
THE SEEKER'S SHADOW

Is there a dark side to the pursuit of self knowledge and the spiritual path? ...A cautionary word from Dr. Peter Nelson.

Seekers are people constantly searching for something, stalking intently down a path, gazing alternately at the horizon one moment and at where they are the next. For many nothing seems more important than getting 'there' – to their desired goal and the alternating examination of goal and self, self and goal is part of an endless process in which the seeker remains ever hopeful of progress.

The seekers I refer to here are those pursuing some kind of psychotherapeutic or spiritual path for healing and self-discovery. In the West today there appears to be primarily two kinds of paths available to those who wish to deal with the existential condition of suffering: psychotherapy and spiritual practice. For those who want to find alleviation of emotional pain via psychotherapy, the point of entry is often a powerful sense of dissatisfaction and dysfunctionality. On the other hand, for those who believe that a quest for 'higher' truth or connection to the divine is the correct way out of suffering, their entry point is some form of spiritual practice.

Sometimes, one can lead to another, as it did for me.

When I was nineteen I found myself in a crisis and as a result I entered Existential Psychoanalysis. After five years of intense work I had learned a great deal through my analysis and I was now more functional. However, there were many issues left untouched for me by the therapeutic process. So, the next ten years of my life were dedicated to spiritual practice in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition as I sought to deepen my understanding of the path out of suffering.

For me both practices were exceedingly worthwhile, but, as I watched myself and others traversing the spiritual and psychotherapeutic paths, I discovered that there is a serious pitfall, a 'dark side', if you will, which can profoundly hinder progress on the path of psycho-spiritual unfoldment.

Seekers often try not to look back. Ahead of them lies the answer, not behind. Back is where they have been and surely they are not in that place anymore.



If they did look back, however, they might notice that the bright light of the goal casts a shadow—the seeker's shadow and this dark replica of self stalks from behind bearing a message, a communication that most do not care to hear.

No matter how sincere and well-intentioned the seeker may be, stalking him always is the shadow. This is the hidden side of the quest of which the seeker tends to remain unconscious. After all, he cannot become conscious of that which never

receives his open-eyed gaze. In other words, the shadow is all that is denied about what the seeker is doing on the path—it is that which he works hard not to know in his quest for self-knowledge.

In my research into the processes of self-unfoldment and in my work as a guide over the past 25 years I have come

to believe that the shadow most often not recognised by this search for existential relief and meaning is *blinding narcissism*. This is a powerful and almost total self-obsession which can turn the path into a treadmill which keeps the seeker going nowhere except continually back to his altar of ever falsified self-reflection.

The most common manifestation of

"Them scientists, they always losing things. First they searchin' and then they's researching!" .. Kurt Vonnegut's Cat's Cradle.

this shadow I call the 'purification ritual', in which certain people in therapy constantly focus on what they term their 'process' – by which they mean the psychotherapeutic process of identifying and rooting out psychological malfunctioning. And they do so at every opportunity. Much reward is offered

initially by the therapist and then by the seeker himself for uncovering the 'fault' so that it can be 'worked' on.

This 'work' often requires that the seeker look back through his life but not back at the path of the process of therapy itself. Gradually, by increasing rewards for 'discoveries' made, this purification rite can come to take over a seeker's life. Every situation is seen primarily through his/her 'process' and everyone is evaluated in terms of this type of self-reflection. Genuine other-directed awareness is lost and life is taken over by a maddening cycle of self-expunging, self-reflecting, self-obsession.

As an example, Woody Allen comes clearly to mind. After more than 30 years of therapy he still ponders himself as if on some kind of deeply meaningful quest while apparently unable to experience the existential condition and needs of someone apart from himself. The respect and appreciation of otherness is lost in a neurotic and false sense of oneness—an unmistakable sign of the shadow.

Unfortunately, the same shadow can haunt the spiritual seeker's path. Spiritual practice as a salvific process is often inextricably connected to meditation which, in the Buddhist tradition, is supposed to lead to a clear mindfulness in daily life and eventually to insight into the process by which we construct our life-worlds. It is held that penetration of the illusion of the phenomenal world will lead to enlightenment and eventual transcendence of suffering.

However, meditation too, can easily degenerate into an introverted, escapist omphaloskepsis (navel-gazing). This form of collapse into narcissism is a

retreat into one's inner world-space which now becomes the only truly 'safe' place from which all else is known. The confusion here is between safety and liberation. A problem for those not attending to the shadow side of their meditation practice is a growing belief in spiritual superiority—a direct result of introverted narcissism. Thus, all is known through self-reflection originating from the safety of a defensive inner world. Of course, this shadow tends to separate seekers from the openness and compassion that is intended by the practice in the first place.

I often think of many shadow-stalked meditation practitioners I have met who feel that a meditation retreat is the high point of their spiritual life. Narcissism is a particular danger for those who are naturally introverted and find that they feel best when they don't have to interact with others. These practitioners are retreating not only from the day-to-day world, but from the shadow of their spiritual seeking which now provides them with a world that is mainly a self-reflection.

In closing I would like to say that psychotherapeutic self-examination can be extremely valuable as can meditation practice which results in one becoming a more compassionate and aware being. However, if we are going to be true searchers, we must not blindly accept the process and lose ourselves in it. To stay attuned requires the simple act of 'turning around' to face the shadow of our practice. Otherwise, we constantly will be "researchin'" but never finding anything other than our own reflections.