

# Lack and Transcendence

The Problem of Death and Life  
in Psychotherapy, Existentialism,  
and Buddhism

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## Introduction

This book grew out of the cross-fertilization of two basic ideas. One is the Freudian concept of repression, including the return of the repressed in symbolic form as a symptom. The other is the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman*, "no-self." If our sense of self as something autonomous and self-grounded is a fiction, if the ego is in fact mentally constructed and socially internalized, then perhaps our primal repression is not sexual wishes (as Freud thought) nor fear of death (as many existential psychologists think) but the quite valid suspicion that "*I am not real*." This shift in emphasis from libido-instinct to the way we understand our situation in the world opens up possibilities that classical psychoanalysis did not allow—many of which existentialism and Buddhism have explored, as we shall see.

When those possibilities are taken seriously, a web of relationships begins to spin among fields of inquiry usually understood to be distinct.

It is a sad comment on our balkanized intellectual world that this book must begin with an *apologia* for hitching together three supposedly different horses. The defense is straightforward: Whatever the differences in their methods and goals, psychotherapy, existentialism, and Buddhism are concerned with many of the same fundamental issues, and therefore we can benefit from comparing what they think they have learned. In addition to an historical affinity between psychoanalysis and existentialism (see below) and more recent links between Buddhism and Western psychology (such as transpersonal psychology), there have been many studies of Buddhism and existentialism: Nietzsche and Buddhism, Heidegger and Buddhism, and so on. Then, why not bring all three traditions together, in a study receptive to the insights of each? Important figures in each tradition have arrived at many of the same conclusions about the problems of life and death and life-in-death: for example, that what passes for normalcy today is a low grade of psychopathology, usually unnoticed because so common; that the denial of death poisons life; that the supposedly autonomous ego-self is conditioned in ways it is normally unaware of; and that it is possible to become more free by becoming more aware of our mental processes—a transformation that all three traditions encourage. Noticing these and other similarities made me wonder about the relationships among them. How do such agreements constellate? In spite of the differences one would expect, might an interdisciplinary study nevertheless adumbrate some shared understanding about the human condition—perhaps even some basic reasons for our notorious inability to be happy?

Much has happened to psychoanalysis in a century, and Freud today would have difficulty recognizing many of his progeny. Among those descendants, Jungian analysis and more recently transpersonal psychology have attracted most of the attention of students of religion. This book focuses on existential psychoanalysis, which originated from an early cross-fertilization between Freudianism and phenomenology, especially Heidegger's *Being and Time*. The most innovative figure was the Swiss psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger, who is also distinguished by the fact that he was able to disagree with Freud without that leading to a break between them. For reasons that become apparent in chapter 2, I think this original movement made a mistake in allying itself with the early Heidegger, and what follows is more influenced by the second- and third-generation of existential psychologists in the United States: among the analysts, Rollo May and Irvin Yalom; of the scholars, Norman O. Brown and most of all Ernest Becker, whose influential books *The Denial of Death* and *Escape from Evil* (the second unfinished at his own death) are used in chapter 1 to summarize the existential approach to psychoanalysis.

These figures are more pragmatic than the first generation. For them, the "existential" in existential psychology means not so much existentialism as being rooted in the fundamental issues of life and death, freedom and responsibility, groundlessness and meaninglessness. Despite this—or is it because of this?—their findings display a remarkable agreement with the best of the existentialist tradition. Becker refers often to Pascal and Kierkegaard, and he could have found as much in Nietzsche and Sartre to buttress his conclusions. This confluence is important because it is one of the fertile places where science and philosophy meet today. Psychoanalysis/psychotherapy is many things: a religion (with founder, dogma, and schisms), a philosophy (Freud and many since him couldn't resist metaphysical extrapolations), but also perhaps the rudimentary, groping beginnings of something that is capable of learning from its mistakes. One important example of such self-correction: In place of the doctrinal disputes which preoccupied early psychoanalysis, contemporary therapists are more aware of the relativity of their theoretical constructs. Yet this hardly a recent discovery, as we shall see.

