

# Intensive Short-Term Dynamic Psychotherapy and the Cherry Blossoms of Yoshino

THEROY & PRACTICE



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## Abstract

Fundamentally, this viewpoint article is about the mystery and wonder that lie within the hearts of clients, therapists, as well as at the heart of this transformative work. The article speaks of the ways that ISTDP's insistence on direct experience helps to convert the forces of resistance into those of the therapeutic alliance. Further, the article touches on the ways intensive, non-dual forms of meditation help mobilize the depths of the unconscious, and awaken the profound healing and compassionate forces of the human psyche. This writing also speaks about Windhorse's *Zentensive Workshop and Retreats*, APA accredited trainings which blend the technical with the spiritual, the psychodynamic with the transcendent. Personal experiences of the author, and others, are shared to give voice to the transformative nature of this approach to training. These narratives also help shift the nature of this work from the theoretical to the practical, and help dissolve the sometimes vague and arbitrary distinctions made between our personal and professional lives. Finally, this article warns of the potential dangers of assuming an overly-technical approach to our clinical work and training. It looks ahead to how a *spiritual* therapist might practice, and to the exploration of potentially new paradigms of psychotherapy arising out of a place of Wonder.

*Keywords: Davanloo, Dharma, ISTDP, Kensho, Meditation, Mobilization, Non-dual, Psychodynamic Zen, Sesshin, Spiritual, Unconscious, Unlocking, Windhorse Zen, Zen Buddhism, Zentensive, Wonder, Mystery*

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Lawson Sachter is a dharma teacher at Windhorse Zen Community, Inc. He is also the spiritual director of the Clear Water Zen Center, a psychotherapist in private practice, as well as the leader of numerous meditation retreats, including the APA approved Zentensive Workshop and Retreats. There are no other conflicts of interest.

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## Intensive Short-Term Dynamic Psychotherapy and the Cherry Blossoms of Yoshino

*"Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery"*

- Annie Dillard (2013, p. 14)

**I**kkkyu Sōjun was a Japanese Zen Master as well as a gifted artist and poet who lived during the troubled times of the 15th century. It's said that one day when he was walking deep in the woods, a fierce-eyed mountain ascetic leapt out in front of him and demanded, "So, you monk, what's the real teaching of all the Buddhas about, anyway?"

Ikkyu replied simply: "It is the truth within your own heart."

At that, the ascetic grabbed Ikkyu, pulled out a dagger, and holding its sharp blade against the Master's chest said, "Well then, let's cut yours open and see what we find, shall we?"

Without blinking, Ikkyu replied, "Slice open the cherry trees of Yoshino and where will you find the blossoms that appear spring after spring?"

The story ends here, but we know this master lived on for many more years, and so we can assume the ascetic at least understood enough to let Ikkyu continue on his way. My hope is that as this article unfolds, you will uncover some ways that the spirit of this story also touches into some of the more ineffable forces woven into our work with others.

### Early Days

I came to ISTDP through the back door of Zen training. My meditation practice had begun in the late 60s, and my first contact with Davanloo's work came through some dharma friends who were studying with him in the mid-to-late 80s. What they shared was fascinating, and even my first impression was that it was touching into something that had been missing in my years of Zen training. A few years later, when I was able to start seeing actual videotapes of Davanloo's sessions, I found all of it so moving, and the openings I saw people going through on those tapes continued to resonate at deeper and deeper levels.

From that time on, I was fortunate in being able to attend almost all of the annual Montreal Conferences until Dr. Davanloo stopped holding them in 2017. In some ways I've found his later work, with its intensity and collective mobilizations, even more compelling than what had come before – broader and deeper in certain respects. To be sure, my understanding of ISTDP, and of the nature of the western unconscious itself, has grown significantly over the past 30 years, and continues to do so. Davanloo's work, and its relevance to the practice of Buddhism in the west, continues to be a central influence in all my work as a dharma teacher and psychotherapist – though in truth, those labels are feeling less and less definable as time goes on.

From one perspective we can say that the heart of ISTDP is about gaining direct and experiential access to the unconscious. This includes opening up the neurobiological pathways, and freeing the psyche from the dusts of abstraction and intellectualization. From the very first tape I saw, I was struck by Davanloo's Zen-like insistence on *direct experience*, a matter with deep and subtle implications. Just as Zen emphasizes experiencing each moment directly, ISTDP calls for the honest experience of feelings and impulses as they arise within us. Taking this further, the more thoroughly we lose ourselves in the *experiencing*, the more fully the sense of separation falls away. This opens up a powerful connection within any therapeutic setting, and may also lead to the question: "*Who is it* that's doing the experiencing?"

