

Psychotherapy, psychological health, & self-fulfilment: a Buddhist perspective

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Abstract: The science of psychology is believed to consist of objective and meaningful knowledge about a realm of our own direct experiencing with which we are all intimate and familiar, yet about which we also feel we have very little understanding, and no real insight, and so feel inclined to submit to psychology as if it were revelatory and definitive. Society's default attitude to psychology is one of deferential, if occasionally grudging, respect. The quasi-medical arm of psychology – psychotherapy - is accorded a similar authority even when it appears to employ questionable methods and dubious reasoning. Yet our submissive, compliant attitude to these disciplines is deeply counterproductive to any serious quest for authentic metaphysical knowledge and self-fulfilment, because it effectively neutralises sceptical enquiry and intellectual self-reliance, both of which are essential precursors to, and indispensable features of, any meaningful commitment to metaphysical gnosis. And if one is to achieve clarity of thought and observational accuracy, it is especially important to approach one's psychological capacities directly – without intermediary - in an independent and self-reliant spirit, free of the misguided and inappropriate interventions of psychology and psychotherapy, however well intended they might be. One should never allow one's judgement to be distorted by specious theories formulated by people who can never know more about you than you can know about yourself.

The simple truth is, if you want to 'know yourself' – that is, gain insight into your own inner mental capacities - you have to start by learning to observe your own personal experiencing directly, straightforwardly, and without any kind of conceptual or doctrinal intermediary. The theories you will find in psychology and psychotherapy will prevent you from doing this, because they do not encourage self-enquiry, and have been designed with quite different goals in mind. Psychology is wholly concerned with achieving scientific mastery over psychological functioning, whereas psychotherapy is only interested in actualising what amounts to a very trivial conception of everyday wellbeing. Psychology and psychotherapy are not, and never will be, concerned with ultimate self-fulfilment, or with metaphysical gnosis, as these ideals lie well beyond their furthest remit.

Disclaimer

Those now anticipating a swift descent into New Age mystical apologetics, especially of the sort which seeks to add chunks of supposed oriental wisdom to existing western disciplines, will find that what is being argued here is not that. Nor is it about contributing to 'exciting new trends' in neuropsychology, brain plotting and all the rest of it. This is simply about analysing the most basic ideas we have about ourselves and our psychological capacities, and working outwards from there, avoiding flights of fancy wherever possible. There is really no other way to proceed: if you start with full-blown theories of one sort or another and then try to fine-tune them into some sort of intellectual cogency, you will end up exactly where psychology and psychotherapy are right now, which is very much on the defensive, and unsure of themselves.

To make this clear: the idea here is to examine generally-held conceptions of psychology and mental health with a view to arguing that they conceal a servile attitude to authority, and that this servility prevents people from exploring their own psychological experiencing for themselves. Which means that if one wants to embark on a genuine quest for self-knowledge, and for ultimate self-fulfilment, one has to develop intellectual self-reliance. The main focus of interest here is the quest for self-fulfilment – while using self-enquiry as the gateway to it - and not another futile discussion as to which theory of human psychology might be better than another.

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Introduction

This short study will limit itself to examining – in a very simple and direct way – the key assumptions concealed behind the everyday, widely-held conceptions of psychology and psychotherapy, with a view to assessing their substantive value in the light of a wider quest for self-fulfilment. This is not about arguing that psychology and psychotherapy lack any worth under any circumstances, or about suggesting ways in which their effectiveness could be radically improved, rather this is about making the difficult and challenging point that operating within these disciplines is inherently counterproductive and damaging when it comes to any genuine quest for metaphysical gnosis and ultimate self-fulfilment. This is because both disciplines muddy the waters with misdirected nonsense when one should instead be learning to observe things clearly and impartially for oneself, and developing the strength of mind to be able to come to independent conclusions.

Put in simpler terms, the quest for ultimate self-fulfilment begins with very basic self-enquiry. Who am I, and what do I want? How can I be sure that what I think I want is actually what I want? And how would I start trying to find out? And so on. And dominating our ordinary lives are our psychological needs and desires, which seem to have a will of their own, and which compel us to behave in certain ways, whether we think we want to, or not. So in a very real way, we are possessed by our innermost needs and desires – they own us – yet we still feel we have some measure of control over events. So we both know ourselves, and yet we don't. Our psyches are a mystery to us, and we don't really know what they will do next. It is very tempting then to turn to the experts, and have them explain the situation to us. The problem is that the experts don't know any more than we do, and turning to them is a wasted opportunity to explore the facts for yourself. If you turn your mind's eye on to your psychological experiencing – your feelings, and your desires – what do you see? How do they tell you what they want? Would it make the least sense to ask someone else? Please, Professor, look into my mind and tell me what I see?

So if you want to know yourself psychologically, and if you want to find a way to fulfil yourself decisively, you will have to abandon any and all dependence on other people's psychological theories, and learn to come to your own conclusions. The reasons for this are relatively straightforward: authentic metaphysical knowledge can only be achieved first-hand, directly; anything else is doctrine, and mediated, and someone else's idea; no matter how profound and compelling it might seem to you, and no matter how tightly you are holding on to it, and wishing it were true, and hoping that the strength of your wishing will magically effect some kind of cosmic realignment, and deliver to you whatever it is that you think you seek, without having to put yourself through anything that you really don't like. This is the essence of our compact with religious faith and sentimentality, and the basis of all prayer to higher powers; and it is an aspect of our experience we have to confront sooner or later, and admit to ourselves that it basically 'doesn't work'. We try to 'believe' our way through life, forcing our experience to conform to ideas we like, yet having in the end to admit defeat, because reality wins out. So the sooner we abandon various doctrines - psychological,

metaphysical and religious - the sooner we can get on with the real task of seeing what we actually see, and working out what is actually what.

Methodology & definitions

This study is about making a case from, as it were, first principles. We are trying to keep everything as clear and simple as possible, and not to hide inadequacies of understanding and observation behind scholarly subterfuge. In other words, we are arguing a case on the basis of a few key facts, while appealing to a very primordial appreciation of independence of mind, and directness of perception. All else is meretricious waffle.

'Psyche' is defined here as our capacity for psychological experiencing, meaning that part or realm of our everyday experiencing which consists of our feelings and our emotions. These feelings and emotions are characterised by a certain autonomy and self-coherence, which justifies their being characterised as located in a certain distinctive realm of their own. It is not going too far to describe our psychological experiencing, insofar as it manifests itself with depth and power, as being our 'soul', although understood in a strictly non-religious sense.

