

Therapy and Spiritual Goals: an Interview with Richard Harvey

Richard Harvey answers questions about personal problems, therapy and spiritual goals.

Your work seems to go beyond the usual parameters of counseling and therapy, yet you seem reluctant to assume the role of spiritual teacher. Also you speak of 'bridging personal therapy and spiritual growth'. So, what exactly is your stance on personal problems and spiritual practice?

That they are connected in a single process and that this is available to you if you wish to see it through—or go the distance. Many people who come to therapy simply want to make things better—improve their relationship to themselves or others, be more confident, less neurotic, more self-assured. Some dissatisfaction or crisis in life causes them to seek help and when the issues are dealt with—healed, resolved—they carry on with a new improved sense of themselves.

But for some the exploration of the inner world opens a bigger door—a gateway into the unknown and they become fascinated by what it may mean for them. If they pursue therapy and inner work they “flip” the board, reverse the rules of the game, and find that they are no longer so concerned about improvements or progress, but more interested in relinquishing the hold their ego has on them out of an intuition that something deeper and more valuable awaits them on the other side of a process of loss.

This process has been called depth psychotherapy or major psychotherapy in the past. It is what Jung called individuation. Or perhaps what Maslow was indicating in the higher levels of his hierarchy of needs. This way of looking at personal growth is entirely different from the present popular notion of having what you want, making the world a better place (which translates as getting more of what you want) through work on self-esteem, positive reprogramming, spiritual channeling or whatever.

Teaching spiritual wisdom and practices is simply referring you to your inner understanding, which is innate in you as a human being. I distinguish between the act of teaching and assuming the role of teacher, because everyone should be their own teacher.

I want to ask: why does a person try therapy if they are seeking spiritual goals? If you are serious, surely you'd be better off going to see a real spiritual teacher in India or the Middle East or finding someone in that tradition. How would a psychotherapist, however experienced presume to compete with spiritual masters?

Well, speaking for myself, I wouldn't! But your question is a very good one, because it highlights certain contemporary ideas and prejudices. Some of these ideas about therapy need to change to catch up with modern developments and some of the prejudices need to be confronted, because like all prejudice they are borne of ignorance.

Today it is perfectly viable to pursue spiritual goals in therapy, providing you find the right therapist for you. I would go further and say that the therapeutic specialty of psycho-spiritual psychotherapy is at the cutting edge of spiritual practice and living spiritual lives today, because nowhere else do we have such a linking of ancient thought, teachings, inspiration and modern day discoveries concerning humanity. So, in my view, if you are serious, go see the specialist—which is a therapist.

On the other hand any individual therapist, of course may not be up to the task. I am talking here of a psycho-spiritual (the other term is transpersonal) therapist or healer. And incidentally spiritual teachers are not always oriental or faraway and they haven't been for a long time. About competing—well the thing to watch is “the grass is always greener” syndrome: if you find you are attracted to a therapist, healer or spiritual teacher and your mind or heart wanders off in search of a greater or more attractive one, you are experiencing a profound lesson in the psycho-spiritual process.

I am a long-time follower of psychological and spiritual teachings and I have practiced many methods. But I have not found what I am looking for. My question comes from my intuition that seeking is somehow linked to our inability to be present. Can you tell me how the two are linked?

The first thing to realize is that usually what we're looking for is right in front of us! Alongside this truth is the fact that usually we don't see or recognize it, because we are so caught up in looking for it or seeking that it doesn't seem to occur to us that we might find what we're looking for! Hence it's always more interesting to us to cast our mind ahead and aspire to some distant future in which our dreams will be realized.

Now, is the only time there is. This understanding is as old as the Upanishads and as modern as the latest self-help book. But to occupy the moment, we have to rein in our aspirations for an imaginary future time. Once we have done that, we have to “be”. Now, two things are incredibly difficult for us about what seems to be a comparatively simple matter to speak about.

First, we don't know how to withdraw from the future and, second, we don't know how to be, in the present or any other time. Our entire life is orientated to the past—modelled on past memories, coated with past assumptions and motivated by past desires.

Nothing, really nothing, is actively present, only the past rehashing itself over and over again. Western psychology has taught us that inside us is a shadowy realm known as the unconscious. It is symbolized in dreams by the basement—a dirty, dingy place we encounter in nightmares which may be inhabited by monsters or threatening presences. Along with a veritable junkshop of material which we have thrown into our basement is the answer to why we should inhabit our lives orientated to the past.

For here we find all our shameful needs, fears and desires that were unmet, unrequited or unfulfilled when we were too young and helpless to do anything about it. Here in this darkness we dwell in our grief and our shame, too embarrassed and humiliated to face up to ourselves. While we don't deal thoroughly with these inner dynamics and relationships, nothing will change, including the future, which is merely a reflection of the past.

