is, the sake of the person seeking self-realisation? I would argue that an essential component of self-realisation is other realisation, if not ultimately transcending any such dualistic self-other configurations. Responsiveness to the primordial call of others, valuing their unfathomable alterity with a concomitant out-flowing of care and compassion, may enable liberation from the confines of a narrow and rigid self-centrism.

Eve is plagued by a waking nightmare.

'I do not exist. All you see is a shell with no being inside, a mask covering nothingness. I am no one and no thing. I am the unborn, the non-existent.'

Eve defended against existential dread by attempting to turn it into a nihilistic philosophy. She also eschewed relationships or human connectivity. Eve's personal form of spirituality emphasized physical and environmental purity and extreme asceticism. Any hint of attachment to body, possessions or people was to be rigorously renounced. Hers was, one might say, a schizoid split of both mind-body and self-other fuelled with her particular conglomeration of intellectual and spiritual defences.

A year after Eve began therapy she hands me a note. She is too frightened to say it aloud in my presence. It reads:

'I have come to the realisation that fear of saying "here I am" touches the core of why I am here. Trusting that I might rise to the occasion of being who I am, and that you will rise to occasion of meeting me as I am. Here. Now. But I despair. I still don't feel real. I'm so alone. I get sick of sitting at home with only my philosophy books for company, but other people terrify me.'

Selving and Othering in Philosophy and Depth Psychology

A fundamental problem that has occupied Western philosophy is the relation of self to others. The origin of the philosophical problem derives from the conceptual primacy of a private, sovereign subject or perceiving ego. How does that self then relate to other selves? Are others similar or different? How can I know another? Or, at least, to what extent, and how much is it subjective apperception and projective and how much is it 'objective'?

The theme of the self and its relations to others permeate the history of psychoanalysis, just as it has permeated Western philosophy. The Jungian goal of individuation derives in part from a post-Scholastic and neo-Platonic Western tradition of self-salvation, reinforced by post-Kantian Idealism, Weimar classical aesthetics, the emphasis on individual salvation in Northern European Protestantism and German Romantic subjectivism. Writers such as Goethe and Novalis

emphasised self-cultivation, the primacy of the self and search for wholeness. Schelling's theory of the emergence of consciousness out of the unconsciousness became a basic model for nineteenth century German psychology and psychiatry. This emergence was seen as cultural, personal and universal, but not interpersonal. Individuation was conceived as ultimately a quest for personal self-realisation, wherein alterity is incorporated within the overarching sphere of the Self.

If our starting premise is the centrality of an independent, autonomous self, then it inevitably makes relations with others problematic. As the Russian philosopher Vladimir Soloviev argued, egoism consists in making oneself the centre, the world only a circumference. This creates an 'absolute opposition, an impassable gulf…between one's own self and other beings' (Soloviev 1918/2010, p. 72).

The legacy of such a first-person standpoint, characteristic of much post-scholastic Western thought, can lead to feeling constricted within a psychologically monadic state of alienation. The idea of human autonomy and individualism, stemming from over-emphasis on 'I am' and 'I think', leads to the primacy of the intra-psychic and hence to a position of solipsistic isolation. Such philosophical issues are not abstract but can be highly disturbing psychological experiences. Schizoid, dissociative, borderline and narcissistic disorders of self may be compounded by recourse to philosophically self-centric views. The question is whether philosophical problems exacerbate psychological, spiritual and interpersonal ones: that is, whether they can universalise or normalise psychological experiences of isolation, existential anxiety and terrors of alterity.

> Eve attended an intensive ten-day retreat run by Western neo-Buddhist teachers at a sea-side camping ground in Northern Queensland. The daily routine consisted of teachings followed by twelve hours alternating analytic, single-pointed and walking meditations. The retreat was conducted in strict silence, all interaction with other participants forbidden, including eye-contact. This was a relief for Eve as she shied away from social engagement. However, there was no opportunity to discuss the disturbing experiences and perceptual distortions that arose during meditation. After a teaching on emptiness, Eve felt literally mortified. She described feeling suspended in thin air, but there was no one to be suspended because she didn't exist and there was no air to suspend her as there was no air either. In fact it felt as if there was no one, no where, no thing but pure no-thing-ness, and this nothingness was 'evil'.

> Eve was found by a passer-by wading naked into dangerous surf near the retreat. She told me she was supposed to owe her life to that person, for the area was known for its dangerous rips and there had been previous drownings. But, she said, 'what life is there to lose for someone who doesn't exist in the first place?'

> Eve's existential loneliness is poignantly described by the Jungian analyst Robert Hobson:

> 'I have no being' carries with it the implication 'No-one is there'. I have no sense of contact with another person who can confirm that 'I am me',

capable of having an identity separate from the world of people and things 'out there'. Even my body is alien. There is a threat of *non-being*—a loss of the capacity to speak the word 'I'… In non-being there is some mysterious uncanny sense of the unknown, of an annihilation in which 'I' cease to be (Hobson 1974, p. 76).

