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making peace

WITH OUR INNER FAMILY



By Claudia Wellnitz

Sometimes I meet Buddhists who seem to consider it a waste of time, despite the teachings, to look at the way their own selves are constructed, or study their personal psychological make-up. Personally I find that borrowing from some Western psychological models can help us to understand more thoroughly what our meditations should be directed at.

Many years of exposure to the Dharma or mere scholarship alone don't guarantee that people will become more balanced and happy, or that their behavior towards others will improve. Sometimes it seems as if the very thing that was made to liberate beings is being used as an instrument to have power over others or harden people's neurotic ego-structures. People – and I include myself – who have the best of intentions, who so much long to be like saints, fall prey again and again to power trips, fits of jealousy or anger, and create disasters in personal relationships. Often consciously declared intentions, and the things people do, seem to be many hundreds of miles apart. And merely remembering the rules of Buddhist ethics alone doesn't help: The energies dominating the person are too strong.

Because these observations made me very sad at times, I looked for a model of thought that could help me understand what was going on. I started to combine traditional meditation techniques with more psychologically oriented methods, often using creative expression. The ideas that I found valuable for my own mind I would like to share.

The mental poisons of attachment, hatred and ignorance in combination with the advanced technological standard of our modern societies have led to an ever more inhuman way of being with each other. As increasing profit

becomes the most important goal for many groups of people, “natural” human instincts of care and protection for others get lost – something that is especially obvious, when we look at the way children are brought up.

Because of our social structure, the stresses of their own lives and their own psychological problems, modern parents are rarely able to offer the time and safety that a child so urgently needs in the very first years of her or his life. In our societies we ask our children to be self-sufficient in many ways, when they are still very small. Being tense and worried that we “don't do it right” ourselves, we ask too much of them – and they can only react with feeling inadequate. Many do not have the chance to “mature organically” and become strong. The conditions are not conducive for us to become stable, firmly rooted people – we cannot learn through watching examples of well-grounded people who protected us just as long as we needed protection. So we remain frail inside, existentially insecure, ungrounded and keep on looking for an outer point of reference that tells us that we are okay – maybe for the rest of our lives.

In the eyes of society it is most important to perform and be successful, so very early on we learn to hide our weaknesses, and soon we hide them even from ourselves. Our psyche uses an – at the time – intelligent mechanism: It splits off its vulnerable parts and puts a wall around them, so that they cannot be attacked by outside hostile forces. This is often a necessary manoeuvre that enables us to survive difficult times, which threaten us to our core. The downside is that the vulnerable parts remain somewhat isolated from the other parts of the personality and from the outside

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world, thus making it even more difficult for them to mature.

We ourselves are the creators of this inner psychic process, but we are not aware of it. We now identify with the part of the personality that “deals with the world,” and the split off parts do not have any direct ways of expressing themselves. But because some part of our vital energy is detained in them, these

cially after the most wonderful experiences – a childlike aspect takes over (as soon as we get up from the meditation cushion) and makes us do things we did not plan for at all. We get so upset if we do not get our chocolate cake. It could be that our meditation was such that an exiled childlike aspect got very scared of being even more thoroughly blocked out. If we merely

ignore these aspects, they find, just like real children, a way to attract our attention, even if it is in a very roundabout or paradoxical way.

We may learn to meditate about the non-existence of a truly existing self. Again we tend to apply the meditations only to the overt parts of the personality. And when we meditate on compassion we think of the starving people in Africa (which of course is very good,) but we keep on starving certain aspects of ourselves. The suffering shadow-parts are neglected, and are neither transformed through our analytical capacities nor through our compassion.

The relationship between more mature parts of the personality and the inner children is very much like the relationship between parents and children in a family. Harmony and growth occur when the family members listen to each other, accept and love each other. A child will open up when

parts, which now lead a shadow existence, do nevertheless find an outlet. They may manifest through experiences, which we ourselves do not understand – sudden outbursts of anger or panic, addictive behaviour patterns, neurotic habits, etc.

