

A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

Based on an Article by Deane Shapiro.

Recently in Japan, at the International Symposium of the Network: "Comparative and Psychological Study of Meditation", I was asked by Dr. Richard Friedman whether there was a Jewish perspective. I said that there was and referred Richard to Deane Shapiro. Deane has kindly sent me a copy of a key article and what follows is partly a precis and partly a commentary of that article, adding translations into other wisdom traditions and psychology, as dialogue. Deane confined his comments specifically to the Jewish wisdom tradition. I urge finding the original and reading that for a fuller appreciation of what Deane is developing. The reference is:

JUDAISM AS A JOURNEY OF TRANSFORMATION:
CONSCIOUSNESS, BEHAVIOUR,
AND SOCIETY, Deane (Davide Moshe) Shapiro, *J. Transpers. Psychol.*,
1989, Vol. 21, No. 1.

According to Deane Shapiro, all psychotherapy and religious traditions involve, at some level, a journey of transformation. He lists several stages and processes incurred during the journey:

1. Pretransformation state.
2. A goal or end point.
3. Obstacles to wellbeing.
4. Method of assessing where one is at.
5. Methods of addressing the obstacles.

In constructing a map for the transformation journey various general points have to be considered such as the differences within any one tradition. Deane details the various subgroups within the Jewish tradition, broadly humanistic, orthodox and mystical. The stories in spiritual literature may be interpreted as history or as a psychological/spiritual path.

A similar view has been put by Bede Griffiths who wrote about the levels of interpretation, historical, mythical/symbolic or psychic level, leading into a more spiritual level of interpretation, (1983) *Marriage of East and West*, Harper Collins. As also stated by Laurence Freeman, the point of interest in a tradition is its usefulness at the present time - the universality of the map, as a contemporary living guide. Such maps are also useful as a basis for dialogue with other people of different traditions.

Religion offers a positive purpose. Clinical psychology and even more so psychiatry are problematic in that they were created from an epistemology of psychopathology. According to Deane Shapiro, Freud's collected works have over four hundred references to neurosis and none to health, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) 111 of psychiatry is based entirely on an epistemology of disease. I think Deane may have overstated the case in respect of Freud for I think he did say, or at least imply that it was mentally healthy to be able to both love and to work - nevertheless the point is well made about where the emphasis lies. It is the wisdom traditions that provide discernment of purpose and a positive framework of meaning. The great benefactors of mankind, according to historian Arnold Toynbee are Confucius, Lao-tze, Gautama Buddha, the prophets of Israel and Judah, Zoroaster, Jesus, Mohammed and Socrates.

There is another important difference between psychology and religion. That is that psychology, for the main part, focuses on the individual but religion also includes social cohesion and collective action. For a full working through of the journey of the individual, the practical insights of psychology need to be wedded to the purposes of the wisdom traditions as expressed in mythology and symbols.

Both in psychology and in religion a common starting point for the journey is pain, confusion or suffering. This could be illustrated in various ways, I think, such as 'a problem causes thinking' (American philosopher, John Dewey), realisation of the second noble truth (Gautama Buddha), regret and renunciation (Christian approach) or simply "my life is in a mess" (statement from a client).

These points apply as general principles. Deane then describes the specifically Jewish features of the journey.

The Jewish Journey.

In Hebrew mythology there is the call to Abraham to leave his current situation and go forth. Abraham is called to leave the house of his father, to leave the idols that provide comfort and support and - in the Chassidic tradition - "Go to himself". This call has its equivalent expression in other traditions too, such as seeking the kingdom of God, nirvana, Buddha mind, Christ mind, the true Self and the Moslem *assan*. The 'promised land' is interpreted symbolically, as an inner state of mind (the Buddhist equivalent is the 'pure lands').

The journey is rarely easy for there is a pull back to the idols. The Jewish drama involves a detour to Egypt and even regret and inveighment against Moses for having led them away from the bondage of Egypt. The slavery of Egypt, delusionary safety of the known, is preferred to the advance into unknown territory. Similarly in psychotherapy, the client may decline to work towards shifting his defences. There is an interesting side issue here, brought out by Otto Reichard. In many cases removal of defences can be catastrophic. In Mahayana Buddhism the teacher should not introduce the "strong meat" of the notion of *emptiness*, before the student is strong enough to apprehend it, letting go of the illusory belief in a solid self. A similar experience was described by an early Christian monk, who mourned the loss of his icon of an ultimate homonomous god in his own image. In any case, continued re-turning, continual conversion is required to correct attraction of and attachment to the old idols.