Eve's nameless dread also raises two further considerations. Firstly, there is the question of what *śūnyatā* and *anātman* might inconceivably mean in the original Buddhist context (remembering that there are different points of view in different schools). Secondly, there is the traditional teacher–student relationship and the specific circumstances in which a teacher would ordinarily give teachings on *śūnyatā* and *anātman*.

Both *śūnyatā* and *anātman* are apophatic terms designed to transcend what are seen as the two extreme views: those of eternalism (Skt. *nitya dṛṣṭi*) and nihilism (*uccheda dṛṣṭi*). Eternalism refers to the belief in oneself being concrete, independent, eternal and singular. Nihilism is the belief that nothing exists, there is no ultimate reality. Unfortunately, due to misinterpretations of both terms, Eve fell into nihilism. Mingyur Rinpoche observes that *śūnyatā*:

> is probably one of the most misunderstood words in Buddhist philosophy. It is hard enough for Buddhists to understand the term, but Western readers have an even more difficult time, because many of the early translators of Sanskrit and Tibetan Buddhists interpreted *emptiness* as "the Void" or nothingness—mistakenly equating emptiness with the idea that nothing at all exists (Mingyur and Swanson 2007, p. 59).

According to Mingyur Rinpoche, emptiness does not mean nothingness, but 'rather an unlimited potential for anything to appear, change, or disappear'. Mingyur Rinpoche suggests that better translations for *śūnyatā*, which in Tibetan is *tongpa-nyi*, might be 'inconceivable', 'unnameable', 'infinite possibility' (Mingyur and Swanson 2007, pp. 59–60 and p. 76).

From what Eve told me, the retreat director presented the Buddhist view of *śūnyatā* in a way that seemed to imply utter annihilation, non-existence, a void of nothingness. Eve also did not receive the benefits of a committed one-to-one student–teacher relationship with a realised master, nor did she receive supportive psychological care. A metaphor given in many Buddhist teachings is that the Buddha is like a doctor, the teachings like medicine, and the student like a patient who is ill. It is said that Buddha observed there were over 84,000 forms of emotional and psychological disease; consequently, he taught over 84,000 forms of meditation as psychological medicine, to be applied judiciously according to need. So too, the Buddhist teacher needs to diagnose the particular psychological, physical and spiritual conditions pertaining to a given student. The teacher can then prescribe the right teachings and meditative practices for that student. What is medicine for one student might be poison for another. A student suffering fear of ego-loss can have adverse reactions when introduced to teachings on *śūnyatā*. Even highly experienced meditators tend to find *śūnyatā* confronting. It is said that Bodhisattvas on the Path of Accumulation, when beginning to truly

realise *śūnyatā*, may be terrified that they are being extinguished and becoming non-existent.

One might also wonder whether one reason that Buddhist teachings on non-self might aggravate disorders of self in those such as Eve, is due to the over-emphasis on the isolated, atomised subject in much of Western thought, a problem we will now return to.

Philosophical Solutions to the Problem of Solipsism and Individualism

Merleau-Ponty, Buber and Lévinas all sought to overturn the tyranny of the isolated subject in their different ways: Merleau-Ponty through recourse to love; Buber through the mutuality of self and other (I-thou relations); and Lévinas through turning the question of the relationship of self and others around and starting with otherness itself. Merleau-Ponty held that 'to love is inevitably to enter into an undivided situation with another. From the moment one is joined with someone else… One is not what he would be without that love; the perspectives remain separate—and yet they overlap' (Merleau-Ponty, as cited in Frie 1997, p. 92). Buber wrote that 'in the beginning is relation' (Buber 1970, p. 32), pre-empting relational currents in psychoanalysis. Buber emphasises the relational spaces between people, and the 'I-thou' subject-to-subject encounter, rather than 'I-It' where the other is treated as a thing or object. 'I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You. All actual life is encounter' (Buber 1970, p. 62).

Lévinas: Ethics Precedes Ontology

Central to the philosophy of Lévinas (1906–1996) is the idea that ethics precedes ontology. From this perspective, concern for beings, and how we ethically relate to beings, is prior to concerns about Being and how we conceptualise it. Lévinas felt that such ethical priority had been ignored by Western philosophy, from Plato to Hegel and Husserl and on to Heidegger, through over-preoccupation with ontology. As well there was a prioritising of 'the Same' (*le Même*) over the alterity of the Other (*l'Autre*), and attempts to reduce 'the Other to the Same' through a relationship of knowledge (*TI*, 33-4/43).

For Heidegger, the other becomes absorbed into the self via *Mitsein.* For Sartre, the other is a threat, creating a 'little particular crack in my universe' and stealing the world from me. For Emmanuel Lévinas, the other is not a threat, except to my unmitigated power, autonomous freedom and narcissism.

