ON THE QUESTION OF SANITY: BUDDHIST AND EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT: Psychological diagnosis presumes an understanding of mental health and mental order, on the basis of which it is possible to discern pathological deviations of mental illness and mental disorders. The field of psychodiagnosis, however, has no such agreed upon understanding, thus lacking in both scientific and philosophical grounding. The article addresses this lack by exploring the question of sanity itself, distinguishing between relative, social constructions of sanity and the nature of basic, unconstructed sanity. The thought of Martin Heidegger and Chogyam Trungpa is amplified by Buddhist-Dzogchen understandings of natural wakefulness in fleshing out this inquiry.

I tell you: one must harbor chaos if one would give birth to a dancing star.

– Friedrich Nietzsche (1969/1891, p. 46)

We live in illusion and the appearance of things. There is a reality. We are that reality. When you understand this, you see that you are nothing, and being nothing, you are everything. That is all.

– Kalu Rinpoche (2012)

This discussion completes an inquiry I began in two previous articles addressing the theory and practice of psychological diagnosis. Drawing upon an ever-growing body of research critiquing the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) (Healy, 1997; Horowitz & Wakefield, 2007; Hutchins, 2002; Ingersoll, 2002; Jerry, 2003; Lukoff, Lu, & Turner, 1998, for example), I described the fundamental flaws of the DSM on the basis of its own empirical scientific criteria, finding it to be both unreliable and invalid as a diagnostic instrument (Bradford, 2010). As an empirical manual, it fails on its own merits to fulfill the purpose for which it was designed and should either be discarded outright or wholly revised. I concluded that analysis by suggesting several alternative criteria (gathered from phenomenological, psychoanalytic, and holistic sources) to guide non-empiricist approaches to psychodiagnosis. These suggestions were developed in a second article (Bradford, 2009) revisioning diagnosis according to a contemplative-phenomenological paradigm. That study reviews a spectrum of diagnostic approaches, from “conventional empiricism (DSM)” through transpersonal and mindfulness-informed inquiry to a radical non-dualistic approach, the latter of which I contend allows for the most thorough (dia) knowing (gnosis) of an Other’s mind.
Since these articles focus on psychodiagnosis, they could not help but accord to the discourse of clinical psychology and psychopathology. Why else “diagnose” someone if not to identify their particular illness, disorder, deficiency, stickness, or problem(s)? On the other hand, if the intention in understanding the mind of another person is to more deeply know them as they are in their wholeness and complexity, and not merely in terms of their pathology, one typically does not refer to that kind of thorough knowing in terms of clinical diagnosis, but as “genuine interest,” “love,” or “appreciative discernment” (prajna).

A contemplative, “heart to heart” approach to the knowing of other minds requires that we enter the occasion with, as Rollo May advised, “at least the readiness to love the other person, broadly speaking” (May, Angel, & Ellenberger, 1958, p. 38). When we relax the calculating, objectivizing, experience-distant mindset of empiricism and adopt instead a meditative, intersubjective, experience-near attitude, we are more able to access the subjectivity qua subjectivity of the other person. As the field of psychology now generally recognizes, empathic attunement is especially facilitative in encouraging another person to reveal more of him or herself to us (Prendergast, 2007, pp. 35–54), thus improving our knowing of them. The enhanced clarity and compassion that arises through being with an Other in a contemplative attitude influences the intersubjective field in that direction. That is, the direction in which non-judgmental, empathic, and appreciative discernment tends is toward what the Tibetan Buddhist master, Chogyam Trungpa (2005) refers to as “basic sanity.” This directive, however, raises the question, What is basic, or essential, sanity? While I referred to this in the previous articles focusing primarily on diagnosis, there was not space there to more thoroughly consider it. It falls to this essay to explore the question of sanity itself.

**Conditional Sanity and Social Context**

Psychology has ever-expanding inventories of psychopathology, such that the DSM is a metastasizing compendium proliferating mental disorders. It now is of a size that makes for an able doorstop. Not only this, but theories of the causation of mental illness: from developmental to social to bio-chemical to trauma-based and beyond, are likewise expanding at an impressive rate. Not to be left behind, treatments of mental disorders are in a formidable growth curve, with pharmaceuticals, psychotherapies, somatic therapies, behavioral therapies, cognitive therapies, and various and sundry forms of self-help counseling doing a brisk business to meet an ever-growing demand of a world going, apparently, ever more crazy. In large part, psychology has neglected the nature of sanity, including the mystery of human being and the phenomenology of spiritual awakening, for the noisier agitations of the distressed mind and the more readily available knowledge and power that comes from tossing ever more wood on the bonfire of the insanities.

