

The Two Wings of Psychological Growth and Contemplative Practice

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Introduction

Any form of psychological development – and its epitome in refined contemplative practice – requires two fundamental activities/skills/functions:

- Being with what is (both subjective and objective, internal and external, mind and matter)
- Working with what is

These are the two wings that enable the great bird to fly. But they are sometimes held as an either-or choice, or in conflict. For example, some therapists and some spiritual teachers seem to stress one wing in particular or criticize the other one. And in our own lives, sometimes our instinct is to *be* with a feeling, longing, etc. but the situation or person we're with is pulling for us to *work* with it (and vice versa). Consequently, it's really helpful to understand what each "wing" really is, the strengths and pitfalls of each, and how they can work best together.

Description of Each Wing

Being With

This involves:

- The initial orientation of attention (a fundamental neurological activity)
- Deepening attentiveness (a similarly fundamental action in the brain)
- Witnessing, knowing – For example, as the Buddha's discourse (called a "sutta") on mindfulness of breathing says, "Breathing in long, know that you are breathing in long; breathing in short, know that you are breathing in short."
- Accepting – Surrendering to what is. Letting it be. (Of course, this does not mean approving . . . or disapproving.)
- Non-fabricating – Not adding anything yourself to what is. No effort whatsoever, no nudging of reality or experience in one direction or another.
- Mindfulness

Initially when we “be with,” there is typically a dualistic observer/observed. But with continued practice – both in the short-term, as during a session of meditation, and over the months and years – there often comes a growing sense of unification with experience and reality, a oneness that is not an ultimate enlightenment, but still palpably felt.

You can be with the flowing stream of experience rolling through – what is often meant by “mindfulness” – or you can be with a single object of attention, and become increasingly absorbed in it. This latter orientation is what’s known generally as “concentration” (“samatha” in Pali) in contemplative practice; intense and sustained states of concentration are called “jhanas” or “samadhis.” Note that both mindfulness and concentration require some – or great – steadiness of mind.

Working With

This is essentially a matter of tending to the garden of the mind and heart, planting wholesome seeds and restraining and pulling unwholesome weeds.

We “work with” whenever we:

- Attempt to become more skillful, more capable, more patient, less angry, more confident, more resourceful – more of just about *anything*
- Actively investigate the contents of our experience or the outer world
- Let go of painful feelings, deliberately take in positive experiences, or use the will
- Uncover or nurture our innate and wonderful qualities
- Engage any progressive path of learning, self-development, self-improvement

The term for this in Buddhism is “bhavana,” which means mental cultivation or development; it also means meditation. This is one of the three “grounds for meritorious action;” the other two are virtue and generosity.

How to Be With and Work With?

Most of applied psychology, as well as most of the Buddhist dharma, is an extended answer to this question, so here is just a very summary response.

Being With

We *be* with when we:

- Observe

- Are mindful
- Accept, let be, let flow
- Have equanimity (both shallow and deep): do not pursue, do not resist, do not cloud over
- Relax selfing; do not fabricate; engage what is called “choiceless awareness”

Working With

We *work* with when we:

- Intend the good
- Let go of something, from relaxing to deep breathing to challenging troublesome thoughts
- Actively engage insight, whether conventionally psychological (e.g., making connections with softer and younger material, clarifying inner conflict) or contemplatively informed (e.g., looking for impermanence, or the suffering that comes from clinging)
- Model people we admire, from Uncle Charlie to the Buddha
- Take in the good; internalize positive experiences
- Engage any of the four right efforts (mentioned above)
- Restrain, abandon, uproot any of the hindrances: greed, aversion, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt
- Practice lovingkindness
- Intentionally strengthen any of our good qualities

Strengths of Each

Both of these wings have many strengths.

Being With

This aspect of practice helps us in many ways:

- Teaches that everything flows, that everything is impermanent

- Shows us things clearly, without the interference of our efforts to influence them
- Demonstrates that it all keeps going on, without a self being necessary
- Teaches acceptance, surrender. Ajahn Chah: "If you let go a little, you will be a little happy. If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of happiness. If you let go completely, you will be completely happy."
- Emphasizes awareness itself. This draws us more into abiding as awareness, into the presence of mere presence.
- Shows the value of slowing down, not doing, relaxation, and peace.
- Draws you into the appreciation of simply what is, exactly as it is – including yourself

Working With

The fruits of this include:

- Absolutely real changes in body and mind and heart. In one way of putting it: you become a better person.
- These undeniable changes build conviction and faith in the path of awakening through experiencing the results of practice.
- The lessons of training the mind and heart in one sphere have "generic" features that can be applied to other areas (e.g., that perseverance furthers)
- An inherent moral view, that helpful is better than unhelpful.