Lévinas suggests that self comes into being through recognition of the other. Through being subject to the ethical call of the other for our solicitude and care, we become substantial. Here, he is playing on the words subject, subjectivity and substantial. Subjectivity is not based on egocentrism but as 'founded in the idea of

infinity' (Lévinas 1969, p. 26). The human being, in having 'an idea of infinity', is by definition, a 'thought which contains more than can be thought' (Lévinas 1987a, p. 54).[3]

Lévinas was concerned by the predominance within Western civilisation of tendencies towards totalisation and reduction in all phenomena to a spurious unity or sameness. When ideologies deny alterity, they fail to apprehend others in their own right, their unknowable yet venerable sanctity, rendering those non-entities to be ignored, exploited, rejected or obliterated. He warned that we damage our own subjectivity and humanity by doing so. There is a correlation between ideologies involving denial of alterity (such as totalitarianism, fascism and fundamentalism) and enactments of that denial. Attempts at totalisation may use different methods to achieve its aim: assimilation, incorporation, conversion, homogenisation, and when this fails, expulsion if not annihilation.

The Ethical (*l'éthique*)

The word 'the ethical' (*l'éthique*) in the context of an ethics of alterity has a specific meaning. It does not infer an ethical system, a set of moral standards, a 'code of ethics'. It is more about recognition of the enigmatic sanctity and holiness[4] of another human being and the responsibility such recognition invites:

> You know, they often speak of ethics to describe what I do, but what interests me when all is said and done is not ethics … it's the holy, the holiness of the holy (Lévinas, in conversation with Derrida 1999, p. 4.).

There are vital distinctions to be made when discussing Lévinas' ethics of alterity. An encounter with the other presents a primordial ethical moment, but this does not necessarily imply that we *will* respond ethically. However hard we try to deny or obliterate the alterity of another, alterity itself cannot be destroyed. Excommunication, violence and murder are secondary reactions to the unavoidable confrontation with the shock of alterity. Even when citing the Judeo-Christian commandment 'thou shalt not kill', Lévinas suggests that the commandment is paradoxical. The other can be killed but not their otherness. 'Lévinas does not tell us that we *should not* kill the Other; he tells us rather that the Other [in their otherness] *cannot* be killed' (Davis 1996, p. 50).

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[3] This phrase is an allusion to the third of Descartes' *Meditations* (1664), concerning the relation between the *res cogitans* and the infinity of God.

[4] Holiness as defined by Rudolf Otto is *ganze andere*–wholly other.

Alterity Undefined

Alterité as a term derives etymologically from the Latin 'alter' meaning 'other'. Yet alterity is more than a synonym for otherness or difference. Although including awareness of otherness, respect for difference, and heteropathic forms of empathy,[5] an ethics of alterity embraces the discipline of not-knowing, or what Lévinas refers to as the philosophy of the enigma. There is absolute ineffability, absolute otherness, the otherness of the other, the otherness of the self. How does one respond to others, not as 'another me', or covered with projections of our own uncanny strangeness, but as subjects in their own right, with vastly different ways of being and seeing the world?

In regard to translation, Lévinas differentiates two terms for 'other' in French. *l'Autre* refers to the 'other' as non-personalised other, usually translated with lower case 'other' and the personalised *l' Autrui* the Other, distinguished in English with upper case. Lévinas uses various terms all translated in English as 'other' (*Autre, autre, Autrui*) and is not always consistent. Lévinas scholars have tended to capitalise 'Other' when referring to the human other and lower case 'other' when referring to otherness in general. The term *autrui* usually means the 'personal other' and *autre* otherness or alterity. But sometimes, *Autre* refers to God. Alterity is deliberately used to differentiate the sense of enigma from difference as in Derrida's *différance* (a deliberately homophonic misspelling of *difference*).

In the context of psychotherapy, there is a need to avoid the dangers of imposing a totalising psychoanalytic model upon a patient, delivered through interpretations that assume superior knowing. The alterity, irreplaceable uniqueness and actuality of a given patient transcend all formulations, theoretical constructs and diagnostic criteria. Instead, the therapist should be open, receptive to all the patient wishes to express, all that is seeking expression behind their expression, all that cannot be expressed. This expression, for Lévinas, overflows any idea or concept, yet it is also a welcoming [*accueillance*] in which 'the very epiphany of the face is produced' (Lévinas 1969, p. 51).

