

Max Praed

Fathers and Buddhas

It's been quite a journey - quite a journey.

It began in the middle of the year before last, when I thought I was escaping from an educational bureaucracy but found myself in the middle of another one that was similar but worse.

(Can you imagine a setup where text-books are prescribed for experiential groups but mention of Reich is proscribed for a talk on self-regulation, where peer - and self-assessment cannot even be discussed at a staff meeting?)

I did not realise this at first. In fact I spent the first six weeks in a state of euphoria. The physical distance I had travelled was comparable to that between New York and California, my wife and youngest daughter were to join me in Perth after six months and my two sons were continuing their studies in the city I had come from in New South Wales.

My symptoms (psychosomatic, I have no doubt at all) started at the beginning of August with a blinding headache and an arthritic-type pain in the left buttock that at worst had me unable to walk except by staggering from fence-post to lamp-post for support. I had massive lapses of memory, I could not concentrate on reading or anything else that called for sustained attention, my hand-writing deteriorated to illegibility and I could not add up or subtract correctly the simple sums on my cheque books. On 24th August I wrote to my wife that I was 'experiencing quite a let-down from euphoria' and followed this on 30th August with the under-statement that I thought I was going bonkers.

I was not the only one who had been covering up with under-statements. On 31st August my wife phoned me and I learned, for the first time, what had been happening to my elder son Tony. In the early period of my euphoria he had been euphoric too. While I was experiencing my breakdown in the form of psychosomatic symptoms he was experiencing his in the form of intensely painful memories and he had become enmeshed in a behaviour and thought pattern that had been diagnosed as delusional. He was in a psychiatric hospital and had been 'medicated' out of his senses.

While I was physically and mentally semi-paralysed my wife was describing herself as 'slowed down to a crawl'. A turning point for me was our decision that my son should join me in Perth as soon as I could find a suitable place for him to live and be treated without drugs.

I was feeling more and more strongly that the therapy I was looking for was my own as well as his. When my headache had been at its paralysing worst I attended a psychoperistaltic massage workshop and brought out some anger as well as tears

without feeling that I was getting anywhere near the deep source of my pain. I also had a course of about twelve acupuncture sessions which reduced the physical pain in my head and the left side of my bum down to a dull ache.

In mid-October a lot of things came together. I learned about Biala, a place in the hills run jointly by John, a psychiatrist, and Ellis, a clinical psychologist, who both eschewed drugs and believed in psychotherapy at the level of deep feelings. On 13th October Tony's psychiatrist in N.S.W., who had been treating him with cuckoo's nest-type drugs and groups, agreed to refer him to John. On 14th October I went to Biala on a visit of appraisal and on the way home my reservoir of tears burst. A peak experience if ever I've had one. On 15th October Tony was booked to fly to Perth and four days later he arrived.

This must be a partial and subjective story. I do not wish to discuss my relationships within the educational-type institution where I worked briefly, except to say that my work paralysis was partly caused by its Judaeo-Christian atmosphere and behaviouristic orientation. When the time came I parted from the people there, amicably enough, and have since been on breakdown retirement caused by mental instability, amply medically attested. Nor am I attempting or purporting to tell Tony's story. Suffice it to say that he is still living at Biala and that his state of well-being is apparently continuing to improve.

Having disclaimed any intention or desire to tell his story, I must nevertheless emphasise that Tony's therapy and mine were inextricably linked. For the first twelve months after he arrived in Perth he and I were both having regular sessions of analytical psychotherapy with John. From time to time there was talk of a joint session but it never happened.

I want to talk about two group events that I attended, one at the beginning and the other at the end of last year. The first was a psychodrama workshop with Zerka Moreno, held in the Beacon-type theatre built by Max Clayton in the Wasley Centre. It was attended also by John, Tony's therapist and mine.

I 'prepared' for this workshop at an unconscious level and in a way that was, for me, unprecedented. That is I asked the *I Ching*, well in advance, what I should work on. I was by no means an *I Ching* devotee. A copy had just come into the house and I did not know how to use it. So I simply asked my question, threw the coins, and my wife worked out the answer.

