

Growing up and Waking Up

An Interview with John Welwood
by Vincent Horn of Buddhist Geeks

Vince: Hello. This is Vincent Horn and I'm joined today by Dr. John Welwood. John's a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist and he's really one of the key figures working on how to bring together Eastern and Western psychology, and also how to bring together, or how to work with conscious relationships. So, John, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us.

John: Sure, I'm glad to be here.

Vince: It might be helpful to start with, just to hear how you got into both therapy and meditation. For me, as a child of the eighties, these things seem like they've always been together. But I know that when you were growing up, and were getting interested in this stuff, they weren't as integrated as they are now.

John: I was a child of the fifties and sixties. That was an era of great alienation in America. It seemed as though everybody was into their materialistic thing and there was not much going on in the area of psychology or spirituality. And I felt that very strongly, that kind of meaninglessness of our culture, the materialism and alienation. And I was drawn to existentialism originally, as a way to address that meaninglessness.

And then, from there, I started to come into contact with

the work of D.T. Suzuki and Alan Watts that provided the most accessible teachings about Buddhism that were available at that time. One of Alan Watts' books, *Psychotherapy East and West*, was one of the first to lay out how psychotherapy could provide a Western parallel to an Eastern path of awakening. When I read that book, it blew my mind completely, and I saw my destiny right there. I felt this intersection was the most important thing I could imagine.

At the time I was a philosophy major in college, but I started to take some psychology courses and decided I'd go on to graduate school in psychology. My intent was to explore that question of the integration of Eastern and Western paths of wisdom, because I was so taken by the writings of Suzuki and Watts, and by the whole idea of liberation from the materialistic and egoic delusions that we were stuck in at the time.

And so my approach to psychology from the very beginning involved looking for something that would help me answer my questions about how to wake up, what is a human being, how to be real, how to deal with our unconscious material, and how to be free from the ego. I became a clinical psychologist, but basically, the question that stayed with me throughout my years of graduate school was the relationship between Buddhist awakening that was called satori in Zen, and the kind of liberating change and growth that happens through psychotherapy and psychological work. Were they the same thing? Were they overlapping? Or were they completely different things? Those were the questions that were of interest to me, and they still are to this day.

Vince: Nice, thank you. And connected to that, in this wonderful book that you wrote called *Toward a Psychology of Awakening*, you talk, in the very beginning, about a distinction between the realms of the “personal”, the “inter-personal”, and then what you call the “supra-personal”. And I found this really interesting and I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about these different realms and why they’re important?

John: I think most people are mainly oriented to one of those realms. Most people who are interested in meditation or Buddhism or Asian spirituality tend to be oriented toward supra-personal realization. They are looking for something that gets them out of the morass of their personal and inter-personal issues— which are often seen as just delusion, *samsara*. And then people who do psychological work are more interested in the personal: what’s going on inside them, trying to understand that, trying to get at the root of their feelings and wounds from the past. And then there are those who mainly hang out in the inter-personal: they focus on marriage and family, and derive meaning through their relationships with other people. Often these three realms are not integrated in people’s lives, and they pull people in different directions.

I feel that it’s important for us to start to understand and appreciate all that a human being is, and all that a human being can realize in a lifetime. If we’re only oriented toward one or two of those realms, we’re not complete. I personally think that all the delusion, corruption, and violence on our planet is largely due to people not

appreciating the incredible resources and beauty that exist within them and their relationships. The human realm is an amazing place to be because we can inhabit all three worlds: a capacity to feel and relate to what is going on inside ourselves, a capacity to know and love others, and a capacity to transcend personal and interpersonal limitations altogether through abiding in the absolute.

If we could realize what we are capable of as human beings, and could see this Earth as a Garden of Eden where we have everything we need, we could learn to become completely happy, powerful, beautiful beings who are at peace and awake and free from wars and violence. But I don't think that's going to happen unless we join those three realms together. When they're cut off from each other, then spirituality becomes separate from our life and relationships; our relationships are largely run by unconscious drives; and the personal realm becomes a dead-end of going endlessly into our own psychological material. But when we inhabit all three realms, we can actually see and appreciate the vast domain that being human spans. We can appreciate our humanness, our access to our true, essential nature, and all the ways we live in networks of relatedness: through our relationship to ourselves, to other people, and to the universe, to the universal energies that are flowing through us.

Vince: Yeah, and it's so interesting when I think about bringing them together as part of the whole path. It's so different from teachings where the idea was that samsara— our personal and interpersonal limitations— was something we want to get out of.

John: Yes, most traditional spirituality and religion is about that, including many strains of Buddhism. How do we get the hell out of here, and how do we get away from the earthly mess, and rise above it all? The problem with that approach, as we've seen over the centuries, is that spirituality becomes cut off from daily life, and does not transform daily life. We've had thousands of years of people waking up and having beautiful, transcendent realizations, but how much of it has percolated down into daily life and what's happening on the planet? Not all that much, I would say, given the amount of violence and exploitation that is everywhere. So if we want to survive as a species, we're going to have to bring the largest truth down into the very heart of our personal life: how we relate to ourselves and others.