It is noteworthy that the field of psychology has no common understanding of what constitutes sanity. There is little comprehension of the ontological nature of the mind and only nascent psychological inventories of sane qualities and potentialities (For example, see Hutchins, 2002 & Sovatsky, 1998). While
developments such as “positive psychology” are working to rectify this, such efforts focus primarily on the qualities of positive states of mind rather than on the nature of mind as such. Let us be clear: mental disorders or illnesses are conceived as deviations from a presumed mental orderliness or healthiness. Yet there is no consensually agreed-upon understanding as to what constitutes mental order or mental health. I will venture to address this lacuna by identifying the ambiguous assumptions underlying the notion of mental health/order. In particular, I will consider how the orderliness of everyday sanity is a social construct that maintains the status quo of consensual reality at the expense of the authentic, or essential, sanity of the person conforming to that reality. Sanity as conventionally understood is strictly relative to the social context which construes it. To understand a cultural construction of sanity is to understand something about the norms and mores of a particular culture, but not necessarily to understand anything at all about the nature or potentialities of unconstructed sanity.

There is the story of a good and wise king ruling over a faithful and prosperous kingdom that illustrates the core dilemma of relative sanity. From a fine, spring-fed castle on a hill, the king contentedly surveys the fields, dales, and villages of his realm. Then a strange event happens: the rivers and wells of the lowlands in which his subjects dwell becomes infected with a virus causing madness throughout the land. The subjects begin to hallucinate and speak in a strange way, making no apparent sense. Stranger still, they are somehow able to accord with each other in their shared madness. While they are not as productive as before, they still manage to continue their work and lives well enough. Of course, the king and his doctors do everything they can to cure the illness, but to no avail. Gradually, a gulf forms between the king and the people; he remaining perfectly sane while they babble on in their delusion, with neither side able to communicate with the other. The people come to see that their king is different from them and that he keeps himself aloof in his castle, speaking when he does in a strange and frightening tongue. In this estranged situation the people become increasingly suspicious of and alienated from their king, fomenting confusion and agitation. The king realizes he is at risk of losing his kingdom, so he decides to drink the tainted water himself. In so doing, he also becomes quite mad of course, but it is a madness shared by his subjects, who are soon relieved that their king is no longer acting so odd, and can once again rule benevolently over them.

There are many anthropological examples in which one culture’s apparently sane, everyday norm is another culture’s crazed abomination, decidedly abnormal and perhaps morally reprehensible. To observe but one instance, European explorers of the New World encountered what for the Aztecs and Incans was a perfectly normal and morally legitimate custom of making animal and human sacrifices to propitiate unseen gods. The Europeans found these rituals to be an ignorant, morally misguided, and spiritually bereft display of a kind of madness, something like a culture-wide irrational thought disorder. Christian missionaries replaced this madness with the Eucharist ritual of drinking the symbolic blood and eating the symbolic flesh of a brilliant young Jew murdered 16 centuries earlier, which seemed to them to be a perfectly sane
and reasonable transubstantiation of dead flesh into the living spirit of an unseen God. Of course, it is not hard to imagine that the indigenous people found (and may continue to find) this practice to be a compulsive exercise in delusion, a bizarre religious ritual, and perhaps a kind of irrational thought disorder.

