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## Return to Emptiness

Core Principle 1: Learn from What Is and What Is Not.

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*Wisdom alone is a science of other sciences, and of itself.*

—**Plato, The Dialogues of Plato**

*It is the readiness of the mind that is wisdom.*

—**Shunryu Suzuki, Soto Zen master**

### INTRODUCTION

The search for wisdom has motivated human beings to learn about the external world and the inner self. It lies at the root of Western science and Eastern mysticism. And yet each perspective is based on very different foundations, taken for granted, about the nature of reality. Psychotherapists gain much by considering both East and West.

Through scientific inquiry in the West, many great discoveries and understandings about the world have led to amazing technologies, improving people's quality of life. We can now relate person to person across

the globe with just a few keystrokes. Healing has been improved as well, with medications that can stimulate and rebalance neurotransmitters, so vital to health. And psychotherapy has advanced with cognitive-behavioral and dynamic therapies, which harness the power of reason for regulating emotions and directing behavior. We use scientific efficacy to help guide us to use the best treatments we can. The assumptions we take in the West lead us in certain directions, defining our options and bringing expected results. The foundations go all the way back to ancient times in Greece, where first principles of science were just beginning to be uncovered.

But now we know that the wisdom of the East also has valuable tools for psychotherapy and for deepening our understanding of the nature of reality itself. Eastern wisdom is based on different foundations from Western ones. Formulated by ancient gurus and spiritual leaders, these foundations led to unique mental and physical disciplines of meditation, quite distinct from the rigors of science. And yet, similar to the science of the West, meditation provides a way to investigate the outer world and know the inner self. Meditation includes varied and highly refined practices, developed over thousands of years. Through engagement with these practices, problems clear away for a healthy flow of mental and physical energy. These Eastern practices lead to improved health, both mental and physical, opening new perspectives that are helpful for therapy. By combining the wisdom from both East and West, creative therapeutic alternatives emerge.

This chapter weaves the science from the West with the wisdom from East to form a new integration. A healing network of new potentials unfolds when there is an understanding of both types of wisdom.

## FOUNDATIONS OF WESTERN SCIENCE

*The object of knowledge is what exists and its function to know about reality.*

—*Plato*

The ancients of the West looked up into the heavens, and they saw material substance—planets, stars, sun, and moon. And when they looked down, they saw earth, water, and trees. They wondered how to know about the things that can be observed and use them to enhance the quality of their

lives. Their curiosity led to science as a way to understand the composition and nature of this material substance they observed all around them. They used the scientific method to explore their world and enhance the quality of life.

### **First Principles**

Science revealed that this world of material things has a rational order. The ancients of the West sought to uncover this order by thoughtful inquiry. They believed that the order must have come from first principles and sought to discover these principles by using reasoning.

Early pre-Socratics proposed various first principles. Thales (625–545 BCE) thought that water was the first principle and that the earth could be stable because it rested in water. Anaximander (610–540 BCE) saw four elements as the fundamental building blocks for all that exists in the world, which he and other Greeks identified as earth, air, fire, and water.

Others proposed that the exact material of the universe was not the key to understanding the principles. First they sought to understand the ways by which material substance undergoes change. Heraclitus (d. 500 BCE) believed that everything is in a continual state of flux. You don't step into the same river twice, because the water always flows. Everything is continually undergoing change. Therefore, change is the very essence of material substance.

By contrast, Parmenides (540–515 BCE) postulated that everything is one and nothing changes. His reason was that if everything changes, some things come into being and exist while others go out of being and are not. But how can we talk about something that is not? We can't; it is impossible to know something that doesn't exist. Therefore, change is unreal.

Democritus (460–370 BCE) believed that change could be explained in a different way, by the interaction among tiny, indivisible particles he called atoms. These atoms exist in space, the void, and make up the material substances we see around us. Our senses can't detect these tiny particles, but through the varied combinations of atoms, we get our rich and diverse, ever-changing world. Modern science builds on this original insight, developing sophisticated understandings through advances in technology that allow us to explore more deeply. We now know that there are smaller

particles than atoms. Particle physics researchers today are still searching for the smallest unit, from which everything else derives.