In the same vein, a few words need be said about the concepts 'popular' and 'widespread', with regard to the ideas of psychology and psychotherapy represented here. Beyond describing what these ideas supposedly consist of, it is not possible or meaningful to attempt to substantiate them with statistics, or polling data, or other forms of quasi-scientific evidence: one either accepts that they are more or less accurate, or one does not. So a certain measure of intellectual indulgence is called for. But in any event none of the conceptions under discussion here is likely to stretch credulity.

And it might seem misguided to focus on commonly-held views when we should perhaps direct ourselves to more sophisticated perspectives, but the surprising fact is that - in this specific instance - the popular, prejudicial ideas are far more instructive and revealing than informed conceptions, in that they have not been consciously 'coached', and 'improved upon'. Widely-held ideas on psychology and psychotherapy show us what people in the real world actually think, and they accurately reveal what most people believe is the appropriate relationship between themselves and the 'head-shrinkers' who are professionals in the field. And regarding the label 'head-shrinker', it is worth reminding ourselves that many people - including those university educated - believe that psychology is basically the science of mental health, and are quite unaware of the fact that most of what actually constitutes psychology has nothing to do with mental illness, and that the clinical field itself is surprisingly remote from the mainstream. That people don't know this might seem to count against the idea of using popular conceptions as our starting point, but it is not the accuracy of the conception which is the key factor, it is the fact that people believe it, and that they respond to it as if it were true.

So it is the way that most people respond to the idea of 'psychology' - as a shorthand for the whole realm of mental health - that is of crucial interest here, because

it sets up, encourages and exploits a particular kind of relationship between ordinary people and those so-called 'in the know'; and this relationship is deeply counterproductive when it comes to basic self-knowledge, let alone the quest for metaphysical truth. This whole issue needs to be explored in some detail, because the correct starting point for the acquisition of self-knowledge should not be arrived at by rhetorical persuasion, but rather as a matter of something like an 'intellectual instinct', which should rightly be awakened at the outset of any and every kind of inner analysis and investigation. If you cede judgement in crucial matters of self-knowledge to others, how can you ever know anything directly for yourself? And if you don't want to know things directly for yourself, why bother with introspection at all?

The label 'Buddhist' being employed here is meant to refer to any characteristically independent, unmediated quest for ultimate self-fulfilment, which is itself understood to be of a metaphysical order. From this Buddhist - buddhistic - perspective, all human endeavour is, one way or another - and irrespective of how half-heartedly or misguidedly - directed towards its ultimate self-fulfilment. Such a quest has little or nothing to do with Buddhist religion, which is basically a religion like any other, consisting of misdirected doctrine, ineffective practice and irredeemable stupidity, all of which deliberately conspire to keep the hapless devotee from any direct engagement with the facts themselves, in case they discover their religion to be no more than a worthless delusion. A genuinely buddhistic quest is directed towards metaphysical 'gnosis' - that is to say, directly apprehended knowledge of a metaphysical order - and not towards any kind of worldly success or worldly achievement as ordinarily understood.

It will clearly not be possible to do more than outline the key ideas and their most basic interrelationships, as a full account would require many more pages of explanation and justification. And the details of any proposed solution to a mediated encounter with one's inner capacities - namely a direct engagement with them - can only be sketched in outline, and will have to be more fully explained elsewhere¹.

The idea of a body of knowledge called 'psychology'

Psychology in its present form is a relatively new science - not more than a hundred and fifty years old - though this aspect of its history is not in itself particularly surprising, given that most of our modern sciences are in a constant state of redefinition. What is surprising is that we as a human species do not seem to have much by way of cumulative historical knowledge when it comes to psychology, and we still, after thousands of years of recording our thoughts on all subjects, continue to find our psyches a troubling mystery. There are many who would consider the very notion of a 'psyche' to be mistaken, so little do we understand about our emotional realm. And beyond the obvious and trivial, we are still nowhere near to any agreement as to what causes what, or what is located where, or how the whole psychological thing holds together, let alone how best to achieve wellbeing and self-fulfilment.

And these facts go hand in hand with a couple of interesting paradoxes. Despite the fact that we blunder around in the dark, psychologically speaking, we readily believe

that those who are trained in psychology are in possession of secret knowledge that the rest of us are not, and that we should give the whole enterprise our unconditional respect. And at the same time as unquestioningly swallowing wholesale whatever psychological research tells us, we also like to joke that anyone who is involved in psychology is probably mentally ill.

It is common knowledge that you can go to more or less any university offering generalist subjects and study there to be a psychologist, and that this will require many years of training. There are heavyweight books – in both senses of the term – on psychology in libraries and in bookshops; so you would be forgiven for thinking that it is a very substantial field of knowledge, and that those who have degrees in the subject must know an awful lot about something, even if they are still in the bloom of youth, and not yet turned 25. ‘Psychologist’ is a regulated profession in most advanced countries, indicating that the knowledge possessed by a person with that sort of title is much more comprehensive and thorough than could be achieved by interested amateurs and dilettantes, and should rightfully be protected from the depredations of chancers and the self-appointed.

To demystify the subject comprehensively would be a fascinating undertaking in its own right, but way beyond the scope of this essay. We need to be charitable and assume that the hundreds of thousands of practicing psychologists around the world actually know something that the rest of us don’t; or, if that is going too far, that they are capable of doing something – even if it is only employing the latest psychological jargon – that the rest of us are justifiably not empowered to do, and so deserve their special status. The point here is not to denigrate the idea of scientific psychological knowledge or specialist training as such, but rather to understand how this knowledge is viewed by society at large, and whether or not a reverential attitude towards psychology is helpful to someone who really wants to get to grips with their own psychological reality, as part of a quest for ultimate fulfilment. In the context of our very unreflective and celebrity-obsessed society, ‘ultimate fulfilment’ may sound like a laughably grandiose and pretentious turn of phrase, but when it comes down to it, is there anything else worth striving for ?

But if we accept – for now – that psychology exists as a meaningful discipline, and that a trained psychologist possesses knowledge that a non-psychologist does not, we can then examine the nature of the relationship between ‘ordinary educated people’ and psychology itself. ‘Psychology’, as it is currently constituted, unavoidably characterises those outside of its initiatory inner circle as suffering from a type of gormless ignorance, unable to understand the simplest of situations, and regularly needing to have life explained to them. ‘Psychology tells us’² is a common enough phrase even in highbrow media, and psychologists are regularly being called upon to clarify the ‘psychology’ of an event – usually a matter of describing hidden motivations – which would somehow otherwise remain mysterious and unexplained, and something the population at large wouldn’t be able to get their heads around. And in this interpretative way, psychology becomes an accepted ‘final explanation’, beyond which nothing further can or need be said: if the psychologists don’t have an answer, then no one does. At least, so the story goes.