In watching Davanloo's tapes one of the things that immediately caught my attention had to do with the ways he would so often wind up asking the patient how they were experiencing a certain feeling. He'd sometimes even interrupt them mid-sentence, saying things like: "Yes, but that's just an explanation, what's the feeling?" or, "But that's just anxiety," or, "That's just a defense," or, "That's just a bunch of words... *what is the feeling?*" He would also say things like, "But you are helpless to tell me how you feel!" Inevitably these kinds of comments would generate a defensiveness, confusion, and lots of increasing pressure. They also conveyed the fact that Davanloo was not there to waste time.

Generally speaking, we all assume we're experiencing our feelings full-on, and yet sometimes we come to see that we're actually just dancing around the edges. As Einstein said, "Few are those who see with their own eyes and feel with their own hearts" (Einstein, n.d., para. 1). The direct experience of feelings can have a simple, but uncommon depth; labeling and explaining often just get in the way. At his conferences Davanloo would often claim that "Interpretation is the greatest defense of the therapist." He was, of course, speaking to us, and about us – addressing our own defenses, as well as our often unspoken need to conceptualize and be knowledgeable.

The roots of Davanloo's approach go back most directly to Erich Lindemann's (1994) grief work in the aftermath of the 1942 Cocoanut Grove Fire – a heart-breaking catastrophe where some 492 people died, and where many of those deaths were due to negligence and worse. In the course of his work, Lindemann realized that when people are in crisis, their unresolved unconscious issues often come to the surface with great force. Later, Davanloo studied with Lindemann at Harvard and then, utilizing this principle in his psychotherapeutic work, Davanloo spent his life exploring ways of skillfully mobilizing the psyche to peel away layers of defense, and thus gain access to repressed feelings directly.



As we know, in that time Davanloo's early work was both radical and revolutionary, as were his later, often misunderstood, group mobilizations. In an article published in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1982, David Malan told the interviewer that while Freud had discovered the unconscious, "Davanloo has discovered how to use it therapeutically" (Sobel, 2017, para. 24). This "discovery" has become consistently refined over time. It's been expanded to include increasingly difficult contexts, opened up a whole new world of interventions, and over the past decade has shown itself to operate as a powerfully clarifying force in the midst of Zen training. Previously, most therapists had tried to find ways of circumventing the resistance. Davanloo's genius was figuring out how to utilize it – specifically utilizing the direct experience of the complex transference feelings (CTF), and the transference component of the resistance (TCR) – in the service of "fueling" the entire process.

Especially in the earlier years of my training, Davanloo would stress how important it was to generate enough internal force to carry the process all the way through as a smooth and unified unfolding. Without a sufficient rise in the complex transference feelings, the process easily bogs down, or slips into the overly analytical. He demonstrated how one of the quickest and most powerful ways of getting this rise was by putting pressure on the defenses. Going further, he wrote, "One of the very early discoveries that I made had to do with the direct management of the resistance and the direct access to the unconscious, and the interrelation between major resistance and what I call the 'unconscious therapeutic alliance'" (Davanloo, 2001, p. 26).

From another point of view, the heart of ISTDP lies in bridging the divide between ourselves and the client in such a way that a uniquely supportive sense of connection takes over. This kind of closeness isn't so much about personal intimacy as it is about joining together for the singular purpose of experiencing a deep emotional freedom. This alliance, particularly as it functions on unconscious levels, both evokes and embodies the healing and collaborative forces arising out of this singular way of working directly and skillfully with the defenses. As Davanloo says, "Each time resistance is penetrated, there is a marked and unmistakable increase in the strength of the therapeutic alliance" (Davanloo, 1986, p. 107). In this sense, we might understand resistance and alliance as two sides of the same coin.

The process of converting the resistance-into-alliance also releases a potent energy, one which can help fuel all kinds of significant change in a person's life. This energy moves through intrapsychic and relational levels as well as collective, and collaborative ones. Obstructions become doorways to deeper realms of healing, and this healing force can deepen and, in my view, even move beyond the confines of the therapy room itself. As we've mentioned, Davanloo's later core group work gets much of its power from the fact that everyone is support-

ing each other in the service of a common goal. All this becomes possible because so much of the resistance arises *reactively* in response to some level of dysfunction or disruption within our foundational relationships.