### Progress of the Scientific Method

As science became more sophisticated, the ancients of the West noticed how much their senses misled them. The essence of material substance that appears to us is hidden. The deeper, true nature of substance is not directly accessible to our senses. The great philosopher Plato (428–348 BCE) believed that the use of reason, not the senses, was the better way to understand the deeper nature of reality. He developed a dialectical method, expressed through the words of his teacher Socrates (470–360 BCE), that used careful questioning through hypothesis. These methods of reasoning led to the scientific methods used today. Many modern forms of therapy still use Socratic questioning as a means to guiding clients to deeper truth about themselves.

Aristotle (384–322 BCE) developed this form of reasoning further. Since something is definitely there, we must understand its causes. Aristotle introduced a theory of causality itself with his famous four causes (2008, ii 3, 8), which forms the bedrock for Western science. The *material cause* accounts for what things are made of. The *efficient cause* is the force or agent that brings them about. The *formal cause* is the ordered state that the change produces, and the *final cause* is the goal toward which the change is directed. He applied this theory of causality to things in the world. For example, think of a beautifully crafted box. The material cause is the wood it is made of. The efficient cause is the craftsman who created it. The formal cause is the sketch or plan the artisan used to help direct the box's design, and the final cause is the reason for creating the box, perhaps as a gift for someone.

This way of thinking influences the approach to psychotherapeutic treatments today. We think about the material causes when we look at the underlying biological condition. We analyze the conditions that may have led to the disorder, the formal causes in the behaviors and actions involved, and the final cause as underlying motivations. Fundamental is the assumption that something is there—a disorder, a problem—and through the use of objective, scientific methods, we can uncover its causes to help cure it.

Since there is a real world, psychological problems should be viewed as tangible entities. We must identify the problem, define its fundamental

elements, and analyze its causes. Only then can we devise ways to treat the problem. Thus, we have diagnoses to identify psychological problems and protocols for curing them. Through the years of research and practice, these methods have grown more sensitive and helpful.

## FOUNDATIONS OF EASTERN WISDOM

*When your spirit is not in the least clouded, when the clouds of bewilderment clear away, there is the true void.*

—*Miyamoto Musashi, The Book of Five Rings*

The ancients of the East looked up into the heavens, and they saw a vast emptiness. Although they could point to planets and stars in the sky, they noticed that the heavenly bodies moved and disappeared. They observed that all living things on earth were transitory, coming into being and then passing away. Everything changed in cycles. They saw that the seasons rotated around every year, and day continually turned into night and back to day. They studied the nature of different kinds of change and recorded their understandings in the now-famous book, the *I Ching, The Book of Changes*. They came to recognize that what was most fundamental and true about the universe was that in its deeper nature, it is empty.

### The Unreality of Appearances

According to Eastern wisdom, the conditions of the physical world and the senses may give an appearance of an apparent object, but no object actually is present. Reality is like a mirage of water on an expanse of sunny highway. No water is there, merely its realistic appearance, due to light bending on the hot road. Similarly, the world that we experience is a function of perceptual conditions. Consciousness makes it seem to exist.

Perceptions of the world are relative because they rely on external criteria, standards that are limited by our perspective. For example, the perception of distance in space is relative to our own capacities and size. The tiny ant cannot imagine crawling to a distant mountain. To an eagle, the same mountain peak may be close, a place for home.

The mushroom of a morning does not know (what takes place between) the beginning and end of a month; the short-lived cicada does not know (what takes place between) spring and autumn. These are instances of a short life. In the south of Khu there is the (tree) called Mind-ling, whose spring is 500 years and its autumn the same.

—The philosopher Chuang-tzu, quoted in Legge (1962, p. 166).

### Foundation in the Tao

There is an empty ultimate reality underlying all that we see in the world. Without recognizing emptiness, we will never understand the true nature of the cosmos. For example, what makes a cup what it is? The answer is: the empty space within. Once you fill the cup with water, it can no longer be used for anything else but a container. In order to use the cup as a cup, you must empty it. The nature of a cup is in its emptiness, as is the universe in its deepest nature.

The ancients of the East called this emptiness Tao. All life follows Tao. Tao precedes and all else succeeds. As stated in the *Tao Te Ching*: “It [Tao] is bottomless, perhaps the ancestor of all things” (Chan, 1963, p. 141).