The most important existentialist thinkers also stress that philosophizing should lead to a personal transformation in the way we live, an emphasis which makes their philosophies therapeutic as well as conceptual. Nietzsche discovered our *ressentiment* and how we project a higher "spiritual" world to compensate for our inability to be comfortable in this one. The modern disappearance of that other world has left us nihilistic and with the difficult task of revaluing this world. Heidegger's *Being and Time* argues that awareness of death can open up the possibility of authentic life, and emphasizes the intimate connection between such authenticity and the way we experience time. Sartre is more pessimistic: Human consciousness is always a lack because our nothingness cannot

help craving the supposed self-grounded being of objective things. Kierkegaard's solution to the anxiety that bedevils our lives is to become thoroughly anxious: to let anxiety dredge up and devour all our "finite ends," those psychological securities we have hedged around us and then "forgotten" in order to hide in a safe but constricted world.

In this book the above issues will be contemplated and integrated into a framework which is predominantly Buddhist, because sympathetic to what Buddhism says about the relationship between *duhkha* (our human disease) and the delusive sense-of-self. Like Nietzsche, Buddhism denies both God and any "higher world," for the difference between *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* is found in the ways we experience this world. Like *Being and Time*, Buddhism notices a relationship between authenticity and another way of experiencing time, yet its understanding of that relation implies a critique of the temporality Heidegger recommends. Buddhism agrees with Sartre that our ego-consciousness is a lack, but its deconstruction of the duality between consciousness and object allows for a solution that Sartre does not envision. Like Kierkegaard's attitude toward anxiety, the Buddhist solution to the problem of *duhkha* is not to evade it but to become it and see what that does to us.

Śākyamuni Buddha declared that he taught only the fact of our *duhkha* and how to end it. The path that ends *duhkha* requires developing our awareness, since, as in psychotherapy, transformation occurs through insight. And the most important insight is realizing how the self does not exist: For Buddhism, the root cause of our suffering is the delusion of self. In response to existential-psychological emphasis on death-repression, Buddhism views the problem of life-fearing-death as merely one version of our more general problem with bipolar thinking. We distinguish one pole (e.g., success) from its opposite (failure) in order to attain the first and reject the other, but that bifurcation does not work because the two terms are interdependent. Since the meaning of each depends on negating the other, we can have both or neither, the two sides of a single coin. So, our hope for success is shadowed by an equal fear of failure, and in the same manner *our repression of death represses life*. For those who deny death, the interdependence of life and death implies a death-in-life.

That is the issue in the first chapter, "The Nonduality of Life and Death." Insofar as we repress our fear of death, the repressed returns as our compulsion to secure and if possible immortalize ourselves symbolically. Our yearning for fame is a good example, for "how can he be dead, who lives immortal in the hearts of men?" Unfortunately, no amount of fame can satisfy me if it's not really fame I want. The Buddhist approach to this issue is presented mainly by explicating what the twelfth-century Japanese Zen master Dōgen wrote about the dualism of life-and-death. However, from the Buddhist perspective, our primary repression is not death-terror but another fear even more fundamental: the suspicion that "*I am not real*." Rather than being autonomous in some

Cartesian fashion, our sense of self is mentally and socially conditioned, therefore ungrounded and (as the mentally ill remind us) fragile.

In many ways the difference between this approach and death-repression is slight, and much of Becker's argument remains valid with some adjustments. The main distinction is that death-repression allows us to project our problem into the future, as we dread losing what we think we have now, whereas the repression of our groundlessness is a way to avoid facing what we are (or are not) right now. Freud and many others have noticed the peculiarity of fearing one's own death: There's nothing to fear if I will not be here to notice that I'm missing. Epicurus concluded that "the most horrible of ends, death, is nothing to us," and the early Freud supposed that death-fear must disguise other repressions, notably castration. Yet that fear is all too understandable if it is the closest we usually come to glimpsing our own groundlessness. The difference becomes crucial because of the different possibilities they allow.

