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Aloneness in Psychoanalysis and Spirituality²

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Religion, Alfred North Whitehead (1926) wrote, *is what the individual does with his own solitariness* (p.16). In this passage Whitehead is giving a particularly profound reading of religion, that is, he is not speaking of ritualized and/or dogma⁴ driven experiences but of what many, today, would describe as spirituality. Accepting Whitehead's reflections we can define spirituality as that area of human experience interested in *exploring individual solitariness*. Such a definition has the benefit of focusing on each individual's task to find what is most real and consequently true for him or her; it does not, in itself, entail any necessary presupposition or definition of a Transcendent Other (God), over against us, so to speak. Finding what is most real has to do with how we interact both with others as well as ourselves; spirituality, although grounded in our essential aloneness is, paradoxically, not a solitary activity. If Donald Winnicott (1958) is right when he speaks of religion and culture, psychoanalysis and play as having their seedbeds in what he categorizes as the *transitional space of childhood*, then it is obvious that psychoanalysis is also concerned with the *solitariness of the individual*. How to understand such solitariness, as a ground for our human experience, will be the primary focus of this essay.

Winnicott (1965)⁵ writes of a quiet alone space that each individual possesses and which no one, particularly a psychoanalyst, should attempt to invade. His thoughts on the capacity to be alone, albeit in the presence of the other, reflect not just a developmental achievement but also an existential

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² I am particularly indebted to James Grotstein's *Who is the Dreamer Who Dreams the Dream*, a text I reviewed in *The Psychoanalytic Review*. In some way this essay is a continuing commentary on as well as a continuing dialogue with Grotstein's text.

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³ I come to this essay as a practicing psychoanalyst for the past thirty-two years; I was trained in the mid-nineteen sixties in the classical Freudian tradition but by the seventies I interpreted that tradition through the eyes and thought of Donald Winnicott. Concurrent with my analytic training I was a lay professor of religious studies at a northeastern university.

⁴ More specifically, traditional western religion, particularly Christianity, has a missionary aspect, which all too often, attempts to impose truth rather than invite the experience of truth within us. For a perceptive and, I believe, non-biased discussion see: *Papal Sin* by Gary Wills.

⁵ ...each individual is an isolate, permanently non-communicating, permanently unknown, in fact unfound. (P.187)

necessity. Such a capacity to be alone is, as we know, basic to feeling alive and consequently as being able to experience the world as emotionally significant. When Winnicott notes that many analyses go on for years, under the false assumption that a patient is alive, he was speaking of an individual's capacity to split off emotional contact from such an internal alone space. Most psychoanalysts, however, have been content to accept Winnicott's notion of such an *alone space* without exploring its implications. Yet that alone space has to be visited, I believe, in order to grasp any meaningful relationship between spirituality and psychoanalysis.

To be internally alone is obviously quite different from being lonely; actually the failure to be internally alone augments loneliness. Nevertheless it is difficult, given psychoanalytic categories, to grasp the full meaning of what "alone" means. Employing admittedly poetic, metaphorical imagery, we can begin to approach a definition by saying that there is a great emptiness within us that is, paradoxically, brimming with life, not deadness. Such a definition goes beyond the common understanding of aloneness, even in Winnicott's sense. It is an aloneness that is open-ended, so to speak, an aloneness that comes closer to what I mean, and what I believe Whitehead means, by solitariness. Such solitariness is the basis to being open to both oneself and the world; it is, I would maintain, the bedrock of therapeutic psychoanalytic practice although, obviously, of a different clinical understanding than the resolution of conflict and/or coming to terms with what fate has dealt us. Following many spiritual traditions, such solitariness has been described as a vital emptiness rather than a blank nothingness. Both Eastern spiritual philosophies and Western Judaeo/Christian philosophers and mystics speak about such a vital emptiness that is, in their understanding, the foundation or the ground of our being. I will explore what such a paradoxical concept as a *vital emptiness*, which is the wellspring of our solitariness, means, particularly as manifested in such a profound thinker as the thirteenth century theologian, philosopher and mystic Meister Eckhart. (Although a Western thinker, Eckhart, historically, was singularly important in the development of Buddhist thought).