### The Empty Tao

We are accustomed to defining emptiness as a state, a vacuum consisting of the absence of molecules. But from the Eastern perspective, emptiness, the Tao, is not simply a nothing, like a vacuum. Rather, it is the potential for everything. Tao is the source for potential from which all things emerge. The founder of Gestalt therapy, Fritz Perls (1969), noted that emptiness implies *no-thingness*, only process.

In our culture “nothingness” has a different meaning than it has in the Eastern religions. When we say “nothingness,” there is a void, an emptiness, something deathlike. When the Eastern person says “nothingness,” he calls it *thingness*—there are no *things* there. There is only process, happening . . . And we find when we accept and enter this nothingness, the void, then the desert starts to bloom . . . The sterile void becomes the fertile void. (p. 57)

Thus, in the void, we find a source for creativity and therapeutic change. Devoid of problems, before they were formed, we can discover health and well-being.

### **Meditation: The Method for Attuning to Tao**

How can we know this empty nature of the world? Understanding the nature of the universe does not involve the accumulation of new knowledge and information, nor does it engage rational thought. To truly understand emptiness, enter the *Way*, a process whereby you become empty yourself. The ancients of the East developed methods of meditation to become empty like the universe. By letting go of the objects of perception, you remove obstructions. You allow the flow of pure consciousness itself, and then you can know the world as it truly is.

Make your will one! Don't listen with your ears, listen with your mind. No, don't listen with your mind, but listen with your spirit. Listening stops with the ears, the mind stops with recognition, but spirit is empty and waits on all things. The *Way* gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind.

—The Taoist sage Chuang-tzu, quoted in Watson (1968, p. 58).

#### **The Value of Emptiness**

Long ago, there was a monk who had become famous for his skills at gardening. The king heard of his abilities and had him brought to his castle to plant a new garden. The monk agreed to do so if the king promised to follow his instructions. The king agreed. The monk asked that certain supplies be brought to the area. Then he told the king and his men to leave him alone. When the king and his men left, the monk sat down in the middle of the plot of land and began to meditate.

A few hours later, one of the king's men peeked in and saw the monk still meditating. Later that night, the king's men looked again, but the monk was still meditating. Food was brought to the monk the  
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following day, but he continued to meditate. Day after day passed in this way. The king began to feel impatient. Finally he could wait no longer. The king walked up to the meditating monk and said angrily, “I brought you here to create a beautiful garden, but all you have done for the past week is sit there!”

The monk said nothing and continued to meditate. Not being accustomed to being ignored, the king said fiercely, “I give you one more day to finish the task, and then I will kill you!”

The next day, the king marched into the garden space with his executioner carrying his sword. But what he found there took him completely by surprise. Stretching out before him was the most beautiful garden he had ever seen.

“How is it,” asked the king, “that you sat for an entire week, doing nothing, and then created this most exquisite garden in only one day?”

The monk replied in a quiet, calm voice, “You asked me to create a beautiful garden, but to do so I must first become empty like nature. Then the rest is easy.”

Meditation is a time to sit quietly. When you meditate, you take a break from all the usual thoughts and activities that fill your life. Then, in those moments of quiet, you begin to perceive clearly in a new way. You become in touch with silence within. We are all endowed with a mind that is clear, pure, and deep. This is what the Zen masters call our true nature. It is already there within, but we usually don’t notice because we are too busy being pushed and pulled by our thoughts and desires.

Meditation is a tool that can teach us how to return to deeper experience to perceive clearly, resulting in a profound sense of calm and confidence that won’t be shaken. This source within is valuable for mental health. As you get more accustomed to meditation, you realize that what seemed at first to be a nonactivity is its own kind of activity. Meditation gets us in touch with the source for well-being. By letting go and simply observing whatever occurs, you gain control.



The purpose is to see things as they are, to observe things as they are, and to let everything go as it goes. This is to put everything under control in its widest sense.

—Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner Mind*

Koans which are paradoxical questions to be solved without the use of reason, sitting in meditation, and other practices allow you to let go of the inner turmoil. You set aside your conceptualizing, objectifying rational thought, which creates the reality we see around us. In the empty moment, peaceful clarity is found.

