

Context for the Healing Ground

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The Healing Ground is the psychological aspect of the Realization Process. This approach uses our potential to experience ourselves as a unified ground of consciousness as both the goal and the instrument of psychological healing. This is an innovative approach, but it did develop within a general trend of knowledge about human suffering and its cures. And it can also be situated within an enduring dialectic of that understanding that has been argued in diverse cultures, possibly since the pleasure of philosophical arguing was first discovered. That is: whether or not there is an innate ground of being, something real, in the sense of uncreated, that can be uncovered beyond our imagining of ourselves and our world.

It is interesting that the disagreement as to whether we can or cannot uncover a fundamental, unified ground of being or consciousness beyond the changing “content” of our experience exists in both the spiritual and psychotherapy fields. The debate within Buddhism about whether or not this ground or Buddha-nature can be experienced is so common that Tibetan Buddhists have divided their teachings into two categories: the belief that there is no ground (which they call “empty of itself”), and the belief that there is a ground that emerges clearly when we contact the innermost depths of ourselves (called “empty of other”) (Hookham, 1991). The teachings that adhere to the no-ground view offer practices for dissolving habitual thought patterns that obscure the immediacy of the changing flux of experience. This immediacy of experience, along with the recognition of the impermanence of all our experience, is considered to be enlightenment. Followers of the Buddha-nature view practice specific meditations to uncover this fundamental aspect of themselves, to actually experience themselves as Buddha-nature. The first category is a cognitive and perceptual shift. The second category, the realization of fundamental consciousness, involves not only a cognitive and perceptual shift but a refinement and openness of one’s whole being, including our capacity for emotion and physical sensation. The Realization Process is in this second category. It is based on the potential experience of a ground of being.

Among psychotherapeutic disciplines, this conflict between ground and no-ground has not been as clearly articulated as in the spiritual field, but the distinctions between these two points of views are still easy to find. Just as within spiritual traditions, this important contrast in the understanding of human nature produces a difference in the methods of achieving health and maturity.

In order for a psychotherapeutic modality to recognize a potential to experience a ground of being, it has to recognize the body as intimately connected with the mind, and as instrumental in both psychological suffering and healing. But even that is not sufficient. For we can focus on

the physical body, such as the nervous system or fascia, without recognizing any dimension of ourselves beyond that. In order to include the primary ground of consciousness in its philosophy and methods, a therapeutic modality has to recognize the potential to refine our attunement to ourselves, so that we know ourselves on a more subtle level than either our thoughts or our physical anatomy. This requirement of sensitivity, or the cultivation of sensitivity, means that those psychotherapeutic modalities that recognize a ground of being are very few. However, the seed of this understanding, that I feel has reached one of its flowerings in the Realization Process, was embedded in the earliest psychotherapeutic formulations, in the form of “libidinal energies.”

One of primary founders of the field of psychotherapy was Sigmund Freud, just a little more than a century ago. Freud (Mitchell & Black, 1995) believed that maturity was a matter of adjusting to the norms of society, by controlling our natural but unruly sexual impulses. He claimed that human beings possess inherent libidinal energies, biological forces that cause suffering and dysfunction in adults if we do not control them sufficiently.

Freud also wrote that psychological maladies were the result of traumatic events in a person’s life that they had ceased to remember. Healing occurred when the patient uncovered these events through a stream of consciousness monologue, and then, with the interpretive assistance of the analyst, was able to understand these events as the source of his or her suffering. He posited that we each contain, somewhere in our mind, a storehouse of unconscious, repressed memories and beliefs that influence our behavior, our choices and our degree of psychological pain or wellbeing.

In the decades that followed his work, his views on libidinal energies were often ignored or dismissed but his theories about the unconscious were embraced and expanded upon. Various forms of object-relations theory emerged that claimed that our suffering as adults is based on difficulties in our early relationships with our parents. The term “object” here means “other,” and generally refers to our first caretakers with whom we did or did not establish relationships of love and trust. Object-relation theories say that we form templates, implicit ideas, of who we are, who others are, and how to relate with others, based on these initial encounters with other human beings. This understanding has become increasingly refined over the years, studying how infants and young children bond with their parents and how they manage to navigate a growing awareness of self-other separation.