Whether we conceptualize human beings in what we can categorize as an open or closed system is, as is obvious, a question that is only answered by the (metaphorical) models one employs. For the purpose of exploring an interfacing of psychoanalysis and spirituality I am adopting a model that favors an open-ended system. That is, following Eckhart, we can say that to know the world is to know what we are, meaning, to know our interiority is to know the world; human beings are not just living on the Earth – they are the Earth in its consciousness.

Employing such an open-ended approach we can ask whether such a vital emptiness, the solitary aloneness we are discussing is, in fact, a variant of the phenomenological description of consciousness. What I have in mind is Sartre's reading of consciousness as emptiness, a consciousness that has no contents but is rather *a great wind blowing toward objects* (p.22). Although this is an extremely appealing analogue for what we are speaking of as our solitary interior vital emptiness, what we are attempting to describe is different from the emptiness of *reflecting consciousness* (p.44) and more difficult to describe.

Both psychoanalytic and spiritual traditions assume and presumably foster human dignity; each tradition holds to the importance of or, in spiritual language, the sacredness of each person. But what is this based upon? Democratic ideals? Or is there a perception in our self-awareness that each of us embodies what we can identify as a transcendence. James Grotstein (2000) alludes to what we can speak of as an *everyday transcendence* that is *not* based on religious belief. One approach to understanding such an everyday transcendence is that it reflects what I have spoken of as a *vital-open-ended-emptiness*. Such emptiness, I believe, is the basis not only for our solitariness but also for our awareness of personal individual dignity.

In order to grasp this common or everyday transcendence I propose a definition that is paradoxical. As our discussion progresses, the need for paradox in order to appreciate such a transcendence should be clearer and perhaps less provocative in its formulation. So, then, we can say that *what is non-existent is truly transcendent*; a non-existence that is alive with what we can further characterize as *unlimited possibilities*. Such a transcendence *grounds existence, while not being limited by it*. Such a definition echoes Buddhist thought as well as, interestingly, the language of quantum physics.⁶ For our purposes, and following the language of quantum physics, we can speak of *the mist of unlimited possibilities*⁷ which pervades and supports the total reality we humans experience. I am aware that to speak of an *alive-emptiness of unlimited-possibilities* that somehow grounds us is a particularly difficult, verging on an obtuse concept. Nevertheless, I think its applicability for understanding the two roads of psychoanalysis and

⁶ Western philosophical tradition has concluded, since the days of Aristotle, that from nothing, nothing comes; Eastern Zen Buddhist thought focuses, paradoxically, on the conviction that it is nothingness (the void) that supports and gives birth, so to speak, to all that is. It has not been until the 20th century that Western theoretical physics has appreciated emptiness or nothingness, as it were. Stephen Hawking, (1987) in his *A Brief History of Time*, speaks of the entire cosmos coming forth from a vacuum.

⁷ Chang, Kenneth. *Here, There and Everywhere: A Quantum State of Mind*.

spirituality cannot be minimized. Rather than focusing on the apparent reality or concreteness of the world as a simple given, the approach of quantum physics is that the world we experience is a product of our observations, of our questioning, actually. Albert Einstein said as much when he noted: *It is the theory that decides what we can observe* (p.199), a statement that many psychoanalytic practitioners can likewise confirm.

The potential unlimitedness of what we call *reality* is only known piecemeal through our tested observations and the particular line of questioning that informs those observations. I would like to relate what we have spoken of as the vital emptiness (or nothingness) of individual solitariness to the quantum concept of an *unlimited-mist-of-possibilities*. . Such a nothingness, such an emptiness is not only the everyday transcendence we are speaking of but primarily the foreground of what we have called the *unlimited-mist-of-possibilities*. It is the foundation of personal solitariness. Each individual is an example of, as well as a circumference to, a mist of unlimited possibilities. What we experience as choice, what we name, in Edward Glover's (1956) interesting phrase as *freed will*⁸ (p.193) can be understood as actualizing particular possibilities. This comes about in both psychoanalytic treatment and in spiritual journeys through what I have named as *a particular history of questioning*. I will return to this perspective shortly, but first we can tentatively summarize our thought by reiterating that the *emptiness*, we are discussing, is not barren; *nothingness* is not sterile; consequently the emptiness and nothingness which we are speaking of as supporting individual solitariness is an emptiness, a nothingness which in our limited language we attempt to describe as a natural or everyday transcendence. A transcendence founded, it bears repeating, on the ubiquity of a mist of unlimited possibilities.

