The Institute for
Meditation and Psychotherapy

Cushion and Couch



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From the Editor

Welcome to this issue of *Cushion and Couch*. In these pages, you'll find a diverse collection of articles exploring the intersection of mindfulness and psychotherapy from a range of perspectives.

Cushion and Couch is IMP's quarterly online journal, featuring articles, interviews, and book reviews written by and for members of our community. We welcome your contributions and feedback. If you would like to submit an article, write a book review, or share your thoughts about the journal, please get in touch by e-mail.

Alex Gokce, MSW
Editor, *Cushion and Couch*

The Luminosity of Emptiness

Charles W. Styron

In the Tibetan Buddhist Vajrayana, it is said that emptiness is luminous. This is a provocative statement, and it sounds like an oxymoron. It also contradicts the experience that most practitioners have when they glimpse it initially. It's definitely not luminous; rather, it's depressing and deflationary. It makes one feel as though the bottom has permanently fallen out, leaving one in freefall. It's not pleasant. It's frightening and insulting and disorienting. This initial experience of emptiness is so repellent that it drives most practitioners away unless they are associated with a genuine teacher and a seasoned sangha to support them. The dharmic path is arduous—not for the weak-hearted. It's like the apocryphal Zen Master said: "Better not start."

Emptiness is the ultimate nature of reality, but what does this mean? In many ways, it's easier to understand what it does not mean. It does not mean that ultimate reality is insubstantial or nonexistent. It does not mean that emptiness is a void, a nothingness. Emptiness is not nihilistic. "Emptiness" means "empty of description (which I am attempting here, paradoxically)—empty of concepts." It means that associations, comparisons, metaphors, mental linkages of all kinds are wide of the mark. Emptiness is "empty" of all of those things. It cannot ultimately be described, in other words. It must be experienced directly. For this to happen for the ordinary person, it has to be pointed out first by someone who is skilled. The kicker is that the pointing itself is not it and should not be confused with it. Emptiness is naked: no clothes, no accoutrements, no camouflage.

Emptiness is brightest when seen with the naked eye without magnification or enhancement, without polish or varnish or lacquer of any kind—all of which dim its radiance. Perceiving reality accurately and clearly is a bit like recovering an original document from palimpsest. The adventitious second or third layers have to be carefully removed in order for the original to be revealed (if it is still extant). Oftentimes, the original document and the subsequent writeovers have almost nothing to do with each other. Clear perception of reality is similar; it is often so different from the conceptual writeovers that we have imposed upon it that the two hardly resemble each other at all.

Let me provide a couple of examples:

Metals that are not inert tarnish over time, and they have to be polished in order to be seen in their original, pristine state. Genuine reality is like this. The perception of it by untrained, confused minds tarnishes it, and this tarnished perception gets passed along from one person to another like a message in the game of telephone. It eventually comes to resemble something from which it is far removed.

For an additional perspective, imagine the fictitious personage, George. He is 21 years old, 6 feet tall, a stunning athlete with speed and strength as well as academic acumen and accomplishment. He is a Rhodes Scholar, in fact. He goes on to become a Senator and becomes allied with many impassioned causes. The things that George represents oftentimes inflame the opinions of both adherents and adversaries. George's name cannot even be mentioned in the public square without causing a stir; his name alone conjures up a galaxy of plaudits and incriminations. But none of these things is the quintessential George. Sometimes when he gets out of the shower in the morning and looks at himself in the mirror, he remembers a 17-year-old student athlete and scholar who has no idea who he is or where he is going. He is full of energy and potential but completely without portfolio. Nevertheless, he feels nascently alive. This flashback, which has thought coverings of its own, is much closer to the quintessential George than anything in the minds of his followers and adversaries. Even this George remains a fiction, however, until it is completely stripped of the vestiges of ego.