Just as the psychoanalytic relationship is asymmetrical, Lévinas' view of the ethical relationship is asymmetrical, such 'essential asymmetry' being the 'very basis of ethics' and the foundation for true freedom. Regarding such non-reciprocal asymmetry, Lévinas cites Alyosha Karamazov: 'We are all responsible for everyone

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[5] Empathy, as I understand it, has a complex linguistic history. *Einfühlung* was originally coined by the philosopher von Herder (1744–1803), in his text *This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity* (1774). Herder argued that it requires imagination to feel one's way into another via *Einfühlung* 'feeling-with' or 'feeling into' what is different. Difference is the critical word here, for empathy is not based on identification but is heteropathic. *Einfühlung* as an inter-personal activity can be seen as an imaginative act that seeks to cross the divide between different forms of self-consciousness, different view-points, different cultures. Theodor Lipps extended *Einfühlung* to interpersonal understanding, viewing it as the primary mode by which we are able to feel our way into another's reality. Lipps saw *Einfühlung* and sympathy as synonymous. Yet the American psychologist Titchener (1867–1927) held that *Einfühlung* and sympathy were not the same, so in 1909 coined the term 'empathy' to translate *Einfühlung*. Empathy came to be used extensively to depict our capacity to feel into another person's experience. Sympathy came to be regarded rather derogatorily as a lesser capacity tinged with sentimentalism.

else—but I am more responsible than all the others', adding that 'I must always demand more of myself than of the other'. However, this principle was something Lévinas applied only to himself: 'If I say that 'virtue is its own reward' I can only say so *for myself;* as soon as I make this a standard for the other I exploit him' (Lévinas and Kearney 1986, p. 31). However, rather than negating the self, this ethical relationship with the other entails peace and non-violence:

> The face in which the Other—the absolutely other—presents herself does not negate …It remains commensurate with him who welcomes; it remains terrestrial. This presentation is pre-eminently non-violence, for instead of offending my freedom it calls it to responsibility and founds it. As non-violence, it nonetheless maintains the plurality of the Same and the Other. It is peace (Lévinas 1969, pp. 222–203).

Such a foundation for freedom grants the possibility of creative expansion beyond the narrow horizons of insular systems of belief, liberation from the strictures of egocentrism, a brush with eternity, the trace of the infinite: 'the Infinite comes in the signifyingness of the face. The face *signifies* the infinite' (Lévinas 1985, p. 105).

Face to Face (le face à face)

> The welcoming of the face is peaceable from the first, for it answers to the unquenching Desire for Infinity (Lévinas 1969, p. 65).

Lévinas said 'ethics begins in apprehending the face of the Other'. The face-to-face encounter is iconic of a relational context in which ethical responsiveness towards another's inviolable unknowable mystery is primordial. It is prior to all philosophical concerns with ontology, epistemology or even philosophy itself. The face-to-face relation (*le face à face*) is an epiphany of holiness, inviolability and vulnerability. It is a revelation of the invisible in the visible, the manifestation of infinity in the finitude of the being of beings.

The immediacy of the face paradoxically reveals hiddenness: defying categorisation, representation, comprehension: 'the encounter with a face which at once gives and conceals the other' (Lévinas 1987b, p. 79). The face also reveals holiness, inviolability and vulnerability, the manifestation of the invisible in the visible, infinity in the finitude of the being of beings.

Lévinas also observed that it is very difficult to kill someone you look at face to face, as if their vulnerable gaze commands 'Thou shalt not kill', yet 'at the same time, the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all. And me, whoever I may be, but as a 'first person', I am he who finds the resources to respond to the call (Lévinas 1985, p. 89).

So too, when a baby is born, takes its first breath and cries it thereby calls upon its mother to respond to its call, face to face. A baby, according to Winnicott, feels real because it is seen and held in the loving mind of another. The baby bathes in mother's attention, face to face, voice to voice, eye to eye, body to body.

Being Born, Being Seen, Feeling Real: The Psychological Perspective

According to Object Relations, Intersubjective, Relational Psychoanalysis, and Attachment theory, we are born into the world as relational beings needing to be welcomed into a loving atmosphere of care and concern. The trauma of birth needs to be mediated by vital emotional, environmental and interpersonal conditions. We need mother's loving mind to ponder our being in a state of reverie. Through her capacity to bear our unthinkable anxieties and primitive terrors, she renders them thinkable and bearable. Psychological birth requires a capacity to tolerate no-thing-ness, absence, whilst that which is inchoate, unknown, unrecognised and unborn is coming into being. When a baby does not come into the world comforted, cradled and contained, a psychological catastrophe occurs. Do we exist if we are not held in the mind of another? Are we essentially alone? Is awareness of separation and solitude as fundamentally terrifying as mortality and death or something we can somehow bear? Aloneness is not always loneliness, as it was for Eve. From the per-spective of psychoanalysis, how is the kind of existential alienation that Eve suffered understood and salved if not healed?

> Eve didn't feel real. Eve didn't feel that she had been born. Eve's parents had planned to have a natural birth in a birthing centre. Their first child would be born, 'trailing clouds of glory' (Wordsworth 1961, p. 628), into a Leb-oyer pool, in a dimly lit, quiet atmosphere. However, this did not occur. At 32 weeks it was discovered that the baby was suffering foetal distress. The mother had an emergency caesarean. The moment Eve was violently extracted from the womb, due to haemorrhaging complications, her mother was taken into another operating theatre. The nurse handed the little Eve to her father to hold, but the father fainted at the sight of the pools of blood on the floor. Eve had a recurring nightmare of falling from a great height into a sea of blood. From as long as She could remember, her parents had relayed the story of her traumatic entry into life. In fact, unbeknown to us all, this was a traumasong reverberating through the corridors of intergenerational time.