It is important to differentiate what Freud (1927) in *The Future of an Illusion* speaks of as an oceanic feeling, a feeling of an undifferentiated merger with the early mother, from what we are classifying as a metaphorical concept, intended to be used as a bridge between our profound interiority and what we experience as our exteriority. To repeat, the solitariness of the individual, which we have in mind, is best captured by the concept of an everyday transcendence; if we try to describe this natural transcendence we are forced back to speaking in terms of nothingness, of emptiness – a potentiality, a void, which each individual concretizes, but

⁸ Glover notes: *The psychic determinism of Freud at least permits man to hope that in the unending struggles between Id impulse and Ego-adaptation, the victories gained during early development may stand him in good stead. Even if the amount of "free-will" accruing there from is only marginal, it at any rate allows man the freedom to decide to continue the struggle.*

which is dense with possibilities. Both psychoanalysis and spirituality are created and experienced, as disciplines, through their respective and particular *history-of-questioning*. Such a *history-of-questioning(s)* is how each discipline attempts to reach, react and respond to individual solitariness.

Language, Wittgenstein asserts, forms our world. Bruce Gregory (1988), a scientist and writer on astrophysics, notes... *We might even say the language that we "are" shapes the world, for language undoubtedly defines us more profoundly than we can begin to imagine* (p.200). In psychoanalysis, even when an analyst is most silent, most neutral, in the traditional manner, we are helping the patient to learn the language of self and other: both analyst and patient are forging new meanings and consequently finding and relating to a new world. We can reduce psychoanalysis to symptom resolution, or deterministically coming to terms with our history, or our neurology; or, without denying any therapeutic goals, can see it as a new model for understanding the profundity and complexity of human existence. Freud was loath to see his new science as a child of philosophy but in fact *psychoanalytic man*, in his goals of self-understanding, self-transcendence and capacity to interact with the world, is a product, as well as a result of a *new line of questioning* – a philosophical contribution - which issues in a new found interiority.

Alternately, spirituality, particularly as expressed in Western tradition, is not just an exploration of the mystery of *being*; rather it intends to help the sojourner minimally understand the temporality we live with as well as the burden of self-referential experiences. It does this through a series of spiritual exercises from meditation, to reflection, to self-mastery in order ultimately to affirm self-forgetful compassion as well as connectedness in one's daily life. It asks of those pursuing spiritual understanding that they encounter more directly, through a different history of questioning, the emptiness of *the unlimited-ness mist of possibilities* that we have attributed as the foundation for solitariness. A solitariness that we can depict as fully alive, a solitariness that grounds both psychoanalysis and spirituality, whose beingness can only be grasped, paradoxically, to the extent that we accept, as I have mentioned, its non-existence. Nor am I using these terms as some type of clever conundrum. Winnicott reminds us that if we are dealing with the complexity of human beings we have to accept paradox and not rush to resolve it or, I might add, to dismiss it out of intellectual irritation.

Perhaps the following image will be helpful in clarifying what we mean by a vital emptiness. Picture two large mirrors, on opposing walls, reflecting nothing but the space between them and consequently each other.

We can, I believe, without too much violence to our topic, name one mirror psychoanalytic inquiry and the other mirror the inquiry of spirituality. And for the sake of our analogy, name the empty space between them as the area of solitude, the un-graspable space of unlimited possibilities, out of which comes the quiet aloneness that makes both others and ourselves real. Our analogy is somewhat weak, however, since psychoanalysis and spirituality are not existent realities in themselves – they are a way of looking, a particular history of questioning, they are more like a certain angle at which we might place the mirrors to get a particular effect. And what they reflect is ultimately *nothing-at-all*. But of course, as we have mentioned, there is a profound paradox here since the *nothing-at-all* that we are speaking of is actually dense with possibilities made manifest in psychoanalysis through interpretations and subsequent experiences and in spirituality through, self-discipline, insight and actions.