Vince: You make the point in your book that in cultures like India, it was totally okay to go into the supra-personal and to abandon the personal, so that there's a cultural norm that supported that.

John: Right. That's the way it is in traditional Asian spirituality.

Vince: That's interesting. It seems like we just live in such a different cultural context.

John: We're in a completely different cultural context, which means that Buddhism really needs to evolve for our particular cultural context, otherwise it will just become like this hothouse flower, a beautiful thing that we just admire, but don't really embody.

Vince: Connected to this, you write in your book that, “We in the West have been exposed to the most profound non-dual teachings and practices of the East for only a few short decades. Now that we’ve begun to digest and assimilate them, it’s time for a deeper dialogue between East and West in order to develop greater understanding about the relationship,” —like you’re talking about here— “between the impersonal absolute and the human personal, indeed expressing absolute true nature in a thoroughly personal human form may be one of the most important evolutionary potentials of the cross-fertilization of East and West, of contemplative and psychological understanding.” I know this is what you’re talking about now, but it seems like such an important topic that we could probably talk about it for a long time. Could you say more about why this is such an important dialogue?

John: Basically what we often have is a one-sided spirituality, where spirituality becomes one pole of life set apart from another pole of life. There’s the division between spirit and matter, for example, or religion and worldly life. Absolute truth becomes cut off from relative truth. And meditation is seen as going for impersonal truth, but then somehow you can’t relate it to your own personal experience, your own emotional life. Or you’re going after some kind of transcendence while leaving behind your own embodiment. I have a term for this— “spiritual bypassing” which means using spiritual ideas and practices to try to transcend or avoid dealing with our unfinished emotional business and psychological wounding. We use absolute truth to dismiss or disparage relative human needs, feelings, relational problems, developmental tasks. That’s common in many spiritual

communities that are based on Asian teachings.

My work aims at correcting that problem, showing how psychological work is a very useful, practical, and grounded path that can help spiritual practitioners connect with themselves more fully on a feeling level—through listening to the feeling body.

I make a distinction between feeling and emotion, a distinction that's not made in Buddhism. Buddhism generally relates to emotion and sees it as an affliction. That's fine, but we also need to distinguish emotion from feeling. Feeling is how we experience the life of the body, the living intelligence of the body. By "body" here, I mainly mean the subtle body, which is a field of felt experiencing, not just blood, flesh, and bones. It's a holistic way of knowing—*felt* knowing. Often we feel something, but we can't exactly articulate it. Yet we still know it in a feeling way, we know it through feeling. Feeling is fluid, it's alive, it's dynamic, it actually helps us connect with ourselves when we tune into it or go deeply into it. Emotion tends to be directed outwards, like in seeking some sort of external discharge. That's why it's called "e"motion; "e" here is short for Latin *ex*, which signifies a movement that takes us out of ourselves. Emotional reaction is an outward drive that seeks release or discharge.

By contrast, feeling is a doorway into bodily felt knowing and sensing. And it's not just a doorway that's connecting to what's true for you on a personal level. If you keep going with it, if you really go into your sadness or your pain or your anger or your frustration, underneath it you

find not just personal truth, but felt embodied sensitivity and presence. So at some point, you find doors opening into your deepest nature. You feel your openness, your life, your Being in the places where you're struggling.

Let me give you an example. I have a client who is a Buddhist practitioner of maybe 30 years. Her practice is split off from her emotional life. She does her practice and teaches in her sangha, but what she teaches is not really hooked up with what she's actually experiencing. And so one day, we were looking at what was going on in her, and we saw that she was stuck in a kind of victim state. Usually we see that as a bad place to be, and so she was very judgmental of it and was trying to get out of it. But I see anything that arises in the psyche, in the mind, as having some intelligence operating in it. So instead of judging it, or trying to get rid of it, or trying to fix it, got go more deeply into it. That's the approach I take. I want to see what's there, in the feeling body.

In exploring her victim identity, what she found was a sense of "poor me." That was her story, "poor me." But that's still not a feeling, so we keep exploring where this "poor me" was coming from. And she got in touch with this deep, deep reservoir of sorrow. This was a sorrow that went back to her very first days of being alive, her birth situation. And from there, we unpacked a lot of material in her life that she'd never grieved and that had become undigested material in her psyche. It was clogging up her capacity to be present, to embody the teachings what she was teaching in her community. Until she could actually meet and experience that sorrow and actually honor it, because it contained deep truth, she

could not go beyond it and feel lovable and feel her own nature as love. She had never in her childhood had that experience—to know that she was loved, lovable, and that her very nature was love. That was her deep wounded.