Everything in this world is like George. Nothing is normally seen for what it really is. Sometimes it's elevated; more often it is tarnished or degraded. Seeing things as they are is a tall order, and it consists more of "not seeing" than it does of actually apprehending. Seeing things as they are is an exercise of stripping away the peripheral. Layers and layers and layers of varnish have to be removed before the original reality can be seen. And reality here is not like an artifact where the layers of varnish can readily be seen. Far from it; "conceptual varnish" is much harder to perceive as well as to remove. Getting down to fundamental reality, therefore, is a very tall order, entailing an almost endless series of iterations.

If one is ultimately able to glimpse fundamental reality, it flashes and shines. It glistens and radiates out but in a subtle manner—not ostentatiously. The radiance is also intrinsic, not reflected. It leaves no trace. This is the luminosity of emptiness, and it has a weightless feeling because it carries no baggage. Glimpses of emptiness are usually fleeting, finally, because we often hasten to proclaim them and characterize them. Far better to appreciate them simply and let go.

Charles W. Styron, PsyD, is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Watertown, Massachusetts, as well as a consulting psychologist for Caritas Norwood Hospital in Norwood, Massachusetts. He is also the treasurer for The Institute of Meditation and Psychotherapy, a former architect, and a family man with 21-year-old daughter. Additionally, Dr. Styron has been a practitioner and teacher in the Shambhala and Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhist traditions for 38 years. He is a contributing author to *Mindfulness and Psychotherapy*, Second Edition.

Genuine, Ordinary, Imperfect

Edward Ryan

"It is truth that liberates, not your effort to be free."

—Krishnamurti

I have found that there is one aspect of reality that poses a real challenge: we have control of very, very little, if anything. Because this is difficult to accept, we resist it. Our resistance often takes the form of working hard, of fretting, of worrying, of competing, of developing, and of thus getting lost in a fantasy of struggling to be in control. In that fantasy we imagine ourselves and others to be characters in a drama, extraordinary beings, striving for perfection. If we imagine we are gaining control, we feel good about ourselves, and if we imagine we are not in control we feel unhappy with ourselves. This is all part of a mind-drama, a delusion in which we are the central character.

It can even be part of our participation in therapy, or in our practice of meditation. But in our heroic effort to be free of neurotic patterns of being and relating, or in our heroic effort to be free of greed, hatred, and delusion, we become lost in this fantasy, this illusion of control.

If we sit quietly and bring our attention to the experience of the breath, coming in and going out, realizing we are not controlling it, becoming aware that the body is doing something it just does, we may be able to settle down to the reality of our experience. We may be able to see that it is genuine (not made up), ordinary (not special), imperfect (not perfect). It just is. Experience that arises, exists, and passes away, followed by another experience that does the same, and another, and so on.

It may be that as we become aware of the ordinary quality of experience, the imperfect nature of it, and its genuineness, so unlike the dramatic fantasy, we might laugh. A laugh of liberation.

But then, can we maintain this awareness, this experience of liberation? What happens when we become aware of the reality of having one experience after another, and as we do, this life is moving along. It's happening beyond our control, and it's going to end with the life of this body ending. Nothing can be more genuine, ordinary, and imperfect than this reality. Yet we may feel moved to resist it. In our heroic, dramatic fantasy, this

reality is not a factor. And so we may easily drift back into that illusion. In that story we are somebody special, not just a passing being, ordinary and imperfect.

I'm guessing that if you have been practicing psychotherapy for a while, like me, you have heard lots of these stories. And if you reflect on your own psychotherapy, you can recall the story you were telling yourself then, and maybe still are. And I'm also guessing that if you have been practicing meditation for a while, like me, you're aware of how the mind resists the awareness of its own genuine, ordinary reality. In fact, like me, you might be aware, from time to time, that despite all the meditation you've been doing, you still get caught up in these dramatic stories. Can relationships with others really be as imperfect as they are? Yes. Can we actually be the way we genuinely are? Yes. Can growing old and dying really be as ordinary as it is? Yes. What is this thing we call life if this is the way things actually are? It's all true—and if we sometimes can see it and know it for what it truly is, perhaps we might feel kindness and compassion.

Edward Ryan, PhD, has taught, supervised and practiced psychotherapy for fifty-seven years and is an Associate Clinical Professor in the Yale School of Medicine. He has practiced insight meditation for over forty years, and has served on the Board of Directors of the Insight Meditation Society. With his wife, the poet Sylvia Forges- Ryan, he published *Take A Deep Breath: The Haiku Way to Inner Peace*.