These object-relation theories have in common the view that our identity is made of our conscious and unconscious beliefs—that we are basically mentally constructed entities. In this regard, these theories resemble the “empty of itself” category of Tibetan Buddhism. Also, for object-relations therapists, as for “empty of itself” Buddhists, the cure is cognitive. The remedy for human suffering is a mental, verbal process. Freud called his psychoanalytic method the “talking cure.” However, the object-relations therapists do not believe that these templates can be entirely undone, they can only be improved upon, and made more flexible. Gertrude Stein spoke for this view of human life (constructivism) when she famously said “there

is no there there.” There is nothing beyond our learned and socially constructed experience of ourselves and the world.

The many talking cures that followed Freud’s method have aimed at making unconscious beliefs conscious, so that we can evaluate and revise them (ibid). They consider mental health to be the recognition and resolution of negative beliefs, arising from painful childhood experiences, so that we can arrive at a more positive conception of ourselves and the world. Today, the understanding of the formative power of belief has bred a new discipline called Positive Psychology that teaches that if we think more positive thoughts, we do not need to search for the origins of our suffering in our childhood. Positive thoughts in themselves, they believe, will engender in us a more positive attitude towards life and make us better, happier people.

Alongside this evolving line of theory of the mental basis of human development and psychological health has been another, much fainter line of theory. It also has its origins in Freud’s groundbreaking work. But, while often accepting and including Freud’s claims about the unconscious, it has developed and refined the somatic and energetic components of his theories. This somatically oriented line begins with a student of Freud’s, a stormy, visionary character named Wilhelm Reich. Reich (1945) believed that there is an actual energetic aspect of our being that is not dependent on mental constructs. He claimed that the libidinal energies are real and can be experienced as flowing, streaming movement within the body. He felt that this energy, which he called “orgone,” could be seen in the air – that it resided in and streamed through all of the natural world. Psychological health for Reich was the full unimpeded experience of this streaming energy. Psychological pathology, he wrote, was the binding of energy, the clamping down on it. He believed that each of us was potentially a natural, whole person who was being squeezed and diminished by abusive social and psychological forces.

Reich developed breathing and touch techniques for loosening this bound energy. He even invented a box that he called an “orgone accumulator” that one could sit inside, or extend body parts into, for stimulating this energy. In the fifties, after he went so far as to claim that his boxes and techniques for releasing bound energy could cure cancer, his books and his gadgets were ordered destroyed by the Food and Health Administration. He spent the last years of his life in prison, after failing to obey the injunction against his work.

Reich called the bound energy in the body “character armor.” He said that we bind ourselves in segments of tire-like structures or “rings” (1945, p. 369) that encase the body, like a protective shield. He wrote, “It is as if the affective personality armored itself, as if the hard shell it develops were intended to deflect and weaken the blows of the outer world as well as the clamoring of the inner needs” (p. 338). Reich agreed with Freud that the treatment of psychological suffering entailed the uncovering of painful events in childhood, but he felt that it also required the release of the binding in the body. He maintained that the release of the character armor was far more effective at uncovering these memories than simply talking. He wrote, “In orgone therapy, the pathogenic remembrances emerge *spontaneously and effortlessly* when the somatic emotions break through the muscular armor” (p. 22).

Reich's work was carried forward and expanded upon by a form of psychotherapy called Bioenergetic Analysis, developed by Alexander Lowen (Lowen, 1975), and by Core Energetics, developed by John Pierrakos (Pierrakos, 1987). Lowen and Pierrakos found new methods of loosening the energy, mainly by stretching the body into extreme shapes to produce trembling in the muscles and through expressive release techniques such as hitting pillows, kicking and shouting. Pierrakos parted with Lowen in order to produce a more spiritually oriented version of the work they had created together. He presented a more subtle topography of energy than either Reich or Lowen, positing vortices of energy throughout the body. As in the Hindu chakra system, Pierrakos considered energy to be not just libidinal, but also the underpinning of all facets of our being, including our mental and emotional lives. In keeping with the views of Reich and Lowen, Pierrakos understood the binding of energy to be a muscular activity, and the methods for releasing this muscular rigidity were much the same methods as those used in Bioenergetic Analysis.