In light of these benefits, the occasionally intense criticism of "working with" is perplexing. For example, *Care of the Soul*, by Thomas Moore (mostly a wonderful book) takes great issue with directed, solution-oriented approaches such as cognitive-behavioral therapy. In the Buddhist sphere, take this quotation from Jon Kabat-Zinn (whom I respect highly, and who has made an extraordinary contribution to mental health worldwide): "*Don't change yourself, experience yourself. Don't change your life, live your life.*"

While there may be some useful guidance in that quote, consider its vehemence, and consider how the inverse phrasing might sound: "*Don't experience yourself, change yourself. Don't live your life, change your life.*"

When constructed in this either-or way, both phrasings are reductionistic, incomplete, and ultimately absurd. In Buddhism – as well as in most approaches to psychological resilience and happiness – there is absolutely a strong emphasis on:

- A progressive path in which one learns from experience, and over time becomes more skillful, virtuous, and refined
- Personal responsibility for self-improvement
- Clarity about how our actions lead to results (the law of karma), and thus the importance of enacting the causes of the good and restraining the causes of the bad
- Lists of wholesome qualities to increase, and lists of negative qualities (such as the “hindrances” and “defilements” mentioned in the Buddhist suttas) to diminish
- Virtue and generosity as the foundation of any genuine mental health and spiritual realization
- Removing the obscurations of one’s true, positive, benign nature
- In Buddhism, Right Effort is one of the elements of the Eightfold Path (the fourth of the Noble Truths), which consists of the “four right efforts”: to foster the arising and the continuance of what is wise, and the prevention and diminishment of what is unwise

Sometimes people consider Buddhism to be little more than a matter of being more aware, relaxed, and nice. That’s a great foundation, but there is much more to it than that. Taken as a whole, it is a vigorous, active, even muscular path. It asks everything of us.

And so does any genuine path of real healing and growth. It is easy to underestimate the fullness of the undertaking to be a happy, loving, productive, and wise person – just like it is easy to underestimate what’s involved in getting a college degree, or raising a child, or running a marathon. Life is the real deal, and thriving in it requires a whole-hearted engagement in which we get *better* at things – including getting better . . . at getting better!

Pitfalls of Each

On the other hand, each wing carries certain risks, especially if taken to an extreme or not balanced by the other wing:

Being With

This mode of practice can be misunderstood to be little more than:

- A kind of spacey, pleasant vacuity. Almost like being stoned.
- Or a flabby indifference: “it’s all the same, whatever”

Working With

The downside of this mode is more obvious when it’s taken to an extreme or is out of balance. That’s because working with your experience – or your circumstances (i.e., external, objective reality) – can be very powerful, but like a medicine that is strong enough to do good, working with things is strong enough also to do harm. The possibilities include:

- The inherent stress of striving
- The machinery of craving, desire for sense pleasures, etc. gets applied to psychological or spiritual pursuits
- What Chogyam Trungpa called spiritual materialism, which is the reification – the “thinging” – and freezing of fundamentally intangible processes of experience, reality, and realization.
- Spiritual pride

A Deeper Union

Although – as noted in the introduction to this essay – the two wings are often seen in a kind of tension, actually they support each other profoundly.

A Single Great Wing, Really

For starters, they intertwine in multiple ways that make them “non-dual.” For example, the repeated act of simply *being* with something – the smell of an orange, the sensation of the breath in the belly, a memory of summer camp – cannot help but cultivate many wholesome qualities in the mind and heart, such as mindfulness, concentration, detachment, and wisdom. And just being with difficult experiences – really experiencing your experience – is one of the premier methods in psychology for helping them to release from the mind and body. Similarly, *working* with anything skillfully requires mindful awareness, and close attention to the details of inner experience and the outer world.

We should *be* with what it’s like to work with something; then the act of working with itself becomes the object of spacious attentiveness. For example, in meditation you are often aware of the skillful (and not so skillful) efforts in your mind to remain aware. On the other hand, we should cultivate and thus *work* with the capacity to sustain choiceless awareness – a faculty of the mind (and certainly the brain) like any other.

Both wings share qualities of investigation – though in *working* with, this is particularly directed and active – which is one of the seven factors of enlightenment, and some might say the most fundamental one. In the same way, both wings are the result of positive intentions. In other words, they arise from common causes; to risk another metaphor, they are the mighty limbs of a tree growing out of a single trunk.

A Natural Rhythm of Mutual Support

Further, the wings support each other in a natural rhythm. Being with reveals things to work with; in meditation as in therapy – and life! – we step in to experience our experience fully and then we step back to reflect upon it. And working with identifies new things to become more aware of, and new fruits of practice to appreciate and savor. Which then give us more to reflect upon, and the cycle continues.

These rhythms can ebb and flow over the course of just seconds – or months and years.

Is One Wing Primary?

