

Enlightenment Therapy

By CHIP BROWN
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I. The Invisible Man If he hadn't been so distraught, he might have laughed at the absurdity of it: a Zen master in the waiting room of a psychoanalyst. He was a connoisseur of contradictions, an unsentimental man with a "Zen noir" temperament and an un-self-sparing wit. "Anywhere I hang myself is home," he liked to say. It amused him that the greatest discovery of his life happened almost by accident — that his decision to renounce a tenured professorship in philosophy and become a Zen Buddhist monk 35 years ago rested not just on the traditional revelations of an enlightenment experience (floods of light, *samadhi* or oneness, ineffable joy) but also on some farcical hurdles concerning Jewish wedding etiquette and his belated discovery that he had indeed been circumcised as a kid.

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But that afternoon in July 2006, driving from his home in Brewster, N.Y., to the shrink's office in Bedford Hills, he was frantic with anxiety. He found a seat facing the door, consumed with the feeling that no one could see him, that he'd become, in his phrase, "the invisible man." He feared what the desire to be seen might drive him to do. How could he have spent his life cultivating unity of body and mind, oneness with all beings and the ability to apprehend reality directly, unmediated by thoughts or concepts or what Zen considered the arch delusion of "the self" — only to be haunted by the feeling that he lacked the most basic unity of all?

His self-alienation had divided him in two. Sometimes he was the Zen master Mitsunen (the name meant "Now Mind"), who got up before dawn each morning to sit selflessly for hours in meditation. Mitsunen received dharma transmission, by which teachings are passed from master to disciple, in the Soto school of Zen and was ordained a Zen monk in the Soto and the Rinzai schools. He served as head monk at the International Dai Bosatsu Zendo Kongo-ji in

upstate New York in the 1970s; for years he has led Zen retreats in Florida and North Carolina.

Other times he was Louis Nordstrom, a 63-year-old professor, poet and essayist with a round face, a shaved gray head and a shaky grip on whatever guise it was that people employed to navigate train stations and grocery stores. He earned a Ph.D. in philosophy at Columbia (his thesis was on Sartre's theory of evil), and after giving up the monastic life he chose over tenure, he scraped by on teaching gigs at half a dozen schools, including [Yale](#) and [N.Y.U.](#) But the anxiety he was mired in in the summer of 2006 seemed deeper than what might be expected from financial or professional insecurity, or the infirmities of growing old, or even the aftermath of a busted marriage — his fourth. For two decades he lectured on the emergence of Western lay Zen, arguing against what he saw as the antiemotional bias of monastic Asian Zen in favor of an approach that integrated psychological experience into meditation practice. But as a pioneer of Zen in America, he had little success practicing what he preached. An antidepressant hadn't helped much. Often in tears, he wondered if he was having a nervous breakdown. In a poem, he wrote:

*... Because being alone
Has penetrated the bone,
I have misplaced the meaning
of pleasure; displaced
the measure of its loss.
Because being lost
has become my treasure,
daily I grow more flagrant
in my courtship of vagrant nowhere ...*

Here he was now, penciled in for 2:30 on the afternoon of July 7, 2006, in a waiting room tastefully littered with back issues of [The New Yorker](#) and [yoga](#) magazines, hoping for ... what? To be seen. To be understood. To be saved in some way.

"Hi," a man said, emerging from an office with his hand extended. "I'm Jeffrey. Are you Lou?"

Nordstrom nodded. He had gotten the therapist's name from a friend. For a moment the two men measured each other across clasped hands. Then they went into the office and closed the door.

II. The Marriage of Buddha and Freud Zen and psychoanalysis have been courting for decades, as dizzy with their differences as a couple in a screwball comedy. The two disciplines — one, a much-revised theory of mind and therapy for neurotic illness from *fin de siècle* Vienna; the other a largely unchanged spiritual technique for realizing enlightenment from fifth-century China — broadly share the goal of relieving mental suffering. But their metaphysical premises and practical methods are night and day.

Psychoanalysis, of course, began as a flashlight safari into the darkness of the human psyche. Bring even a bit of the benighted unconscious to light, and neurotic patients might be relieved of their symptoms, free to enjoy, in Freud's famous phrase, "common human unhappiness." With its staple ideas about unconscious conflicts, the hidden freight of feelings, the secret intelligibility of dreams, psychoanalysis is essentially an exploration of how meaning arises in the mind.

