

A Contemplative approach to psychotherapy *

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The Nature Of Contemplation

We propose to explore here a psychotherapeutic approach that we would describe as contemplative.

Contemplation can be defined as the natural ability to perceive objects whatever their kind: sensations, emotions, thoughts, sights, sounds... This ability is inherent in all of us. However it is not awakened in each of us to the same degree. Indeed, a certain mental and physical calm is required for the contemplative dimension of our being to be functionally available.

Our awareness has the peculiarity of only being able to settle on one object of perception at a time. The possibility of shifting very rapidly from one object to another gives the impression of simultaneity, but actually it occurs consecutively.

When the mind is busy, it moves from one object to another almost without interruption, and so there is little availability for an unexpected perception to emerge from the background.

If, for example, you are at the wheel, concentrating on the road ahead, and someone touches you on the back of the shoulder, a certain delay in time will be needed for consciousness to release its object of perception and return to the physical sensation. This time lag is often responsible for accidents caused by a busy mind 'lost' in thought.

Inversely, there exists a quality of awareness that is more detached, without tension, such as we experience when listening to music or poetry, in a way that welcomes sounds without seeking to seize them, through a relaxed and loose listening. In this different quality of listening, which resembles the 'floating' listening of psychoanalysts, the field of perception is global and open. Perceptions are received without tension, but with a sense of detail that is less sharp than when attention is focussed. It is comparable to when you are focussing with a camera. The focussing can be concentrated on a precise point, or more generally, with less precision in the detail but with a wider field of perception.

Contemplation can thus be understood as a total welcoming of present perceptions, free from choice, judgement and preference. In this listening without seizing, the mind is at rest. The need to comment, analyse or draw conclusions is not present.

Perception and interpretation

We need here to differentiate between immediate perception, which exists only in the instant it emerges, and the interpretation that the mind makes of it. This interpretation is individual, referring to the content of memory, to an acquired knowledge. One can describe it as projective, in the sense that it is not the reality proper of what has been perceived, but the way the perception is felt, understood and interpreted. One can say here that the immediate perception is not dependent on the mind, but on the dimension of consciousness in which the object of perception imprints itself, and that the

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interpretation of the perception is mental in nature, and belongs to the individual self.

Introduction to contemplative psychotherapy

Following the introduction, intended to more accurately define the essence of contemplation, we are going to see how it can be applied in a psychotherapeutic context.

Let us imagine that a client comes to see us. The client tells us their personal story, and experiences it with significant emotional intensity, which engenders all sorts of different inner states. If the client has been motivated to attend a session, then it is likely that these states are ones of suffering and fear.

In general, people who have not familiarized themselves with inner approaches, whatever kind they are, do not distinguish between perception and the interpretation that they make of it. Their account mixes up what belongs to pure perception, for example, a description of the facts as they unfolded, with an interpretation of the perception, which is about the way in which they lived those facts and the understanding that they have of the situation. There is suffering, otherwise there would be no demand for help, and the suffering seems caused by past and present circumstances.

The contemplative gaze

One of the first stages of a contemplative approach is to learn to look without interpretation. We are going to visualize the situation with an eye that does not blinker itself with judgement, whether negative or positive. One can familiarize oneself with this style of looking by contemplating nature. The mountain or the forest can be seen from a point of view which contents itself with welcoming impressions, colours, sensations, without referring to the past, without any hint of judgement. Thus the gaze is liberated from interpretation. Perceptions are welcomed just as they are, in the instant in which they emerge in consciousness. Each moment is lived as if independent from the previous one. It is in fact this experience that comes when memory and the mind don't try to attach a perception to the one that immediately preceded it. When applied to the perception of the current or past situation in life, this way of positioning oneself with regard to events rapidly brings an easing of distress. In fact there is often an element of guilt just under the suffering, which is eliminated when the perception is not encased in a judgement of others or oneself. Not judging does not mean to seal oneself in a lethargic passivity without capacity to discriminate, but that the judgement one can have of the situation is considered to be relative, not absolute. It's only a point of view, and a point of view is a fraction, not the totality of the thing.

Take the well-known story of the sage and his disciple who receive two people in a state of conflict. The sage acquiesces to the first one, then acquiesces to the second, and when the disciple asks him 'but Master how have you been able to say to both that they are right?' the sage replies with a shrug 'you are right'.

The relative point of view can be summed up as the individual viewpoint. It is conditioned by individual experiences and the content of memory.

The global viewpoint can be called universal. Here we leave individuality to better position ourselves at a level of vision, which welcomes perception without enclosing it in interpretation, whatever it might be. One can speak of impersonality, because the perception becomes impersonal. A mountain is a mountain, a tree is a tree, a flower is a flower. The name has a universal value, whereas what the name evokes has an individual dimension.

