



Working from the Center that Holds

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The journey towards procuring an MFT license can be a bitter-sweet experience, requiring, and sometimes even demanding, inner strength, fortitude, and perseverance. Reflecting on the process of undertaking this journey, I realize that there have been several pillars of support in my life that have aided me and continue to support me as I navigate the path of licensure. However, one of the most precious gems I have discovered is the importance of that vital nucleus of every human being or the “center that holds.”

The center that holds is akin to the Vedantic principle of the Self. According to Whitfield (1992), the Self is infinite non-dual existence, consciousness, and fullness. From my personal understanding of the term, the Self is that core being within each individual that is meant to be immeasurable and whole. The Self, to me, is pure love. One could understand the idea of the Self from a western perspective as well. Within a Jungian framework, the Self can be understood as the archetype of wholeness. In other words, the Self is the totality of the unconscious and conscious mind; an organizing and guiding principle within the psyche. Jung believed that the Self was distinct from the ego, and stated that one of the aims of human beings should be the

development of a relationship between the ego and the Self. This is more commonly referred to in Jungian psychology as the “ego-self axis.” Of the Self, Jung stated:

“The Self...reaches out beyond the ego personality on all sides; because of its all-encompassing nature, it is brighter and darker than the ego...” (par 778)

The Self, although innate to every human being, varies from individual to individual. Some possess a strong sense of Self; a core that is imbued with love, courage, and integrity. Others possess a fragmented Self, one that does not possess a sense of courage and vitality. In any case, the Self possesses the capacity to develop to its fullest potential, moving towards wholeness and healing in the human psyche.

It occurs to me that the center that holds, which I shall now refer to as Self (for the purpose of this paper), is an inherent part of every individual's being or existence. Reverting to my ongoing preparations for the MFT license, which was accompanied by a very busy schedule of working towards a doctorate degree, as well as working to earn a living, it was my Self that kept me going despite my experience: waves of apprehension and anxiety consumed my spirit from time to

time. It was not very difficult to be consumed by them. However, with each experience, I was able to stay still and not be overtaken by the flood of emotions.

The process of preparing for licensure has provided me the opportunity to reflect on my own Self, gifting me with the realization that I possessed a core within me that was able to hold my external experiences while maintaining a solid sense of love and strength. Because I believe that the Self is pure love, more often than not, I find that I am able to work through difficult situations without feeling overwhelmed or defeated. There have been other occasions in my life where I have been unable to contain difficult emotions or circumstances. This situation has left me with a rather poor sense of self, feeling hopeless and fragile.

I have learned over the years that one of the ways to stay in deep connection with the Self is through dialogue. More importantly, the very acknowledgment of the existence and purpose of the Self paves the path to personal growth and healing. The Self can essentially be looked upon as an ally, that very center that holds us in time of joy, despair, happiness, or sorrow. Therefore, for myself, creating a relationship with the Self through dialogue is one of the most important and reverent

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practices in my life. Being in communication with the Self provides knowledge and wisdom of our true nature. As Whitfield (1992) poignantly states:

"This realization frees one from the limitations of time, space and causality, as one discovers one's true nature to be limitless existence, consciousness and love (ananda or fullness). This knowledge is liberation and puts an end to transmigratory existence." (p.116)

Taking the idea of the Self a step further, I would like to add that our sense of Self, and the acknowledgement of the same, has an impact not just on one's emotional and psychic life, but on the physical well-being as well. Healing occurs on the continuum of mind, body, and spirit, and the Self plays an integral role in this process.

To elaborate on the above statement, I shall address the relationship of the Self to the body with a relatively recent client encounter. In the last few years, I have been working with a client around the fear of commitment. Michelle came in for therapy in the summer of 2004 seeking counseling for not being able to commit to long-term romantic relationships. During one of our sessions, Michelle also revealed to me that she often suffered from a weak gastro-intestinal system, frequently leaving her with immense discomfort and pain.

At first I did not make much of her poor physical health, continuing to focus on the psychological challenges of commitment. Michelle would continue to complain about her physical health, to which I responded with empathy and concern. However, six months into our sessions, I was prompted to ask her about her concept of the Self, the center that holds. On listening to my description of the Self, Michelle confessed she had no idea of what it was and never paid any attention to her inner life. She was stunned by this revelation, as was I.

It then occurred to me that perhaps there might exist a relationship between her physical health and the lack of a sense of Self.

All of a sudden, I was now treading into a different mode of therapy with Michelle. I found myself in a quandary not knowing how to proceed. I soon realized that I should invoke in Michelle her own sense of Self, and support her process through therapy.

Over the next several sessions, Michelle and I worked on her ability to recognize and accept the Self. Once that was achieved, therapy was focused on developing a stronger Self and in coming to direct relationship with the Self. We examined ways in which Michelle could communicate with her Self, thereby expanding her awareness and appreciation of her inner life. Reflecting on the writings of Jung, Michelle decided that the best way she could contact her Self was through working with dreams. This work opened a new dimension in her personal life and transformed therapy into being far more elaborate and healing for Michelle.

By Fall 2005, Michelle revealed that she was experiencing some improvement in her health, thereby confirming my initial suspicions. I explained to her that with a stronger Self, she was able to contain her anxieties and fears around commitment and life in general. Her body was no longer the sole vessel of these emotions, thereby relieving itself of the physical pain she often experienced. Michelle stated that once she was able to contain her feelings and direct them to the Self, she was no longer a victim of poor health. Michelle continues to work on her Self, although we are still working on her fear of commitment.

In summarizing the ideas of the Self, it is worth mentioning once again that the Self is our most powerful ally. The Self of the individual mirrors the Self of God, which in terms of Vedantic philosophy can be described as "sat-cit-ananda" or existence-consciousness-wholeness. We need to constantly remind ourselves of our true nature, that being pure love.

I shall leave the reader with the words of the Indian guru, Sri Sathya Sai Baba, who fully embodies the idea of sat-cit-ananda:

"Start the day with love; fill the day with love, end the day with love; that is the way to God." (p.12)

In many ways, the way to the Self is the only way to God. For the center that holds or the Self, ultimately desires to come into complete wholeness and union with God. ☉

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Rochelle Suri holds a MA degree in Integral Counseling Psychology from the California Institute of Integral Studies, where she also currently pursues a Ph.D in East West Psychology. She has lived in San Francisco for 7 years, before which she resided in India and the United Arab Emirates. Being exposed to several cultures and ethnicities, Rochelle has enormous experience working with diverse populations and minorities. She is currently pursuing her Marriage and Family Therapist license in the state of California. Rochelle is dedicated towards integrating western psychology and eastern spirituality within the realms of her psychotherapy practice. She has worked with the geriatric population for over 4 years. Currently, Rochelle is involved in her ongoing research on auditory hallucinations in schizophrenia, a paper she has also presented at the First Global Conference on Madness in Oxford, England.