If we begin to suffer too much, we may go to see a therapist or become spiritual seekers. Let's say we like Buddhism. We go to courses, learn how to be mindful, how to be calm and how to behave ethically. The parts of our personality that we habitually present to the outside world may be quite easy to tame – at least it may be relatively easy to pretend to ourselves and others that they are tamed. We may soon experience deep, satisfying states of serenity in meditation and believe we are almost enlightened. But then again – and that happens espe-

it feels understood, only then it will contribute his or her specific positive energy for the wellbeing of the family team.

Likewise, if we do not accept certain inner parts of ourselves, they become more and more vicious. The more we try to ban them, the more fiercely they present themselves in the form of obstacles: Unsurpassed laziness when it comes to meditation, psychosomatic illnesses, depressions, addictions etc. In the thought-transformation teachings, “outer” obstacles are considered very precious, because they present us with an opportunity to practice. This can be also applied to these inner obstacle-makers: They are like pure gold, because they are the key to a very real and deep transformation of ourselves. Learning to be wise and compassionate with them liberates us from all types of

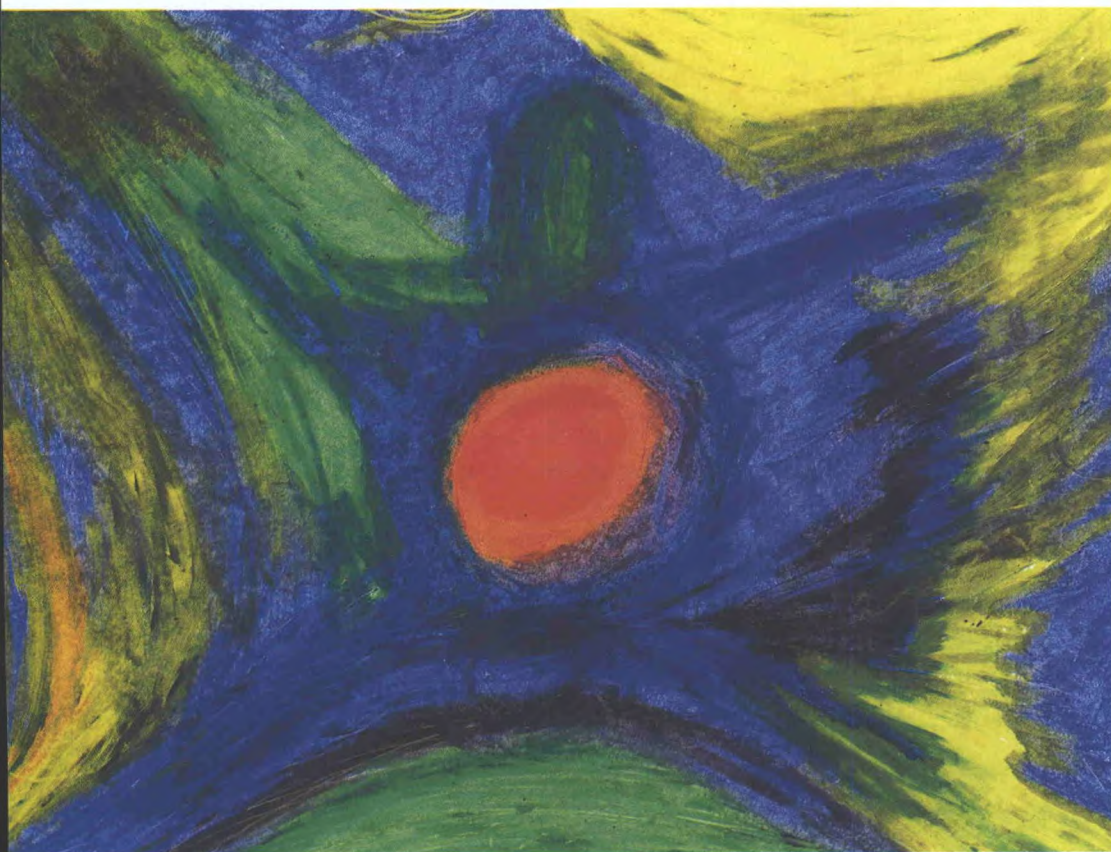


Illustration Claudio Weinitz



shortcomings and fears. If, on the other hand, we do not face up to them, sooner or later we will come to a standstill on our spiritual path. We need the energy, which is encapsulated in these “little persons,” for our growth – even if they manifest in perverted ways, they often represent our best talents.