The Buddhist emphasis on the groundlessness of the ego-self implies that our most troublesome dualism is not life-versus-death but *being versus nothingness* (or *no-thing-ness*): the anxious self intuiting and dreading its own lack of being (or thing-ness). As a result, our sense-of-self is shadowed by a sense of *lack* that it perpetually yet vainly tries to resolve. The interdependence of bipolar dualisms still holds: To the extent I come to feel autonomous, my consciousness is also infected with a gnawing sense of unreality, usually experienced as the vague feeling that "there is something wrong with me." Since we do not know how to cope with such an intimate sense of *lack*, it is repressed, only to return in projected form as the compulsive ways we attempt to make ourselves real in the world—which implies, among other things, a time orientation focused on the future.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger claims that consciousness of my finitude cuts through the chance possibilities which normally distract me by making me consider what I really want to do during my short time on this earth. That unifies the scattered "nows" of the inauthentic present into the care-full and thus future-oriented concern of the authentic present. Chapter 2 "The Moving Image of Eternity" argues that this approach is insightful but upside-down. *Being and Time* presents essentially the same relations among death, self, guilt, and time as chapter 1 does, yet draws the opposite conclusions because it absolutizes temporality. From a psychotherapeutic standpoint, Heidegger misses the return of the repressed in symbolic form, which makes future-oriented time into a schema for the expiation of guilt, as Norman O. Brown put it. In more Buddhist terms, the sense of time as something objective that we are *in* derives from our sense of *lack* and our projects to fill up that *lack*. Both of Heidegger's alternatives, inauthentic and authentic, are preoccupied with the future because they are our two main ways of reacting to the inevitable possibility of death. In order to glimpse how time might be experienced without

the shadow of death, the last part of chapter 2 offers a Buddhist deconstruction of time.

Chapter 3 "The Pain of Being Human" evaluates in more detail the claim that a dissatisfaction with life is intrinsic to the ego-self as it usually functions. The first part surveys the psychoanalytic understanding of ontological guilt and basic anxiety, both now recognized as ineliminable even from a "well-adjusted" ego. The two most important Western philosophies of *lack* are quite pessimistic, and their challenge to wishful thinking is addressed in the second part. Yet Schopenhauer's monism of unsatisfiable will may be criticized for projecting our sense of *lack* onto the cosmos, and Sartre's ontological dualism between the for-itself and the in-itself is also questionable. The last part of this chapter (and the crux of this book) discusses how the Buddhist deconstruction of the ego-self can end its *duḥkha*. The Mahāyāna critique of self-existence is explained by considering Nāgārjuna's arguments about interdependence and the Hua-yen analogy of Indra's Net.

The Buddhist solution to bipolar dualisms usually involves accepting the term that has been denied. If our worst fear is death, the answer is to die now. To study Buddhism is to study yourself, says Dōgen, and to study yourself is to forget yourself. The ego-self's attempt to make itself real is a self-reflexive effort to grasp itself, an impossibility that leads to self-paralysis; Buddhist meditation, in which I become absorbed into my practice, is thus an exercise in de-reflection. To yield to my groundlessness is to realize that I have always been grounded: not as a sense-of-self, but insofar as I have never been separate from the world, never been other than the world.

Chapter 4, "The Meaning of It All," considers what the previous chapters imply about our understanding of morality, the search for truth, and the meaning of our lives. These implications are developed by engaging in a dialogue with Nietzsche, perhaps the first Western thinker to realize that they are not discovered but constructed: internalized games we learn from each other and play with ourselves. Nietzsche sees how moral codes gain their psychological compulsion because they provide a symbolic way for us to gain some grip on our fate. His solution is to reverse valency and replace slave morality with master morality, yet he does not see how much the heroic ego of his Overman is a fantasy project for overcoming our *lack*. In contrast, Buddhism undercuts the ethical problem by emphasizing an interdependence so great that I *am* you. Nietzsche sees that our search for truth also tends to be a sublimated attempt to secure ourselves: We want to grasp the symbols that enable us to grasp reality, because they reflect it. Stripped of its will-to-power, Nietzschean perspectivism, which liberates all truths from the supervision of a dominant one, turns out to be similar to Nāgārjuna's realization that "no truth has been taught by a Buddha to anyone, anywhere."

Eternal recurrence is Nietzsche's attempt to resolve nihilism by revaluing



this world, yet it is not a good enough myth because it still seeks being: it attempts to make the here-and-now *real* by making it recur (or by acting as if it recurs) eternally. For Buddhism, however, nihilism is not the meaninglessness of life but our fear of that meaninglessness and the ways we evade it—ways which include myths about eternal recurrence. To accept meaninglessness, as part of the process of yielding to the no-thing-ness we dread, is to realize what might be called *meaningfreeness*. As a result, life becomes more playful. Yet, the question is not whether we play but how. Do we suffer our various games because they are sublimated life-or-death struggles, or do we dance with the light feet that Nietzsche called the first attribute of divinity? The problem is that anyone who *must* play—because he or she needs to get something *from* their play—cannot *play*.