Even though sanity is relative to the culture which construes it, within its cultural context the social construction defining sanity-madness reigns as absolute. (For instance, see Bennett, 1978; Foucault, 1961/1965; Laing, 1967; Szasz, 1974) To deviate from a culture's definition of sanity is to court madness within that culture. The folk wisdom in the story of the mad king conveys that it is at times wise "to go along in order to get along," teaching that it can be useful to compromise one's own truth in order to maintain one's personal ties and social position in the service of social adaptation. The king wanted to continue being king and understood that in order to do so he could not continue to see things in his own sane way, but had to join in the madness of his realm. The price of being found relatively sane, and so accepted by others, was the loss of his sanity. That these Others are his own people well reflects the human condition. It is our own people, in each our own family, that form the (constructed) world into which we are born and to which we must adapt. As Freud observed (1961/1930), the price of social adaptation is psychological discontent, since the individual is compelled to contort, deny, or otherwise stifle his personal desires in order to belong to society. Whereas Freud focused exclusively on the self-restriction of sexual and aggressive impulses, self-restriction also extends to the suppression of more subtle impulses, such as the desire for authenticity and spiritual awakening when these desires emerge at odds with cultural norms. Heidegger (1927/1962) refers to the voluntary – even if unconscious - suppression of authenticity as losing oneself in a world of otherness. As he laments, "Everyone is the other and no one is himself" (p. 165).

Echoing Existential and cultural thinkers before and after him, Heidegger observes that a self who unwittingly conforms to a social context becomes lost in what he refers to as "the They" (das Man) (1927/1962, p. 163–168). The They is the anonymity of society: everybody and nobody, which cling to a particular worldview. In becoming submerged in this anonymity, authentic presence is lost. Every culture has its own view of the world and different cultures are more or less rigid in the policing of that view. Depending on the rigidity of a worldview and the capacities of its members to tolerate differences, mysteries, and insecurities, human groups have varying tolerance for what lies outside the constructs of their shared reality. Above all, it is the mission of the They to maintain the consensus vision which makes sense out of the dizzying immensity of existence, creating a habitable world in which a people can feel emotionally secure and mentally sane. As Ortega y Gasset puts it,

For life is at the start a chaos in which one is lost. The individual suspects this, but he is frightened at finding himself face to face with this terrible reality, and tries to cover it over with a curtain of fantasy, where everything is clear. It does not worry him that his "ideas" are not true, he uses them as
trenches for the defenses of his existence, as scarecrows to frighten away reality. (1930/1985, pp. 156–157)

To quell existential anxieties, it is not necessary that social constructs be true, only that they be effective; and a worldview is only effective to the extent it is unquestioned.

History is littered with the steep price many self-honest men and women have paid for daring to express truths that emerge from a free mind, sourcing themselves from within rather than in conformity to the They. The terror that societies feel, and the terrorist acts the They deploy toward those they fear is written throughout the long arc of history. Unwilling to face each their own existential anxiety, individuals abrogate their freedom and responsibility, submerge themselves into the rabid anonymity of the pack, and so satisfy appetites of aggression that serve as sedation from a sobriety that might recognize the illusory nature of constructed reality. Socrates, Jesus, and witch hunts are but a few obvious examples of the intolerance the They has for nonconformity, especially if the nonconformity is not merely reactive, but a proactive force sourced from an individuating being.

In the modern world, largely by virtue of the rapid advances in technology and globalization, there are many forces acting to splay the cohesiveness of any particular worldview, raising tacit questions about the nature of reality and one’s place within it. In what W. H. Auden has called “the age of anxiety,” this situation is one of increasing uncertainty and insecurity, giving rise both to the hope of a collective global village and fear of the loss of one’s securely delimited sense of self and world. To decrease the anxieties stemming from a breakdown of worldview, the They works to maintain the status quo by tranquilizing and deterring impulses of wakefulness that threaten the easy slumber of its consensual security arrangements. Various diversions promoting social cohesion at the expense of authenticity include many forms of entertainment, material acquisition, self-promotion, and the vapid, “empty speech” of social chatter. All such preoccupations serve to distract us from who, what, and where we actually are, and from where we are going as we pass through time.

**EXISTENTIAL GIVENS, BUDDHIST-STYLE**

Being lost in the They occurs in a sleep of what Heidegger refers to as “average everydayness” (1927/1962, p. 163–168), which is an illusion we cultivate in order to avoid facing unnerving truths of existence. The Buddha described three existential characteristics with which every human being must reckon: **suffering, impermanence**, and **no self** (Conze, 1973, p. 34–46). While it was common for Existential writers of the 20th Century to posit various collections of existential givens with which human beings must contend, all of them, such as anxiety, meaninglessness, and death, are contained in these three fundamental characteristics. Insofar as we keep ourselves benumbed, stimulated, and generally preoccupied with relatively meaningful activities,
which means relatively meaningless activities, then we are less likely to notice how we are, who we are, and where we are bound. This everyday, seemingly sane, and apparently moral lack of awareness is what the Buddha famously referred to as the primary “ignorance” resulting in unnecessary suffering, and which Heidegger referred to as the proximal cause of inauthenticity.