What darkness is to psychoanalysis, light is to Zen. In pursuit of mystic illumination, "the vast ocean of dazzling light," Zen is cheerfully unconcerned with the manufacture and distribution of personal meaning. It tends to discount the authority of the unconscious and to ignore the significance of dreams. Students are discouraged from delving into the content of emotions. Where psychoanalysis is keen to unpack a patient's past — especially those aspects of the past that distort perception in the present — Zen dwells on awareness in the present. *This! Here! Now!* Zen masters have been known to whack students with a stick.

It's no surprise that such an unlikely pair got off to a rocky start. For decades the feeling of being "one" with the universe, prized in Zen as an attribute of enlightenment, was belittled by many psychoanalysts as an "infantile regression." By the same token, the injunction "know thyself," the ultimate chocolate-cherry in the candy box of Western wisdom, was brushed off by Zen adherents as a delusion. What's to know about a conceit that has no fixed reality and more often than not is an impediment to experiencing Buddha nature? The self, as one Rinzai teacher put it bluntly, "is a malignant growth which is to be surgically removed."

But by the middle of the last century, Zen and psychoanalysis were warming up to each other. The views of the relational school of psychoanalysis, which emerged in the 1980s to critique "the myth of the isolated mind," fit comfortably with the Zen notion that suffering comes from the misperception that we are separate from the world. By 1994, when some 500 Buddhists and psychoanalysts gathered for a conference at the Harvard Club in New York City, a number of analysts had regular meditation practices and were incorporating Buddhist ideas in their work. Among them was Jeffrey B. Rubin. At the time he was 41. He grew up on Long Island, the elder of two boys; his mother was a social worker, his father an executive for Burlington Menswear.

Rubin's interest in Buddhism and psychoanalysis can be traced to the last five seconds of a high-school basketball game he played for the Woodmere Academy Wolverines on Long Island in February 1971. As the short but sharpshooting point guard, he got the ball at half court, with the Wolverines trailing by a point. As he dribbled up the left side, the din of the crowd dropped away; an uncanny feeling of clarity and peace came over him; time slowed. After he shot from the top of the key, he heard the roar in the gym break in like the sound resuming in a movie. He lingered in the locker room after his teammates dressed, hardly caring that the Wolverines won or that he was the hero. A door had opened onto another world.

After graduating from Princeton, where he was a literature major, he was still confounded by the realm he'd glimpsed. He attended a Buddhist retreat and took up meditation. At night he immersed himself in the literature of Buddhism and yoga, Krishnamurti and Freud. During the day he worked in a halfway house for schizophrenics, more intrigued now by actual characters than by characters in texts. He got a master's in social work at Columbia, and later a Ph.D. in psychology from Union Institute and University. At Lenox Hill Hospital, he entered a training program in psychoanalysis and in 1980 opened his own practice.

By the 1994 conference at the Harvard Club, Rubin was convinced that "the marriage of Buddha and Freud" would benefit both disciplines. "When you combine the best of Buddhism and psychoanalysis," he told me one day last winter, "you get a full-spectrum view of human nature focused on both health and spiritual potential as well as on the psychological forces we struggle with and the obstacles we unconsciously put in our way." But people at the conference still seemed bunkered in their doctrines, and he often found himself tacking between camps. He was scheduled to summarize a dialogue between a Buddhist and a psychoanalyst, but he was suddenly struck by the fallacy that enlightenment meant complete freedom from self-deception. He stayed up till 5 a.m. drafting a new talk, "The Emperor of Enlightenment May Have No Clothes." Two years later he published his first book, "Psychotherapy and Buddhism." Ten years after that — a decade in which he refined his pioneering approach to Buddhism and psychoanalysis, published two more books and began his own studies of Zen — the ultimate patient appeared in his office.

III. What Does It Mean to Have a Life of One's Own? With a wraithlike air, the Zen master accepted a seat on a black leather couch below the colored tumult of a de Kooning print and a photograph of a stone path vanishing around a bend in Kyoto. Lou Nordstrom later said he felt better almost the moment he met Jeffrey Rubin's gaze. He had come as someone would to an emergency room for a therapeutic intervention.

"I left that first session with tears of joy on my face," he told me one day last October as we sat with cups of coffee in the mica light of Bryant Park in Manhattan. "What Jeffrey did that first session saved my life. He listened empathetically and nonjudgmentally. He encouraged me to see my fears of acting out as symptoms of an unconscious desire to be seen."

As the months went by, measured out in 50-minute sessions twice a week, the motifs of his history emerged. There was the surreal and horrific childhood of parental neglect, abuse and abandonment. There were those aspects of old trauma he was unwittingly reinflicting on himself, contriving to be abandoned by wives, disillusioned by mentors, seemingly incapable of taking basic care of himself. And there was the paradoxical role of Zen, which had enabled him to cope with the pain and alienation of his purgatorial youth but which he was now beginning to understand was implicated in his difficulties and may even have been making some of them worse.