Of course this is only one side to the regular appearance of psychologists in the media, because expertise – of whatever sort – acts as a shorthand for the conveying of large amounts of information, as well as giving definition to accounts which might otherwise be very shapeless. It is not the fault of the ‘expert’ that they are wheeled out to explain to us slack-jawed spectators what is going on; part of that is down to the way we like our narratives fashioned. But the point is not the form or content of the narrative, it is the way we defer to certain elements in it, as if we are not capable of working these things out for ourselves. Society has definitely acquiesced to the perceived authority of the psychologist, as a spokesperson for the imposing body of knowledge called ‘psychology’.

From the point of view of anyone simply making their way through life as best they can, deferring to psychological ‘wisdom’ does not represent a problem, or even something worth spending much time on. Life has its own complications, and if someone is capable of working the system, and having themselves declared as an expert, then so be it. And if their expertise is a sham, then so be that too, because so much of life is a sham, and experts are just people who have succeeded where others have failed. And after all, there are august regulatory bodies to supervise this kind of thing, and if they are not capable of dealing with the situation, then who is? And so on.

But if we are motivated to try to understand the world we live in, and more specifically to understand the features of our basic metaphysical predicament, then we need to realise - as urgently as possible - that the first step to genuine knowledge always involves learning to put aside doctrines of any kind, especially those which in any way appear to disclose to us how we experience things, and how we process those experiences. These ‘doctrines’ are the most pernicious forms of teaching, because even if they are accurate – and almost all of them are not – they do your thinking for you, and seemingly remove the need for you to think for yourself. You shouldn’t need to be told that your mind works in a certain way – you should have a look for yourself, and see if it does. And if you don’t have the strength of mind to look for yourself, you need to try and find a way to work towards that strength, so that at some stage in the future you will be more self-reliant, and more capable of independent, objective judgement. These are not impossible, world-shatteringly difficult undertakings – anyone can do them, with a bit of patience, and a bit of resolve. The fact that very few people can be bothered is a testament, not to their difficulty, but to the fact that people don’t value thinking for themselves, and coming to their own conclusions. There is always something cosy and reassuring about repeating platitudes and staying within the herd.

The self-reliant, independent approach to psychology is not organic to the discipline itself, as psychology is often deeply authoritarian and prescriptive in its ethos, as can easily be understood from its scientific, carefully-regulated procedures, and from the strictures of the many regulatory bodies which oversee its workings. Unknown to the world at large, psychology - within its countless specialisations - is riven with competing factions, all striving – albeit through scholarly jostling – for some kind of decisive dominance, so as to have their particular angle on things declared authoritative, and everyone else relegated to the margins. All this is very normal and unremarkable – this sort of thing happens in every field of human endeavour

everywhere - except that in the case of psychology there is also a deep and persistent underlying uncertainty as to whether psychology is really anything substantial at all, and not just an impressive label for a lot of tawdry chatter. The confident public front – invariably buttressed with interminable misleading experiments³ and statistical ‘evidence’ - is as much about convincing itself as it is about convincing the rest of us poor bewildered onlookers.

The point here is to make clear how a person who really wants to know the truth about their psychological capacities ought properly to relate to what is commonly understood to be the science, or discipline, of ‘psychology’. And this relationship ought to be predicated on a kind of relentless scepticism, only ever consulting psychology – as a matter of legitimate interest, to see what other people have to say – after the event, after one has come to one’s own judgement, quite independently of prevailing intellectual opinion, and fashion. Contrasting one’s own judgements with those of others, including the psychological establishment, would not be a matter of deciding who’s right or wrong, but a matter of working through issues in the most direct, unbiased and objective way, observing what your experience tells you about yourself, and then getting another perspective on it, as part of a wider quest for insight. Starting out by taking what other people have to say about the way your mind works and then filtering your experience through those ideas – destroying and distorting your clarity of perception in the process – is self-defeating, as well as demeaning: you have your own capacity for independent thought – so why not use it ? Why persist with the received conviction that you are intellectually crippled – incapable of seeing the obvious - and can’t work anything out for yourself ?

Submission to authority may, in the course of life, go hand in hand with many schemes for self-preservation and self-advancement – from religions to everyday philosophies of how to get things done – but it does not go with Buddhism. At least, not with the spirit of genuine Buddhism – the buddhistic outlook - which promotes independence of mind, self-reliance, and scepticism towards any and every kind of doctrine, including – of course - what might be seen as the hidden agenda of the buddhistic quest itself, because after all, relentless scepticism and self-reliance might well be a recipe for disaster, so even that line of thought has to be subject to constant scrutiny.

So we’ve ended up in a situation where, if we’re genuinely interested in the truth of our own personal psychological functioning, and genuinely interested in gaining a greater insight into the features of our own human condition, we have to abandon the hand-me-down theories of psychology – all of them, without exception - no matter how seductive and convincing, and learn to observe ourselves as objectively and independently as possible.

Naturally enough this assumes that we, as independent and unbiased observers of our own inner realm of feelings and emotions, will have something meaningful and tangible to observe, once we have abandoned all our cherished pop psychology beliefs. What happens if we look into ourselves and see absolutely nothing meaningful at all ? Or if we are simply unable to interpret what we see without grabbing at bits of garbled

Freudianism and lumpy platitudes we've heard off the radio? In such a situation – which is very likely to happen to begin with – we have to develop our own multifaceted strategy for negotiating the apparent incomprehensibility of our own psychological outpourings. This is an overblown way of saying that we have to learn to accept what we see, and if we see nothing, or nothing that we can make sense of, we have to learn to accept that too. We have to learn, for example, to ask ourselves why – for reasons other than mental laziness or our own inability to think for ourselves – we feel lost without the reassurance of some overarching authoritative theory, no matter how demanding that theory on our credulity? And if we don't really see anything, why do we feel we are 'getting somewhere' by reading an account in a book which tells us what we should be seeing? Why, for example, did the world absorb the whole Freudian project – with all its patent idiocies – so easily? Why, in the same vein, is the astonishing character classification 'anal'⁴ [meaning anally retentive, meaning fussy about detail] such a popular form of psychological label among certain educated people? Do any of those who use the term to describe themselves – and others – have any interest in what it was originally meant to explain, or more importantly, whether or not this explanation is accurate and helpful? Do they really care? The answer is of course no, and it is somewhat misguided even to ask that kind of question, because much of what is employed in the service of psychological explanation is just a form of conversational poetry – colourful rhetoric – which supposedly sounds informed, and perceptive, and in this case, brutally candid, but whose actual meaning is largely irrelevant. The concept 'anal' has been handed down to us from on high, and we cheerfully go along with it, believing it to represent the perspicacity of much greater minds than ours. You really couldn't make it up if you tried.