The primary characteristic of human existence enshrined as the Buddha’s first “noble truth” is the inescapable fact of suffering (Rahula, 1959). Nevertheless, that mortal suffering is inescapable does not mean we do not try to do so. Suffering is obviously something we try to avoid when we receive things we do not want, such as travel delays, indigestion, domestic discord, or illnesses great and small. We also do not want to suffer the infirmities and indignities of aging, and most especially we do not wish to die. Psychoanalysis understands this much. However, we also suffer when we receive the things we do want, be it a beloved companion, a dear child, more money, a new technological gadget, a piece of jewelry, or even a sublime spiritual experience. These desirables turn out to be causes of suffering because once we have them we do not want to lose them. We suffer to the extent we seek to possess them and worry about their loss. So we suffer both when we get what we do not want as well as when we get what we do want. If we take stock of this predicament, we come up against the paradoxical dilemma that unhappiness and dissatisfaction is caused both by our efforts to secure happiness and satisfaction and by trying to avoid the unhappiness and dissatisfaction inherent in existence. Surely this is crazy. Nevertheless, it is considered to be completely normal and perfectly sane to pursue and cling to our desires while avoiding and rejecting our aversions. Moreover, in a consumption-driven society like ours, undeterred striving for material acquisition is even construed as a righteous endeavor.

Who can forget that following the shattering 9/11 air attacks on America, the President at the time, G. W. Bush, urged Americans to go shopping, lest the economy falter in a pause of material consumption. Rather then pause to more thoroughly digest the tragedy, understand its causes, and weigh an informed response, the country (the They) effectively closed down, submerging its vulnerability in arguably chaotic and reckless self-defensive aggressive reactions. In an effort to feel less vulnerable and more secure, the United States engaged in acts of war, torture, and political intrigue that alienated potential allies, energized potential enemies, and wound up only making Americans feel more afraid and less secure than before these impulsive self protective efforts began. Of course, one reason Americans experienced an extreme spike of insecurity following those brutal attacks was due to the American people’s denial of being so vulnerable to terrorist attacks in the first place. America existed in a consensual illusion of invulnerability while actually existing in what had become a world increasingly vulnerable to such attacks. This is an example of how the They exists within “a curtain of fantasy” which seeks to avoid facing life’s insecurities.

Even though it is a complete illusion to think that existential suffering can be avoided, the consensus opinion is that it is perfectly sane to try. Consider the eight everyday “worldly concerns” which the Buddha specified as sources of
potential suffering whenever we believe that our well-being hinges on possessing one while avoiding the other. *Pleasure and pain, praise and blame, gain and loss, and good versus bad reputation.* Striving to have pleasure and avoid pain is utterly sane and normal, is it not? Yet how can one be sensitive enough to delight in pleasure without also being sensitive to agonize in pain as well? When is it possible to fall in love without running the risk of having that love be unrequited? Wanting to be praised but not blamed, seeking gain without loss, or wanting to be admired without being envied are all normal preferences which are impossible to have without also having its unwanted twin. All of these normal, apparently reasonable desires are like wishing to have “up” without “down”. How sane is that? Upon even a little reflection we see that gain without loss is a fantasy, as is admiration without envy. These preferences are all futile exercises inviting more misery, yet they reflect the everyday sanity of the They.

Regarding the second existential characteristic, we exist wholly in a dimension of *impermanence*. We are just now – reading this sentence - hurtling through time on our way toward certain death. In addition to the favored distractions of a particular culture, and in our case we surely have more varieties of distraction than have ever before existed, there are our everyday misdirections which Stolorow refers to as “absolutisms of everyday life” (2007, p. 13–16). By this, he refers to the common incantations we recite to reinforce an illusion of security covering over our inherently insecure existence. These absolutisms include such everyday affirmations as “I’ll see you later” to a friend, or “I’ll see you tomorrow” when tucking in a child for the night, or “I’ll be right back” to our partner as we leave on a short errand. Of course, we have no idea whether or not these assurances are true. We do know that some day, although we know not which day, they most certainly will not be true. But we ignore the fact that we know we do not know what awaits us as we leave the house each morning. In fact, we do not even know what will happen if we stay home for the day and merely climb in and out of the shower, light the stove, descend the stairs, and answer the doorbell on a perfectly ordinary day…a day like any other day. Marvelously, assuming that nothing unexpected will occur and life will proceed without interruption, we readily deny the truth of impermanence by warmly offering and eagerly accepting these reassurances to and from each other. In so doing we collude in servicing an illusion of permanence.