'I Am': A Sense of Self

Did you create that or did you find it? (Winnicott 1969, p. 712)

A sense of self depends on the provision of key intersubjective responsiveness between baby and parent in the early psychological atmosphere. Holding, contain-ment, attunement, synchrony, resonance, mirroring, recognition, being interacted with and loved—all give rise to a feeling of being real, of having a self. Even if this sense of self is no longer master in its own house, unconscious as well as conscious, multiple if not split, ever changing, interdependent, impermanent, decentred, there is nevertheless a sense of self which does a good-enough job of keeping us from fall-ing through the cracks of non-existence.

Psychoanalysts, like philosophers, differ as to whether there is a primary or potential self from the very beginning of life, or whether self is something that develops over time and only under certain conditions. They also define self in very different ways. Jung's view of self is manifold, 'an extremely composite thing, a 'conglomerate soul', to use the Indian expression' (*CW* 9i, para. 634). Jung believed that the true self only truly comes into the fullness of being in the second half of life. According to Samuels, one simple definition is that self represents the 'potential for integration of the total personality', including 'all psychological and mental processes, physiology and biology, all positive and negative, realised or unrealised potential, and the spiritual dimension' (Samuels 2003, p. 72).

The Jungian analyst Michael Fordham puts forward the view of a self that is primary as well as relational, dynamic and developmental, involving processes of de-integration and integration as it meets with the peopled world (Fordham 1957, p. 127).

For Winnicott, 'the central self could be said to be the inherited potential which is experiencing a continuity of being, and acquiring in its own way and at its own speed a personal psychic reality and a personal body-scheme' (Winnicott 1965a, p. 46). Winnicott defined psyche as 'the imaginative elaboration of somatic parts, feelings, and functions, that is, of physical aliveness' (Winnicott 1949/1992b, p. 244). 'Personalisation' was, quite simply, the 'development of the feeling that one's person is in one's body' (Winnicott 1945/1992a, pp. 150–151). The sense that 'I am' depends on feeling that I am seen, that I exist in the mind of another, that 'I have been recognised as a being' (Winnicott 1965b, p. 61). The sense that 'I am' and that others are 'not me' emerges out of original pre-differentiated merger states.

> The achievement of integration is the unit. First comes 'I' which includes 'everything else is not me'. Then comes 'I am, I exist', I gather experiences and enrich myself and have an introjectory and projective interaction with the NOT-ME, the actual world of shared reality' (Winnicott 1962, p. 61).

Over-emphasis on the individual self can lead to dualistic self-other divisions. Yet merger states of non-distinction and fusion can also be a denial of the 'not-me'. Instead, the child needs to develop the capacity for a relationship of what Hobson calls 'aloneness–togetherness' where 'there is an apprehension of distinction and of mutuality, of autonomy and of reciprocity, of identity and of sharing. In egocentric pre-rational thinking, there is no separation: no togetherness, no recognition of, and sensitivity to the feelings and point of view of the other' (Hobson, p. 26).

The Buddhist resolution of this dilemma is non-dualism and interdependence. According to many schools of Buddhism, the root of all mental suffering and psychological disorder is a fundamental ignorance which involves a mistaken belief that one's self or ego or I is autonomous, independent, unchanging. This leads to self-grasping (*ahamkāra/ātmagraha, ngar/bdag 'dzin*). In turn, this leads to concepts of 'my' and 'mine' (*mamakāra/ātmagraha, nga yi/bdag gir 'dzin pa*). Candrakīrti writes:

> First, [beings] grasp at 'I' thinking 'this is me',
> Then, [they] grasp at things thinking 'this is mine'

And sway without self-control like a paddlewheel.
(in Phuntsho 2005, p. 24).

From the original clinging to ego, dualistic divisions abound between what is I and mine, as well as notions of others as being separate. One arranges the world in a self-centred way, in terms of likes and dislikes, attachment and aversion, greed and hatred. Dharmakīrti warns that 'if self exists', then the concept of 'other is conceived. From discriminating the self and other arise attachment and hatred' and then 'all the defects come into being' (in Phuntsho 2005, p. 24).

The question here is how to pass beyond ordinary mind, mired in perceptual distortions and dualistic constrictions, to the ultimate nature of mind, the base of all which is primordially pure, free and unlimited, luminous, empty of inherent nature, spacious, infinite, unlimited, unborn, unceasing, clear light, radiant, fully awake and also radiates compassion and a sense of non-dual communion with all beings.