To the extent that we appreciate the function of metaphors in organizing our conceptual world we overcome the tendency to organize our experiences in terms of individuated, separate realities. Whitehead, as A.H. Johnson notes, calls such tendency in our thinking *misplaced concreteness* (p.150). Popularly speaking we might say that human beings have an almost incurable attraction for missing the forest for the trees. Whitehead, however, thinks in terms of overriding operative principles which govern our experiences in the world. Such principles, somewhat akin to Plato's world of ideals, are more normative than the particular concrete objects which we encounter daily. To forget the interrelatedness of the world is to give individual objects a reality they cannot sustain; to appreciate the role of metaphor in our experience of knowledge is to perceive a wider and deeper world than specific events. Winnicott's appreciation of metaphor and its role in life is reflected, as we have indicated, in his understanding that an analysis can go on for years under the false assumption that the patient is alive; alive meaning, among other aspects, that a patient is able to play the play of metaphors. To be able to play with language is to understand metaphor rather than concreteness. It is from this viewpoint that I have spoken of psychoanalysis, as well as most spiritual traditions, as a history-of-questioning; each approach has its own metaphors. Psychoanalysts, for example, speak of defenses while spiritual teachers speak of discernment of spirits. And each particular history-of-questioning, as we have indicated, predetermines a particular response. Consequently psychoanalytic or spiritual truths can only be contextually validateable. That is, *they are "made true" in context*. For example, in a previous publication (1997), I noted that the unconscious is *only created and therefore revealed through*

interpretations (p.6). Each interpretation of symptoms, or of actions, or of unconscious factors is a unique creation that occurs between a particular analyst and a particular analysand; actually each interaction between analyst and analysand is a unique creation. Context helps us locate what is true for each individual; what is not relative to individual context is ultimately meaningless to both psychoanalytic and spiritual insights. Therefore ... *Understanding the metaphorical basis of knowledge frees us of the Herculean burden of finding the truth. We can, instead, settle for "a" truth, or should I say several truths.* (P.419) (Gargiulo 1998) Truth, even contextual truth, deserves reverence and an appreciation of metaphor serves that reverence. Dogma, spiritual or psychoanalytic, does not serve it well since it attempts, in its misplaced concreteness, to quell anxiety by promoting a misguided narcissistic need to be the knowing other.

Several truths is another way of speaking, I would say, about unlimited possibilities, but unlimited possibilities, in a different context - that is, not in the nothingness of our inner being, but in the functional actuality of our lives. Each patient ultimately has to find not only his/her way to aloneness, to solitude but also his/her own way in the world. Winnicott's understanding that one essential facet of being alive is each person's need *to create the found world* is another way of saying this. This engagement is as equally true of the discipline of spiritual awareness as it is of psychoanalysis. Spiritual masters or teachers have the task of discerning the way; a psychoanalyst's task is not so different. The naming dialogue of psychoanalysis is a struggle, so to speak, to *re-create* the world in the face of what we can call the *de-creation* of neurotic transference, in the face of the *de-creation* of what we identify as symptoms. *Re-creation* involves not just working through, with all that entails, but contacting the internal solitary ground from which our deepest sense of aliveness springs. An analyst's, as well as a spiritual master's, appreciation that there is no correct concrete path but only a mist of possibilities which questioning will either activate, or leave inactivated, is the best guarantor of living with several truths. The psychoanalytic dialogue, consequently, echoes off the walls, so to speak, of both analyst and analysand; echoes off the non-existent seedbed of unlimited possibilities and is heard in the solitary chambers of both. Within this context Winnicott's (1989) prayer: *oh God, when I die, may I be alive* (p.4.) – is not only strikingly psychoanalytic but profoundly spiritual⁹ as well. As we create our found world, we transform possibility into actual experience;

⁹ Anyone familiar with Zen thought or Vedantic Hinduism will hear echoes while reading (Winnicott); particularly, for example, in his understanding of the role of breathing in establishing a personal soma. Gargiulo. (1998). p.154.

we are then going from the transcendent to the immanent. Immanence in this context is the concretizing of particular possibilities – each interaction within the self and between the self and the other is a unique actualization, e.g., no two analyses can, nor should they be, the same – a patient with a different analyst has a different analysis – the same is true of spiritual discipleship. Transcendence,¹⁰ to repeat, reflects the awareness that possibilities, as such, are unlimited. Such a definition allows us to de-sacralize the term transcendence without compromising its complexity¹¹. An analyst or spiritual master who practices anything less than this, who thinks that technique is a safeguard, so to speak, against the transcendence of unlimited possibility is living in a world of misplaced concreteness.