In regard to the third characteristic, still more strongly do we cling to the view of consensus reality that supports the illusion that our selfhood is a solid ground in an otherwise chaotic sea of change. In addition to the existential truths of suffering and impermanence, the Buddha observed there is the ontological truth of *selflessness*. At first glance, this declaration seems strange and simply wrong. That “I” exist as an enduring entity seems to be the most incontrovertible fact of existence, the denial of which at first strikes us as either absurd or nihilistic. Indeed, Buddhism has been faulted, mistakenly, as a nihilistic religion. As with all the Buddha’s teachings, this declaration too is not to be taken passively as an article of faith. The point is not to believe it, but to *discover* if it is true. Meditative inquiry into the nature of the self is a powerful
lens through which to discern the nature of unconstructed sanity as distinct from social constructions of sanity that vary from context to context.

Engaging in simple self-inquiry, Siddhartha Gautama sat on a comfortable seat under a sheltering tree, and during his long night of self-reckoning discovered the brilliant nature of sanity itself. In releasing the distorting tendencies of his mental fixations and emotional conflicts, he discovered that the cessation (nirvana) of clinging to the self-constructs of relative sanity was in itself a bliss-saturated freedom surpassing all conceptual understanding. Letting go of the fear, aggression, and grasping of his firm convictions, the constructed, felt existence of his selfhood separate from the Otherness of the world collapsed into unimpeded openness which we refer to as awakening to the way things actually are. The way things actually are in the interdependent connectedness of existence is decidedly not how we construe them according to the self-centered imaginings of the They.

Whether examining the minds of ourselves or others, we readily find that it is a separate sense of Self which forms the primary identity and personal territory which we defend against the intrusions and unpredictable Otherness of the world. The insulation of a separate self and delimited world is a marvelous fiction, creating a habitable world that is – within its constructs – comprehensible and sane. In child development, we know very well that if a child is unable to create a dependable sense of self, that child will feel extraordinary powerlessness and be increasingly vulnerable to psychic fragmentation. It is no wonder given the immensity of existence, that we are developmentally prone to “cover [chaos] over with a curtain of fantasy, where everything is clear.” And then, to cling to our constructions “as scarecrows to frighten away reality.” Especially as children, the vastness of existence can certainly feel overwhelming, and it is of utmost importance for caretakers to sooth the existential anxieties of children with the reassurance, illusory though it may be, that “everything is going to be fine.” Adults also have varying capacities for tolerating unknowing, otherness, and the disturbing givens of existence. It is important to respect that the constructs of consensual sanity serve a protective function and not everybody at anytime has the capacity to accept the mysterious and at times terrifying truths about themselves and their vision of the world.

As Carl Jung is to have said, “The most terrifying thing is to accept oneself completely.” When we look into the nature of the self we take ourselves to be, it can be disturbing to accept what we find there in two senses. Psychologically, we are challenged to accept the egoic humiliation that we are not entirely how we like to think of ourselves, but bear an unconscious “shadow” of disowned intentions, impulses, and ideas that may be chaotic, embarrassing, threatening, or otherwise disruptive of our conscious, cohesive sense of selves. Ontologically, the matter is more serious, since in seeing that “I” am no thing: not the firm ground of being I take myself to be, I am up against the terror of groundlessness. Heidegger, echoing the Buddha, spoke to this situation suggesting that not only do we who are lost in the They wish to ignore the truth that we will die one day, we are even keener to ignore the truth that we
are not self-existing just now! Distraction in idle activities and meaningless pursuits serve as a hedge against discovering the groundlessness, or as the Existentialists provocatively put it, the abyss of self and world. Even though Heidegger glimpsed and the Buddha realized that the discovery of selflessness opens a way to the freedom and bliss of inter-being, accepting such openness can be a formidable challenge.