At this stage we want to summarise this discussion by reducing it to these key interconnected points:

- (1) even if we accept that the discipline called psychology – which offers us ready-made explanations of our psychological functioning – has something relatively useful to teach us,
- (2) we ought always to pursue our own personal psychological self-knowledge independently of pre-existing doctrines, avoiding them wherever possible,
- (3) because we cannot hope to gain insight into the metaphysical realms of our being if we have failed to learn how to explore – independently of other people's ideas, theories and doctrines – our own mental capacities, starting with our psychological experiencing.

Metaphysical knowledge and insight is not a function of psychological exploration – it is of a different modality altogether – but you could not possibly embark on serious metaphysical study without first having proved to yourself your own ability to explore the information supplied to you daily by your own psyche.

Psychological health: adequacy, sanity, normality

But if 'psychology' turns out to have been something of an enticing distraction, offering us temptations that we need to treat with the utmost suspicion and scepticism, does this mean we are then condemned to being lost in space, freefalling until such time as we have worked out our own plan of action? Not necessarily, because we can ground ourselves at the outset by means of some very basic everyday ideas already in current use which don't derive their content from the formal discipline of psychology, even if they might appear to.

The most useful yet provocative of these ideas is that of everyday psychological health or, to portray it in its most recognisable form, simply 'being normal'. 'Being normal' is a useful idea for specifying a practical and realistic context in which anyone ought to be able to function; and it is provocative in the sense that, when systematically examined, it begins to reveal key aspects of any quest for self-fulfilment which are easily overlooked.

We can define 'being normal' by means of a kind of loose triangulation, involving the additional ideas of 'adequacy' and 'sanity'. 'Adequacy' means being able to function in life to the point where there are opportunities for reflecting on what it will take for self-fulfilment, and 'sanity' means being able to put these reflections to practical use in such a way as to avoid extremes. Adequacy could include a vast array of lifestyles, from being rich to being homeless - including along the way being forcibly institutionalised - the only requirement being that any particular lifestyle, however deprived, degraded or sublime, affords the individual the chance to reflect slowly and systematically on life and existence, such that they could begin to enact those ideas which they might believe would lead to ultimate self-fulfilment. The point here being that ultimate self-fulfilment - an issue of a metaphysical order - bears no relation to wealth or social status, and can instantiate itself under more or less any conditions, and in more or less any circumstances.

The quality of 'sanity' - as a necessary feature of healthy normality - is even more interesting in its implications. It might appear at first to be a straightforwardly medical matter, but in fact - in the way it will be defined here - it has little or nothing to do with medical pathology: it is essentially about maintaining a balance in what one does, and never going too far in any direction, while anchoring oneself in the most mundane and banal aspects of everydayness. Why? Because the tedious, the ordinary and the routine are the indisputable gold standards by means of which you can tell exactly where you are, and that you haven't left the planet, and that you're no more special than anyone else, and that you are still subject to the everyday laws of the universe. Those who fail to recognise the privilege of everyday ordinariness and strive to propel themselves permanently - by meditation, moral goodness, narcotics, prayer, or whatever - into altered realms of consciousness, supposedly in pursuit of divinity, enlightenment, or astral travel, do not appreciate that if you damage your fragile links to tedious normality, you will have no means of knowing whether you have made progress, or gone backward, or are losing your mind. And for those who have somehow managed to achieve permanent states of transcendental cosmic bliss, and couldn't care less about

the how or the why – then good luck to them - but they have situated themselves at the opposite end of the spectrum from anything like metaphysical gnosis, or the possibility of authentic self-fulfilment.

An important feature of everydayness which we need to identify, as it is easily overlooked, is that of the necessity of ‘being in the midst of it’ or, to put it more crudely, ‘up to your neck in it’. And this means being in regular contact with other ordinary and not so ordinary people, and having to acknowledge their existence, and having to put up with their demands. It is a great mistake to isolate yourself from other people, and cut yourself off from the relentless and unavoidable difficulties, conflicts and humiliations you will likely experience if you are properly a part of the human social world; and this exposure to negativity is a valuable corrective to all kinds of mistaken ideas about life and existence that can easily take root if you live in a world of your own making, remote from the egocentric and grossly selfish ambitions of others. This does not mean that you have to throw yourself in the very front line of social life, but it does mean that you have to know about life on the streets, and in the shops, and on public transport. There is plenty there to stop you getting unrealistic ideas about your value to the universe, and how you could save the planet if people would only follow the ideas you believe in. Witnessing the selfishness and stupidity of others is but an instant away from seeing exactly the same, or more likely worse, in yourself. Being in regular contact with other people is also valuable in subjecting you to the requisite amount of stress, which in turn sharpens your wits, and keeps your feet on the ground. Persistent stress, in moderation, is desirable.

And if we understand everyday mental healthiness – just being normal – as this balance between adequacy and sanity, is there any way of securing this as your permanent condition, as opposed to your being condemned to a state of perpetual uncertainty ? In other words, is there any way to guarantee, or safeguard, normality ? Given the general direction of travel – towards ultimate self-fulfilment – it is possible to make a few observations, based on a kind of coherence of purpose, which will help to justify why embarking on a genuine quest for self-fulfilment might rightly secure itself.

But at the start we have to acknowledge that there is only so much you can do for yourself -by yourself - and that beyond that, life itself will have to give you a helping hand. This reciprocal relationship extends from worldly situations we get caught up in, to states of mind we find ourselves having to endure. In exactly the same way that we know that it makes plain and simple sense, if you want to improve some aspect of your worldly environment, to keep looking for ways that could potentially lead to such improvements, and that by doing this you will eventually secure them, by a sort of mysterious logic that no one can prove decisively, but which somehow we know to be true. This is not the same as believing, in an adolescent way, that ‘if you really want something badly enough, you will definitely get it’ – this is a much more realistic assessment, based in everyday experience, that a certain persistent, directed, effort always pays off; and that, even if you don’t get everything you wanted, you can be guaranteed of a better outcome than if you didn’t do anything to help yourself.