It was hexagram No. 18. Ku/Work on What Has Been Spoiled (Decay). The persistent theme in the lines is: Setting right what has been spoiled by the father. At least that was the persistent theme for me, and that was what I carried into the workshop to work on as a psychodrama.

I wrote the theme on a blackboard (where I believe its universality inspired some other people to work), I let my intention slowly ripen for most of the duration of the workshop and then, on the last night, I prefaced my session by telling how my theme

came from the *I Ching*. I felt impelled to utter the truism: I am my father's son and my son's father. Then I *worked*. . .

Another peak experience and probably a turning point - although don't forget all the individual sessions, the acupuncture and the plethora of other group experiences over the years. All my familiar ghosts were there - my parents, my dead sister, my aloneness. But somehow, since that psychodrama session, all those ghosts have faded from urgency. . . Again, don't forget the patient chipping away at irrational expectations represented by weekly psychotherapy sessions.

The second group event was a course in Vipassana Meditation. I had never heard of it until my attention was grabbed by a poster in a show window. I thought I had rejected the meditation path to whatever I have been searching for over the years. That is, I had been initiated into transcendental meditation, given a mantra, and then had fairly quickly backslid from regular to occasional to no sitting worth mentioning. So I was full of scepticism about this different kind of meditation technique - but also full of amazement because the desire to attend this course was so strong and so exhilarating. By this time I had consulted the *I Ching* on a number of occasions, almost always getting replies that spoke to me on the deepest levels of significance and acceptability. As the date of the Vipassana course drew near I framed my question for the *I Ching*: 'Will this course really be the important turning point I expect it to be - both for myself and in some sense for Tony?' I started throwing the coins and they started coming up with two yins and a yang - No. 7. At about the third seven I KNEW they would all be sevens - and they were. Hexagram No. 1. Ch'ien/The Creative. The Judgment says, *inter alia*: 'When an individual draws this oracle, it means that success will come to him from the primal depths of the universe and that everything depends upon his seeking his happiness and that of others in one way only, that is, by perseverance in what is right.'

Success! Me? Certified mentally unstable, on breakdown retirement superannuation, unable - at that stage - even to write to my friends about my experiences.

The Vipassana Meditation courses ended early last December and I am writing this in early April. I have backslid a long way from the hour's sitting each morning and night recommended by the teacher. I cannot accept all I was taught in the course about Buddhism. But. . . I have a constant feeling of expectation, of calmness and underlying joyfulness. There is a kind of challenge in the notion that something desirable will happen when I comprehend the Buddhist concepts of *dukkha* (suffering), *anicca* (impermanence) and *anatta* (selflessness). And the greatest challenge of all lies in 'knowing' (intellectually at least) that this most desirable state of Nibbana will come about only when I stop desiring it. . .

From the point of view of humanistic psychology, Vipassana meditation *really does* what groups and analytic techniques say they do but really do not, i.e. facilitate living in the here and now and making the unconscious conscious. As Glyn Seaborn Jones writes in his notes on Recipropt, Vipassana is an important technique when working

alone. From the context he is talking about being temporarily alone, but I would say that Vipassana can be fully adequate technique in the absence of any Recipropt partner or group. It focuses mindfulness first on the breath at the nostrils and then on any part or organ of the body, external and internal, where work needs to be done.

The nearest thing to Vipassana that I have seen in groups is a small part of the fantasy section in the introductory Mini Lab. at workshops conducted by Will Schutz. He gets group members to lie down and relax and fantasise a tiny person - often a workman in overalls with a toolkit - who goes in through one of the apertures of the body and works, literally, on anything that needs to be done. People scrape, polish, hammer, oil, sweep and in various ways mend and alter organs and functions of their bodies - and apparently often report lasting benefits as a result of this therapeutic fantasising. I know of no better exposition of the work of Vipassana, however, than the following quotation from the Neoplatonist Plotinus, who wrote: 'Withdraw into yourself and look. And if you do not find yourself beautiful yet, act as does the creator of a statue that is to be made beautiful; he cuts away here, he smooths there, he makes this line lighter, this other purer, until a lovely face has grown upon his work. So do you also: cut away all that is excessive, straighten all that is crooked, bring light to all that is overcast, labour to make all one glow of beauty and never cease chiselling your statue, until there shall shine out on you from it the godlike splendour of virtue, until you shall see the perfect goodness surely established in the stainless shrine.'