Psychological wounds are always relational. They're a place where we've shut down around some pain or trauma around love. So you could say that all our psychological wounds are relational wounds, They are all ways we shut down in reaction to not feeling seen, recognized, accepted, loved as we are. As she got in touch with feeling that deep sense of disconnection from love, and stayed with it, her heart actually started to open to herself. And then she started to access the love she had been cut off from.

This is a brief example of how we can start out with being stuck in an identity and then unpack it or take it apart. There's always some intelligence there, there's something that needs to be uncovered, there's some part of yourself that you're disconnected from. So a wound is a signpost that points to the openness that was lost in reacting to the pain of disconnection from love . The solution for her was to actually feel love for herself through first feeling the sorrow of being cut off from love. That actually awakened her heart. In the Buddhist tradition, we talk about the awakening of the heart as bodhicitta or compassion. Bodhicitta and compassion come out of that sense of feeling deeply. Compassion literally means “feeling with”— deeply feeling the pain of yourself and the world.

Vince: That's so interesting because this woman that you were working with had been practicing for thirty years. And one of the questions that often comes up for me in my own practice is: How come meditation doesn't necessarily give me the tools to go into my feeling life, and go into some of these wounds? Why doesn't it necessarily give me those tools?

John: It's not designed for that.

Vince: Yeah. Could you say more about that? Because I think a lot of people assume that it is designed for that.

John: Meditation is designed for liberation. It seems there are two main tracks of human development: "growing up" and "waking up". Growing up is becoming a genuine, mature, human person — a *mensch*, basically — someone who's open to life and relationships and can function well in the world. That's the basis for the next level of human development, which is about liberation, liberation from samsara.

So one path is becoming a full human person, the other is going beyond being a person altogether. Buddhism is not oriented toward becoming a person, particularly. It's about liberation from the conditioned mind, from karma, from ego, from the fixation on self. That's why it's not going to take you in the direction of understanding the conditioned self more fully, which is the domain of psychological work, or what I call horizontal work. This involves unpacking what's affecting us and clarifying it, and finding new ways of relating to it.

Meditation, by contrast, is what I would call vertical

work. It provides a way to cut through any state of mind to the essence—what in Buddhist terms is called emptiness, or pure awareness, or nondual awareness, or Buddha mind, Buddha nature. It's about cutting through to that essence of consciousness, which lies at the heart of our experience. The meditative approach is not about unpacking the emotions, understanding your personal history, working with the emotions to feel them more deeply or getting to know yourself more fully through connecting with your feelings. It's about liberation. It's a different trajectory of human development. Both of these tracks are important.

In other words, we're both human beings who are learning to become Buddhas, and also Buddhas waking up in human form and learning to be human. The latter track is not generally emphasized in the Buddhist tradition. But I think we need the whole cycle.— humans becoming Buddhas, Buddhas becoming humans. Then we have a complete circle.

Vince: Nice. I'd like to play a little bit of devil's advocate though.

John: Sure.

Vince: I could imagine someone who's spent a lot of time practicing and studying in the Buddhist tradition and who could point to different things and say, "The perfections or the paramitas are all about becoming more fully human through practicing ethical conduct and loving kindness.

John: Yes.

Vince: Yet I hear that in some ways, the Buddhist tradition, has, in your opinion, kind of fallen a bit short on investigating the personal human realm. So, how do you reconcile those two perspectives?

John: I greatly love and respect the Buddhist Dharma. And there's no doubt that most of those teachings and practices help develop essential human capacities such as compassion, generosity, loving kindness and so forth. The Dharma is certainly an important training for ethical and loving behavior as well as wisdom. It teaches us how to go beyond the confusion and conceptual limitations of the mind. *Gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate*: Going beyond conceptual limitations is the essence of the Dharma.

The focus on going beyond is essential, yet often not a complete method, in that it doesn't help us understand and appreciate all the emotional wounding and relational needs that are involved in being human. One area that is central to being human is personal relationship and the whole way that relationship serves human development. In a relational context, for instance, attachment to others is not just samsara; it has an important role to play in child development. From a psychological perspective, the inability to form attachments to other human beings leads to major developmental problems.

I personally needed help in the area of relationship that I was not receiving from Dharma practice alone. This led to my publishing four books on conscious relationship, where I tried to bring together the spiritual and

psychological dimensions of relationship.

Let me give you an example of how the psychological and Dharmic perspectives can diverge, I had a client who had a tremendous amount of anger toward her husband. But she was Buddhist and she felt guilty about feeling angry toward him. She had gone to one of her Buddhist teachers who said, “Just let go of the anger and be compassionate.” Of course, it’s a good general principle to be compassionate and not get caught up in anger and driven to act that out. That’s very true. But in her particular case she was stuffing the anger, and she was using her Buddhist practice and the Buddhist teachings as well as the advice from her teacher to squelch her anger. So she had a hard time not owning how she actually felt in the relationship.

