THE INTEGRATION OF PSYCHOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY IN THE CROSS CULTURAL WORK OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTORS
By Robert Cornell, LMFT

INTRODUCTION:

There is a rich and complicated boundary shared by spirituality and psychology. Currently this boundary is being actively explored by many therapists through the use of Buddhist mindfulness techniques with their clients. In Christian spirituality, Richard Rohr talks extensively about the importance of spiritual practitioners doing their own Shadow Boxing and Shadow Work. And finally, there is A.H. Almaas who has in my opinion developed the most profound body of integrated psychospiritual knowledge and practice with his writings on the Diamond Approach and his seminary, the Ridwhan School. This talk will address how Spiritual Directors can inform their practices with psychological knowledge and practices in order to assist their Directees in exploring and working with their shadow material.

My Story:

I want to share with you how I as a Buddhist/Christian/Psychotherapist do my therapy/spiritual counseling work as one seamless whole using all of the skills, knowledge and experience I have learned in my forty five years of swimming in this rich sea. Because of my own long and sometimes difficult spiritual journey, I see the need for many of us to have aware of and experience with the unavoidable interplay of spiritual and psychological issues. I got to where I am today not through one brilliant success after another but rather from hitting spiritual and psychological brick walls and struggling with the pain and confusion of not knowing what to do and not knowing where to find help for myself. You could say that I am now the kind of person that I wish I could have found when I was in my thirties and struggling to find my way.

A Cross Cultural Framework

From my Buddhist background, I look for where a person is either holding onto or resisting their direct experience. In Buddhism, there is a profound realization of how much our suffering and alienation from Life and from Spirit comes from either aversion or grasping. From my Christian background, I look for how their heart is closed to love of self, love of others and love of God. And from my psychological background, I look for the childhood wounds that set up so many of the ego defenses that keep us cut off from our True Self, our Inner Divinity, our connection to God. And each of these sources gives me ideas of how my client can practice to heal their wounds.
BUDDHISM:

Buddhism classically talks about the Three Poisons that cloud human consciousness: Greed, Anger, and Ignorance. These can be expressed in different language that might make it clearer as to us as to what this means. Greed can be described variously as clinging, grasping, addiction, compulsion, obsessing, etc. Anyway that we try to hang onto something. Anger similarly can be equated to hatred, resistance, aversion, dislike, malice, resentment, etc. All the ways that we try to push things out of our lives. Ignorance can be equated to spacing out, being bored, or going unconscious. In order to realize one’s true nature, these three afflictions of human consciousness need to be worked through. And the way to do this is through awareness practices such as mindfulness as part of the eightfold path of Buddhist Practice.

Wisdom: Right Understanding and Intention/Motivation.
Ethical Conduct: Right Action, Speech and Livelihood.
Mind training: Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration.

When working with a directee that struggles with addictive or compulsive behavior, I help them to become mindful of the seed of the thought or the impulse that precedes the addictive acting out. To see if they can catch the seed before it germinates in their mind into full blown addiction or compulsive behavior. One Buddhist teaching story that is very useful for this is the story of Buddha and his antagonist Mara the deceiver. After his great enlightenment, Mara still pops up in the Buddha’s life from time to time to try to tempt and undermine him. And the Buddha each time catches Mara and says to him, “I see you Mara.” And with that he defeats Mara.

With clients that have an anxiety issue, which is a version of aversion, I help them to learn to befriend the fear that they are experiencing. For the greatest fear is the fear of fear itself. In this case, I love to tell them the story of the great Tibetan Lama, Milarepa, and the three demons.

Case: A non religious middle aged man suffering from anxiety attacks and childhood trauma.

PSYCHOLOGY:

One of the most useful awarenesses for Spiritual Directors to have from psychology is the role that childhood trauma and emotional injury have in the formation of ego defenses that block spiritual development. Early psychological injuries can result in many deficiencies and ego defense mechanisms that impede spiritual progress.
Some of the injuries/ deformations of Soul & Psyche that we may observe with our Directees because of childhood issues are as follows:

1) Lack of trust in the world, others and God.
2) Lack of trust in oneself and splitting off parts of oneself.
3) Inability to take initiative.
4) Lack of self confidence, severe self doubt.
5) Overdeveloped Super Ego / Inner Critic.
6) Performance Issues / Perfectionism.
7) Deep feelings of unworthiness.
8) Overly Mental stance to life.

Case: A middle aged Hispanic man with severe basic trust issues.

