I would like to develop and articulate some distinctions between “being” and “about.” Bion’s use of alpha function serves to enter the discussion. Bion developed the notion of “alpha function,” a process by which “beta elements,” a term he uses to describe the basic raw experience of sensations and affects are worked over and transformed into the precursors or the material of thought. Alpha function explains, as Eigen writes, “… how feelings become real for us, how “emotional digestion” works (2004, p. 76). The failure of alpha function in the absence or failure or deficiency of maternal reverie, the lack of, which Lopez-Corvo, for instance, notes, “… will hamper the possibility of structuring an alpha function” (2006, p.99). From this theoretical perspective, Ferro (2005) details the manner in which pathology occurs as a result of deficient or lacking alpha function or in which the alpha function cannot process the intensity and extent of incoming stimuli. Rhode speaks of the role that the “deterioration in alpha function” plays in psychic deadness. He notes that “Meaning drains from the concepts of space and time, and a sense of catastrophe darkens any attempt at comprehension” (1994, p. 111). These sensitive and creative formulations and developments in psychoanalytic thought derive from Melanie Klein’s original theoretical formulations and have extended the range and efficacy of clinical technique.

However, in a shift in perspective away from an exclusive emphasis on pathology, Zen experience informs me that just as such deficiencies require attention; one can become what I would like to describe as being over “alpha-betized.” This experience

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1 This article is adapted and excerpted from The Zen Impulse and the Psychoanalytic Encounter (2010) by Paul C. Cooper and used with permission of Routledge an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group.
finds expression in the human tendency to seek out, discover, uncover, recover what is the cause, the reason, the why, or the meaning of experience. Becoming alphabetized contributes to what Rhode (1998) describes as viewing the world in a limited and “lexical” manner, imagining that everything must make sense; that we feel comfortable when things make sense; as if all experience can be lined up alphabetically or numerically; as if the crucial existential questions of life can be answered by consulting a master dictionary; as if dream images are devoid of unique meanings for the individual; as if the koan can be “solved” or answered logically and intellectually; as if, as Rhode notes, with regard to the medical model, that “it has no place in it for a concept of unknowable internalization – a concept of unknowable becoming” (1998, p. 20). Such problems and dilemmas constituted the agenda of the positivists, not the Zenist and not a small but increasingly expanding cadre of contemporary psychoanalysts. These basic existential questions are the type that Zen teachers characteristically and repeatedly scoff at. The Zen literature is filled with stories reflecting this attitude. This over-reliance on sense-making operates at the expense of a view of the infinite and creative potential of openings into the unknown. This tendency becomes institutionalized and rationalized through an exclusive use of theory, logic, linear thinking and sense-making and results in de-emphasizing, thus inadvertently buffering, and at the extreme foreclosing the felt, lived impact of experiencing Truth as we find it. Grotstein, for example, takes it a step further. He describes psychoanalytic theories as

… veritable psychoanalytic manic defenses against the unknown, unknowable, ineffable, inscrutable, ontological experience of ultimate being, what Bion terms “Absolute Truth”, “Ultimate Reality.” It is beyond words, beyond contemplation,
beyond knowing, and always remains “beyond” in dimensions forever unreachable by man (2007, p.121).

Zen practice demands a stripping away of such defenses, which are often characterized in Zen parlance as “dualistic thinking.” Practice, in this respect, demands “being” not simply talking “about” a koan. Performing, not informing and not speaking, as the Zen master demands, when he says, “Show me!” This demand, however, has often been misunderstood, even by serious Zen practitioners, as an exclusive “showing” at the expense of “telling,” at the expense of dialogue, at the expense of intellect and can result in a radical extremism that devalues dialogue and which has clearly been the subject of criticism among contemporary Zen scholars and practitioners who assert that intellectual and intuitive capacities require integration and that prioritization of one over the other represents dualistic thinking (Heine, 1994, Heine & Wright, 2000; Hori 2000, 2003). Heine, for instance describes the interview between teacher and student as an “encounter dialogue,” which he notes involves “… a particular type of oral practice in which masters and students interact in certain definable, if unpredictable ways (2000, p.47).

The fundamental and distinctive Zen tenet, “no reliance on words and letters,” for instance, what was intended as a critique and warning of fundamentalist tendencies toward concrete and literal meaning of the scriptures, a tendency in any religion or psychoanalytic school of thought; a tendency and a dependency, has been erroneously interpreted and misused to rationalize a total disregard for written teachings. This radical disregard for the intellect has clearly not been my experience with several Zen teachers whom I have studied and practiced with over the years, who all, without exception, encouraged discussion, especially during our early meetings. Without exception these
teachers consistently worked through this misconception on my part, which was typically expressed through my own attempts to derail dialogue and that interfered with genuine relatedness. These efforts, while consciously reflecting my intention to demonstrate, in no uncertain terms, my own level of realization, also functioned, at the time, more as expressions of my own unconscious character-driven avoidance tactics than any true expression of any Zen realization, or, as my analyst used to assert it at the time, “You prefer to be a moving target rather than a sitting duck.”