Is the Cup Half Empty?

Nelly Kaufer

Psychotherapists are well acquainted with the language of metaphor. It often arrives unannounced in the consulting room, offering a compact way to gesture toward inner states. One of the most common metaphors is the image of the cup: half empty, signaling a depressive orientation; half full, suggesting optimism or resilience.

When a client describes their world as "half empty," we may recognize well-worn cognitive and affective patterns associated with depression: a narrowing of attention, a privileging of absence over presence, a sense of foreclosed possibility. The reflex to counter this stance—by inviting the client to consider what is "also true," what remains intact or available—can be therapeutically useful. And yet, the counterpoint of "half full" can feel insufficient or even alienating when introduced prematurely. Clients often experience such reframing as a subtle disconfirmation of their lived reality, a pressure toward optimism that does not seem authentic. In this way, the "half-full" position can drift into a kind of psychological insistence, one that risks bypassing rather than deepening contact with experience.

A more nuanced therapeutic move might hold both perspectives simultaneously: the cup is both half empty and half full. This formulation invites multiplicity. It acknowledges that loss and presence, grief and gratitude, depletion and sufficiency, can coexist without canceling one another. For many, this shift from opposition to inclusion can be quietly transformative. It expands the field of awareness, allowing for a more complex emotional life that does not require premature resolution.

In *Reflective Meditation: Cultivating Kindness and Curiosity in the Buddha's Company*, the book I co-authored with Linda Modaro, the "four-cornered argument" offers a further development of this kind of inquiry—one that can be generative in psychotherapeutic work. Drawn from Buddhist logic, the four-cornered approach invites us to examine a proposition from four distinct vantage points: **that it is so, that it is not so, that it is both so and not so, and that it is neither so nor not so.** Rather than serving as a solely philosophical exercise, this framework can function as a lived, experiential inquiry into the nature of our assumptions.

Applied to the metaphor of the cup, the four corners unfold in a way that derails any fixed interpretation. First, the cup is half empty. This honors the immediacy of loss, the felt

sense of lack that may be central to experience. It validates without correction. Second, the cup is not half empty. Here, we begin to question the totalizing nature of the initial claim. What has been overlooked? Third, the cup **is both** half empty and half full. This introduces a dialectical holding, a capacity to remain with apparent contradiction without collapsing it into a single, definitive view.

It is the fourth corner, however, that often opens the most unexpected therapeutic space: the cup **is neither** half empty nor half full. At first glance, this may seem abstract or evasive. Yet clinically, it points toward a loosening of the entire framework through which experience has been organized. The question is no longer simply **how much** is in the cup, or whether one perspective is more accurate than another. Instead, attention shifts to the assumptions embedded in the act of measuring itself—the implicit belief that experience can be fully captured, defined, and known in this way.

This fourth position can be disorienting. It invites a step outside the familiar terrain and into something less certain. The mind's habitual movement—to conclude, to settle, to know—is gently interrupted. What emerges in its place is not an immediate answer, but a different quality of awareness: one that is more open, more curious, and less constrained by the need for certainty.

This is where the therapeutic relevance of uncertainty becomes particularly vivid. Much of psychological suffering is sustained not only by painful states, but by the conviction that these states are definitive—that they will persist, that they reveal something final about the self or the future. The depressed client "knows" that emptiness will endure; the anxious client "knows" that threat is imminent. These forms of knowing are rarely experienced as conjecture. They present as fact.

The four-cornered argument offers a way of engaging these certainties without directly confronting or dismantling them. Instead, it widens the frame. If something is so, could it also not be so? If it appears to be both, could there be a way in which it is neither? This is not an invitation to flexibility—a softening of the structures that organize experience.