And if this works for trying to get a job, or trying to find a partner, or getting control of household finances, it also works for creating a frame of mind conducive to the kind of minimal optimism needed for a very basic engagement with the world, such that things can be done, days got through, lists ticked off, weekends reached, and life lived. This might seem a ridiculously modest way to look at your existence – embarrassingly pathetic even - given the lifestyles of the rich and famous that are constantly being celebrated in the media, but these lifestyles are a form of absurdist entertainment, not a reflection of anything meaningful. Real life is very much more humble, and difficult, and unexciting. Real life is more of an ordeal than a pleasure. People with any sense know this, despite everyone desperately pretending otherwise. So behind the effusive displays of delight that are compulsory in our society - and in many cases because of them - most people are quietly tormented by the sense that they are being mysteriously excluded from all the fun and games, and that this must mean that there is something seriously wrong with them. In fact there is nothing wrong with them, and nothing to be tormented about: ordinary life is in reality something of a grim process for all of us.

There are also two factors relating to people who are serious about tackling the 'big questions' in life which ought to be pointed out here. One: that people who are sincerely attuned to issues larger than wealth, fame, and worldly success will by their very nature be possessed of a certain curious sensitivity which makes them unsuited to fiercely extraverted lifestyles; and two: more importantly – if you are trying to orientate yourself in life, for whatever reason, and with whatever goal in mind, you need to learn to appreciate the basics, and those basics are very basic indeed. And the most basic of the basics is just being able to muster enough mental energy to get you through the day, so that you can relax in front of the television with a drink for an hour or two before going to bed, so that you can start the whole vaguely arduous process over again tomorrow, all the time looking forward to the weekend. There is not a lot more to it than that, and if you find this portrayal of life grotesquely underpowered – horrifically depressing even - then you are most probably not much interested in finding a way to resolve the mystery at the heart of it: you are probably quite content with the idea of life as the mere pursuit of your own pleasure and success, and why not, if that's the way you are? Enjoy yourself. As for the rest of us, just keep going: there is an ultimately fulfilling 'way out', but for some reason it chooses not to reveal itself just like that.

But returning to the point, which is how to justify that the triangulation of sanity, adequacy and normality will become a reassuring and reliable context in which to situate yourself, this depends to a great extent on the overall direction of your travel. Life will always feel as though it is just about to collapse – it is in its very nature to do so – and half the battle, getting through the day, is to manage to keep this feeling at bay, by immersing yourself in whatever it is you think and feel you need to do. Your self-imposed task might be to try to make more money, or to secure your family relationships, or to keep the house clean – the nature of the task itself does not matter – what matters is that you have something you consider meaningful to do, which is something meaningful to fill up the long hours between the good times, and the times when you can reflect deeply, and purposively, on what life is all about.

A commitment to metaphysical gnosis: self-help as self-psychotherapy

Now the difference between a dreadful, arduous existence on the one hand, and an existence which is tolerably interesting on the other - with some fleeting moments of great pleasure and joy - is all down to a very explicit decision - in your own mind, and just between you and yourself - to commit yourself to the quest for metaphysical knowledge, whereby you transform everything that happens to you, physically and mentally, into an opportunity to search for deeper insights into life, existence, and the universe. You reposition yourself - reorientate, recalibrate yourself - and in doing so you not only lighten the load of life, you make the whole process of living at least marginally more interesting, and you give yourself something to work towards, whether or not you think you are likely to achieve anything wonderful in the end. The value of this kind of perspective cannot be overestimated - it reaches to your very roots - and it accords with something of our deepest, innermost nature. It feels right, from whatever angle. In its own way, this is the highest possible form of self-help, and it constitutes, if you like, an unassailable instance of self-psychotherapy. This has nothing to do with religion and holiness, and it completely transcends your likes and dislikes, pushing you towards a level of objectivity and impartiality which will surprise you when you eventually come to notice it.

And more to the point, this type of self-acknowledged metaphysical commitment will not isolate you from bad experiences, and the negativity of life, nor should it - after all, life would be extremely boring without there being nightmarish stuff to avoid - but it does allow you to look at things in such a way as to turn life into a quest, and into an ongoing search for the holy grail of metaphysical gnosis, and almost into a kind of adventure.

But we have to be careful here not to overlay the sense of adventure that might come with an inner commitment to the quest for metaphysical self-fulfilment, because if you take things seriously you will see that it is simply not possible to treat your life as a game which you can easily put back in the cupboard when you start to feel things going wrong. And things can get very rough indeed, and you can, on occasion, feel all your most reassuring and dependable thoughts slipping through your fingers, leaving you with nothing to hold onto at all. You can find yourself stripped of everything, and in despair. But if you've honestly committed yourself to an ongoing quest for greater knowledge and insight, you will - because of your inner commitment - also discover that you are able to recover from catastrophic despair relatively quickly and easily, and be able to say to yourself, 'That was exceptionally bad, I wonder what went wrong that time?' It's a completely different perspective from someone who puts all their faith in material and social success in life, and is committed to that. When things go wrong for such people, and they eventually do - as they eventually do for all of us without exception - their prospects are very bleak indeed. How many of the beautiful people make it through life unscathed? Only the very stupid ones.

There are obviously many similarities between the approach to life generated by a buddhistic quest like this and any type of deeply held conviction, whether it be political, or religious, or philosophical. If you suffer everything for the sake of Jesus, Muhammad, or Ron Hubbard, you can achieve miracles, no doubt about it. But you can achieve miracles by committing yourself to a political cause as well, as you can even with a simple love affair. You can also achieve miracles by working in the computer industry: the internet itself is nothing short of unbelievably miraculous. But the quest for self-fulfilment and metaphysical gnosis is not about finding a way to toughen up your inner resources, making you so resilient you can withstand any catastrophe; it is about connecting you with your inner resources in such a way that you are in an unimprovable relationship with them, allowing them to function with clarity and purpose. And if there is a better way of going about the whole process of fulfilling yourself, you will surely come across it sooner or later, because you are not distorting your thinking or damaging your mental capacities by forcing them to operate according to a religious or philosophical doctrine. You remain open minded, alert, flexible, ready for anything.

And perhaps the most important feature of a wholehearted commitment to metaphysical gnosis – or to put it more plainly, to realising the highest possible fulfilling knowledge – is that such a commitment accords with the most stringent and demanding possible standards of your intellect: you are not demeaning yourself by striving for less than the best, for less than is adult. You are not begging for mercy, or trying to slime your way into some creator's good books, or just generally being immature, and sentimental, and unctuous. You're not giving in to the silliness of your heartfelt yearnings, which you've been clinging on to from your childhood. You're doing what any adult human should do, which is to stand up for yourself, and take on the challenge of life and existence. We all have the resources to do this, but we fall by the wayside through a lack of determination, and an inability to pick ourselves up after a few bad punches. Your 'self-narrative' – your account of yourself to yourself – doesn't have to be marvellously and admirably consistent – occasional periods of cowardice and laziness and feebleness are in order: we are human, after all – but you do have to find a way somehow to keep at it, to get back to the task at hand when you've had your moments of defeat, and self-doubt.