**Existential Anxiety**

Both Freud and Heidegger spoke to the difference between fear and anxiety. They specify that fear is always fear of something, an “entity-within-the-world” as Heidegger put it (as quoted in Stolorow, 2011, p. 36). The something might be an actual thing that is about to happen or it might be something that is imagined. In either case there is an entity or event that is feared. In the face of fear, it is possible to mount defenses to combat an identifiable threat. One’s response to fear may be skilful or misguided, but either way one is mobilized to either action or inaction (fight or flight or freeze) that rivets attention to the what that is feared, binding attention to an external object.

Anxiety on the other hand is not about an objective entity or event, but is about one’s own subjective being, which is no thing. As Heidegger put it, anxiety is “completely indefinite…nothing and nowhere”, and yet this non-being is “being-in-the-world as such” (as quoted in Stolorow, 2011, p. 36). There is a marked difference between observable and knowable things in the world and the being of the being who observes and knows these things. As Heidegger put it, a human being is “distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an issue for it” (1927/1962, p. 32). That is, the mystery of one’s own existence is a mystery, an unresolved issue which niggles, drawing one’s attention within. As one senses into the no-thingness which is oneself, one may feel a kind of vertigo. Whether by deliberately inquiring into the enigma of selfhood or in being haunted by an existential disquiet perhaps arising unbidden in the middle of the night, one finds oneself anxious. Heidegger felt that confronting existential anxiety is an individuating opportunity in which one is called to turn from the superficialities of everydayness to the actualities of one’s existence. Buddhism speaks of this turning toward the way things are as “noble,” while Existentialists refer to it as “authentic.”

Paradoxically, the process of individuation is evocative of existential anxiety precisely because of its release of self-groundedness. We typically think of individuation as the development of a separate self; whereas, to the extent it is an authentic process, individuation involves the de-centering of self-centeredness along with a growing capacity to tolerate unsettledness and non-self-centeredness. Authentic subjectivity discovers it is an occasion of inter-subjectivity. As one becomes more oneself, relaxing more deeply into the who, what, and where one actually is, the inherent open/inter-ness of selfhood becomes more apparent.
Although we tend to lose ourselves in the They, we can never completely escape the sanity of our basic nature. The unconditioned openness of inter-being exerts a gravitational pull which I call the impulse of authenticity. Unnervingly, this impulse is at once a pull toward relative insanity (defined according to the They) and toward unconstructed sanity. This is an impulse we can either resist or accept. To the extent we resist it, authenticity tugs at our conscience, nags at us as anxiety, guilt, or despair. So that even when things are going momentarily well, we still feel vaguely incomplete and somehow wanting, craving for our situation to either not change or to be further improved. On the other hand, to the extent that we accept the impulse toward authenticity and relate to the existential anxiety that arises in so doing, the sanity of unconditional presence arises in our mindstreams.

When Heidegger refers to our own being as the core issue of human being, he identifies to my way of thinking, the essential question forming the overarching purpose of being human. To the extent this issue remains unaddressed, one has not fully realized the purpose of human life and so continues to feel somehow incomplete and to experience some measure of existential anxiety. As the Buddha discovered, to come to terms with this issue leads to its dissolution and the evaporation of anxieties. Existential thought is not so bold as to go this far. Like psychoanalysis, it is wary of self-deception and suspicious of claims to the effect as well as the possibility of "fully realizing" life's purpose. For good reason. It is very appealing to the They-self to fool itself into thinking it is beyond existential insecurities in having attained the ultimate ground of being, resulting in ego-inflation, spiritual bypassing, and a profound kind of lostness in which one becomes convinced one is not lost. Of course, meditation masters are also well aware of this pitfall. Nevertheless, being aware of the pitfall does not mean that the impulse of authenticity is exhausted when one is courageous enough to face up to existential truths. Having dared existential sobriety, there is still the matter of living authentic presence forward, both in relationship to others and in regard to releasing the unfolding potentialities of authentic presentness. Seeing the suffering, impermanence, and selflessness as the way things actually are does not mean one has completely resolved one's issues with this situation and is therefore able to fully embody that knowledge. Beyond recognizing one's basic nature is integratively embodying it in time. From what I can tell, such reckoning and integration are the issue, the raison d'être, of human being. All other reasons and activities are secondary or preparatory to the primary purpose of recognizing, embodying, and radiating brilliant sanity.