In the consulting room, this kind of inquiry can deepen the therapeutic process in subtle but significant ways. It is most effective when it is not introduced as a formal technique or named framework, but rather embodied in the therapist's way of listening and responding. When the four-cornered argument is presented explicitly, it can easily become something the client feels asked to "do correctly," or a cognitive exercise that distances them from the immediacy of their experience. Approached more carefully and experientially, however, it becomes less a method and more a stance—one

conveyed through tone, pacing, and the kinds of questions that are allowed to open rather than close inquiry. The therapist might gently reflect one aspect of the client's experience, then, at another moment, leaving space for ambiguity without rushing to organize it. Without naming the framework, the therapist invites movement across perspectives, allowing clients to explore their experience from multiple angles without requiring them to abandon any single perspective too quickly.

Importantly, this approach does not lead to a detached or indifferent stance. On the contrary, by loosening the grip of fixed views, clients may find themselves able to feel more deeply, not less. When experience is no longer constrained by a single interpretive lens, its texture becomes richer, more varied, and more alive. The vulnerability of uncertainty is still present, but it is accompanied by something else: a sense of openness and insight, even creativity.

For psychotherapists, engaging with the four-cornered argument might involve a reorientation of our therapeutic practice. It asks that we, too, relinquish some measure of certainty—not only about our clients, but about our formulations, our interventions, and the trajectory of the work itself. This does not mean abandoning clinical knowledge or skill, but holding them more lightly, allowing space for what cannot be anticipated.

In this shared field of inquiry, therapy becomes less about arriving at the correct interpretation and more about cultivating a way of relating to experience that can accommodate its inherent complexity. The cup is not simply redefined; it is released from the necessity of being defined at all.

What remains is a different kind of engagement—one grounded in curiosity, sustained by kindness, and open to the unfolding nature of life. This is not simply an attitude the therapist adopts toward the client, but one the therapist can learn to cultivate in relation to their own experience through the practice of Reflective Meditation. As therapists become more familiar with observing their own thoughts, emotions, and assumptions without prematurely organizing or resolving them, a corresponding flexibility begins to inform their clinical presence. In this way, Reflective Meditation is not applied as an intervention, but lived as a sensibility. It shapes how the therapist listens, how they tolerate uncertainty, and how they resist the pull toward quick conclusions or fixed interpretations. When this capacity is embodied, it naturally enters the therapeutic encounter.

The work becomes less about directing the client toward particular insights and more about participating together in an unfolding process. Within this shared space, neither

therapist nor client is required to know in advance where the exploration will lead. And it is precisely this willingness to remain with not-knowing—without collapsing into confusion or retreating into certainty—that allows something genuinely new to emerge.

Nelly Kaufer, LPC, is a seasoned psychotherapist and the founder of and lead teacher at Pine Street Sangha in Portland, Oregon. She has been teaching meditation, mindfulness, and Buddhist psychology to mental health professionals for over 20 years, continually refining her perspective and approach. In the Reflective Counsel program, Nelly designs and teaches online and in-person continuing education workshops that nurture a meditative and contemplative practice, along with an experiential knowledge of Buddhist psychology.

Radical Gathering: Why Lay Sangha Practice Is a Revolutionary Act

Sage Acharya

Back in 2022, my intention for starting a lay sangha was quite simple: I wanted to bring women together to practice the Buddha's teachings in a supportive space where we could gather regularly.

As a woman juggling the many roles of mother, mental health therapist, wife, friend, sister, and daughter, I was deeply familiar with the toll of burnout and the profound isolation that can come from living in a distracted world. Craving connection but lacking an in-person community, I realized I probably wasn't alone in this longing. I wanted to create a gentle refuge—a container for women to explore how to engage with life through the lens of Dharma, cultivating awareness, insight, wisdom, equanimity, and compassion.

What began as a quiet hope blossomed into something truly beautiful. As we began to gather regularly, I realized that our lay sangha was not just a weekly meeting; it was a deeply revolutionary act against consumerism and fragmentation.

When we think of revolution, we often think of massive political upheaval. But I am speaking here of a social revolution—a radical shift in the way we think, behave, and relate to one another. Our sangha dares to challenge the conditioning of modern life, which so often keeps us stuck in a cycle of consuming more, distracting ourselves, and living unskillfully. By meeting in person, practicing formal meditation, and engaging in mindful listening and speaking, we are slowly dismantling the individualistic, reactive habits that catch us again and again.