A quick word about grounded normality and everydayness: this is not a doctrine about tedious moderation and dull abstinence. There is nothing wrong with 'losing it' occasionally – in accordance with your capacities for recovery – as long as you can regain it for 'going to the office' on Monday morning. What would be wrong would be to believe that extremism of any sort leads to anything significant in spiritual terms: it only leads to a damaging of the capacities you depend on for all forms of judgement, whether worldly or metaphysical.

To summarise: we are examining the concept of psychological health – psychological normality – and characterising it as the capacity not only to lead a relatively fulfilling normal life, but also, more importantly, as an opportunity to reflect, slowly and systematically and purposefully, on what you need to do to fulfil yourself in some kind of conclusive, decisive way. In other words, to achieve your 'ultimate

fulfilment'. We are aspiring to go beyond relative fulfilment – that is, mere success in worldly terms – because we know that it is inadequate to our deepest needs, and unable to offer more than a temporary sense of satisfaction. Sanity, adequacy and everyday ordinariness are the necessary and indispensable features of the basic everyday context within which we ought to ground ourselves, and within which we need to move and breathe, and to which we need to return as soon as we feel ourselves drifting away from it. And the contention here is that if you commit yourself – in the service of a higher quest - to a type of bog standard normality, keeping it all very plain and simple and grounded, you should, almost by necessary default, be guaranteed of something like ongoing psychological health; at least, guaranteed as far as anything can be: human life is a very fragile and uncertain predicament, and nothing can ever be taken for granted.

Psychotherapy and self-fulfilment

On the basis of what has been argued above, we can move towards the conclusion that the whole idea of psychotherapy – in the light of any quest for ultimate self-fulfilment – is essentially counterproductive and self-defeating. If you cannot find a way to deal with your own inner experiencing, you will surely be wasting your time trying to tackle wider questions about life and existence as a whole; questions which of their very nature require levels of clarity and objectivity which, if you think you can achieve them, you would be well advised to apply to your understanding of your own psyche.

This conclusion may seem more than a little blunt when set up against what is unquestionably a respectable profession, overseen by responsible governing bodies, and informed by a discipline – psychology – which is itself committed to objective and scientific procedures. But if we set aside the undeniable respectability, and return again to asking simple questions about a basic understanding of psychotherapy, working from first principles, we can discover some interesting facts about ourselves.

We need at this stage to point out a characteristic feature of our individual psychologies which, when all else could be said and done, is what keeps the whole 'psychology industry' in business. And it is the peculiar fact that, despite our psyches being an intimate and very familiar part of us - and at the same time giving rise to these very experiences of intimacy and familiarity – they are also potentially as mysterious and unknown to us as anything could possibly be. We all come to know, from experience, what our own personal emotional and sentimental responses are - under normal situations - though of course we reserve the right to surprise ourselves when it comes to extremes. And we generally like to stay within the confines of the familiar – the so-called comfort zone – because we don't want, or like, what we don't want, or don't like. But our psyches don't appear to care what we want and like, and occasionally put us through distressing experiences, often without warning, and very often without explanation. In other words, our psyches can, under their own authority, subject us to experiential states which, despite the fact that the psyche is supposed to be something like our private 'possession', are life-threatening in their intensity, and which render us incapable of functioning in any meaningful way. In other words, if your own psyche turns against you – for whatever reason – you are in trouble. It can also disable you in

what is considered a positive way, flooding you with rapture, and causing you to lose touch with your surroundings, in what the Hindus call 'God-intoxication'. Something very similar – in both positive and negative examples - can be achieved using narcotics.

So we have our everyday psychological capacity, which we generally consider benign, and in which we normally 'reside' and experience our lives, and we have the 'out-of-the-comfort-zone' psyche, which lies just around the corner, and which we do our best not to provoke. And it is this sense of an uncertain negative presence, distantly threatening our wellbeing, and always lurking just out of reach, which leads us, quite justifiably, to think that we don't really know ourselves, and that we best leave psychology to the professionals. After all, might not the explanation for the horrific behaviour of some people be that the lurking presence, instead of remaining somewhere distant, suddenly decides to occupy our everyday mind, and turn us into monsters ? And why can't I make myself feel happier, despite the fact that I've read all the books, and even attended lectures by happiness experts ? It's because my mind is not really my own, and I can't work things out for myself, and who knows what would happen if I decided to 'psychoanalyse' myself: I would surely cause my whole mental structure to collapse in on itself. Best leave it to the professionals, even when they take the form of an immature and empty-faced youngster, just out of adolescence, but replete with degrees and certificates.

There is also the sense of relief and reassurance which comes from abdicating responsibility to someone you have decided knows better than you. It is not that they *do* know better – no easy way of telling – but rather that you have decided they do. Your decision may have been made on the basis of a recommendation, or more likely, on the fact that they occupy a position in some kind of authoritarian hierarchy, and you hand the rest over to fate. And of course the simple, unanswerable fact is that you would never get anywhere in life if you were sceptical, as a matter of principle, about the competence of each and every declared professional you came across – you sometimes *have* to go with the flow, and take some things on trust. It seems to work most of the time, and the world seems to be functioning quite well, and getting better all the time. At least for some of us.

But this kind of functional pragmatism – deferring to authorised professionals - is fine when it comes to consulting your GP about a persistent rash, or getting a technician to fix the boiler, or taking advice from the bank on your finances, but it has no place whatsoever – none - when it comes to exploring your own psychology. To seek professional advice when you should be seeing to yourself is a fundamental error of judgement, and one which will haunt you until such time as you acknowledge it for the colossal mistake that it is. This is not about persuading you to accept an argument by weight of evidence, or selling you the idea that it will somehow make you a better person: it is simply getting you to realise that you cannot possibly think for yourself if someone else is thinking for you. And if you cannot think for yourself, you cannot know anything for yourself, and if you cannot know anything for yourself, you will never be in a position to see where your own special and unique opportunity for ultimate fulfilment lies, you will only be in a position to see what someone else's idea of what your fulfilment might be. In a word, you need to be able to see what you can see, for yourself.