So, this is why we project ourselves ahead of the present moment, idealizing a future which can never be any different from the past, except in fantasy. Think about it: how much of your time is spent imagining how life can be, wishing for things to be different from how they are. We aspire, by way of compensation for our dismal state of dissatisfaction, to better life conditions, improved relationships, more money or power or standing in the world. Our life moves ahead like a train that never reaches its destination, but is always in-between, always leaving, always arriving, never present.

Reining in our aspirations for an imaginary future is the same as letting go of our attachment to the past. The work is challenging and demanding, but not impossible. It

is enabled through deep acceptance of how things are. And we cannot do it alone. We can try, but we will never take ourselves close enough to the edge, never tolerate the degree of suffering that we need to, to bring about the inner change that finally liberates us.

The second point is our inability to “be”. Deep inside, in our essence, we may experience a sense of presence from which being comes. But this subtle sense has not been validated, so we don’t give it value. If we did, we wouldn’t do so much. We would spend more time just being and when we can be, we can allow others to be. Feeling, valuing, communing would be words that described real experiences from our everyday lives. We would be less concerned about distractions that cause us to lose touch with ourselves and our sense of being.

Being is essential to presence, but also to love and caring, to compassion, to truly touching and experiencing the world.

But our experience, from the past, is that such openness caused us much suffering, pain and hurt. At some point, we made the decision to cease to be open and vulnerable to the world. We withdrew from this pure experience, compromised ourselves and concealed our essence to protect ourselves from hostility and insensitivity. So, this is how we are unable to be in the present—the only place where life is. We are therefore detached from life.

I heard you telling a story about Ramana Maharshi where he was saying that realized beings remained in the forest and someone asked him wouldn't it be better if they came out and mixed with others. To which he replied, 'What others?' Does this mean that the goal of enlightenment, the pursuit of psycho-spiritual psychotherapy is a sort of quietism, a withdrawal lack of concern about the outer world?

We have to distinguish between the inner and outer worlds, between the absolute and relative worlds and between inner reflection of a psychological nature and inner reflection of a spiritual nature to answer this.

What Ramana Maharshi said was in response to the question, “Does one person’s realization help others?” And he says, “Self-realization is the greatest help that can be rendered to humanity.” Then he says, “the Self-realized person is helpful even though they remain in forest”, which I take to be a symbolic way of saying in seclusion. His answer to, “Wouldn’t it be better if they mixed with others?” is “There are no others to mix with.”

Now from the point of view of the relative, outer world and of our shared human psychology of perception this is obviously absurd! But he is speaking of beings who are Self-realized, which means that they have merged with the absolute where inner and outer are one. In Zen, the saying would be that they have swallowed the world, in other words they have realized that the outer world is inside them, rather than outside, which again sounds preposterous, until you understand that a Self-realized being is one who is totally identified with consciousness—not individual consciousness in the relative world, but the consciousness within which everything—everything— is arising.

This is very hard to understand from within the constraints of our accepted habitual way of thinking. But it should come as no surprise to people who have even a glancing acquaintance with the methods of Zen or crazy wisdom masters, whose methods are designed to shock us into awakening, that our habitual ways of thinking create the world as we are, not as it is (this is also the nature of projection in the sphere of

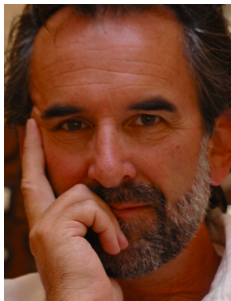
psychology and interpersonal relationships). In other words Self-realization cannot, will not be proscribed by how we think about things.

So, if you have reached the point where everything is going on inside the consciousness you have realized that you are (you see, it even gets messy and almost impossible to talk about), then you are in relationship to everything all the time, regardless of your physical location (which is merely relative), since everything is going on within the sphere of your awareness, or consciousness. Paradoxically then, now you have the power to “do good” for example, to influence affairs and so forth, you don’t. You simply witness with compassion, devotion and love.

Now you are reminding me of personal therapy which is a kind of witnessing by the therapist without doing anything, a profound acceptance that leads to healing. Even Freud himself when asked what was the essence of psychoanalysis, said it was simply love.

He said, “Psychoanalysis in essence is a cure through love.” And yes, you’re right, because deep acceptance embraces everything in its all-accepting field. One of the lessons of practicing therapy for me has been the absolute power of non-intervention, of simply letting things be, and, without interfering, things change through finding their natural balance.

The original version of this interview can be seen at
<http://www.therapyandspirituality.com/articles/interview-therapy-spiritual-goals-2.html>



Richard Harvey is a psychotherapist, author and spiritual teacher with over 30 years experience, offering training and support to those who want to achieve deeper personal change and spiritual growth.

He provides one-day and weekend workshops, week-long personal and spiritual growth retreats, longer-term courses, and a sustained three-year program of psycho-spiritual training at his personal growth centre and family home set high on the beautiful southern slopes of the Sierra Nevada mountains in Spain. He works in other countries on request.

He is the author of *The Flight of Consciousness* (Ashgrove 2002), as well as several other books and many articles aimed at both inspiring and offering practical guidance on the process of realizing our true selves.

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