By intentionally taking our time and energy away from endless consumption, and committing to gather week after week, we have learned a different way of being. This practice offers a way to break free from the cycle of samsara—the cycles of greed, hatred, and delusion. As we sit together, witnessing how these states of mind create suffering within ourselves and in the wider world, we learn to cultivate a more mindful, awake way of living.

Showing up, week after week, stands in quiet defiance of a culture that prioritizes speed, privacy, and convenience. In this safe container, we risk vulnerability, sharing the deep, messy realities of family life, career pressures, and existential anxiety. We are

intentionally slowing down, practicing deep patience with ourselves and each other. As lay practitioners "in the same boat," we share the weight of life's sorrows, turning a lonely, isolating path into a shared journey.

Furthermore, cultivating joy and contentment in our sangha is in itself a revolutionary act. It directly counters the societal message that happiness is bought, not cultivated. By finding contentment together, regardless of external circumstances, we tap into an internal wellspring of resilience. This energy flows against the grain, challenging us to find a more sustainable way of being.

Withdrawing our attention from the outer world to be in this sacred container allows us to reclaim the time to stop, breathe, and rest. It helps us see clearly what causes suffering and how we can act with more skill in our daily roles. In a world constantly distracted by screens and demands, this intentional pause is a profound, revolutionary act.

Our gatherings are also rooted in ethics, allowing us to practice non-harm, honesty, and mindful speech—qualities often missing in the wider world. Through this, we learn to balance the hectic, often unethical ways we see around us. And through the practice of Metta (loving-kindness) in our meditations, we use our sangha as a vehicle for good, radiating compassion inward and outward to our families, communities, and the world, offering a tender alternative to anger and violence.

If there is one type of revolution I would highly recommend, it is this: the radical, nurturing act of gathering in a lay sangha. It is the practice of gently challenging the automatic ways of thinking, behaving, and speaking that we were taught would make us happy, and discovering true, interconnected freedom instead.

Sage Acharya is a South Asian, Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor practicing in Naperville, Illinois. She has been in solo practice for 17 years. Her company is Be Counseling LLC. She works with adults and adolescents with anxiety disorders, depression, teaching mindfulness techniques and self-compassion to manage symptoms and overcome obstacles. Outside of being a mental health therapist, she loves to write, dance, meditate and spend time with her family and friends doing activities that feed the spirit.

Poem

Rebecca D. Forkner

Ghost in the graveyard
That night
A full moon wreathed in light fog
Such magic
I and the children
Sneaking in shadows
Giggling
Senses heightened, a tiny bit afraid
With delight
While the adults
Talk business
A small and secret smile
At my fortune

Rebecca D. Forkner, PhD, is a clinical psychologist specializing in helping adults—especially college students—struggling with anxiety, depression, OCD, and non-suicidal self-harm. She works from a mindfulness-based perspective, integrating ACT, CBT, DBT, and psychodynamic approaches as needed. Her focus is on helping clients shift their relationship with thoughts and emotions, cultivate resilience, and move toward more meaningful, fulfilling lives. She is licensed and can treat clients in MA, NH, and CT (NY in progress). She has worked with clients from all over the globe and with many first-generation college students. Clients often share that they tried many therapists before finding a good fit with me, and value my warmth, compassion, and commitment to truly understanding their unique experiences.

About the Institute for Meditation and Psychotherapy

The Institute for Meditation and Psychotherapy (IMP) is a non-profit organization dedicated to the education and training of mental health professionals in the integration of mindfulness meditation and psychotherapy.

The vision of IMP is practice-based, and all teaching faculty have extensive personal and professional experience in the practice of mindfulness meditation or other mindfulness practices. Most educational programs offer CE credit for psychologists, social workers, licensed mental health counselors, licensed marital and family therapists, and nurses. Secondary activities of IMP include psychological consultation to meditation centers, clinical supervision, psychotherapy referrals, and networking for interested clinicians.

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