Psychotherapy is, at its most elemental, guided by an utterly trivial concept of therapeutic effectiveness⁵, and would have us submit to various speculative dogmas, surrendering in the process both autonomy and self-reliance, supposedly in the cause of a quasi-medical concern for our wellbeing. And while it is undeniably true that there are vast areas of our own experiencing that we ourselves can't fathom - let alone control - it is a serious misjudgement to conclude from this that this means other people - the accredited professionals - are in a better position to understand us than we are ourselves. To accept the idea that they are - even inadvertently, or with the best of intentions - is to cripple yourself at the very outset of any quest for ultimate self-fulfilment, with far reaching consequences. It testifies to an elemental failure to appreciate the necessity for self-reliance - as part of a requirement for direct knowledge - and it condemns the subject to a mediated understanding of themselves. Even if the mediated knowledge were both wholly benign and wholly accurate - most unlikely - it would still not constitute direct knowledge, in a situation in which direct knowledge is specifically being sought. This renders any form of mediated psychological self-knowledge both counterproductive and self-defeating. The buddhistic commitment is to seek direct insight wherever meaningfully possible, and to avoid any sort of doctrinal mediation, even in the benevolent guise of theories specifically designed to enhance our wellbeing.

Where does this leave someone wanting to begin to try to understand their own psyche for themselves? Unavoidably bewildered, most likely. When you try to think your way around your own mind, and at that very moment seem to have lost your way, it seems so appropriate to want to consult a professional, and have them offer you expert guidance. It's so much more reassuring than having to negotiate the darkness for yourself. Working things out for yourself is seldom comforting, or encouraging. At least, not to begin with. It always seems to leave you feeling bereft, and alone. Partly this is to do with the inevitable anxiety that you may be missing something by setting yourself apart from the flock. This is why people will gladly pay someone to tell them what to do, even if the advice is unwittingly misguided and uninformed, as it almost always is. It takes years to get to know a person, to a stage where you could begin to tailor meaningful advice to them personally, and it would take even longer if your only exposure to them was in a formal setting, such as a counselling consultation. This has nothing to do with psychoanalytic garbage about transference or whatever, it is a simple truth about exposure to the facts about how a person actually lives their life in concrete situations, and the simple truth that no counsellor is going to be able to witness these facts for themselves, short of moving in with the client. And even then, it would be a very foolish and inexperienced person who would conclude, after a year or two living with a client - an impossibility anyway - 'I know this person inside out'. Have you seen them react to grief? To the ravages of time, or to the ravages of illness? To the loss of lifetime friendships? Or to the sudden acquisition of wealth, or success? To any kind of life-changing event?

The idea here is simply to expose the basic misjudgement about the feasibility of accurately and meaningfully uncovering a person's psychological experiencing as the result of the application of learned technique. Psychological insight can't be thought of

as something you can teach, like boxing, or playing the violin, or speaking Chinese. Even more to the point, the extent to which a person's psychology can easily be apprehended is in inverse proportion to their complexity of character, so the more there is to them in terms of depth of personality, the harder it will be to gain any kind of grasp of what really motivates them, and sustains them inwardly. This is not a difficult concept, flying in the face of all the evidence. It has to be one of the most painfully obvious facts of life, available to anyone anywhere, whatever their intellectual capacity; yet somehow psychotherapy does not consider it worth taking seriously. This is because psychology and psychotherapy believes it can overcome any deficit in understanding by the application of technique, so that any modestly intelligent 25 year old can, with a certificate or two, and a dab of midnight oil, analyse someone with a lifetime of experience, and confidently set them on the right path. It doesn't take much reflection to see how ridiculous this is.

Does this mean the end of all forms of psychotherapeutic counselling? For adults – meaning autonomous individuals with a measure of age and experience – it should certainly mean the end of partisan counselling of the sort which, believing it has cracked the code for human psychology, attempts to implement a solution by means of specific techniques. This is not because of the theoretical impossibility of there being a psychological theory so insightful and sophisticated that it effectively exposes human psychology in all its richness and depth, but because this is not the way to approach your own psychological capacities, or even to help other people understand themselves. If you want to understand yourself, you have to learn to observe your own experiencing, not consult a book which explains it all to you, no matter how accurate that explanation. You have to come to your own conclusions, however difficult and time-consuming it may be to reach them: anything less than this is insight by proxy, which is equivalent to no insight at all.

We need to draw the threads together here. It might appear that the conclusion is that psychotherapy in any shape or form is mistaken, and that the whole enterprise, starting with psychology itself, ought to be abandoned. This is not what we are trying to say. What is being said here is that psychology and psychotherapy have to be abandoned if and when you are serious about the quest for self-knowledge, and self-enquiry, and the innermost truth about yourself. If and when you are serious about striving for metaphysical gnosis – for knowing your place in the universe, and how the universe works. This type of knowledge cannot be gained through doctrine, or through filtering your experiences through the ideas of others: it can only be gained first hand, directly, and without intermediary.

But this is not to say that many ordinary people – especially those who are only concerned to enjoy life - cannot be greatly helped by psychology and its sister science psychotherapy. Of course they can. There is nothing to dispute here; this is a matter of common sense. Psychotherapeutic intervention can be the difference between life and death, between sanity and madness, between meaning and meaninglessness. But success on this scale can only happen if the client is, for whatever reason, deeply trusting of whatever it is they are told, to the extent that they would 'feel better' about their situation even if their experience of distress were to increase! People who are

willing to submit to psychotherapeutic authority can be found in all walks of life, and their capacity to do so is not a function of their education, sophistication or maturity. Likewise the phenomenon of a patient feeling better whatever the therapeutic intervention – and perhaps in spite of it - is well known to the medical profession. So we are effectively talking about psychotherapeutic value as a function of a kind of innocent faith in the system – combined with commonsensical therapeutic practices such as having someone sympathetic to talk to – where the client is taken care of by forces they perceive to be superior and more knowledgeable than themselves. There is obviously more to it than this, but it is the passive and credulous approach of the client which is key to success in the whole process. Clients hand themselves over to the system, hope for the best, and respond positively to whatever they are told. It is essentially a deferential submission to authority, and it most certainly can work.

Trying to make a start, on your own

So where do you start, if you want to understand your own ‘psyche’, your own psychological experiencing ? Not by supplying yourself with explanatory material, which is what psychology amounts to, but by learning to question what you see, at two levels at the same time: at one level, by asking yourself, in the most elemental way, what you think causes what, when it comes to various psychological states that you experience; and at another level, by asking yourself whether ‘causality’ is the most appropriate category to employ, or not to employ, when trying to explain your psychological functioning to yourself. And if not, what would be ? Can we explain our psychological reactions to things without employing the concept of causality, or something like it ? Are we not just clutching at readymade explanations supplied by other people ? And why do we feel reassured by applying some explanatory label to a situation, when the label does not advance our understanding in any way ? And so on. By establishing these two tiers of questioning, one directed at specifics, and the other at your methods of thought, you effectively undermine any psychological dogmas and doctrines you may be secretly holding on to, and in so doing neutralise them, and pave the way for authentic clarity of thought. It shouldn’t be too long before you can stand on your own two feet, and be able to see the ridiculous vacuity of most psychological pronouncements made from on high, and be able to work things out for yourself.