In a similar vein, Andrew Harvey writes:

The alchemists knew this great secret – that if you did not bless and accept fully everything that was most painful and dark in you, you could never attain the conjunction of opposites, the sacred marriage, the philosopher's stone, because final wisdom can only flower from the transformation of everything in the psyche, the bringing up into the light of spiritual consciousness and the releasing there of everything hidden in the dark depths of the unconscious. As Jung said, "One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious. (Harvey & Matousek, 1994, p. 164).

## Doorways of the Unconscious

In his remarkable book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, originally published in 1902, William James wrote:

Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the flimsiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence, but apply the requisite stimulus and at a touch they are all there in all their completeness... *No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded.* [emphasis added] (James, 1983, p. 388)

The "flimsiest of screens" which James refers to are the energetic barriers that function visibly or invisibly as resistances to any deepening therapeutic or meditative process. From one side they can seem impenetrable, and yet from the other they appear wholly insubstantial, or even illusory. The prominent linguistic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1977) wrote about what it's like to find yourself trapped in a room where you push and push against the door, only to suddenly and inexplicably discover that it opens inwardly. When the doors swing open, when the veils give way, other worlds are revealed. As William Blake so famously put it, "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern" (Blake, 1790, para. 1).

In his *Varieties of Spiritual Experience*, a tribute to Wil-

liam James' work, David Yaden writes of "the hazy boundary between pathological and positive spiritual experiences" (Yaden & Newberg, 2022, p. 185). Many others have also written about all kinds of complex and contradictory experiences, which are more common than might be expected. They are complex because they can include spiritual, repressive, neurotic, traumatic, and even pathological elements; and contradictory because they can be both freeing and binding, compassionate and destructive. William Miller, who together with Stephen Rollnick developed the approach of Motivational Interviewing, offers a range of such case studies in his book *Quantum Change*. He distinguishes *insightful* from *mystical* openings, and further explores the rich and mysterious borderland between conscious and unconscious awareness.

As a brief clarification here, and primarily following Yaden's work, I use the term "religious" to refer to *teachings and systems of belief* which have evolved over centuries. On the other hand, the term "spiritual" is used here to refer to *an experience, or series of experiences*, which are at once both inclusive and transcendent. With these types of non-verbal 'openings', the world comes forth as a unified whole, and our perception of the self is no longer experienced as alone, or apart from anything or anyone. Spiritual experiences take us beyond our conventional, cognition-based sense of reality, and instead affirm the wondrous and interdependent unity of existence. When deep enough, these types of experiences also open our hearts, and bring forth feelings of gratitude and compassion.

When such openings do come, the veils may open briefly, allowing us just a glimpse of what's beyond, or they may be flung wide open to reveal the stars. Shallower experiences often fade into memory as quickly as they appear, while deeper, more complete ones may stay with us for a lifetime – especially when the work is on-going. Miller (2001) reserves the term "quantum change experiences" for such major life-changing events.

ISTDP generally focuses on the breakthrough of complicated and contradictory repressed feelings through *unlockings*, while intensive forms of Zen practice tend to foster non-dual openings, often called *kensho* experiences, where the fixed sense of self falls away. These types of experiences aren't the same, but they are often closely related and entwined. A *kensho* experience will also often rattle the cage of the unconscious, while unlockings often help open a person up to new realms of freedom and selflessness.

Just as the process of *analysis of the transference* helps to solidify unlockings, subsequent dharma training helps deepen and refine experiences of oneness. And just as a person may experience numerous unlockings, deeper and deeper awakenings are possible too. These kinds of openings arise out of an intrapsychic fluidity; how close and interconnected they may end up being depends in part on our previous training, and also on how we work with them afterwards. These days, especially

with meditation and psychedelics gaining such prominence, the rigid and often artificial distinctions between the psychological and spiritual are softening, and we seem to be entering new and promising dimensions of exploration.