So far I have followed the lead of Meister Eckhart, (Fox 1980) as well as the language of quantum physics, by blending what I have characterized as the emptiness of unlimited possibilities and relating it as foundational to the alone space of the individual, a solitariness which each individual negotiates throughout his or her life. When Eckhart prays, for example, that *God rid me of God* (p. 217) he is attempting, I believe, to cross the perimeter into solitariness – past the language of sign signification. Eckhart’s “*God*” is so radically different from traditional western usage that it is unfortunate he could not find another designation – given his time and place he had no choice. When he reiterates that to know oneself is to know the world – that internality is externality - he is attempting, I believe, to understand transcendence, shorn of the concrete bifurcation that all too easily turns human beings and the world into an arena of objects to be managed. What is ineffable in Eckhart’s thought is what we can characterize as the unlimited possibilities of *the solitariness of the world*, so to speak. When he writes that we cannot even begin to know God unless we know ourselves, since to

¹⁰ James Grotstein in *Who is The Dreamer Who Dreams the Dream*, writes, as I noted above, of the everyday transcendence of *the ineffable subject of the unconscious*. When I speak of unlimited possibility which grounds existence, I am attempting to indicate a pre-subject mode out of which *the ineffable subject of the unconscious* can be spoken about. The ineffable subject is an actualization of transcendence giving birth to what psychoanalysts understand as the unconscious – an unconscious that thanks to Grotstein’s reading, is alive with meaning, with psychic presences. In terms of psychoanalytic understanding Grotstein’s notion of *the ineffable subject* captures what we can put into words – Eckhart speaks of the absolutely hidden and unknowable Godhead – for which even the term emptiness seems too positive. The unlimited mist of possibilities is an attempt, given our language, to encompass both of these possibilities.

¹¹ Within the psychoanalytic tradition such works as *The Book of the It* of George Groddeck, or within a more limited frame of reference, Freud’s understanding of the system unconscious reflect awareness that there is transcendence to human experience, although it was conceptualized in terms of an ultimately unknowable unconscious. The work of James Grotstein, particularly his *Who is The Dreamer Who Dreams The Dream*, explicating the thought of Klein, Bion, Matte-Blanco gives a particularly creative and insightful reading to the term transcendence.

know God is in some profound way to be God also¹² – he is speaking, not as a religious missionary with a set of dogmas but as an individual who has struggled to put the “*non-existent quiet alone space of unlimited possibility*” into words.

I have offered a personal reading of this great mystic’s thoughts – thoughts which, as I have said, have little to do with convincing a person to “believe” but more to do with sensitizing a person to mystery and to a sense of reverence for what grounds our life. If we practice psychoanalysis without a sense of mystery and reverence we are wandering in a dark forest with no way out. *We are poor indeed if we are only sane* (p.150) was Winnicott’s (1945) way of saying the same thing.¹³

Although spirituality is sometimes portrayed, by psychoanalysts, as the polar opposite of scientific, empirical thinking its subject matter is, I have tried to show, not that different from psychoanalysis. Spiritual traditions are a different order, a different history of questioning than psychoanalysis, which fact, in itself, should not disqualify it as meriting thoughtful introspection. Spirituality, as it has developed in Western societies, addresses the great quiet within us. Spirituality has nothing to do with capturing that which cannot be captured – it is, I believe, a quiet response before the absolute quiet of unlimited possibilities. Spiritual questioning, like psychoanalytic questioning, is made concrete, is made existent by actions¹⁴. Overcoming the false import of the self, and the narcissistic illusions of the “I” is the basis for a capacity for self-awareness as well as for compassion and civility.