The etymology of the word "Egypt" is "narrow place". There is always a drawing back to the ways of lesser scope - as is spelt out in Patanjali's yoga sutras, where kleshas or attachments/complexes are reduced in a circular application of *dhyana* and analytical meditation in which we know where we are at. Very practical ways of easing ourselves out of the "narrow places" are spelt out by Sogyal Rinpoche, in his recent book, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, including the techniques of *Tonglen*.

The various images of the Torah, the Jewish holy book, mark points of transition. The hero Jacob recrosses the river to return to a meeting with his brother Esau, whom he had cheated out of his birthright. There is a motif of reconciliation and forgiveness in this story but Jacob does not return to the materialistic values of his culture of origin, of his father-in-law, Laban and his less transformed brother. He maintains his journey

and his vision.

There are a great many rituals in Jewish practice that help remind practitioners of the journey. There are markings of the time of the day for turning to God, like the European Christian prayers of the Angelus; markings of the seasons and so forth - all of which have the potential to remind practitioners not to remain in the "narrow place". Sometimes the hero of a Hebrew myth lacks the stomach for the journey, using such excuses as: "Am I my brother's keeper?", "Who am I to do this?", or showing emotional impassiveness in the face of the suffering of others or again the 'tower of Babel' syndrome where our own mental products are mistaken for wisdom, calling our handiwork our God. This may be related to the Buddhist idea of *ignorance*. But the main point is that we do have difficulties and failings and we can address these obstacles within us. This raises the question of a having a guide or teacher.

It is natural for people to pull the wool over their eyes, and therefore appealing to the discernment of the teacher may be appropriate. But how do we know that the teacher is not pulling more wool over our eyes? There is no final answer here and Deane does not attempt to give one. A good suggestion has been provided by Gautama Buddha which is that we should listen, being available to the teaching with as little preconception as possible, like the 'empty cup' but then test out the teaching critically for ourselves in actual living. It is also important that the teacher select what he teaches to match the readiness and apperception of the student. All good therapists try to do that. Deane sets out alternative, major subpaths or styles of transformation and these match the Yoga ones of *bhakti* (devotion), *karma* (constructive, compassionate action) and *jnana* (wisdom). He wishes to add *kundalini*, which may not be in quite the same category. The selection of a way should match individual need. Interestingly, just as in the Moslem religion, there is the facilitating method of meditation. There is the *mantra* "*Ribbono Shel Olam*", meaning Master of the Universe. The Moslem sufi equivalent is the *Shahadah* (term used by Moslems rather than meditation) *La ilaha illa Allah* (said *La ilaha illa 'Llah*), which means "there is no God except Allah", who/that is ineffable (Luk Omar van den Broek, 1993, "Moslem Spirituality", in *Proceedings of the Workshop: Towards the Whole Person: Integrating Eastern & Western Approaches to Body-Mind Skills*, St. Benedictine Abbey, Zevenkerken, Bruges, ed. Mark Blows). Deane does not say when the use of a mantra was introduced into Judaism.

There may have been interaction with other religions leading to the highlighting of meditation, perhaps during the Moorish period in Spain? There is also the use of the consonants of *Yahweh*, YHWH, as a visual object of meditation. These concentrative techniques may lead into waiting in faith, waiting on the ineffable experience of God, with quiescence of mind. The very best part of the article is the last four pages which give a very inspiring vision available to all people. It is best to read the original. I can only give a small sample here. Deane uses the metaphors and teaching of the particular part of Judaism that contains the myth that there is a universal root that all humans are considered to be related and all are thought to be 'brothers and sisters' under God. I suppose one could add that there is also another trend of exclusiveness but the universal root is also there. Christians believe that Jesus crystallised that universality (some think exclusively in this religion too, like St. Peter before his enlightening dream) but the interest here is in the will to acknowledge this universal root. He provides a good discussion about uniqueness of the individual, and uniqueness of a tradition. The special unique features of a path need to be retained without exclusiveness, without regarding the other traditions as inferior.

At various times in history people have tried to listen to each other's teaching without prejudice. This happened in the Moorish empire (including the Jewish mystical tradition, the *Kabbala*). It also happened in the court of Akbar the Great, at Fatephur Sikri, near Agra, (a Jesuit was included there). This tolerance was quashed by Christian fundamentalists, in the first instance and quashed by Aurangzeb, Akbar's great grandson, a fanatical Moslem emperor, in the second instance. The movement towards interaction is much broader now, involving many scholars and practitioners. Let us hope that this particular renaissance flourishes.