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Ascribing meaning to meditative experiences.

Expanding on this emergence, I shall now deepen my comparison of the Judaic *hitbonenut* and Buddhist *vipassana* schools of meditation. In doing this, I am aware that both Buddhism and Judaism are vast, diverse and complex civilizational systems which cannot in any way be reduced to particular examples from selected sources. My interest here is focused on how these systems are brought to bear, or may be brought to bear, on contemporary transpersonal psychological theorizing. For that fairly delimited purpose, a comparison based on a key transpersonal paper by Engler (1984), representative of a stream of Buddhist-inspired transpersonal writing, is instructive.

As described by Engler (1984), Buddhist *vipassana* or “mindfulness” meditation seeks to cultivate an awareness of the “radical impermanence of all events.” Both reality and self are regarded as illusory, imaginary constructions growing out of the misperception that successive moments form a continuous stream of being.

...a self representation is constructed in each moment as a result of an interaction with an object, and only as a result of such an interaction... [Through meditation] I begin to perceive that there are strictly speaking *no constant end-products of representation; there is only a continual process of representing...* When this total moment-to-moment “coming to be and passing away” (*udayabbaya*) is experienced, there is a profound understanding of the radical impermanence of all events. Not only do I no longer perceive any durable “objects,” but even the processes of thinking, feeling, perceiving and sensing themselves come to be and

pass away without remainder... I become aware of the selflessness (*anatta*) of mind, body, external objects, and internal representations (pp. 46-47).

Thus for Engler (1984) the important thing is the quality of negation, of separation, a continuously repeating disintegration of self and reality. Non-being, and “no-self” are the true reality. Self and objects are illusory. Engler (1984) compares the perception of a continuity of being to

...the tachistoscopic flicker-fusion phenomenon which produces the illusion of an object when discrete and discontinuous images are flashed too quickly for normal perception to distinguish them... (p. 45).

A parallel to this ontology can be seen in *hitbonenut* in that the first of the three general levels of *hitbonenut* (as seen in the last section of Chapter 3) culminates in a direct perception of “continuous coming-into-being” (*hithavut tamidit* in Hebrew) (Shneur Zalman, 1803/1986). In Chassidic-Kabbalistic terms, reality is said to constantly “pulsate” (*dofek*) in and out of nothingness every moment (Hillel, 1868/1995)--an apparently similar, or even identical perception to the oscillation described by Engler as “coming to be and passing away” (*udayabbaya*). In fact, the Chabad founder R. Shneur Zalman explicitly mentions this meditative perception specifically as being known to the “wise amongst the nations” (Shneur Zalman, 1803/1986, p. 568).

It is this similarity in the quality of the meditative perception itself that makes the divergence in the meaning ascribed to it so telling. Whereas Buddhism as expounded by Engler (1984) emphasizes the aspect of negation, the “passing away” part of the “coming to be and

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passing away,” Jewish meditation emphasizes the “coming-to-be.” This “coming to be” (*hithavut*) is seen as a process of continual, moment-by-moment rebirth and re-creation *ex nihilo* (*briah yesh mi-ayin*) (Shneur Zalman, 1796/1981).

When reality and self are thus perceived as being constantly re-created every moment from non-being and non-self, the question that then arises within a Jewish sensibility since Abraham is: “*Who* or *What* is making this wondrous thing happen?”¹ And furthermore: “*Why* is this being done?” With these questions at the fore, Jewish meditation takes on its defining characteristic as an all-embracing inner movement of *search* for the invisible Source of this perceived cosmic creative activity; a search for God.² In the course of this meditative search, the relational posture of acknowledgement emerges as an important plateau on the way to deeper and deeper immersion and *bitul* in the Object of meditation, as discussed at length in earlier chapters.

Thus, in contrast to the deconstructionist view captured by Engler’s (1984) tachistoscopic metaphor, whereby all objects and self are reduced to a series of disconnected perceptual fragments, the Chassidic metaphor of a “pulsation” (*dofek*) of reality in and out of being implies a process of creative construction. The pulse “in” to life, objects, being, ultimately overpowers the pulse “out”; the pregnant pause between heartbeats. A Judaic meditation requires that these moments, these ontic “pulsations,” be interpreted in terms of an *overall* continuity and

¹The Name of God in the Torah, what is referred to as the Tetragrammaton or Name of four letters, is literally translated as “Brings-into-being.”

²“With all my heart I have sought You” (Psalms, 119:10). This verse is quoted, as definitive of Jewish meditative endeavour, on the opening page of the Tract on Meditation of the Mittler Rebbe (Shneuri, 1820/1995).

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intention--even a Divine “desire” or “craving”³--and not merely in terms of their micro-discontinuity. We might say that the Judaic meditator would choose to re-interpret Engler’s (1984) “tachistoscopic display” of apparently disconnected frames as a movie, with a plot, characters, a moral, and above all a Director, an Author.

Transcendence of the therapeutic. When we regard the common everyday perception of continuity and solidity of being--normal, integrated ego functioning-- as being ultimately at least as legitimate as the cultivated meditative perception that all constantly emerges from and returns to nothingness, we then have no impetus to pathologize this everyday consciousness. We no longer have a need to interpret even long-term, aspirational meditation in clinical terms, as a “cure” for the “pathology” of normal adult adjustment (Engler, 1984). Nor do we have to look upon meditation as an activity specifically adapted and applied for therapeutic purposes, only. When long-term serious meditation is regarded in this way, as a “prescription,” so then life in general may take on the aspect of “...one long, drawn-out period of convalescence” (M. Abehsera, personal communication). Rather than surrender to this “triumph of the therapeutic” (following Rieff & Lasch-Quinn, 2006), we could choose to preserve a distinction between therapeutic meditation, and meditation that is a getting on with the business of life.

³ “God craves (*nitaava*) a dwelling place in the lower worlds” (*Midrash*). A comparison with Buddhist concepts around the notion of ‘craving’--as the source of all suffering--would be interesting. However this is beyond both my thesis and my current level of knowledge of Eastern systems.

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