Nonetheless, notwithstanding these synergies and integrations, we may well ask, is one of the two wings more primary than the other? I believe that the answer is Yes, and that being with is more fundamental, for several reasons.

First, our fundamental true nature is awake, interested, benign, and happy. You can see that in ordinary life when you are rested, fed, physically comfortable, and not upset: unless there is an underlying issue with mood or anxiety, you probably feel at least mildly happy at those times, and you wish the world well. That's the innate resting state of the mind. Neurologically, the resting state of the healthy brain manifests a deep coherence in its brain wave patterns.

From a Buddhist perspective, there is a strong line of teaching – particularly prominent in the Zen and Tibetan lineages, but well represented in the Theravadan tradition as well – that the essence of the mind and heart is “stainless purity,” “Bodhichitta,” and similar terms. Buddha nature is our true nature; therefore, *your* true nature is Buddha nature.

While the teachings of the Buddha are generally silent or ambiguous about the existence or non-existence of a Divine Transcendental Something – call that God – and are thus *agnostic* and compatible with the great religions of the world, the sages and saints in those, theistic traditions speak of an underlying Divinity infusing everything (including you and me), or of an eternal soul, or of a spark of the Divine illuminating our essence.

Bottom-line, in the ultimate sense, there is nothing to cultivate at all. You are always already radiant consciousness, loving, happy, and wise. Pretty good news!

Second, there is a fundamental categorization of all human activity in terms of Be, Do, and Have. (A related categorization is found in the three forms of the Divine in Hinduism: Create, Preserve, Complete [Destroy].) Of these, Be comes first because it is primary and encompasses the other two; for example, you can Be Do-ing without distorting or falsifying Doing, but you cannot Do Be-ing without distorting and falsifying Being . . . In this framework, *being with* is obviously “Being,” while *working with* is definitely a kind of Doing.

Third, Western culture – and particularly American – really is kind of berserk in its tilt toward endless striving and its accompanying epidemic of feeling like one is . . . chronically . . . falling short. Most of us are, frankly, tilted way too much toward various flavors of working with. I know I am. Making being with the first thing we think about, rather than (typically) the last one is a wholesome correction to the imbalance most of us suffer from.

Fourth, truth be told, sometimes you really just can’t work with something: it’s too overwhelming, or you’re too tired or too flooded or too distracted or too undone. Sometimes you simply have to bear it, and then what do you do? As we have all discovered, again and again, you can always be with it mindfully, and when you do, that simple shift changes everything. Mindful awareness is indeed the ultimate safety net when all else fails.

Fifth, it is mindful awareness – being with, in other words – that really reveals the contents of mind and world, their endless flux and interdependent co-arising, and how the least whiff of clinging in any of its myriad forms leads inevitably – and often instantly – to suffering for oneself (and usually for others).

For example, Christina Feldman quotes one of her own teachers in summarizing the Buddhist path as:

Know the mind.

Shape the mind.

Free the mind.

Not a bad summary, at all! To know the mind is largely a matter of “being with,” and notice that it comes first, before shaping the mind (which is about “working with”). Knowing the mind enables us to shape it, and we can’t shape it until we know it somewhat.

Then, at the end of the road – and sometimes in the beginning and the middle, too – comes the great matter of freeing the mind. That’s when we move beyond any willful knowing and shaping – beyond any deliberate being with and working with – to a kind of effortless abandonment of all efforts, all selfing, and all grasping.

In its milder, less complete forms, that freeing of the mind comes in those moments of letting go: the clenched fist of mind opens and the light of pure selfless awareness shines through like grains of sands streaming between your fingers.

And in its complete form, the utter freeing of the mind is Nibbana, the immersion in what the Buddha called the Unconditioned. He insisted that was a real possibility for everyone, whether monastic or householder, female or male, Brahmin or untouchable, you or me.

Personal Practice

All this being said, it is worth inquiring into your own strengths and weaknesses with the two wings. Just like most of us have one arm stronger than the other one, most of us have a stronger wing.

Consider these questions:

- Are you more inclined to be with or work with as your initial orientation to something difficult?
- Are you more adept at being with or working with?
- What do the people around you, at home and work, reward you for, or count on you for: to be with things or to work with them?

Based on their answers, you might like to focus on developing one wing in particular. It is both simple and easy – and complex and a lifelong undertaking – to do that.

The simple part is to bring awareness to the wing you want to strengthen and use it more in daily life. Just that will develop it, since “neurons that fire together, wire together.”

The more complex part is to place yourself in situations or with people that will naturally “flap” the wing you’re developing. For example, certain Buddhist practices emphasize being with, such as “just sitting” in Zen. Others delve deeply into working with, such as some of the visualization practices in Tibetan Buddhism.

Conclusion

Like anything, if you bring awareness to it and even a little attention, you will get better and better at it. And remember both to *be* with and *work* with . . . the process of being with and working with!