## The Power of Extended Meditation Retreats

After some 20 years of Zen practice, I had finished my formal training, and sometimes helped to assist my dharma teacher, Roshi Philip Kapleau, in running seven-day Zen retreats, often referred to as "sesshins." During a particular fall sesshin, I experienced two unlockings which profoundly changed many things in my life. The first opening was a grief unlocking related to the feelings around my father's sudden death, something that had occurred early on in my training. Then, towards the end of the retreat, a second unlocking released intense waves of anger that had been sealed over since my early childhood.

Davanloo has referred to the experiences described above as two-part unlockings, with grief opening the door, so to speak, for rage and guilt. In my case the unlockings were clearly linked, one with the other, but they were also connected in deep, unexpected, and profoundly moving ways to my earlier dharma work. I would now say that these experiences were, in essence, all part of the same opening system, involving the release of energies that flow together and apart - as can happen with the branches of a stream.

I should say these experiences really came out of the blue as far as the sesshin itself went, and they deeply confirmed Davanloo's teachings about the nature and structure of the repressed unconscious. There was nothing theoretical about them, and they opened up a new world in terms of my Zen practice and understanding. One thing that shifted was that I realized I had been using dharma practice repressively, which, after so many years, was surprising and disconcerting to recognize. Unfortunately, this repressive force runs through so much of our western culture and religion; it clearly underlies a great deal of the suffering that compels so many to look for psychotherapeutic or spiritual relief and change in the first place.

Over time, what also became experientially clear to me was that obstructions are often opportunities, and that the greater the internal resistance, the greater the potential for personal change. In some kind of ephemeral way, I believe I also came to understand more about what it means to be a human being. As Joseph Conrad wrote, "It is when we try to grapple with another man's intimate need that we perceive how incomprehensible, wavering, and misty are the beings that share with us the light of the stars and the warmth of the sun" (Conrad, 2003, p. 52).

My experience at that sesshin also helped me to understand Davanloo's work in a different light – more from the inside out, rather than only from the outside in. The unlockings combined with dharma practice further confirmed the rich, paradoxical, and inclusive nature of the unconscious. Over the years

I've seen similar shifts emerge for some of the therapists who attended one of our *Zentensives* – these accredited, ISTDP-informed meditation retreats.

To further elaborate, both ISTDP and intensive forms of dharma practice mobilize the unconscious in very similar and complementary ways. ISTDP tends to take a more targeted approach to the defenses, while meditation tends to work more globally by quieting and clearing the mind. In my experience, however, drawing such distinct lines here isn't possible. What is clear is that mobilizing the whole of the psyche in this way brings about a remarkable fluidity, and at the same time, a unique and collective energy rises up. How one works with these energies depends on a person's intent, the circumstances, and perhaps a kind of *ripeness*, but what's clear is that when things are stirred up, as people like William James, William Miller, and Erich Lindemann have all affirmed, a wide range of shifts and openings become much more possible.

When I said that my unlockings came out of the blue, what I meant is that I was doing my usual dharma practice during the sesshin, nothing more. At that point I had been studying ISTDP for several years, and had also been seeing some of Davanloo's tapes during the Montreal Conferences and elsewhere. You could say that, in a sense, I was primed, but I wasn't at the retreat to work on "therapy issues," at least not consciously. At that point, which was some 30 years ago, the resonances I had felt between dharma practice and ISTDP were still clarifying themselves, and so what occurred that week has become part of a larger process of understanding and integration that's been unfolding ever since.

During our structured, focused, and intense retreats, the inner stillness, openness, and collective energy build up over time. Davanloo's group mobilizations also took advantage of the extended time factor as well as the group effort, and so there's some significant common ground there. The fact is that both ISTDP, and intensive meditation, richly mobilize the unconscious, leaving us both more sensitive, and more vulnerable in uncommon and powerful ways. As an example, after a five-day spring Zentensive, a therapist-participant wrote:

As I walked through the airport... I continued to marvel at the perceptual changes in "reality." Normally, an airport is a place to wait, maybe with mild irritation at the chronic over-stimulation, crowds, fast food and lack of control over time and schedule. Something to get through on the way to somewhere else. Not so on that morning. For me, it was a destination I had never before had the privilege to experience. I felt so wide open, so moved by everyone I saw. I felt I was in love with every stranger I passed. Streams of compassion flowed out and into my heart. I watched people with an incredible sensation of tenderness, not unlike those first moments of holding my newborn babies.