The transformative power of independent, self-reliant thought

Self-reliant thought has tremendous transformative power – in terms of clarity and lucidity of thought, and simply getting a basic grip on life - but it takes a while before the results start to show. This is because of the sense of isolation - and directionlessness - that invariably accompanies any attempt at working things out for yourself. You face multiple tasks, in that you find yourself having not only to think through what you find, but also having to work out where to look, and even *how* to look. To begin with, you find it impossible not to rely on stuff you have read, and stuff you have been told. Concepts like ‘the unconscious’ or ‘transference’ or ‘Oedipal complex’ seem to explain things to you in a way that your own ideas never will be able to, and you cannot imagine a day when you might be able to witness your experiencing without recourse to them. But if you examine these concepts slowly and persistently, all the time

asking yourself how they can be justified, and which bits of your experience supposedly justify them, you can, in time, begin to see whether or not they are merely bits of narrative fantasy, or real elements which stand up to objective scrutiny. And if they are real elements, are they fixed, or fluid, or neither? How does the whole idea of 'psychological explanation' – whether Freudian, or behaviourist, or whatever - hang together, and make sense? Or is it some kind of convenient delusion, a kind of mass psychosis we are all a willing party to?

But if you can find the strength of will and purpose to persist with such questioning, chipping away at the granite edifice of your worldly indoctrination, you will surely come to see some things for yourself. Even if the only thing you manage to see is that you cannot break free of other people's explanations of things, and that you will never be able to come up with your own. That would be enough of a start, and a useful first step, on which you might be able to build.

A very basic but useful exercise at a very early stage on the road to developing self-reliant thought is simply to learn to drill through – until you reach a dead end - the hidden content behind the various news items you come across in media. The surface content is easy enough, in that you are being informed of something considered interesting and newsworthy, but beyond that, what is the news item trying to tell you about life? Why is it interesting and newsworthy? This might seem an impossibly open-ended task, but it is not: the broad categories into which news items can be classified are surprisingly few, and these classifications can be made without trivialising or seriously distorting the actual content of the item itself. For example, most news items are about threats to life of one sort or another; the rest are about ways in which life can be enhanced, or extended. News hardly consists of anything other than these two topics, and this surely tells us something about the elements of life just below the surface: avoid pain, seek pleasure, keep going.

If you can learn to think your way beneath the surface excitement of life, not following any doctrine of any kind, but simply trying to get to the point of things, as best you can, you will surely, sooner or later, begin to gain insight into the metaphysical structure of the experiencing capacity in which you are already situated. And if there is a possibility, through the insights you have gained, of finding a way to fulfil yourself in some kind of ultimate and decisive way, then you will be able to explore it. And other soteriological doctrines – religious and secular – which you will already have encountered along the way, will start to look, in the light of your own direct, unmediated explorations, very hollow indeed. This is the whole purpose behind rejecting the beguiling theories inherent in psychology and psychotherapy – as well as any other doctrines which mediate your experiencing - and learning to think for yourself.

Conclusion

While the science of psychology and the practice of psychotherapy may have much to offer those whose only goal in life is worldly happiness, they have almost nothing to offer, either directly or indirectly, those who seek ultimate self-fulfilment. And more importantly, there is no middle ground here, no possibility of merging psychology and psychotherapy with a quest for ultimate self-fulfilment, because worldly scientific advancement and metaphysical self-understanding are pursuing qualitatively different objectives.

Metaphysical self-knowledge is predicated on the ability to think and observe for oneself, and a good place to start is by observing one's own psychological experiencing.

Summary

- (1) Psychology and psychotherapy are sciences – disciplines - supposedly aimed at supplying us with objective knowledge about our inner mental capacities, as well as how to achieve and maintain everyday wellbeing.
- (2) But insofar as they present us with fully developed theories of mental functioning, and prescriptions for wellbeing, they prevent us from a basic and direct examination of our own experiencing, and what that experiencing might inform us about ourselves.
- (3) If we are to achieve direct knowledge of ourselves, we will have to abandon mediated accounts - such as are presented to us by psychology and psychotherapy - of what we supposedly are, and how we supposedly think, and learn to think and observe for ourselves.
- (4) We can ground ourselves in a basic context comprising of adequacy, sanity and normality.
- (5) And what we will discover, if we ground ourselves in this wholly elemental context, and begin to explore our own experiencing, will be startlingly different from what is commonly believed to be the case; and it will also serve to increase our self-reliance, and capacity for independence of thought and judgement.
- (6) Metaphysical gnosis – and the path to ultimate self-fulfilment - can only be achieved under conditions of direct perception, observation and reflection. This is the buddhistic way, and it runs counter to doctrinal authoritarianism of any and every sort, especially as might be encountered in religion, and in secular systems such as psychology and psychotherapy.

Endnotes

¹ Further essays can be found at <https://theindependentbuddhist.website>

² Online magazines such as Slate, Salon & Huffington Post regularly publish articles consisting of portentous psychological explanations; typical example: 'Psychology helps explain why Louis C.K. is so funny' 'Research suggests we really do find humor in tragedy, but only during a specific, limited window of time.'
http://www.salon.com/2013/12/18/psychology_helps_explains_why_louis_c_k_is_so_funny_partner/

³ Malcolm Gladwell – though not strictly a psychologist – is the current master of specious arguments supposedly validated by experimental data.

⁴ Anal Character: one fixed at the anal level of *psychosexual development*, when the *libido* charges the anus with energy. People stuck at this early stage are regarded as parsimonious, obstinate, hoarding, and perfectionistic.
<http://www.terrapsych.com/freud.html>

⁵ Psychotherapy is all about solving life problems. For example: 'Generally psychotherapy is recommended whenever a person is grappling with a life, relationship or work issue or a specific mental health concern, and these issues are causing the individual a great deal of pain or upset for longer than a few days...Most psychotherapy tends to focus on problem solving and is goal-oriented. That means at the onset of treatment, you and your therapist decide upon which specific changes you would like to make in your life. Psychotherapy is most successful when the individual enters therapy on their own and has a strong desire to change... Change means altering those aspects of your life that aren't working for you any longer, or are contributing to your problems or ongoing issues.' From <http://psychcentral.com/psychotherapy/>

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[a representative sample only; many dozens of other books used in the preparation of this essay]

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