The relationships between analyst and analysand; between Zen teacher and student are fluid with specific identifiable phases that traverse the full range between “being” and “about.” For instance, Daido Loori, the contemporary American Zen master, outlines this flow as follows:

The first stage is very much like a child with a parent. The teacher is very directive. “This is the way you sit. This is the way you hold your hands. This is the way you breathe.” It’s to get the student started. That quickly dissolves into a relationship in which the teacher … becomes a spiritual mentor. Then that dissolves into spiritual equals. The teacher disappears. Finally the teacher and the student exchange positions—the teacher becomes the student, the student becomes the teacher. (2009, p. 41).

In this regard, we take in the qualities of our teachers, although teachers will consciously work against such identifications in order to facilitate a process for the student of opening up to who one is, to “true self.” However, just as maternal reverie facilitates alpha function and the development of the capacity to digest and use raw experience, the power of unconscious identification and internalization through cycles of
projection and introjection can exert a strong influence in shaping the student’s perception, experience and expression of Zen.

Loori, in describing his experience with his teacher, characterizes the conversations as sparse. The terseness of language that Loori describes can be reflective of both the evolution of the relationship interacting with cultural influences and personalities. For instance, during my sui-zen \(^2\) training with Japanese teachers, basically nothing was spoken. Teaching was exclusively through example, playing together and by demonstration. Given this traditional formalized Japanese teaching style, certain teachers said more or less than others. By contrast, American teachers who I have studied with tend to speak quite a bit, providing guidance and historical information in between demonstrations and explications on technique. Within this interactive context, this group of teachers displayed a wide range of personal variation. For example, one teacher would usually take a break in between pieces to serve tea during our lessons.

Similarly, the relation between “being and “about” can be observed in different approaches to psychoanalysis. One approach hinges on the view of psychoanalysis as a collection of theories and related techniques applied to specifically diagnosed pathologies with cure as a goal. The practitioner stands outside looking in and applies the tools. The notion of cure as an exclusive goal can become problematic and at the extreme can be intertwined with intolerance, greed, aggression or fear. Conformity to a system of techniques, at the extreme, reflects an expectation that the analysand conforms. With regard to the role of cure, Barratt draws a distinction between “psychotherapeutic

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\(^2\) Sui-zen: Literally “blowing meditation,” practiced with a shakuhachi, a bamboo flute played vertically.
efficacy” and “psychoanalytic truthfulness and transformation” (1993, p. 41). He further observes that “In short the psychoanalytic method is not the generation of formulas by which lives may be encoded and guided” (p. 42). Loori’s pronouncement “I am a worthless wretch and have nothing to show you, go see for yourself!” exemplifies this position.

Alternatively, the psychoanalyst facilitates and engages in a free-associative inquiry that constitutes the psychoanalytic dialogue relating to the individual’s uniqueness in an accepting and creative way. The ensuing transformative conversation is unique and integrates varying levels of both “being” and “about.” Barrett’s observation holds relevance for both disciplines. He notes that “the secret of the psychoanalytic method is the very engagement of a discourse wherein the fixity and certainty of any proffered epistemic configuration are dislodged … what psychoanalysis offers the subject is thus its discourse as Otherwise” (Barrett’s emphasis, p. 42).

Dogen, the 13th C Japanese monk and founder of the Soto Zen tradition, points to non-privileging of silence or dialogue, demonstration or talking about in this poem:

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Not limited
By language
It is ceaselessly expressed;
So, too, the way of letters
Can display but not exhaust it.
(Dogen, In: S. Heine, Trans. 1997, p.108)
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In this regard, “experiential being” does not exclude “talking about” direct experience and does not always exclude intellectual discourse. We are thinking and
feeling beings. Our relationships are fluid. Such an option and misperception betrays subtle splits and reinforces dualistic thinking. Rather, “being” and “about” become harmonized and reflect a lived aspect of the abstract notion of the identity of the relative and the absolute. “Being” does not exclude “about” or other capacities. Rather the dialogue evolves and opens an expanded enriched sense of who we are in relation to each other, for instance, when student and teacher exchange roles.

The Zen master and the student, often through formal ritual, express a commitment to partake in truth evolutions through varying and oscillating combinations of “about” and “being” discovering moments of balance of simultaneous separateness and oneness. In this way, the ensuing dialogue occurring in the interview re-establishes the basic rhythm of one’s personal oscillation, which in this sense becomes restorative, and refreshing, albeit, at times, shocking, disorienting and terrifying and often, in my experience, includes a discussion of ordinary day-to-day basic human experiences.