As the views of Lowen and Pierrakos were gaining attention in the seventies and early eighties, Ida Rolf (Rolf, 1977) introduced a bodywork technique called Structural Integration, better known as "Rolfing." Structural Integration does not aim to be a method of psychotherapy and does not directly address psychological history or emotional suffering. It is a form of deep massage that is performed by the SI practitioner on a client who is lying on massage table. Its purpose is aligning the body so that people experience greater physical ease and comfort. However, Rolf discovered that in penetrating deeply within the body with her fingers, fists and elbows, and particularly in working with the layers of deep fascia that surround all of the structures throughout the body, the client would often have vivid childhood memories, along with emotional catharsis. These memories and emotions seemed to be the result of the release of these long-held tensions in the fascia. Here was the spontaneous emergence of memories and emotions breaking through their somatic binding that Reich had described several decades earlier.

However, Rolf found that the binding was not arranged just in the tire-like segments describes by Reich, but involved the fascia all through the body. This is an important difference. The fascia surrounds all of the components of our anatomy. It is basically a unified structure that is found everywhere in the body, and that forms the connective tissue of the internal space of the body as a whole. This means that, through the medium of the fascia, we can bind ourselves anywhere within our body, not just on the surface of ourselves. Rolf also spoke about the force of gravity moving "through" the body, and the relation of this movement to energy. She wrote, "What we can do is to change the way the parts of the body fit together into a whole which can transmit the gravitational field through that body in such a way that it enhances its energy field" (1978, p. 35). Although Rolf did not consider her work to be a method of psychological healing, she associated the structural alignment and ease achieved through Structural Integration with personal maturity, and with optimal personal functioning. She wrote that Structural Integration practitioners were not therapists, that "the gravity is the therapist" (p. 87).

In the last twenty years, a form of somatic psychotherapy called Somatic Experiencing, developed by Peter Levine (Levine, 1997), has become popular. Instead of involving mysterious, difficult to research aspects of the body such as “energy,” or the equally mysterious relationship between memory and fascia, Levine’s work focuses mainly on the effects of trauma on the nervous system. Trauma activates the fight, flight or freeze reaction in the brain’s limbic system. Levine based his work on the observation that human beings respond to trauma in the same manner as other animals, such as the way a deer will stand frozen in front of an oncoming car, or a dog will shake itself vigorously after a close encounter with a predator in order to discharge the activation and return to a regulated state.

In recent years, the refinement of instruments of measurement such as the fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) have uncovered a wealth of new knowledge of, and interest in the functioning of the brain. With these new technical advances, Somatic Experiencing, and the many new forms of therapy derived from it, can be effectively subjected to scientific study. It has been clearly shown, in scientific experiments, that trauma engages the amygdala in the brain, and that similar post-traumatic events evoke similar responses when environmental stimuli mimic the original traumatic event. Somatic Experiencing began as a way to heal severe trauma, such as rape, car accidents, or the horrific events that soldiers endured in war. However, in recent years, the concept of trauma has been expanded to mean any abrasive circumstance in our lives. In this way, Somatic Experiencing, and the fight, flight and freeze response, has been applied to what we now call developmental trauma, the ordinary painful or confusing events that occur in every human being’s childhood. Any frightening or confusing event in our lives suppresses our calming parasympathetic nervous system and activates our sympathetic nervous system, with its alarm signals of heightened vigilance, accelerated heartbeat and heightened blood pressure. People who have sustained consistent developmental trauma are found to be fixed in a chronic activation of the sympathetic nervous system.

The popularity of Somatic Experiencing and its availability for scientific study has highlighted the importance of working with the body to alleviate psychological suffering. However, Levine himself, adhering to post-modern philosophy and the more popular forms of “empty of itself” Buddhism, does not posit a ground of being. He wrote (2010, p. 287), “Paradoxically, the only way that we can know ourselves is in learning to be mindfully aware of the moment-to-moment goings-on of our body and mind as they exist through various situations occurring in time. We have no experience of anything that is permanent and independent of this. Thus, there is no ego or self, just a counterfeit construction. Although counterintuitive to most of us, this is common ‘knowledge’ to highly experienced meditators.” It is beyond the scope of this short article to parse out distinctions between concepts like “self” and “permanent” and the experience of oneself as a unified ground of being, although ignoring these distinctions has produced some unnecessary confusion for spiritual practitioners. I include this quote to show how body psychotherapy does not necessarily reach, or teach, the deeper, more subtle levels of our experience.