Contemplation and the psyche

Applied to the psyche, a contemplative perspective will act as the welcoming area for various kinds of perceptions: physical sensations, emotions, thoughts, sounds, sights...Here we are going to examine different levels of perception.

The body and contemplation

The body is usually known by the representation that the mind makes of it. There is a mental image and identification with that image.

The body can also be approached from the inner perspective, that which is presented, for example, when the eyes are closed and we listen to physical sensations.

The sensations are perceived from moment to moment. They are by nature localized and constantly changing.

This approach to the body is going to have an impact on several levels. First of all, when the body is listened to, it relaxes. We can make the experiment at the level of the breath. As soon as one's attention is brought to bear on it, the breath changes its rhythm. It slows down, becomes fuller, more spacious. It occupies a larger territory and will even overflow the body's limits to spread out in the space beyond.

Listening to sensations will equally allow the identification of areas of tension. A region that is tense is experienced as contracted, cold and dense, and breathing little or not at all.

The recognition of these tensions is an important element in a contemplative approach. Indeed these tensions are not only of a physical nature, but reflect a defensive state of mind. We see here that the body is a mirror, an extension of the mind. All these attitudes and behaviours belonging to the personality imprint themselves in the body. A feeling of fear is accompanied by a tension, localized preferentially in an area specific to each one. A feeling of joy is accompanied by dilation, a gentle warmth, which invades all or part of one's physical space.

Thus we have, under our eyes, an open book, which allows us to better understand the way we position ourselves with regard to the world and ourselves.

Often enough, with an emotional reaction, psychological analysis is not, on its own, sufficient to free one from oppressive feelings. You can know why you have a deep terror of water, without nevertheless having it be changed. On the other hand, when you allow the body to release, the anxiety-inducing situation - the water in this example - can be approached with a more expanded consciousness. The reaction will be influenced by this expansion, and often it will be less intense and long lasting.

Thus it is difficult to exclude the body in a global psychotherapeutic approach. We can delude ourselves, but the body itself does not lie. It is a faithful witness to what occurs in the background.

Emotion and contemplation

Emotion is a reaction. It is a way of reacting in the face of a given situation, which comes to touch a sensitive and reactive area. It can be, for example, old memories that have never been accepted. Imagine one has experienced abuse as a child; the sight of similar abuse as an adult can immediately provoke a reaction of suffering. If I really accepted what I experienced in the past, the reaction would be less. Even if there remains a sensitive scar, this area loses its reactivity. We can say therefore that the emotion comes to inform us of what has not yet been completely integrated in our psychic life. It is a guide.

We could say that emotion is the physical manifestation of the mind. Fear, anger, sorrow, joy and contentment are, above all, physical experiences, expressing themselves through multiple and ever-changing sensations. Thus emotions come to reflect the experience and the maturity of the moment.

But intellectually understanding the nature of the emotion is not enough to allow for its resolution. It is here that a contemplative approach is going to reveal its true value. For in this way the emotion is observed, being first of all objectified at the level of the body. Indeed, emotion is above all a sensation. Remove the sensation from the emotion and what is left? When this emotion is welcomed, and we mean properly welcomed and not interpreted, it will be reabsorbed. The tension that is held within it reveals itself, invades the field of awareness, then dissolves slowly in the observing consciousness - this dimension of presence that welcomes all perceptions in us.

Here is a radical observation. A possibility opens up, that belongs neither to repression whose limits we know, nor to collusion. It is the attitude of identification that feeds and determines the perception and the mental representation that we have of it.

Thought and contemplation

Contemplation is equally relevant to mental activity. Thoughts, in their contents and flow, can be observed. They appear, take shape, transform themselves and disappear. This active contemplation of the mental process is useful on several levels.

First of all, it will allow us to better appreciate the content of our thoughts, and to recognize that on the whole, thoughts are 'egocentric', that is to say, concerned with the person called 'myself'. Thoughts are often centred on the pronoun 'I', which recurs like an obsessive leitmotiv. This observation will allow us to get to know one of the main expressions of the ego.

A second comment concerns the relationship between the past, the future and thought. Mental images of the past manifest in awareness. They are experienced as real, and can lead to corresponding emotional reactions, whether they are reactions of joy or suffering. When the future is thought about, it also takes the form of mental images, and they in turn are experienced as being real, even able to unleash genuine panic attacks. However, these thought events have no reality other than as mental

representations. It is proof of the astonishing power of the mind, which breathes life into shapes and then makes us experience them as if they were perfectly real.

It must be noted that the content of our thoughts is never about the present moment, since as soon as the instant is thought, it becomes the past. If, for instance, you look at a situation in which you find yourself, and thoughts develop around this perception, attention orientates itself to those thoughts and abandons what is really present. The thought of the object then substitutes itself for the object itself.