Such goals are actually common to both the psychoanalytic and Western spiritual traditions. The honesty Freud offers, when he helped us understand that we are not masters of our own house, has less to do with a deterministic philosophy than with promoting a muted sense of our own importance. The great aloneness, that we all live with, should help engender a reverence for life. Reverence for life is an equal goal of psychoanalysis and of spirituality, a spirituality or psychoanalysis that has overcome self-aggrandizement. Only when we are alive, in Winnicott’s meaning, can we

¹² -----.,(1983) *Meditations with Meister Eckhart*. Note the following as a general example: *The eye with which I see God/is the same eye with which God sees me.* (p.21)

¹³ Note also Winnicott’s (1987) statement...*I am doing nothing worse than I would do in saying of myself that I was sane and that through analysis and self-analysis I achieved some measure of insanity. Freud’s flight to sanity could be something we psycho-analysts are trying to recover from.* (P.483)

¹⁴ In this regard note one of Meister Eckhart’s poems: *Spirituality/is not to be learned/by flight from the world, /by running away from things, or by turning solitary and going apart from the world. /Rather, /we must learn an inner solitude/wherever or with whomsoever we may be. /We must learn to penetrate things/and find God there.* (p.90) Quoted in: *Meditations with Meister Eckhart* by Matthew Fox (1983)

experience compassion, only when we are alive are we comfortable with unknowingness, only when we are alive can we achieve a reverence for truth.¹⁵ Such thoughts are not just the domain of spiritual writers, Francois Roustang,¹⁶ among others psychoanalysts, writes of similar concerns.

In terms of each individual's *historical actuality*, (p.206) in Erik Erikson's (1964) sense, we have spoken of truth as contextual; in terms of our understanding of the profound emptiness that grounds human existence, we can speak of a non-contextual truth, if I can phrase it in such a manner. A truth that understands that we are a momentary coming-into-being, each individual, each an actualization of possibility, of transcendent unlimited possibilities. We can think of that unlimitedness as the unconscious, the house of being, or the unspeakable - unknowable nothingness - which grounds our lives.

Just as the psychological mechanisms of isolation, de-realization or de-personalization have no place in a viable spirituality, so likewise self-satisfaction, unreflective empiricism and a lack of a capacity for civility and compassion have no place in a viable psychoanalysis. If an individual leaves analysis, as I have indicated above, bereft of a profound sense of mystery s/he are probably still suffering. If one enters the spiritual search bereft of a sense of the dark forest of our human pathologies one is in danger of finding that one is living in a house without windows.

Human dignity is based on more than our functionality or our potentiality for meaningful actions – our dignity is based, as I have indicated, on an intuition that we somehow embody what is transcendent to the immediacy of our historical selves. The psychoanalytic experience, its particular history of questioning, addresses the unlimitedness that not only grounds our lives but the equal unlimitedness with which we live. Psychoanalytic questioning is at a different angle, as we have depicted it, from spirituality, but it is clearly based on the same solitariness from which the histories of questions of spirituality arise. Psychoanalytic questions focus

¹⁵ In a previous publication (1999) I noted that: *Terminating therapy, individual should be able to love the world and to experience personal competence, to value themselves and be committed to the surprise of finding out who they are with honesty and humor. This is what it means to be alive. This is what it means to find oneself... We know our aloneness, however, because we are with others. Paradoxically when we are not in relation with others, we are not alone – we are isolated.* (P.344-345).

¹⁶ See in particular: Roustang, F. (1976) *Dire Mastery*, as well as *Psychoanalysis Never Lets Go* (1980) both texts dense with insight, note particularly from this last text: *We conclude from the preceding argument that the cure is an act of inspired creation. The neurotic and even the psychotic are not suffering from too much imagination, but from too much reality. They are invaded by it because they dread it, and it freezes them in a repetitive process that prohibits the imagination from unfolding. Then come the permanent short circuits that doom the patient to sterility.* (P.140.)

on transference, symptom resolution and communication with our deepest creativity and spontaneity; spiritual traditions speak of a discernment of spirits,¹⁷ a resolution of self-aggrandizing desire, an invitation to touch the oneness of things – measured and reflected by one’s mode of being in the world. That psychoanalytic therapy can lead to dead knowledge and/or inflated self-aggrandizement, most notably by a failure to foster the capacity to cross-identify, is a recognized failure – just as spiritual exercises, paradoxically, can foster an unrecognized narcissistic specialness, depersonalization, and/or schizoid isolation. Obviously, neither route should be judged by its failures.

The awareness of the absolute aloneness of unlimited possibilities, which I have spoken of as vital emptiness or nothingness, is the world – from a different view.

¹⁷ A tradition wherein a person seeking spiritual counsel consults a recognized teacher who helps the student differentiate what practices and personal experiences can lead to spiritual enlightenment and what does not.

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