This person also wrote about how much more connected she felt with her clients:

The week following the retreat, almost without exception, all of my psychotherapy sessions were deep and powerful, even sessions with patients I've seen for years, who have felt stuck or coasting. I know that the shift in me, the focus, the expansion, opened up something in the room for them as well. I feel so grateful for all of this.

It's not at all surprising that people who have been trained in experiential forms of therapy have smoother retreat experiences; not necessarily easier, but smoother because they are familiar with, and know how to work with what might be called the *darker forces* of the psyche. What is increasingly clear to me is that the healing and the destructive forces of the unconscious are all of one piece. Being more comfortable and familiar with the ways repression works, and with the ways in which both the tender and powerful forces can be held back, helps immensely with the retreat experience.

The kinds of experiences noted above also offer insight for the concept of *the person of the therapist*. If the therapist makes too strong a distinction between their personal and professional lives, they may limit the depth of their work with others. From a more inclusive perspective, ISTDP training is not only about what happens in the therapy room, but also about how we, as therapists, live our lives. ISTDP is not simply about what we do, but also (and at the same time) it's about who we are as people.

### Common Ground: One Client's Experience

A significant focus of ISTDP has always been on restructuring the unconscious, and a central feature of this process involves tapping into and releasing the layers of unconscious guilt (Davanloo, 1990). Davanloo has referred to this process as draining the pathogenic zone, a process which calls for layers of repressed feelings, including and especially authentic guilt (Johansson & Nygren, 2015). As this clearing out process continues, our hearts can open to others and the world and, at times, especially when coupled with meditation, can foster still deeper openings into the compassionate unconscious.

The following is an account from someone who came to me for therapy. She had attended a number of seven-day retreats at another Zen center, but found herself becoming increasingly mired in "darkness and gloom and depression." She was from out-of-town, and so we did some block therapy together. The work went well; she experienced a number of major unlockings, and then at a later time we did a follow-up session. What's written below was taken from a transcript of that review:

Well, it's been a year and a half [since our work ended] and it hasn't...

Oh, I have to tell you something that may have some significance to all this:

Before we did this [meaning our work together], I never recalled my dreams, or very rarely, and it was really hard, and if I did, there was always some disturbing element to it. As a kid, I always used to fly in my dreams, and then I lost that as I grew older. It became harder and harder to fly. I had a lot of chase dreams, and when I was a kid, I could fly away. When I got older, I couldn't fly away. So, I stopped remembering most of my dreams. Right after, shortly after the experience with you, and up to now, where it's so vivid I remember everything in great detail, in vivid color, and *I fly*.

I tell you, [laughs] I love going to sleep. I love dreaming. I have been in outer space. I have *flown* on Mars. I have flown over cities. I have no problem, and what that means in the scheme of things—I don't know much about dreams and what dream interpretation is—but it feels so good. When you talk about the unconscious, and I know that the dream state is that, that there must be something going on there for me to be just soaring like a bird in every dream, and it's no longer an escape, it's a joyous—I do aerial ballets in these things, I mean I am swirling around, all sorts of wonderful things, seeing everything from a bird's eye view, and there's no body.

There's just an awareness flying. There's no concern. Even as a kid I had to flop my arms to fly [laughs] but I'm not aware of my body, I'm just flying. And everything is just... the landscapes that I have in my dreams are so exotic, and so wonderful, I don't recall this stuff before. I know I had a lot of frightening dreams, and I don't seem to now. That doesn't mean that all of my dreams are wonderful, there's sometimes things I'm wrestling with, but it's never a problem. I don't see myself running away and in a helpless position anymore in any of my dreams. It's usually I'm dealing or wrestling with something if it's a problem dream, and I'm there doing it, or I'm soaring in some magical world that I'm in. It's wonderful.

Admittedly, this is a one-of-a-kind report, but it does speak to the depths of some of the changes that become possible as the relentlessly thinking mind quiets down, the rigid sense of disconnection softens, and the repressive and dualistic modes of consciousness give way.