As a young child, Miriam suffered a trauma when, due to the illness of one of her parents, and without preparation and proper explanations, she was separated from her family for several months. Her tender self-structure collapsed and the splitting off mechanism took place, as described above. But she managed to survive and remain “normal.” She turned out to be intellectually brilliant and had a successful career. Despite this, she always felt lonely inside and found it enormously difficult to trust people and to form close relationships. In fact, at times she felt extremely angry or jealous towards people who seemed to have close relationships, because they reminded her of the inner part she could not connect to. Through working on the sub-personality of the mistrusting little girl inside, Miriam may not only get rid of her anger, but also discover that she herself has the ability to be warm and nurturing. She may then develop a special aptitude to give others comfort and support – because she remembers so well how it can feel if you are in a vulnerable state and have nobody who is close to you.

Bob, as a boy, had received a lot of scolding and beating. He had to do a lot of physical work, and never did it right, for his father. But as there was no alternative at the time, Bob internalised this severe father figure so as he grew up he kept asking a lot of himself. He was able to work extremely long hours and became very successful, but he was quite impatient and arrogant toward people who showed the ‘weaknesses’ of tiredness and exhaustion. When he started to suffer from severe back pain, he began to look inside for the reason. Working with the internalised father figure by sending it love and compassion, along with an increased understanding and forgiveness towards the actual father, helped to relieve the symptoms and made him a happier person. He may now develop the positive fatherly qualities he had lacked when he was little.

If we haven’t liberated the inner exiles, it also becomes extremely hard work to benefit others. As long as we are afraid or ashamed of the weak, suffering child inside, we will not be able to feel compassion towards others who are weak and suffering. And if we are impatient with a wild and untamed inner part, how could we possibly be patient with other human beings who behave in all sorts of uncontrolled ways toward us?

Many traditions of psychotherapy name and work with these inner figures. Some call them sub-personalities, some “inner fam-

ily,” some “community of selves.” The figures are of course not truly existent, but nevertheless some of them can become very destructive, if they are not transformed. I am convinced that is our job as human beings to create peace between our inner parts.

I have started to include my sub-personalities in my meditations. It was very helpful to encourage them to speak, to listen to what their needs are, send them purifying or healing light, meditate about their emptiness of true existence, etc. Compassion can heal them and bring them to maturation, then they will start giving their particular contributions to the life of the whole person and to the specific projects the person has. The project of Mahayana Buddhists is the enlightenment of all beings. If we start by liberating those “beings” inside, we will stop projecting our own shadow material onto other sentient beings. As a result we will have less problems with others and be better able to help them.

In my counselling practice I have found that almost all clients understood the concept of sub-personalities straight away and could intuit some of these inner figures. Playing with little toys, drawing or painting can be helpful methods in this context. Working with watercolors often reveals stuff a person could not have grasped intellectually. Aspects of the psyche, which lie just below the surface of consciousness, become recognisable and can be worked with through meditation methods. In that way we become our own therapist. We all have the Buddha potential of compassion and wisdom in us – and some parts of us have brought it to maturation more than others. If we send the light of compassion and wisdom to our inner exiles, heal them and welcome them back into the circle of the “community of selves,” our inner weaknesses will be overcome and our neurotic everyday games become superfluous. Our personality becomes “whole” and better able to cope with the challenges with which life and our spiritual path present us. I believe that this will bring us a bit closer to enlightenment. ☸

Claudia Wellnitz, a student of Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche since 1980, has studied Buddhist psychology and philosophy at Nalanda Monastery and other FPMT centers, and has gained meditation experience through several months-long retreats. She is Diamant Verlag, the German FPMT publishing house’s publisher and editor. She has completed a four-year training course in Tara Rokpa psychotherapy, a therapy process based on Buddhist principles, and is working with groups and individuals as a counsellor and a meditation teacher.