This also raises the question of whether enlightenment is there as a potential to be developed, or whether, like a diamond covered in grime, it is there underneath all that obscures it. In the latter view, enlightenment requires discovery of our fundamental original nature, rather than attainment of it. As Mingyur Rinpoche puts it 'Buddhism is not so much concerned with getting well as with *recognising* that you are, right here, right now, as good, as essentially well as you could ever hope to be' (Mingyur and Swanson 2007, p. 11).

In the Buddhist context of Dzogchen, our 'fundamental nature' (*dngos po'i gnas lugs*) is not something created, developed or attained, but something to be uncovered, recognised and realised. The fundamental nature of the mind is the *tathāgatagarbha*, 'or essence of enlightenment in all beings' which is 'present from the beginning' (Guarisco 2015, p. 36).

Being Seen, Feeling Real, Feeling Real, Seeing the World

Winnicott observed that a baby's sense of being real emerges out of feeling seen. When a baby looks at mother's face, the baby sees its own reflection in the mother's imitative expression. As Winnicott described it, 'the mother is looking at the baby and *what she looks like reflects what she sees there*' (Winnicott 1971, p. 131).

Adapting Berkeley's *esse est percipi*, to a psychological context concerning the development of a human being, Winnicott writes:

When I look I am seen, so I exist.
I can now afford to look and see.
I now look creatively and what I apperceive I also perceive.
In fact I take care not to see what is not there to be seen (unless I am tired)
(Winnicott 1971, p. 134).

The baby begins to see through 'being seen' to being able to 'see' the other as another and not simply a figment of its imagination:

Eventually, after a capacity for relationships has been established, such babies can take the next step towards recognition of the essential aloneness of the human being. Eventually such a baby grows up to say, 'I know that there is no direct contact between external reality and myself, only an illusion of contact, a midway phenomenon that works very well for me when I am not tired. I couldn't care less that there is a philosophical problem involved.

Babies with slightly less fortunate experiences are really bothered by the idea of there being no direct contact with external reality. A sense of threat of loss of capacity for relationships hangs over them all the time. For them the philosophical problem becomes and remains a vital one, a matter of life and death, of feeding or starvation, of love or isolation (Winnicott 1988, pp. 114–115).

Maternal Reverie, Containment of Unthinkable Anxieties and Nameless Dread

When all goes well at the proverbial 'first feed', the mother takes into her heart, as a form of unconscious communication, unthinkable anxieties such as fear of dying. According to Bion, the mother's capacity to retain a 'balanced state of mind' (Bion 1959) means she is able to contain, bear and think what was for the infant uncontainable, unbearable and unthinkable.

Normal development follows if the relationship between infant and breast permits the infant to project a feeling, say, that it is dying into the mother and to reintroject it after its sojourn in the breast has made it tolerable to the infant psyche' (Bion 1962,116).

Through her containment, the mother metabolises the baby's fears of impeding death, transmuting nameless dread 'into vitality and confidence' (Bion 1963, p. 31). However:

If the projection is not accepted by the mother the infant feels that its feeling that it is dying is stripped of such meaning that it has. It therefore reintrojects, not a fear of dying made tolerable, but a nameless dread (Bion 1962, p. 116).

Eve's mother could not 'tolerate experiencing such feelings' and became 'prey to the anxiety' projected into her by Eve (Bion 1959, p. 313). She was left with the threat of non-being made infinitely worse.

I was around three. I was playing on a headland near our house and I slipped and fell down the cliff. I only fell half way and was rescued by a passer-by who took me home. But I was so scared I messed myself. I tried to clean myself up but my father found me and yelled 'you are disgusting!' I ran to my mother for comfort but she was not there. I didn't know it at the time but she had been hospitalized again for post-natal depression. I was overwhelmed with terror: was she dead?

Later I asked my mother 'what happens when we die? Will you be there when I die?' She didn't answer. I couldn't stop crying but my father just hit me and said 'don't be a cry-baby'.

Such a traumatic event exacerbated Eve's original fall into the world off the operating table. She felt herself to be falling forever in an alien universe without limits: infinity was evil, eternity was evil, and she felt herself to be an alien.

Transitional Space, the Me and the Not-Me, Play Leading to Capacity To Be Alone

Winnicott argued that the subject comes into being in the potential space between mother and infant. In this space, self and other are neither one nor two but somehow make up an interpenetrating interpersonal field. Transitional space is a protected realm of trust, in which imagination, creativity and culture are generated. One can withdraw attention from the outer environment because one is being 'minded'. Paradoxically, being held in mind gives rise to a capacity to be alone in the presence of another. Such a sense of presence enables one to bear absence. A baby also develops the capacity to be alone, to enjoy solitude as well as fulfilling relationships. We need to be minded in all senses of the word. Unfortunately, Eve was not minded in any sense of the word.