Again, there is a difference between the psychological integration of unconscious material and an ontological recognition of one's true nature. Summarizing the psychoanalytic project of "making the unconscious conscious," Jung wrote that psychological integration involved a "transcendent function" (1957/1969, p. 67–91), which is a "bringing together of opposites for the production of a third [position, in which]…it is no longer the unconscious that takes the lead but the ego." (p. 87). This "third" position involves a synthesis of conscious and unconscious attitudes into a less divided
selfhood. However, this psychological integration, as valuable as it is for coming to better terms with one’s inner divisions and so providing a more stable position from which to inquire more deeply into the nature of one’s being, is not yet recognition of that ontological nature.

The discovery of basic sanity, or rig-pa, which the Dzogchen master, Chogyal Namkhai Norbu, translates as “primordial awareness” or “instantaneous, nondual presence” (Namkhai Norbu & Clemente, 1999, p. 58), is not a unification of opposites, but the intrinsically undivided nature which allows for the division and unification of opposites. From this perspective, the positing of a transcendent function is superfluous, since there is nothing to transcend. *The search for and realization of authenticity is no particular state, but an attuning process.* Through attuning to the impulse of authenticity, one de-integrates from the (protective) self and world constructs to which one clings, which is simultaneously an opening to the essential inter-ness of being in time. In being-open, one is more able to integrate whatever arises within that presence in basic wakefulness. This integrative process is easily misunderstood, inviting further clarification.


Explicated according to the Dzogchen tradition of Buddhism, basic sanity, or instant presence, has three aspects: *essence, nature, and energy* (Namkhai Norbu, 1986, p. 56–73). While these are experientially indistinguishable, they can be conceptually teased out in order to better understand the subtle and elusive nature of unconditioned mind.

As has already been mentioned, the *essence* of mind is empty-openness (*sunyata*). Without center or periphery, the mind is essentially the unconstructed capacity of inter-ness, vast like an unclouded sky. Far from being a mere “void,” as *sunyata* has sometimes been (mis-)translated, the *nature* of empty-openness is cognizant liveliness. Like every other sense organ, it is the nature of the mind (understood as the sixth sense organ in Buddhist psychology) to perceive. Unlike other sense organs, the mind’s perceptions include concepts, and concepts have the unique power of appropriating perceptions of the other five senses by interpreting them according to various criteria and intentions. The cognizant quality of mind therefore has the capacity to either disregard its empty-open essence, which includes the sensory experience appearing within it, or not. In disregard, or “ignorance,” of its true nature, the mind detaches from *being-in-the-world* and seems (to itself) to exist separately from the world. It is not recognized that this split occurs wholly as the mind’s own mental construction. This ignoring, and self-managing, of experience is a form of intentionality which the Buddha identified as the root cause of suffering (i.e., *samsara*). By grasping onto what is liked, rejecting what is disliked, and ignoring what is of no personal interest, one participates in an on-going struggle with one’s self-world. Since self and world are not fundamentally separate, the tensions of this struggle are felt to be “inner” tensions which manifest as self-conflicts. The split between self and world,
including self and other, can be understood as basic insanity, which may then
develop into more sophisticated manifestations of psycho-somatic pathology.
At the same time, since the nature of mind is essentially open and free like the
sky, even though clouds (of delusion) may obscure its empty essence, the
mind’s cognizant quality can always rediscover and recognize its intrinsic non-
self-centered spaciousness (Wegela, 1994).

When mind recognizes that the nature of sensory perceptions and mental
constructs are in essence unconstructed, the apparent separation between self
and world collapses, releasing mind’s intrinsically healing energetic properties.
The energy of mind manifests as nondualistic responsivity. In letting oneself
be…and continue to be…open and undefended, with naked awareness not
losing itself in the clothing of its perceptions, the impulse of authenticity
expresses itself in compassionate and discerning responses to self and other. In
contrast to everyday emotional reactivity that aims to defend or enhance a self-
position, the energy of unconditional presence responds to experience without,
or with reduced, self-centered distortion. Responding without attachment or
aversion to what arises or passes away within the field of awareness loosens the
tensions that bind one to a defensive position and the anonymity of the They.
Whether alone or with others, when the energy of nondual attunement is
unimpeded, subtle psychic holdings that constrict body and mind in defensive-
offensive postures naturally release. This occurs simply because the intentional
effort that maintains them loosens. In Dzogchen, the naturally healing
responsiveness of authentic presence is referred to as self-liberation (rang-drol)
(Reynolds, 2000). Elsewhere, I have referred to this intrinsic healing potential
as natural resilience (Bradford, 2002).