Chapter 5, “Trying to Become Real,” discusses some of our more compulsive games, four of the most popular ways we symbolically try to fill up our sense of *lack*: the craving for fame, the love of love, the money complex, and our collective Oedipal project of technological development. Although now so widespread we take them for granted, these pursuits are not “natural” (i.e., not needing to be explained) but historically conditioned. All four began to become important just before or during the Renaissance, when the Western individual sense of self—and therefore its shadow sense of *lack* as well—became hypertrophied. Each of the four can be viewed as a demonic secular religion: *secular* because by pursuing it we seek a salvation for the self in *this* world; *religious* because in that pursuit a basically spiritual urge for *reality* manifests in distorted form; and tending to become *demonic* because the inability to overcome our sense of unreality through these pursuits is usually experienced as “I do not yet have enough. . . .”

If the concept of *lack* can illuminate such aspects of Western culture, might it also shed light on other cultures? In place of a more conventional summary, the conclusion speculates about the differences among Indian, Sino-Japanese, and Western cultures and about the possible role of *lack* in those differences: some key distinguishing features may be understood as different ways of responding to our sense-of-*lack*. The distinction between this world and another transcendental dimension is fundamental to India but much less important in China and Japan, which emphasize this phenomenal world. In terms of *lack*, Indian culture traditionally orients itself to another reality that can fill up the sense of *lack* we feel here, while China and Japan try to resolve human groundlessness by grounding their members more tightly into a hierarchical social system. In the West, an early transcendental dimension was gradually internalized to become the supposedly autonomous and self-directed individual addressed above.

The argument in this book provides another version of the often-made claim that today, as usual, our deepest problem is a *spiritual* one. Since that word is not respectable in some circles and too respectable in some others, let me emphasize the special sense of the word as it is employed in the interpretation of Buddhism that follows. Our problem is spiritual insofar as the sense-of-self's lack of being compels it to seek being one way or another, consciously or unconsciously. The solution is spiritual insofar as what is necessary is a *metanoia*, a turning-around or rather a letting-go, at our “empty” core. It should not be assumed that this puts us in touch with some other transcendental dimension; according to Mahāyāna Buddhism what it reveals is the actual nature of the world we have understood ourselves to be in yet always felt ourselves to be separate from. That sense of separation from the world is what motivates me to try to secure myself within it, but according to Buddhism the only satisfactory resolution is to realize I am not other than it.

In contrast to the various types of reductionism that have been predominant in the twentieth century—Marxist, Freudian, behaviorist, materialist, etc.—the chapters that follow argue for what might be called a transcendental reduction, or a “transcendentalization.” The reduction goes the other way, up instead of down, by noticing how our ultimate concern, the need to ground the groundless sense-of-self, cannot be denied. When we attempt to ignore it, by devoting ourselves to secular pursuits, we end up sacralizing them—and therefore demonize them, as chapter 5 argues. According to Nāgārjuna's famous dictum, the limit (*koti*) of *nirvāṇa* is the limit of the everyday world; there is not even the subtlest difference between them (*Mūlamadhyamikakārikā* XXV.20). Then, the sacred/secular distinction too needs to be conflated, by demonstrating how each term is complicit in the other. Nietzsche attempted such a deconstruction with his critique of all “higher worlds,” only to become impaled on the other horn by celebrating the will-to-power of a heroic ego. His brave new world eliminated the sacred without doing the same to its opposite, which we perceive as the secular. In sum, the concept of repression can help us see ultimate concerns functioning in so-called secular pursuits, although in a distorted, unconscious, and compulsive fashion.

If there is no difference between *nirvāṇa* and the everyday world, the sacred can be nothing other than the true nature of the secular. To realize this is to experience our phenomenal world as holy: not because it is God's creation or *śūnyatā*'s form, not because it recurs again and again, not as symbolic or symptomatic of something else, but as what it is. The question, finally, is not whether the world can be resacralized but whether we will sacralize it fetishistically, because unconsciously, or wholeheartedly, because awake.