At the same time as Somatic Experiencing has become popular in the psychotherapeutic field, a form of bodywork has emerged that is also concerned with developmental trauma. In the early 1980s, Franklyn Sills began teaching a new, biodynamic approach to craniosacral therapy. It focuses on the subtle pulsations in the body. Michael Kern (2003) wrote, "The emphasis in Biodynamic Craniosacral Therapy is to help resolve the trapped forces that underlie and govern patterns of disease and fragmentation in both body and mind. This involves the practitioner "listening through the hands" to the body's subtle rhythms and any patterns of inertia or congestion."

Biodynamic craniosacral therapy, although a bodywork technique and not a form of psychotherapy, makes, in my view, an important contribution to the field of psychotherapy. It points to an underlying "primary respiratory system" or "vital force" that is experienced as imbalances are released (Kern, 2001, p. 8). This brings us into a more subtle realm than the physical anatomy, a realm that requires both the patient and the practitioner to refine their own perception. It also posits an actuality of being, an unconstructed true nature, beyond our constructed organizations of ourselves, similar to the theories of Wilhelm Reich. In these theories, who we are is not just the result of mental activity. We have an actual nature that we can uncover. Kern wrote, "However, at our very core there is a state of pure, unfabricated being and stillness. This is the place of our deepest nature. This essential ground state is underneath all our individual traits, our personality and all our doing. It's like the ocean floor" (2001, p. 23).

The direct experience of a unitive ground of being appears only rarely in the literature of the psychotherapy field. Roberto Assagioli was a contemporary of both Freud and Jung who developed a method of psychotherapy called Psychosynthesis. He claimed that one could have an actual experience of the self, and of pure self-awareness (Assagioli, 1965, p. 5). Jung also wrote about a self that was beyond or behind the fragments of our personality, and he theorized about a collective unconscious, in which the deepest contents of all of our minds were somehow shared. However, Jung presented these as ideas and symbols, rather than as accessible experiences. For Jung, the archetype of the self represented an "unknowable essence" (Fordham & Adler, 1966b). Abraham Maslow (Maslow, 1994), one of the founders of the humanistic movement in psychology, described "peak" experiences of unitive consciousness, which he considered to be indications of personal maturity. However, he described these as intense, temporary experiences that one necessarily returned from in order to live a normal life.

Ken Wilber (Wilber, 1980), a renowned transpersonal theorist, included the realization of unitive consciousness as the pinnacle achievement in his stages of development. The Diamond Approach, an integration of mystical Islamic concepts with psychodynamic psychology developed by A.H. Almaas, also points directly to an innate essence of ourselves. Almaas (1988) wrote that we could dissolve and live without our learned object-relations templates, and that this was necessary for knowing ourselves as our underlying essence.

For the most part, though, the field of psychotherapy has ignored or dismissed the notion of an essential aspect of ourselves beyond our learned and constructed templates. The dominant understanding, within the psychotherapy field, of human nature as made up of mental constructs and nothing else meant that when Buddhism began to gain popularity in the West, many psychotherapists were ready to embrace and incorporate into their work the school of Buddhism that denied any inherent ground of being. Today, in the West, as it was even in ancient Tibet, the “empty of itself” concepts of Buddhism are more widely known than the Buddhist teachings that point to a fundamental ground of being. The integration of psychotherapy with the no-ground theories and practices of Buddhism have led many psychotherapists into increasingly disembodied, even de-humanized forms of therapy, and have led even body-oriented therapists to look no further than the physical body for sources of healing.

In the Realization Process, however, we discover that we actually can know ourselves beyond the momentary flux of our disparate sensations, feelings, thoughts and perceptions. We can know the knower, or more accurately, the knower can know him or herself. We are not just a figment of our imagination or a mental construction. As we release the protective constrictions from our body, we uncover an experience of an underlying unified ground of our being.

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