Self and Society is interested in personal experiences and in the learnings that flow from them. During much of a fairly long life I have been in and around the therapeutic scene - as therapist, patient, group leader and group member. I have also been professionally involved for many years in tertiary adult education - although I prefer to call it adult learning. I have been the subject of a number of medical reports, some labelling me as indomitably mentally stable and others as intractably mentally unstable. I have a few original theories about human behaviour, all unpublished and one arguably unpublishable. Perhaps I have nothing better to do from now on than write up some of this material and send it to *Self and Society*.

Also I spent the first seventeen years or so of my life as a fairly fervent christian and the following forty as a convinced, crusading atheist and humanist. It was therefore with something of an intellectual and emotional shock that I have found myself lately approaching the *I Ching*, the theory and practice of Vipassana meditation and various expositions of the clairvoyant and mystical realities with feelings of acceptance and anticipation. But this has not led to a change of attitude towards christianity, which still seems pre-eminently the religion of patrilineal societies with their attributes of authoritarianism, divisiveness and violence.

Along with my emotively loaded work on 'setting right what has been spoiled by the father,' however, I have come across a heretical but to me wholly convincing 'natural history' of the original Jesus story. It is *The Jesus Scroll* by Donovan Joyce (Melbourne 1972), which sets out the thesis that Jesus was literally King of the Jews, being the first in line for the usurped throne of the Hasmoneans, and Jesus bar Abbas

(son of the Master) was his son and heir. So Jesus did not give up his life to save the whole world but he *did* risk his life by surrendering on condition that his son was set free. Then he and his supporters carried out an audacious plan to cheat the cross of its second royal victim!

Having been prepared to go down into the pit with my son, I feel I can identify with this interpretation of Jesus.

Or does that just prove I'm bloody mad?

Letters to the editor

Dear Vivian,

You ask [May Self and Society] how we can get the kind of publicity we want.

The answer is simply persistence, thinking of new ways of reaching people and putting them into practice. Success won't come every time but often enough, bit by bit. I think this was borne out by the response to the 'Role Conflict and Authority' workshops when enough circulars are sent out and press contacts are made, including going through the social services and education yearbooks to reach those in charge of groups of people who are interested. They themselves will usually circularise their staff, if they are asked to do so. It's a lot of work and not easily done in one's spare time alone. It needs one person to take on a particular project and see it through. I would appeal to any AHP member to take on one such project in their particular field of work, finding ways and means to get the message across, putting on a particular event suitable for their own profession.

For instance, I saw this marriage guidance counselling programme on television and pretty awful it was. All the more surprising because I know some marriage guidance counsellors who certainly know a lot better. But here was a client pretty heavily defended, unable to say

very much about himself but plenty about other people, and the counsellor who presumably was a 'trained' person being equally judgmental and dismissive, and obviously unable to cope except to say, all right, let's end it. How could she? [Here I go being judgmental myself.] As a result, what I want to do now is put on a weekend workshop for counsellors to show them what gestalt can do, role plays, psychodrama, creative listening exercises, doing something rather than talking about it. Surely they need to know, and surely many of them already do? So why, I ask myself, why pick someone who doesn't represent them on television? So what went wrong?

There is a lot of work to be done and so few of us to do it. I am tempted to give up my full time post and devote myself to the AHP alone. May be in a year or two I can afford it. I don't want to get involved in anything to which I cannot give my full attention and hence my non-involvement in the conference. I can only do so much, by way of apology. Any further suggestions from the S & S readership will be very welcome.

yours sincerely,

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