Nordstrom was born in Atlanta in 1943, the only child of a Norwegian father who worked at a bank and a Scotch-Irish Cherokee mother. Both parents — now dead — were alcoholics. When Nordstrom was 3, his mother fled; his father, who remarried twice, ceded the child-rearing to Nordstrom's paternal grandparents in Brooklyn. They had their own problems, his grandmother's incipient senility among them. Once, when a friend came over for dinner, she triumphantly served up strawberry ice cream on a block of still-frozen French fries. As Nordstrom wrote in an unpublished memoir composed after a year of therapy: "My grandmother spent most of her time lying in bed amongst her large collection of dolls, wearing layers of housedresses, rarely taken off, and her Dodgers baseball cap; my grandfather spent most of his time in his basement workshop where he made hundreds of miniature sailing ships in bottles. They hated each other, and hardly ever spoke."

From his grandparents Nordstrom learned his mother had stubbed out cigarettes on his skin and had beaten him with a brine-dipped switch; he was told that she was dead and advised to ignore the occasional phone call from a mysterious woman. It was not until he was 16 that he met his mother for the first time, at a hotel lounge in New York, where she downed a row of sloe-gin fizzes. She offered little explanation beyond that he was better off without her.

Growing up in the drawn-curtain gloom of that lonely, airless house, Nordstrom created the illusion of space by painting a wall in his room sky blue. He invented a private language and honed an ironical humor that was as much an existential posture as a rhetorical device. He escaped into sports and books. He learned to read in French and eventually German. He played the wise-before-his-time role common to children of incompetent parents. Once, when he was 14, sitting at the dining-room table working on a paper about the novel "Of Human Bondage," his father dropped in for a visit and abjectly asked him what to do about a recent episode of impotence. When his grandfather was dying, his last words to Nordstrom were: "Be a man, not like your father."

"I always felt my life was a Zen koan," he said, sipping his coffee as an old woman crumbled bread for a flock of Bryant Park pigeons. "The koan is: What does it mean to have a life of one's own?"

He entered Columbia at 16 on a full scholarship. His junior year he married for the first time, "a pure experiment to see if I could fit in." He graduated summa cum laude and won a Fulbright scholarship, among numerous other prizes. The marriage ended after three years.

By 1967 he was employed as a philosophy instructor at Columbia and engaged again: it was his fiancée, a Brooklyn-born Vassar graduate, who, he says, came up with the idea of a Zen wedding when Nordstrom, then 24 and somehow unaware that he was circumcised, told her parents he was reluctant to make any amendments to his manhood that might be required were he to convert to Judaism and be married in an Orthodox ceremony. Nordstrom hadn't a clue what Zen or a Zen wedding entailed, but as long as surgery wasn't involved, why not? They found a local Zen center in the Yellow Pages.

The marriage, in September 1967, did not allay his self-destructive tendencies. “The agonizing absence of internal unity made me suicidal,” he would write later. His wife, who began a Zen practice after their lark of a wedding (and who would later become one of the first women in the United States to receive dharma transmission), enlisted a friend, who browbeat Nordstrom into a session of *zazen*, seated meditation. The habit took. He was impressed by the calmness he felt, not the “valium calm” of killing the turbulence inside him but the equanimity that came from becoming the turbulence.

“I felt saved by Zen,” he told me. “The Humpty Dumpty image is corny, but it’s right. Meditation put me back together. It helped me overcome the split between the body and the mind. The question that remained was what to do with emotions and the self.”

A year later in Litchfield, Conn., he attended his first multiday *sesshin* with a group of Zen meditators. The Rinzai teacher instructed him to “kill the watcher” within. By the third session he experienced *kensho*, which some meditators spend their lives hoping to attain: “I felt as if something like an earthquake or implosion was about to happen,” he wrote in his autobiography. “Everything around me looked exceedingly odd, as if the glue separating things had started to melt. . . . By the time I got to my room I was weightless; there was no gravity. . . . Then the earthquake or implosion — ‘body and mind dropping off’ — occurred. There was an incredible explosion of light coming from inside and outside simultaneously, and everything disappeared into that light . . . there was no longer a here versus there, a this versus that. . . . I understood nothing except that nothing would ever seem the same to me. . . . And despite the fact that I had no understanding whatever of what had happened (nor do I now), this experience changed my life completely.”