With experience, a sense of trust develops. One begins to experience the break up of exclusive reliance on the intellect. Break ups in momentary doses exert a beneficial and integrating impact that engenders a psychic balance between “being” and “about.” The transitory and unstable nature of experiences of clarity and insight can be frustratingly fragmentary occurring in split-second moments. Grasping engenders reification. We grasp at what the contemporary psychoanalyst and Zen master Diane Martin describes as idealized “preferred psychological states.” These states are partial and tantalizing. Zen masters typically dismiss such states and advocate for continued practice. Enlightenment experiences in their seductiveness can engender complacency. In

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3 Personal conversation with Diane Martin, Roshi and Abbott of Udumbara Zen Center
such states, we fail to realize that there is no endpoint. Practice is ongoing and something that we need to keep at. This is the significance of such mandates as: “Enlightenment, throw it away!” Or, “If you see the Buddha, kill the Buddha!” However, as brief as these momentary experiences might be, they can exert a profound influence on our lives in subtle, yet dramatic ways and reverberate outwardly as shifts occur in one’s mode of being in the world and affect those individuals with whom we come in contact with. This is what I feel in relation to my teacher regardless of whether she is terse or expansive when we meet.

This process takes time and depends on the development of trust in the other and faith in the process. Eigen, in a discussion of recovery from breakdown, describes a parallel relationship in psychoanalysis. He writes, “One must feel the Other’s fidelity in order to risk finding the place of breaking and coming together, in order to establish this psychic pulse-beat” (2004, p. 23-24). For example, after finishing this manuscript, I commented to Enkyo Roshi that I felt like a fraud; that people view me as some kind of expert, which I clearly know I am not. She responded: “How do you think I feel?” “All of my students expecting me to be enlightened all of the time?” This was followed by shared heartfelt laughter that drove home the point that after all, we are simply human beings seeking the truth together.

This idealized expectation or illusion that the teacher is enlightened or perfect is simultaneously devaluing and dehumanizing because there is a failure to see the teacher in real terms or in human terms. Stefano Baragato, Sensei would say during interviews, “The teachings came about because we are human!” In this spirit he would often pick a student to conduct the interviews.
There is a grandiose expectation of perfection, a perfect mother, father, breast, mirror, anchor. Growth requires seeing through the transparency of this illusion and the accompanying expectations, suffering through the disappointment and realizing that we are simply human beings struggling together. Giving up this idealization of the teacher, giving up this grandiose expectation requires giving up one’s own grandiosity and the idea that we will find some permanent state of incorruptible perfection.

**Nick’s Safe Harbor**

Similarly, the analysand often entertains the fantasy and holds the desire of some conflict-free endpoint where everything will forever be fine, smooth, seamless and live the fairy tale existence of a “happy ever after.” During his analysis, Nick described a “safe harbor” free from waves, turbulence, and chaos. He imagined a move out of the city to a rural environment where he speculated that “I can grow flowers, walk my dog, play music, whatever. I noticed that he would run from relationships when “things would heat up,” when the waves appear. He has trouble realizing that the safe harbor is in how an individual or a couple negotiate the waves as they rise and fall. How do they ride them out without drowning in the conflict? Is collaborative and sensitive communication possible or do defensive aggressive flight –fight patterns emerge? Can we own our humanness in a way that facilitates feeling and surviving the impacts of self and other on self and other? This safe harbor wish might be related to early experiences and might be successfully analyzed. However, analysis can strengthen the capacity to work with such states, not necessarily make them disappear.

From the Zen perspective, Hisamatsu speaks to the urge to engender a feeling of safe harbor. He notes:
Man cannot comfortably live in inconstancy. As a consequence of the view which would have it that the world is ‘inconstant,’ one comes to hate this world of inconstancy and to retire from it. There then arises an idea, typified in the recluse, by which one tries to attain a world of eternal life, lending significance to the inconstant world as a mere process of preparation for the achievement of the eternal realm (1979, p.4).

The implication for both Zen and psychoanalysis centers on the willingness for two individuals to participate in a shared endeavor of becoming real, being human and living sensitively and compassionately as we become “partners in Truth.” From this perspective, the question as I see it becomes not whether to privilege “being” or “about” but how we use or misuse “being” and ‘about?” Do we exploit their capacities to resist or to reveal Truth? Realistically we operate through variations of blends of both. They are not mutually exclusive. Functions are variable and subject to rising and falling oscillations. The teacher’s or the analyst’s flexibility to enter both forms of encounter and variations of both engenders growth. Can we transcend such either or’s and ask: How real can we become to ourselves? How real can we become to others?”

References


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