## Absorption and Alliance

During an interview in 2017, Tom Insel, the former head of the *National Institute for Mental Health*, made the following remarks:

I spent 13 years at NIMH really pushing on the neuroscience and genetics of mental disorders, and when I look back on that I realize that while I think I succeeded at getting lots of really cool papers published by cool scientists at fairly large costs – I think \$20 billion – I don't think we moved the needle in reducing suicide, reducing hospitalizations, improving recovery for the tens of millions of people who have mental illness. I hold myself accountable for that. (Henriques, 2017, para. 2)

Insel, no doubt, is talking primarily about severe and profound levels of suffering, and it's certainly possible that many of the cases he refers to may have little to do with the crippling forces of repression. Assuming that's true, however, we might still compare this scientific, quantifiable approach with what Carl Jung intended when he said, "healing comes only from that which leads the patient beyond himself and beyond his entanglement with ego" (Jung, Harris, & Woolfson, 2016, p. 62). An on-going question and concern I've had is, are we limiting our understanding and appreciation of the non-dual and spiritual levels implicit in the psychodynamic process by under-valuing the depth and complexity of the unconscious dynamics that arise out of these deep mobilizations?

Jung's comment about "entanglement with ego" also has implications in terms of a broader understanding of the unconscious therapeutic alliance. The term "ego" is commonly used with a variety of meanings, but loosely speaking it has something to do with this sense of who we are, and by implication *who and what we are not*. There is a rich and permeable interface between the known and unknown, between the experienced and unexperienced, between the sense of *self* and the sense of *other*. As the wall between self and other becomes increasingly permeable, and as we enter into more selfless and flowing states, all sorts of things can shift, and change becomes possible on many different levels.

An essential point here is that, in terms of the therapeutic process, the therapist is certainly not neutral: our conscious and unconscious therapeutic stance inevitably contributes to setting the tone for how a session unfolds. For example, starting a therapy session with the question "how can I help you?" sets up an implicit and hierarchical split; while a question like, "what brings you here?" begins the work with more of a collaborative invitation. It's not that one approach is better than the other, only that these approaches will be significantly different in their initial impact. Similarly, the question "what are *we* going to do about such-and-such ..." addresses the *therapeutic alliance*, while the question "what are *you* going to do about such-and-such ..." addresses the client's *will*.



Which of these interventions the therapist selects depends on the intent, the context, and perhaps even the therapist's earlier training. Of course, many other possibilities, including a simple silence, exist too. From my later experience of his teaching, Davanloo came to favor the more nuanced head-on-collisions (HOCs) – complex interventions that can function in ways that address a range of issues including the nature of the therapeutic relationship, the will, difficulties related to self-sabotage, as well as the many forms of resistance against emotional closeness (RAEC).

The issue of the *therapeutic alliance* is absolutely central to the depth of the therapeutic process itself and, as such, relates directly to the final outcome. I would add here that the lasting quality of the “outcome” often has to do not only with the nature of the client-therapist relationship, but also with how thoroughly the client and therapist are able to lose themselves in the process. An example here is the level of engagement that can occur during the *portraiting* process, something Davanloo refers to as “dreaming while awake” (Davanloo, 2005, p. 2647). When portraiting is largely cerebral or formulaic, compliance is much more likely, and we can expect little, if anything, in the way of sustainable change. However, when the energy and absorption in the portraiting experience is more profound, inevitably we see more lasting change. This same principle applies in terms of the experiential alliance between client and therapist. When a shared, mutual absorption is present, *when the therapy is alive*, interventions will be far more effective than when the therapist holds to a detached and clinical approach.

We can find interesting parallels to these processes in Tanya Luhrmann's book (2012), *When God Talks Back*, where she writes about her research involving different sorts of prayer, and how those who engaged in more *absorptive* forms of prayer were more likely to have transformative spiritual experiences. In some forms of meditation, times of profound absorption, periods where the sense of a separate self falls away, are referred to as *samadhi-like* states, and reflect mindstates which often precede breakthroughs and sudden insights.

As I've mentioned earlier, over the years I've seen, with increasing appreciation, how non-dual practices which lead to deeper meditative states also open and mobilize the unconscious. What makes a considerable difference here is our underlying intent, which determines the ways we work with these mobilized dynamics. In my experience, the various aspects of the work involving these complex mobilized energies can be all of one piece. To whatever extent the walls come down in affirming ways, we experience a greater sense of personal freedom and connection. As Einstein said, “Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison [of self-isolation] by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty” (as cited in Haymond, 2021, para. 3).