IV. As Though a Fool, Like an Idiot Six months into therapy, the psychoanalyst and the Zen master had mapped the abandonment and neglect in Nordstrom’s past. They had explored how the themes were re-enacted in his professional and personal lives and how the same patterns began to surface even in the dynamics of the therapy itself. Nordstrom missed an appointment after a big snowstorm, then missed another because he wasn’t feeling well. Rubin held three sessions with his patient over the phone.

“Please don’t abandon me!” Nordstrom said during the third session.

“I’m staring at an empty couch,” the psychoanalyst said, trying to keep some velvet over the steel in his voice. “You are the one doing the abandoning. Are you abandoning yourself the way you have always been abandoned?”

“I’ve never thought of it that way,” Nordstrom said. “I think there is something profoundly disturbing and true about that.”

By the spring of 2007, nearly a year into the therapy, Nordstrom had a breakthrough — what he called “a tearful reunion with my narrative.” The gist of it had to do with the way he devised what Rubin termed “a self-cure.” He sought to protect himself against the trauma of further abandonment by preemptively abandoning himself. If he wasn’t there in the first place, he wasn’t in a position to be cast away. The Zen concept of no-self was like a powerful form of immunity.

“The Zen experience of forgetting the self was very natural to me,” he told me last fall. “I had already been engaged in forgetting and abandoning the self in my childhood, which was filled with the fear of how unreal things seemed. But that forgetting was pathological. I always had some deeper sense that I wasn’t really there, that my life and my marriages didn’t seem real. In therapy with Jeffrey I began to realize this feeling of invisibility wasn’t just a peculiar experience but was maybe the central theme of my life. It was connected to my having ‘ability’ as a Zen student and to my being able to have a precocious enlightenment experience. In a sense it was as if Zen chose me rather than that I chose Zen.”

Impelled by a flood of memories, Nordstrom composed an autobiography in June 2007, pouring out most of the pages in the space of a month. He titled it “As Though a Fool, Like an Idiot,” after a phrase written by the founder of Soto Zen in the ninth century. He viewed the manuscript as an attempt to resurrect the self he had buried — buried in part because he was appalled people might think he felt sorry for himself. He wrote, “I’ve come to a point in my life where survival requires that I reclaim my narrative by refusing any longer to dismiss experience that was profoundly painful just so I’m not accused of self-pity.”

But what was absent in the rush of revelations during his tearful reunion with his narrative was any heartfelt sense of mourning. His new insights were mostly a matter of intellectually understanding the way he used Zen to assuage the pain of the past, hiding the pathological aspects of self-abandonment and neglect in the rapture of Zen vacancy; how he hid from his own neediness, anger and grief in the ecstatic abnegation of enlightenment. Yes, he got it. It wasn’t rocket science. He was thinking his therapy was winding down; he could get on with his life. What he felt he needed more than a therapist was a social worker — someone who could help him find a place to live and help him put in for [Social Security](#).

And then in January 2008, he got up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom. It was dark; he knew he should put a light on. All at once he was tumbling down a flight of stairs. His left hip, his pelvis, his sacrum and three ribs were fractured. He lay at the bottom thinking he didn’t want to go on anymore, but prodded by some willful, inconvenient impulse, he dragged himself up the stairs and called 911.

On the phone a few days later, his therapist wondered if the fall had been an unconscious suicide attempt. It struck him how quickly he accepted the interpretation.

I visited Nordstrom at his home a few weeks later. Unlike his trouble on the stairs in January, the second tumble seemed to weigh lightly on him. It was not his nature to abandon irony as a mode or get all mawkish about a fresh round of suffering. All the same anyone would wonder if you could really know the cost of the choices you'd made unless you'd felt them. He seemed like the weatherman appraising a hurricane from the studio, not outside soaked and hatless in the rain.

In the new year Nordstrom started teaching a course in Zen at [Hunter College](#). He was still seeing Rubin. At times he felt ambivalent about Zen, and Rubin — who for himself discovered in Zen not just a way back into that realm that possessed him for five infinite seconds in high school but also the basis of a new clinical approach he called meditative psychotherapy — sometimes found himself in the paradoxical position of affirming the virtues of Zen to a master who had devoted his life to it. In early February 2009, the psychoanalyst asked, “How does it feel to be out there and connected?”

“Re-entry is difficult,” Nordstrom admitted. “I feel I’m going to be blindsided — that I’m being set up. The record suggests that’s what tends to happen to me.”

“Do you hear your language?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s what tends to happen to me.”

“What do you hear — that I sound like a victim?”

“There’s no agency in there — to see that is to open to the possibility of feeling less the victim in your life.”

“I know this intellectually. I’ve had this sense of being a victim, a marked man for a long time — marked for bad things and marked for great things.”

