

The Psychodramatic Technique of Doubling and its Relationship to Zen Buddhist Practice

by Katerina Seligman

Katerina is a psychodramatist and a TEPIT working in the Nelson region of New Zealand. In this article we come to appreciate the more recent integration of meditation in Katerina's life. We also can see how our connections, themes and concepts tend to be re-worked as we continue to open out to new areas of life.

Psychodrama has been a mainstay of my life for the past 20 years. Throughout the personal and professional work I have done, the quality of my life has improved in many ways. It was when I suffered a severe illness, and as a consequence, began a regular Zen Buddhist meditation practice that I began to find a consistent inner peace and joyfulness, which was previously only erratic and transitory. I have given considerable thought to the nature of this practice and have come to see it in psychodramatic terms as a form of doubling. This perspective has integrated the two most powerful influences in my life to date: Psychodrama and Zen Buddhism.

Consider for a moment the psychodramatic practice of doubling. When we act as a double for another person, we attempt to enter the world of the other, to momentarily put ourselves in their shoes, and to experience them, as it were, from inside their own skins. We aim to

take up the same body position and breathing pattern to the other person and attempt to come very close to being that person, that person's experience, their thoughts, their feelings, and their impulses. When we lovingly communicate our understanding to the other person, we give them the experience of being understood and accepted.

Through this understanding and acceptance, the person's experience is validated. This produces a deepening of affect, self-awareness is increased and self-acceptance is fostered.

Several years ago I became paralysed from the waist down, my body's response to the self-abuse of working too hard, for too long on too many things at once. This crisis brought with it hidden gifts. Confined to a wheelchair, in an attempt to make sense of my illness, I re-discovered the simple Zen Buddhist practice of zazen. This practice was advocated by the Buddha to foster compassion and

overcome suffering. It consists of sitting in an upright and relaxed posture, and focusing our attention on the breath. This sounds simple but can in fact be a difficult task as inevitably thoughts, feelings and impulses interrupt our concentration. Zazen goes something like this ... "Take a moment to try this: count each in-breath, from one to ten, and then start again at one. When you notice that you have become distracted from your breath, rather than pushing the thoughts away, simply notice their content and give them a label before returning your attention to the breath. In the same way, label any feelings and impulses. This noticing and labelling is an acknowledgment. It brings to consciousness those thoughts, feelings and impulses which were previously unconscious or only partially conscious. Labels might go something like this: tense neck, sadness, thought about work; thought about Fred, and so on. Keep the labels simple, and each time you bring your attention back to the breath, start the counting back at one".

I have come to appreciate that it is this practice of labelling thoughts, feelings and impulses during meditation, which is akin to the psychodramatic process of doubling. Moreno developed the concept of doubling as a part of his theory of human development. A young baby starts life in an identity fusion with its mother. The mother acts as a double for the baby and gradually the baby develops a sense of being a separate entity. If a child is doubled accurately, it develops self-awareness and self-acceptance.

Many of us were inadequately doubled in our early years, and consequently as adults there is a need to re-establish the lost sense of

self. In a therapeutic relationship, healing occurs through the corrective experience of having our thoughts feelings and impulses understood and validated. I have come to view Zazen meditation as a process of self-doubling, where, rather than tuning in to the experience of another person, we are tuning in to our own experience. I think that we are in fact doubling ourselves. As we become aware of the content of our thoughts feelings and impulses, and in labelling them with acceptance, there is an increase in self-awareness, a validation and deepening of experience, and a consequent relaxation. Certainly, I have found that practising meditation, or "self-doubling" for a short time every day has brought a subtle transformation to my life, especially it has brought a greater consistency to my experience of inner peace that was previously erratic. The outcomes of more self-awareness and greater self-acceptance, are there, not just during the meditation practice itself, but throughout the day. Therefore, this practice has the potential to empower us to live with more consciousness and may impact on every aspect of our lives.