Thus we can spend a good portion of our existence believing that we live in reality, all the while contemplating thoughts which are not the reality of what is present. Indeed the thought of the present is not the reality of the present. The thoughts that we develop about someone are not the reality of that person, but only mental representations.

Another benefit of contemplating the mental process is its capacity to create distance. When thoughts are observed, without rejection or seizure, a feeling of distance is established in us. This distance, which let us repeat, is a natural distancing - different from the wilful distancing ourselves from something we want to flee- is one of the keys to easing emotional tension. A situation contemplated with a detached eye is not seen in the same way as when it is contemplated from an involved point of view.

Being involved in a situation is the result of an inherent tendency of the ego to identify itself with objects of perception. We can see it clearly when we watch a thriller or a romantic film. Our emotions change as a function of the nature of the images and of what is evoked in us. And yet, all of that is just a game of images that unfold before our eyes.

A new possibility opens up then, that of non-identification, which is not to be confused with indifference. Non-identification is simply an awareness that I am not what I see, but that I am the one who sees. The difference can appear minimal, but it is considerable in its effects. When I identify myself with the scene before me, I suffer all the emotional consequences. When I look at the scene without identifying myself with it, my body stays quiet and free of tension. In both cases, the scene is the same, but the way it is lived is different.

Breathing and contemplation

Noteworthy for the wealth of instruction it contains, the breath is equally an object of observation.

This contemplation of the breathing process teaches us first of all to listen, and to be fully present to the sensations such as they are. The breath is listened to, and respected in its natural unfoldment. We are going to see that its flow is often shallow, irregular, and tight. We see here that it contains all the accumulated tensions of the psyche, its defences, fears and resistance. When we start to listen to the breath, one of the first observations is that its movement slows down, becoming fuller and more fluid. By the simple power of listening, the breath reorganises itself.

We are also going to see the tendency to control. This tendency manifests itself in particular at the beginning of the inhalation, with a habit to pull in the inhalation, as if we were afraid of suffocation, and at the end of the exhalation, with a habit to push out the exhalation, as if we were afraid to

choke on too full a residue. This tendency, which is another expression of the ego, is going to be objectified by the contemplation of the breath. Through this observation, this tendency is transformed. It appears, as a result of observation, unnecessary to pull on the inhalation, and to push out the exhalation. It is in fact the tendencies to seize and to reject that are thus transformed. They are both expressions of a search for security, which express itself by the desire to keep what is pleasant and to push away what is unpleasant.

One of the comments that can be made relates to the issue of anticipation. The habit of anticipating, wanting to throw oneself into the next moment instead of facing the current one, shows itself in the tendency to inhale before the preceding exhalation is completely finished. In bringing one's attention to this tendency, the exhalation can then be accompanied to its natural end, and the inhalation can occur when the body invites it. Then there is no longer any fear-induced pressure.

The moment, which divides the end of the exhalation from the beginning of the next one, is equally rich in information. This instant, when it is completely lived, is a moment of mental suspension, in which an expansion of consciousness can occur. To inhabit this instant is in fact to fully live the present without anticipating the subsequent moment. There is here a precious message, which invites us to completely live each moment, without dispersing ourselves in mental projections of the past or future.

Therefore we see through these few examples that the contemplation of the breath goes beyond simple physical well-being, to offer a more subtle understanding of the personality's tendencies and to present an opportunity for liberation from the oppressive grip of an avid self.

Action and contemplation

Contemplation is not passivity. Passivity is a form of inertia, an inhibition caused by fear. Contemplation is an active presence that contains the action within it and observes its unfolding.

Contemplation includes both an interior and exterior orientation. It welcomes perceptions, but also the responses that emerge to meet a situation. In an appropriate relationship to perceived phenomena, the emergence of the response is neither encouraged, nor rejected. It is simply accompanied by a permanent presence. There is neither repression, nor impulsiveness.

The idea that I am the author of my acts is nothing but a mental creation. Under the eye of contemplation, acts unfold without an author. Life creates the elements of the action, its development, and its consequences. From this point of view, life is the sole player in a scenario that it directs from one end to the other.

The self, in its delusion of power, seeks to appropriate acts and their fruit for itself. But this self is nothing other than a mental character that has no existence outside the thought that created it. In this way we can say that an action freed from the idea of its author is an eruption of life's spontaneity. As a result, it is fluid and in harmony with the needs of the moment. Inversely, an action weighed down by the demands of a self in need of recognition is abrasive, incoherent and maladapted to the actual situation. It is this type of act that causes awkwardness and reactions. Derived from the violence of a

self that seeks to impose its own law, the action stimulates what it has emerged from - violence confusion and incomprehension.