## Broadening the Psychotherapeutic Landscape

Personally, I've always felt that within Davanloo's work there is a strong under-current of spiritual energy. Some may say it's a stretch, but I know I'm not alone in feeling this way. What is clear enough, though, is that Davanloo's work offers us significantly greater direct access to the unconscious than was previously available. The dynamics that arise in psychotherapy mirror some of the characterological forces that become mobilized during intensive forms of meditation, and certain intensive forms of meditation offer us access to the very deepest levels of the psyche. Generally speaking, what I've seen is that ISTDP offers a more comprehensive approach for resolving the kinds of intrapsychic conflicts that arise for westerners than any of the more traditional forms of dharma practice with which I'm familiar.

These days many people draw a pretty hard line between the psychological and the spiritual, but of course, it hasn't always been this way. As William Miller writes with regards to James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, “At the time of William James these were still closely related fields, making it only natural for him [James] to study spiritual experience. It was later that a great chasm opened between them” (Miller & C'de Baca, 2001, p. 6). My sense is that this psycho/spiritual split is both a reflection of, and at the same time partially responsible for, the ways so many people nowadays feel so empty and alone. A further truth here is that it wouldn't be possible for us to do such violence to ourselves, to each other, and to the earth itself, without this profound sense of disconnection.

Unfortunately, many of us who have been molded by centuries of western culture seem to have lost touch with much of what might be called the spiritual dimension of life – with the wisdom of inherent wholeness. These shifting patterns are both intrapsychic in nature and, at the same time, as Joseph Henrich (2021) powerfully documents, are part of a much larger evolutionary process – one that has drastically weakened the family bonds inherent in kinship systems, and at a significant cost to our collective humanity. William James, for one, believed that a sense of the spiritual is what lies at the heart of our human experience, and I like to think this same spirit informs the depths of what ISTDP has to offer as well.

## The Coloring of Assumptions

Clearly, the spirit we bring to our therapeutic work grows out of our underlying assumptions: assumptions about ourselves, about the context of our work with others, and about the unconscious itself. Our assumptions and expectations shape and color our entire experience of the world – what we pay attention to, and how we respond.

Wittgenstein wrote, “A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language, and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably” (Wittgenstein et al., 2010, para. 15). Of course, many of these belief systems go beyond



language, and are systemically embedded in our culture, our religious views, and in the ways we live our lives. These inner assumptions take on much greater significance if we believe, as Freud did, that “the unconscious of one human being can react upon that of another without passing through the conscious” (as cited in Sabater, 2021, para. 8). Like the proverbial fish swimming in the ocean, it can be hard to catch hold of these kinds of assumptions which, by their very nature, are so global and ego-syntonic.

As a visual example, if you were asked to draw a picture of a plane flying over the South Pole, how would you do it? The idea is simple enough, but as long as the southern hemisphere faces down, then the pieces just don’t fit together. As another example: during the time of Copernicus (16th century) it was difficult for people to imagine that the earth might actually revolve around the sun; such a view was considered heretical by the prevailing religious authorities of that time (and actually cost at least one person, Giordano Bruno, his life). Our present-day experience is exactly the same as it was centuries ago, of course, but our understanding of that experience is fundamentally different.

So, in terms of therapy, one of the most basic issues we run into has to do with how we actually experience ourselves and our clients. More specifically, if we assume this work is about fixing a damaged or broken person (or that we ourselves are damaged), then the outcome will be very different than if we approach the work as a way of helping someone wake up to their inherent freedom and wholeness. Clearly, an entirely different spirit will shine through.

The fact is, our western view of the individual tends towards the hard and critical. “The essential American soul,” wrote D.H. Lawrence, “is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet melted” (as cited in Blanchfield, 2016, para. 1). We might ask ourselves in what ways, and to what degree do we separate ourselves from the people who come to us; and where does that leave us in terms of the therapeutic relationship? In general, western institutional culture and religion, as distinct from the actual teachings of Christ, tend to view human beings as fundamentally sinful. That coloring can run pretty deep for us all. This perspective ties in with another essential point, one highlighted by Jung: “If our religion is based on salvation, our chief emotions will be fear and trembling. If our religion is based on wonder, our chief emotion will be gratitude” (Sreechinth, 2018, p. 1689). This is one of those quotations that’s grown within me over the course of many years. Sometimes I’ll just sit with the open question of what a psychotherapy truly based on a sense of collective wholeness, as well as on this fundamental gratitude and wonder might look like?