Case: A young man who was sexually molested by his father and now struggles with Internet pornography.

CHRISTIANITY:

For me, one of the most precious gifts that Christianity has given the world is the emphasis on Love and Forgiveness. And the idea that everyone of us is special in God’s eyes. The practice of prayer and opening oneself up to the presence of divinity in one’s healing and spiritual growth.

Case: A middle aged gay man struggling with sexual acing out.

Case: A Mexican American middle aged woman suffering from traumatic memories surfing from severe childhood abuse. Using Mother Mary as an internalized object to help her work with & heal her trauma.

CROSS CULTURAL CHALLENGES:

There are times when our own experience hardly prepares us to understand another person and where they are at. In these cases it is useful to suspend judgment and be open to the life of the other and to what it can teach us.

Case: A devout Muslim woman who is involved in a Leather Family.
An Example of an integrated Psycho-spiritual practice
SDI CONFERENCE PRESENTATION PROPOSAL

THE INTEGRATION OF PSYCHOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY IN THE CROSS CULTURAL WORK OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTORS

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Attendees will learn more about:
1) the integration of psychological and spiritual processes in Spiritual Direction & spiritually based counseling,
2) working cross culturally with persons of other faith traditions,
3) the interweaving of Buddhist and Christian spiritual traditions in spiritually based counseling and Spiritual Direction.

PROGRAM CONTENT

There is a rich and complicated boundary shared by spirituality and psychology. Currently this boundary is being actively explored by many
psychotherapists through the use of Buddhist mindfulness techniques with their clients. On the spiritual side, we have Richard Rohr who talks frequently about the importance of spiritual practitioners doing their own Shadow Boxing and Shadow Work. How can Spiritual Directors inform their work with psychological knowledge and practices in order to assist their Directees in exploring and working with their shadow material?

In this workshop I will share how I as a Buddhist/Christian/Psychotherapist do my therapy/spiritual counseling work as one seamless whole using all of the skills, knowledge and experience I have learned in my forty five years of swimming in this rich sea. My spiritually based counseling grades imperceptibly into spiritual direction and my spiritual direction in turn is very psychologically informed. There have been those who want to draw a clear distinction between Spiritual Direction and Counseling. For me, I feel that I would not be serving my clients to the best of my abilities if I kept these two very allied areas separate from each other.

From my Buddhist background, I look for where a person is either holding onto or resisting their experience. In Buddhism, there is a profound realization of how much our suffering and alienation from Life and from Spirit comes from either aversion or grasping. From my Christian background, I look for how their heart is closed to love of self love of others and love of God. And from my psychological background, I look for the childhood wounds that set up so many of the ego defenses that keep us cut off from our True Self, our Inner Divinity.

Buddhist perspective: the importance of working with a client/directee regarding the way that they relate to their experience in the present moment. The value of this insight and way of working. The Buddhist idea of the three poisons: clinging, aversion, and unconsciousness.

Case study: a young man with an anxiety disorder; using the teaching story of Milarepa and the three demons from Tibetan Buddhism.

Christian perspective: the value of helping a client/directee to open their heart to receiving and giving Love.

Case study: a middle aged Mexican American woman that is dealing with surfacing memories of severe childhood abuse; using a image of Mother Mary the mother of all sorrows to aid in the healing work.
ROBERT CORNELL studied Zen Buddhism for fifteen years under Maezumi Roshi, ten as an ordained monk. He also studied with Zen teacher Charlotte Joko Beck, and then became interested in the integration of psychology and spirituality earning a Masters Degree in Spiritual Psychology from the University of Santa Monica. He is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and a Spiritual Director. He has recently published his first book *Fifty Ways of Letting Go*, a psycho-spiritual study of the many aspects of surrender that can occur on the spiritual practitioner's journey.

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Case: A young man suffering from anxiety attacks and childhood trauma

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Case: A middle aged Hispanic man with basic trust issues.
Case: A Mexican American middle aged woman suffering from issues surfacing from severe childhood abuse. Using Mother Mary as an internalized object to help her work with & heal her trauma.

Case: A devout Muslim woman who is also involved in a Leather Family.
Case: A devout Muslim woman who is embroiled in control issues with her children

6) Lack of trust in the world and of others
7) Lack of trust in oneself and splitting off
8) Inability to take initiative

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Overdeveloped Super Ego / Inner Critic / Performance Issues / Perfectionism
Deep feelings of unworthiness
Distrust in others, the world, and God
Lack of self confidence, severe self doubt
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