Relationship and contemplation

When this quality of seeing is extended to our daily environment, we can then look at our close relations in a way that is freed from memory, anger and various resentments. It is from this quality of seeing that an authentic relationship can be established, a relationship not based on power and competition, but on the awareness of a unity that binds us. It is in fact our way of seeing which creates and maintains separation. When the place from which we see changes, the feeling of separation leaves us. For example, see a person towards whom you have thoughts loaded with anger and resentment, position yourself in front of them, and look directly into their eyes. You will now see something completely different from what was present on the mental plane. A depth reveals itself behind the surface appearance. A contact can now be established from depth to depth and no longer from periphery to periphery.

Love and contemplation

A contemplative gaze placed upon our personality's functioning will allow us to recognize what love is not - compensation, self-promotion, acknowledgement... Tendencies belonging to the self, which reveal themselves in sometimes quite subtle ways in the need to love others or in altruistic behaviour, are recognized as soon as they are seen for what they are, with the lucidity of a welcoming gaze.

This understanding of what love is not, leads to a new experience of a love free from the need to love and be loved. Thus we can say that sight works with a scrubbing motion, eliminating the dross which hides the jewel. It is a deliverance, since the needs of the person are as insatiable as a bottomless pit.

Silence and contemplation

The silence that is the issue here, in inner experience, is often confused with the absence of noise. This misunderstanding sometimes leads to absurd behaviours, prompted by a desire to impose silence on one's surroundings.

The nature of this silence is experienced in awareness itself. We could say that silence is consciousness. This expression points to an inner dimension free of thought, which includes the sounds, but is not the sounds. Listen for instance to a melody played slowly, and bring your attention to the silent gaps between the notes. In deepening your experience of this silent space, you will notice that a silent dimension also exists in the background when the notes are played. The silence here can be compared to the sun, which cannot be disturbed by the presence of clouds. It is a permanence in which the impermanent emerges. The impermanence of sounds and other noises can only be noticed because you *are* the permanence; you *are* the silence in which sounds and noise appear. The instant awareness of this silent nature is what we call here silence. See therefore that it does not refer to an absence of sound but to a silent presence, without words or thought.

Unity and contemplation

The question of unity and duality is often asked. We can notice that as soon as the 'I' thought awakens, a separation has already occurred between what belongs to me and what belongs to the 'not-me'.

The root of separation lies in our own minds, in the attachment to various systems of beliefs and opinions that mesh into a dense web, leading to violent behaviour of the kind well known in our society.

The experience of unity is discovered and affirmed in silent consciousness, which brings a feeling of fulfilment and contentment. In this experience intrinsic to consciousness, things are naturally accepted just as they are, since the self, as judge and controller, does not occupy centre stage. Unity and acceptance are not therefore the result of an effort, but rather the abandonment of the illusion of the self, the illusion of a separation between the self and the world.

What is called duality is simply the consequence of a belief in the reality of the 'I' concept, as a separate entity.

An accurate perspective will bring the re-absorption of this belief and its associated suffering.

Contemplator and contemplation

The idea of the existence of a contemplator is another thought that can be observed by the background's contemplative eye.

At its core, contemplation is free from the contemplator. The absorption of the personal self in impersonal consciousness is a key moment in establishing a permanent contemplative dimension, one that no longer fluctuates dependent on outer circumstances.

It is at this level that an experience of freedom can be tasted, not a freedom of choices and decisions, which still remain projected conditionings of the self, but a freedom of being.

The very notion of identity is called into question here as soon as mental projections are recognized as such, and the sense of being - a sense that precedes the birth of thought - affirms itself as the sole identity. The surface identity, which corresponds to the current notion of identity, has, certainly, a functional value useful in space-time but it takes a different amplitude when it is supplemented with identity rooted in the depth of being.

Epilogue

As we have seen, a contemplative approach to our inner functioning is not a psychological approach, in the sense that it does not seek to analyse or to describe.

It can be considered liberating, for when the ego is seen for what it is, with all its transitory manifestations, the contemplating eye experiences itself as free from what is observed. We refer here not to a freedom of action, knowing that the action is as conditioned by inner circumstances as outer ones, but a freedom of being.

With the traditional psychotherapeutic method, when the explanatory models reach the end of their potential, a moment comes where understanding no longer finds anything to hold on to. It is at this moment that an opening is possible towards an understanding that is not conceptual in

nature but points towards an experience of joy and freedom not dependent on circumstances.

A global psychotherapeutic approach must therefore include the awakening to a dimension of consciousness free of conflict and suffering. This quality of experience, which establishes itself in a mature mind and an inhabited body, is the central focus of a therapy, which does not limit understanding to the confines of the self but opens itself to a dimension of impersonal consciousness.

It is at this point, where the horizontal and the vertical axes meet, that the profound desire for freedom finds its attainment and radiance. So let us toast the health of a liberating therapy, which invites us to drop the heavy yoke of the self to open up to the limitless horizon of unitive consciousness.

See also <http://jmmantel.net>

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