In contrast to what is normally thought of as psychological or spiritual “work”
involving earnest effort, the natural resilience of basic sanity delivers its healing
power through the “play” of effortless presencing. The maintenance of self-
defensiveness, self-image, and conformity to the security arrangements of the
They requires an on-going exercise of intention. Releasing the tensions of
defensive intentionality involves not practicing them for at least a moment or
two. It is in a pause of self-intending that fundamental healing takes place, as
the subtle effort maintaining dualistic vision relaxes. Ironically, it is by relaxing
one’s efforts to secure oneself that one is able to discover that there is nothing
to be secure from. Naturally resilient sanity cannot be created; neither can it be
destroyed. It can however be released from fixating tendencies which bind it.

Conclusion

The deceptively simple message of spiritual and psychological practices
informed by basic sanity is “let it be” (which Heidegger (1959/1966) refers to
as gelassenheit). The irony of this is that the non-doing of letting be may be the
most difficult thing we can ever do. It can seem impossible and feel terrifying to
let go of our everyday sanitized consensual security arrangements, self-image
management scenarios, and taken-for-granted worldviews. To let go of these is,
in some measure, to risk our relative sanity. Of course there are many skillful
means that can be employed to guide, buffer, support, confront, soothe, and otherwise assist an opening to authentic presence, but that requires a much larger discussion. I am content here to sketch the paradox of sanity/insanity that a search for authenticity invokes. This leaves many avenues of inquiry open for further research, such as: Is it true that unconditioned presence has inherent healing potential?

As a pointer for this kind of inquiry, there is an enduring image that has served as an encouragement for many on the path of awakening: the classic figure of the seated Buddha having passed through the night of his enlightenment (see Figure 1). He sits in dignified repose, the fingers of his right hand touching the ground. The “dark night of the soul” through which he has just passed opened him to the depths of suffering his own hopes, fears, and confusions. Having emerged into the wakefulness of brilliant sanity in which confusions self-liberate, dawning as wisdom, he expressed this recognition simply by touching the ground upon which he sat. The usual explanation of this “earth-touching mudra” is that he was having the earth bear witness to his awakening. Perhaps—but resting in the healing bliss\(^2\) of unconditional presence, would the Buddha really need a witness? I doubt that he needed any validation beyond the self-evidence of the intrinsic openness in which he then unwaveringly dwelt. My sense is the Buddha is expressing in this gesture the trans-conceptual actuality of awakening in the sense of displaying that everything is as it is. Nothing need be corrected, nothing need be enhanced. Touching the ground

*Figure 1. Buddha displaying the earth-touching mudra.*
says simply and directly, just here in this place, just now at this time. The upturned hand resting easy on his lap expresses the natural confidence of unobstructed openness: anything can be held lightly, any situation is manageable, just as it is.

Finally, as regards psychodiagnostic reference systems, we do well to acknowledge they are forms of knowledge relative to the psycho-cultural context which construes them. As guides to foster the emergence of genuine sanity and awakened qualities, categorical forms of knowing reveal less than they conceal. To echo a terse admonition of the gifted Nazarene, as constructs of consensual reality, psychodiagnoses may be appropriate for “rendering to Caesar what belongs to Caesar,” thus serving a function of social hygiene. They are not, however, appropriate for “rendering to God what belongs to God,” genuine sanity being unconstructed, naked presencing. Aware of what is at stake, psychotherapists and spiritual counselors ought not confuse who they are serving at any given time.

NOTES

1 Thanks to Tulku Orgyen Rinpoche, Tsoknyi Rinpoche, and their translators for this translation of mind’s dynamic “nature,” tshal-wa.

2 Thanks to Peter Fenner for coining this excellent phrase.

REFERENCES


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