“I wonder if that isn’t a compensatory fantasy which hides a deeper pain. It’s not that ‘I was horrifically abandoned, unconscionably neglected,’ it’s ‘I have a special destiny.’ ”

“Yes,” Nordstrom said. “As a boy I consciously constructed this idea that I’m in a situation that makes no sense whatsoever. The only meaning I can glean from it is that there may be some kind of completely different life in store for me.

There will be a compensation. I am owed.”

“What comes to mind with ‘owed’?”

“I’m entitled. That feeling got me through high school. It’s why I excelled at sports and studies.”

“It also killed you.”

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The thought hung in the air.

“Why do you think I say that?” the psychoanalyst said.

“Because it’s true?”

“No, because it’s led to a passive detached relation to your own life. It’s robbed you of your human birthright. It’s like you are waiting for Godot. It keeps you in a virtual life. Do you get that? Do you feel that emotion?”

“This isn’t the first time you’ve said that this is the source of my suffering.”

“The vessel you took to escape your childhood became your prison cell. If we could move through that, I think it would open things even more.”

“What I got from my life in Zen is not what most people get or want from Zen. Most Zen students are *samadhi* junkies. They like the buzz. There’s a suppression of anger in Zen which is another kind of alienation. Sometimes it makes me sad. Teachers should point this out — how risky *samadhi* is from a psychological point of view. I was once asked what did I want from Zen practice. What I wanted was I didn’t want to be like everyone else, running around like chickens with their heads cut off.”

“There’s a little bit of that elitism — I don’t want to be one of those suffering clowns.”

Nordstrom nodded.

“Blindsided. Passivity. Entitlement. Marked man. Where does this leave you?”

“I’m aware of having made progress.”

“Will you leave here with all this stuff as intellectual notes?”

“It could soak in.”

“Let it soak in.”

“It makes me sad,” Nordstrom said at last. “It makes me feel sad about what I’ve done to myself. I’ve actually been crying. Reading Beckett helps me cry precisely because he makes such an unsentimental presentation of pathos. I don’t cry convulsively. I think the word is ‘weep.’ It’s what my grandfather said — don’t be weak like your father. I don’t like sentimentality and melodrama. But if you subtract meaning and sentiment from emotional life, what’s left?”

“Could it be your antipathy to sentimentality and melodrama has another meaning in addition to your valid reservations? Could it also be a dismissal of your own emotional experience?”

“I don’t know why I constantly deprive or deny myself positive experiences,” Nordstrom said after a while. “There is a perverse self-destructiveness. It’s like the theme from the movie ‘The Pawnbroker’: if my life is in good shape, then my history makes no sense. . . . When I broke my hip the first time, before I fell, I thought, Don’t move, turn on a light, then I thought, Screw it, and I fell.”

“Stay with that ‘screw it’ voice: are you saying nothing that happens to you that’s good is going to make a difference?”

“There is something I know that I really want that I’m never really going to get. It may be mother. It may be mother.”

“Maybe your pessimistic stance is a defense against that shattering realization. Maybe you see your life as a Faustian bargain: I will not have *hope* demolish the hope that one day what I want will come.”

“My least favorite word in the English language is ‘hope.’ ”

“And in the meantime you’re knee-deep in it!”

“Yeah. It’s why Beckett is bad for me. Hellish hope is bad for me. The more negative the presentation of hope, the more I resonate with it. But I have also realized that hope in me is ineradicable. The two falls really showed me that. I am a real survivor.”

VI. Mother-and-Child Reunion In late February, sitting with his students at Hunter, Nordstrom found himself thinking of a poem he’d written in memory of the Zen master Soen Nakagawa, who often spoke of the endless dimension of universal life. In the poem, Nordstrom claimed it was the universal life that he loved, too. He could avow no love for the life of his mother or his father, and precious little for himself either, but he was Buddha incarnate when it came to the universal life. The pathos of it suddenly struck him. It seemed unspeakably sad that he had deceived himself into believing he loved the universal life for itself alone when in fact he loved it for lack of anything better.

What he wanted now was to love the life he had been given. In an e-mail message he framed it in the most primal terms: “This abandoned life of mine is like the abandoned boy, and I am the mother I never had who returns to claim that life and embrace it. It is a source of great pathos to reflect that without the therapy experience I might have died without having been reunited with my life! And in that sense, without having truly lived.” He was not sad, he said. Nor in any way disenchanted with the way of Zen. What could be more Zen than to restore the relish of the particular life? What he felt was joy. Not the unbordered joy of enlightenment, but the vernal joy that comes after the wintry work of mourning: the joy of a man with a life of his own.

Chip Brown is a contributing writer for the magazine. His most recent article