### **Integration East and West**

Thousands of years have passed since those early discoveries, both East and West. Today, thanks to verification from careful scientific research, the field of psychotherapy has come to recognize the value of meditation for psychological healing. Many have sought to integrate the Eastern meditative practices into treatments. But how can we integrate these meditative practices, which rest on opposite foundations from Western science? Can we reconcile these seemingly contradictory traditions? In this book/CD/DVD package, we offer an integration that allows the wisdom from the East to fit seamlessly with the science of the West, leading to a more comprehensive foundation from which to draw techniques for therapy.

### ***Form Is Emptiness and Emptiness Is Form***

In the Zen monastery, practitioners chant, “Form is emptiness and emptiness is form.” One metaphor that may be helpful for understanding this relationship is to think of a mirror and its reflection. If emptiness is the mirror, substance (form) is the reflections. Reflections depend on a mirror to reflect them, but they aren’t literally the mirror itself. And no matter what is reflected or how much the reflections may change, mirrors never change in what they are in themselves. The true nature of form is emptiness because emptiness is like mind’s mirror that reflects forms, creating them in the interaction. They are inseparable, a unity.

### *Unity*

As therapists, we recognize unity when we view our clients within their family context. There is no self outside of the environment because we are all part of our surrounding environment, just as our environment is part of us. Attachment theory shows how a lifetime of relationships evolves out of early interactions with the primary caregiver.

The Buddhist monk Fa-tsang (643–712) gave a demonstration of the unity to the empress Wu of China, who was studying Buddhism under him. He covered the entire floor, walls, and ceiling of a room in the palace with mirrors. Then he placed a statue of Buddha with a torch in the center. The moment the torch was lit, the empress saw infinite Buddhas all at once, each reflecting all the others. This image gave her a powerful experience of unity. Everything came into being at a single moment, existing together just as it was. After she saw this demonstration, the empress felt a deep understanding of what her teacher was trying to communicate.

### *Experience Integration with Indra's Net*

Indra's net is a metaphor used to illustrate the emptiness and the interpenetration of all things in Buddhist philosophy. To begin this integrative journey, we invite you to have an image. Imagine a vast net that spreads infinitely in every direction with no beginning and no end. At each juncture of the net is a perfectly reflecting crystal-clear jewel. We are all jewels in this limitless net. If the net moves in one area, the movement ripples through the entire net, like a pebble thrown into a still pond. The net is a self-creating, self-sustaining network of interacting links. Hold this image in mind for a moment.

Now we turn to the recent discovery of neural networks. These networks are composed of on-off units, modeled as a simplified version of a neuron, known as a *perceptron*. Combined, these perceptrons form a network of interactions, which feed back and feed forward to form a network of interaction. These networks can be created to produce what resembles cognitive thought. They can be trained to learn how to recognize faces, distinguish dogs from cats, and perform other cognitive activities.

We are all involved in neural networks without realizing it. Consider when you use your credit card. Credit card companies have neural networks.

As you use your card, the information is fed into the network as it learns your typical patterns. Then, one day, perhaps you are on vacation in a new place or you make a larger purchase than usual, and you get a telephone call. “Did you make this purchase?” asks the network. Hopefully you answer yes, and the voice says, “Then I will authorize this purchase.” The information is then fed back into the network, which has learned something new about your spending. With neural networks becoming more sophisticated, they eventually will be able to carry out more complex mental processes.

Of course, we know that each person is unique and separate, but from another perspective, we can see how much we are influenced by significant others. We are all part of a unity, which helps to shape what we become. And yet, at the same time, we are uniquely ourselves, with the choice of how to respond to that unity.

## CONCLUSION

Now, with all this in mind, let’s expand on Aristotle’s assumption that either a thing is or is not. The great Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna (150–250 BCE) said that a thing is, is not, neither and both. Particle physics has come to a similar conclusion, recognizing that at the microscopic level, we can’t determine whether the substance of a particle is matter or energy. It seems to be neither and both. For psychotherapy, we gain from a broader, more open perspective. By holding the seemingly opposite worldviews from East and West together in a network, like a neural net, we gain a more inclusive point of view that produces new potentials. Drawing on emptiness and substance, more interventions become possible. We can better accommodate the unique individuality of each client and address the complexities of personality in each unique situation. May you hold Indra’s net in mind as you work your way through this book, to incorporate new potentials for healing and well-being.