Feeling terribly apprehensive when about to go on another Buddhist retreat, Eve asked 'will you hold me in mind?' I answered, 'Of course I will'. In fact, I thought, I always hold you in mind. I had 'minded her' and cared about her since our first session. One of the things that psychotherapy offers is that we hold the patient in our hearts and mind, perhaps not always at the forefront of our awareness, but at a subliminal level, session to session, week to week, year by year. We commit to be there with the patient on their life journey for as long as we are needed, like a companion on the way. This 'companionship', the feeling that another is with you, cares for you, tries to understand you in all your complexity and alterity, brings presence into the absences, understanding into misunderstanding, yet cognizant of what is ever elusive and unknowable. That it continues over time, gives rise to threads of continuity that are woven into the on-going, interdependent, ever changing and evolving tapestry of a life.

There are parallels between the state of reverie that Bion describes and meditation. The patient bathes in the therapist's 'balanced state of mind' (Bion 1959). The therapist is fully present, compassionately attuned, with what Freud called 'free-floating' or 'evenly suspended attention' (*gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit*). Reik advocated poised attention, and 'listening with the third ear', observing that in analysis 'one mind speaks to another beyond words and in silence' (Reik 1949, p. 144).

Continuity and Going on Being

An important aspect of feeling real is that there is a sense of continuity, of going on being, that we are integrated, coherent, continuous, even if we are also de-integrated, incoherent and discontinuous.

Winnicott's 'going on being' depicts a sense of continuity of a sense of being real, creatively alive, through the vicissitudes of life. 'Going on being' is also relational: the sense that another continuously holds us in mind gives rise to a sense of continuity of being.

In Buddhism, the word 'tantra' also means continuity, without interruption. Guenther compares tantra to a loom, and figuratively 'a weaving of one's life' (Guenther 1996, p. ix). He relates tantra to interdependence and inter-relationship. Such 'continuity of being … arises out of the question of how we are going to *be*. Tantra also sees the question of how we are going to be in terms of relationship, realising that [one] is always related to something or someone' (Guenther 1975, p. 2). Trungpa uses the analogy of that which threads things together: 'In Tibetan tantra is called *rgyud*, which is like the thread that runs through beads' (Trungpa 1975, p. 8).

Discontinuity, Disruption, De-integration, Disintegration

New experiences may initially feel disruptive to our sense of going on being. But as we integrate such experiences, the flow of life continues, ideally enriched by such experience. Some experiences, however, may be so overwhelming that integration is not immediately possible, resulting in trauma. What is the consequence for being creatively alive if we have suffered too long a separation at too early a time for this to be repaired? According to Winnicott, a baby might be able to face mother's absence for x minutes, possibly recover from $x+y$ minutes, but that $x+y+z$ minutes leads to a fissuring in the psyche:

> If a breaking point is reached, the sense of continuity is lost. This rupture of continuity is associated with such primitive agonies as a return to an unintegrated state, falling forever, loss of psychosomatic unity, and loss of the sense of reality and the capacity to relate to objects…the subject tries to find some way of organizing herself in the face of an unthinkable agony, in which the personality is threatened by a fate worse than nothingness (Eigen 1993, p. 120).

We are all marked by areas of sensitivity, wounds, traumatic complexes. But, as Eigen (1993) observes, we may also suffer a sense of pervasive deadness, that at the deepest level bears witness to a 'fissuring, dissolving, breaking' lapse in the continuity of existence, that once was unendurable and endless, an 'evil eternity' (Eigen 1993, p. 121).

Eve's 'evil eternity' derived from an emotionally dead mother, a sense not of a pregnant absence, but an annihilating absence thus engendering a primordial break in life's continuity, a psychic black hole.

Nameless Dread

I open the door to a white, frozen mask. I know immediately that Eve has disappeared again into what she calls 'the void'. She sits down like an automaton, stares in stony silence at the wall as if staring into space. I do not exist for her, she is totally isolated in her own realm of non-existence. The sense of deadly despair pervades the room. I feel myself fading into nothingness, this realm of absence, unmitigated, bleakness and blankness.

We sit in silence, sometimes for session after session. I wonder what on earth do I have to offer her? Nothing, it seems.

I long to reassure her that things will get better, that I am with her, silently present rather than silently absent like her mother. An abyss opens up between us. On her side She is sucked into the evil eternity of a psychic black hole, evil because the isolation is, for her, totally absolute. On my side, I want to find a way to cross the abyss of agonised alienation, to offer some gesture of hope. All I can do is silently but emotionally connect to this unbearable zone. One day I can bear it no longer. I break the silence, saying:

'I would go where angels fear to tread, to be with you in your hell-realm.'

She looks up momentarily, with a penetrating indictment replies:

'I am not in the hell realms. I am the hell-realms. I am nothingness incarnate.'

We sit for what feels t like an agonising eternity, listening to the deafening silence of the void.