In a case like hers, the main way to go beyond the anger was to feel it and allow it to be there, and then to explore its meaning. She had good reason to feel angry about the way her husband was treating her, and if she wasn’t going to acknowledge that and bring that up to be worked with, then she had no way for her to take a step forward because she remained stuck in denial and cut off from where she actually was.

I’m not arguing with any of the general ethical guidelines of Buddhism, I think they’re all great. But the question is how to work with the complex human situations in our lives. For this woman, the compassion she needed first of all was compassion for her own anger. Her anger was there for good reason, and had its own intelligence. She needed to hear from it and see what it was telling her.

Usually when you get in touch with something like anger, you find that it's not just anger. There's a lot more to it. For this woman her anger was about how her husband related to in a way that had to be talked about honestly and openly. I think it's important for someone to be able to say, "I'm angry about X, Y or Z. You treat me this way; you act badly toward me, and I'm angry about it." Not to act it out by shouting and screaming, but to bring it into consciousness. And then it can become integrated into the whole weave of a relationship.

Once we can honor our feelings and go deeply into them and express the truth that is contained within them, then we can let them go. Once you've cried and deeply felt your sorrow, there's a natural letting go that happens. It's not like I'm letting go because spiritual doctrine says I shouldn't be angry. It's more like a mature fruit naturally ready to fall from the branch.

A big problem with religion over the centuries is that it becomes a set of commandments or prescriptions or "shoulds." I should be compassionate. I shouldn't have anger. I should be generous. I should be devoted. That's the right way to be, but maybe inside myself, I'm not genuinely ready to be that way. Then what do I do with that? Then I tend to stuff my feelings and live a double life. That's a setup for spiritual bypassing. When your spiritual practice is not integrated with your psychological material, this can lead to shadow problems, where things that have been denied and stuffed away start coming out in unconscious ways. And this creates problems in spiritual communities, as a lack of personal

openness and personal transparency can lead to blow-ups, schisms, and conflicts of all kinds. Even in Buddhist sanghas I'd say the quality of personal relationship is often not much better than it is in any other group, and sometimes it's a lot worse because people are pretending to be more spiritual than they actually are because they haven't integrated their practice into their personal life.

Vince: Wow, that's a bombshell. Given this perspective you're offering—that as Buddhist practitioners we don't necessarily know how to embody some of its wisdom—are there certain skillful means or practices you'd suggest that would support meditators in exploring their personal issues and doing some of this work that you're talking about?

John: I'm coming to the place where I feel like most people who are involved in an Asian spiritual tradition need to be also doing some psychological work in order to be fully balanced in their practice and in their life. Ultimately, what I'd like to see would be Dharma communities that have some way of processing emotional and psychological material, in small groups or one-on-one.

But, that doesn't exist right now so I think that for people who feel stuck in their lives, and their practice isn't addressing the places where they're stuck, they should consider doing some psychological work. It's not easy to find a good therapist, I have to say. Ideally it would be someone who has some background in meditation or Buddhism.

Vince: What have you found working with mediators when they start doing psychological work? What are the results or benefits?

John: I find that sincere meditators—and that’s often the kind of people who come to me—have a leg up on the psychological work because they’ve already developed mindfulness and some commitment to truth. I love to work with this kind of practitioner because they actually move faster. And their mind is more developed. They’re sharper. They just need a little help and a little coaching to guide them in a slightly different direction, and then they usually move forward. They learn to take the presence or openness that they’ve developed on the zafu, and apply that openness and presence to their subconscious psychological material, their feeling life, or their relational life. They learn to allow their psychological unfinished business to reveal itself more fully, instead of just going toward pure awareness, or pure openness. I call this kind of psychological work “applied presence. I have found that dharma students are my favorite clients because they have a commitment to truth and some mind training.

Sometimes there are people who are threatened by psychological work. My observation is that the dharma practitioners who are most opposed to doing psychotherapy are the people who need it the most. So if they are saying, “I wouldn’t go near psychotherapy with a 10 foot pole,” it’s probably a sign that they really need it. Usually there’s something buried in their psyche— some part of themselves that they’ve given up on, they’re afraid of, or that’s been shut down and denied. And there’s a

tremendous fear about going there.

If there's a fear about going anywhere in your psyche then, that's where you need to go, actually. Part of the spiritual path is about fearlessness. And fearlessness is developed through confronting what we fear, actually meeting the fear directly. That's very much a part of psychological work as well. So I would encourage those on the path who feel stuck to consider doing some kind of psychological work as a balance and adjunct to their spiritual work. This is what I call "psycho-spiritual work" or "psychological work in the service of spiritual development."

Vince: Thank you, John, for your time and for your work.