Another issue, one which runs quite parallel to this one, relates to commonly held assumptions about the nature of the unconscious itself. If we hold to a traditional Freudian-based view – that the unconscious exists primarily as the realm of repressed feelings, of the *shadow side* – that’s one thing. On

the other hand, if our understanding of the unconscious is deeper and broader, then all kinds of other possibilities open up as well. This more inclusive understanding forms a bridge between the light and the dark, between conscious and unconscious, the known and the unknown. It is right at this liminal point where difficulties can become gateways – openings into far greater depths of our being. Again, quoting Jung: “The unconscious is the only available source of religious experience. This is certainly not to say that what we call the unconscious is identical with God or is set up in his place. It is simply the medium from which religious experience seems to flow” (Jung, Harris, & Woolfson, 2016, p 13).

## Realms of Mystery and Wonder

Many great spiritual masters of different traditions have affirmed this wellspring of mystery that lies at the heart of it all. “Alas,” lamented the Hasidic master Bal Shem Tov, “the world is full of lights and mysteries, but man shuts them from himself with one small hand.” (Buber, 1970, p. 74). Since this mystery defies all words and concepts, we are faced with the paradox of trying to take hold of something that transcends the mind of labels and duality.

Several months ago, I was having a drink with a friend, someone who has also been quite involved with ISTDP training for many years. In the course of our meandering conversation, he quite seriously asked if I thought teaching ISTDP, *really* teaching ISTDP, was even possible? It’s a great question. Of course, when we’re beginning to learn ISTDP it can feel as if we’re trying to perfect the moves in a chess match, and this part of the process is natural and essential. But it seems that at the same time, at exactly the same time, we would do well not to minimize the value of the deeper currents that run through us all.

I have no doubt that as our connection with ISTDP evolves, it can become something more like an artform, and perhaps for some, even a kind of meditation. As author and dharma teacher Stephen Batchelor writes:

A meditative attitude is a creative attitude. Merely to master the techniques of painting is insufficient to create a work of art. The work of art, whether a painting, a poem, or a piece of music, needs more than mere technical mastery. Likewise, proficiency in the techniques of meditation alone is incapable of creating insight. Insight, wisdom, compassion, and love all come from a source other than that of technical mastery. The meditator is akin to an artist: proficient in his craft, an adept in creating love and wisdom. (Batchelor, 2015, pp. 42-43)

At this point let’s come back to the beginning and ask: Where do the cherry blossoms of Yoshino that appear spring after spring really come from? In *The Little Prince*, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, speaking through the wise old fox, wrote, “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly – what is essential

is invisible to the eye” (Saint-Exupery, Howard, & Mortenson, 2000, p. 36). Again, from Stephen Batchelor:

The mysterious lies at the heart of our lives, not at the periphery. And its presence is only felt to the extent that a meditative attitude still lives within us. Unlike a problem, a mystery can never be solved. A mystery can only be penetrated. A problem once solved ceases to be a problem; but the penetration of a mystery does not make it any less mysterious. The intensification of a mystery leads not to frustration, but to release. (Batchelor, 2015, p 40)

Close to the end of one of Davanloo’s three-day conferences he commented, “The therapist simply cannot let the patient’s

life go to waste.” This was in the early 1990s, decades ago, but even as I write this, these words, and the spirit they convey, still resonate strongly within me. If there’s too much knowing and analysis, and if we confine ourselves within too narrow a view of what it means to learn, to teach, and to practice ISTDP, we face the danger of losing touch with something essential in this process, and something fundamental to us all. This truly feels important. Therapeutic technique can only thrive within a much larger field of genuine *caring*. If we’re not attentive to this truth, if we lose connection with the inherent mystery and wonder, the awe and compassion of our lives, we risk losing the heart-essence, the soul, of this gifted and powerful work.

***“Therapeutic technique can only thrive within a much larger field of genuine caring. If we’re not attentive to this truth, if we lose connection with the inherent mystery and wonder, the awe and compassion of our lives, we risk losing the heart-essence, the soul, of this gifted and powerful work.”***

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### Lawson David Sachter



Lawson David Sachter is both a Zen teacher, sanctioned and ordained by Roshi Philip Kapleau, and a licensed psychotherapist. He is president and co-director of Windhorse Zen Community, and spiritual director of the Clear Water Zen Center. Since beginning his Zen practice in 1969, Lawson has participated in, or conducted, over 200 meditation retreats.

His training in Intensive Short-term Dynamic Psychotherapy began in the late 1980's, and since the early 1990's he has attended virtually

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