Eve's painful silences during such sessions arose out of her isolation in a universe of nameless dread:

In loneliness we are inarticulate. There are no words. That is the agony. We cannot speak our loneliness but perhaps (a large "perhaps") if we are able to discover and to rest in our loneliness there might emerge some fragments of a language in which we can speak out of it, and maybe our speaking will find an echo in the loneliness of another. When imprisoned in the deepest loneliness, I am dumb. Walled around by terror, I assume that no one else can ever be like this. Only me. Often, there is intense shame—for in our society, however much we may talk of heroic or creative solitude, it is not at all acceptable to say 'I am lonely' (Hobson 1985, pp. 267–268).

The Development of a Capacity for Alterity

How does a child come to appreciate alterity and unpredictability? How does a child intuitively imagine the emotional states of the others and come to a psychological experience of 'the problem of other minds' or 'other-mindedness'? The child needs to first feel recognised responsively face to face in Lévinas' sense.

A capacity for alterity develops from having caregivers who were receptive to a child's ever-changing, unfathomable alterity. Such parents are able to enjoy the child's unique 'spontaneous gestures' of the true self, rather than expecting the child to conform to their expectations. In other words, for a child to develop a capacity for alterity, the child's parents had to have had a capacity for alterity.

When a child fears disapproval, distain or anger in place of being valued, the child retreats. In the case of reverse mirroring, the child receives the unconscious demand to mirror the parent, relaying an unspoken demand 'Don't be yourself: be my unknown and unfulfilled needs. You are here to become my existence, my identity; you must not exist for yourself' (Clark 1983, p. 75).

> Eve was never able to be angry, be a naughty two-year old, stamp her foot, say 'No!' lest a withering look of utter disapprobation left Eve cowering and shivering and withered if not obliterated inside.

> Any signs of being a rambunctious child with her own personhood, desires, proclivities, were not even disapproved of, they were ignored. She felt a continual tug-of-war between her desire to simply be herself and a need for recognition. She loved painting and expressed her emotions through the medium of colour. 'I cannot believe', She told me, 'that no one in the family ever once even commented on my huge murals. Eventually I simply gave up.'

According to Winnicott, mother's capacity to attune and attend to her baby is, at first, so close that the baby almost believes that mother is an extension of its own mind, that is, a subjectively conceived object. Gradually, over time, mother misses the mark just a little, and this creates slight cracks in the seamlessness of the baby's subjective universe. The baby becomes more able to tolerate the paradox of being neither one entity nor entirely separate. A baby has aggressive fantasies involving destruction of mother. Her survival leads to the realisation that mother is not simply a figment of the baby's imagination: she has an existence beyond the baby's mind:

> The subject says, 'Hello object. I destroyed you. I love you. You have value for me because of your survival of my destruction of you. While I am loving you I am all the time destroying you in unconscious fantasy (Winnicott 1971, p. 105).

The baby asserts its own agency and separate identity. And does so through temper tantrums, foot stamping and the famous 'no' word. Eventually, the baby develops a desire for reparation and 'ruth'. Prior to this, relations are based on ruthless love; there is little consideration for pain inflicted on the other as another being. Yet this stage is vital, for without it the baby may develop an overly compliant false self. If a child's authentic spontaneous gestures are welcomed and

validated, a child grows in confidence. The child is paradoxically more able to empathise with the parent's joys and sorrows, their separate experience and alterity, without feeling threatened by this. The child comes to recognise the other as a whole person, distinguishes otherness within from otherness without and enjoys, rather than fears, the unpredictable, ever-changing, inter-relational dynamics of being alive.

A Creation Myth

'I feel that you are introducing a big problem. I never became human. I have missed it' (Winnicott 1986, p. 96). This statement, made by one of Winnicott's patients, floated into awareness during one session. It was an uneasy reminder. I thought: 'I just so hope that for Eve this isn't the case. I hope that Eve hasn't missed the boat of life, that through the process of therapy, as well as a gentle practice of meditation guided by loving kindness and compassion towards herself, life itself, may stitch threads of presence across the void of absence. I can only have faith that these threads of continuity may one day hold her together and support her, rather than her perpetual disappearance through the gaping holes into the abyss.

And in the sometimes empty, sometimes pregnant, sometimes angrily hostile silences something began to float into awareness. Gradually, in my reverie, a series of vague images began to cohere into a 'myth of origins' that seemed to describe what was happening in therapy for Eve.

In the beginning there was nothing, an eternal void of no-thing-ness. But there was movement in the huge vast space and the movement created droplets of moisture and the moisture started to form. There was a sense of formation out of nothingness. Out of nothingness a huge cosmic ocean began to emerge: dark, mysterious, primeval, murky, so deep there was no bottom for there was no earth to hold it. But it churned and churned and churned, so gradually that it was almost imperceptible and one would never trust it was occurring. But incrementally water became mud and mud cohered into earth and eventually there was earth Eveeath the seas which held the ocean. And the ocean churned and churned and slowly, so slowly, the churning stirred and created more mud. Over aeons of time the mud began to cohere into a slimy, viscous form: the first man. And her name was Eve.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

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