

From Object to Subject

In an uncanny parallel between the world of psychotherapy and the world of Indian spirituality, the metamorphosis of desire that both disciplines envision is equated with an opening to the feminine. The more commonly accepted form of desire, the one that is usually associated with masculine energy, is the familiar one of possession, acquisition and objectification. In this version of desire, the self actively tries to get its needs met by manipulating its environment, extracting what it requires from a world that is consistently objectified. But it is this version of desire that tends toward frustration and disappointment, that can never be entirely satisfied. The paradox of desire is that we are actually seeking another mode altogether, one that we have trouble imagining, or acknowledging. This is where both the psychoanalytic and the Indian spiritual worlds are helpful.

By articulating this alternative mode as a feminine one, they show us what we are missing in ourselves. As D. W. Winnicott succinctly put it, "The male element *does* while the female element (in males and females) *is*."¹ The male element is involved in activity, while the female element is all about being. While desire's masculine energies are necessary, they are not, by themselves, sufficient. Desire, in its longing for completion, is ultimately in search of being.

In the *Ramayana*, it is the female protagonist, Sita, who must discover and stay true to her own voice while her lover battles to reclaim her. All of Rama's male energy goes into this effort. Both Sita and Rama must come into a new relationship with Sita's deepening desire, with her newly won female capacity. This is the direct outcome of the first three steps of the left-handed path: entering the gap between satisfaction and fulfillment, honestly confronting the manifestations of clinging and renouncing the compulsive thoughts and behaviors that clinging provokes. Working with desire in this way allows for a growing appreciation of the feminine. Nor is this insight limited to the *Ramayana*. In the Indian myth of Shiva, his yogic renunciation not only brings him into harmony with his lover Parvati but also, in a further development that only the most outrageous psychoanalyst could imagine, reveals his own hermaphroditic nature. In the most esoteric portraits of Shiva, it turns out, he is found to possess both phallus and vulva. While he represents, in most instances, a classic male position, complete with erect phallus and unsurpassable energy, he is also revealed to be thoroughly at home with his female side, as exemplified not only by his female sexual organs, but also by the Ganges River, symbol of the mother, flowing from his hair. And even in the relatively staid world of Buddhism, the loosen-

ing of desire's fixed agenda—its relaxation—strikes a note that is eerily resonant with recent breakthroughs in psychoanalytic theory, in which the perspective of female analysts has finally been given its due. The Buddha, it must be pointed out, assumes an androgynous figure throughout much of Asian art.

THE BIRTH OF THE SUBJECT

In her now classic book on woman's desire, the psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin described this missing element very well. She recounted a poignant vignette. Two psychologists, one of them the mother of an infant boy, were strolling by the hospital nursery one day when they stopped to peer through a glass partition at the other newborns. On each bassinet were pink or blue labels announcing the sex of the child for all to see. The blue labels for the boys jauntily proclaimed, "I'm a boy!" but, to their astonishment, the pink labels for the girls did not correspond. Instead of "I'm a girl!" the pink ones all read, "It's a girl!" All the boys were "I" and all the girls were "It." The boys were given a subjective voice, the voice of desire, but the girls were offered to the world as objects. The sight of the baby girls, already bound by society's preconceptions, was an epiphany for Benjamin. Freud's perennial question, "What does woman want?" was not phrased correctly, she concluded. The question is not *what* do they want, but *do* they want, at all. Do they *have* their own desire? Or perhaps the question might be more correctly stated: Can women *be* their desire? The challenge for women, she decided, is to move from being just an object of desire to becoming a subject: *she who desires*.²

In formulating things this way, Benjamin made a major contribution to the understanding of what makes passion passionate.

She charted a course that we can also see described in the ancient *Ramayana* epic, in which Sita found herself stolen away from an undifferentiated union with Rama and became the object of Ravana's lust. Refusing to capitulate to this objectified status, Sita deepened her own desire while held captive on the island of Lanka, making possible an eventual reunion with her lover once he reached her in her newly discovered subjectivity. Sita made the journey from object to subject that Benjamin described, and then demanded that Rama come to her, even though the magical Hanuman was completely capable of spiriting her off the island and back to her lover. In making this demand of Rama, Sita insisted that he find and recognize her current inner life, so that the two dimensions of desire could become one. She gave new purpose to his male element. In so doing, she made possible a fresh experience for both of them, that which can only unfold between two subjects. This is the journey that desire wants to take us on: one that cuts through the limitations of both subject and object and opens up the playful possibilities of mutuality, passion and affection that are dependent on the capacity to be.

Benjamin's contribution to the psychology of desire was crucial because she was able to differentiate its two distinct aspects: one that she initially equated with the male and one with the female. The male desire, as male psychoanalysts have conceived of it for a long time, is represented by the phallus. It knows what it wants. In a child's psyche (according to the psychoanalytic tradition), the phallus, emblem of the father, stands for separation from the mother and for an independent life in the world. Because the father is perceived by the child to have a self-sufficient life outside of the household, his sexual organ takes on the connotations of this autonomy. It becomes the

antidote to the all-powerful maternal presence, the fundamental expression of an alternative. As a representation of an active agency apart from the maternal environment, the phallus comes to represent the seeking of satisfaction outside the protection of the mother. For a girl it might take the form of fantasies of having her own baby or discovering her own body rather than having a penis, but the psychic function is the same: The need is for an alternative to, and an escape from, the demands of the home environment.

For young boys, according to this theory, the process of identification with the father makes assuming their own desire relatively straightforward; but for young girls, especially those with controlling mothers, the process is more complex. Differentiation is more problematic. The phallus might still be the most prominent psychic symbol of separation and individuation, but it is more difficult for a young girl to identify with it than it is for a boy. This is where the concept of penis envy comes in. "Penis envy is not an end in itself," wrote one of the first feminist psychoanalysts to untangle the sexual symbolism of the psyche, "but rather the expression of a desire to triumph over the omnipotent primal mother through the possession of the organ the mother lacks, i.e., the penis. Penis envy seems to be as proportionately intense as the maternal imag[e] is powerful."³ For a girl in such situations, the phallus is the symbol of the way out of the relationship with the mother. The French feminists, with their characteristic bravado, say that the phallus "beats back the mother" in a young girl's imagination. Possessing, or being possessed by, a man, especially a self-inflated one, functions as a bulwark against the seemingly overwhelming nature of the mother-daughter relationship. A classic example of this might be the decision of an overprotected and obedient

daughter to date a young man with a motorcycle while away at college. The “phallic” symbolism of the motorcycle—dangerous, powerful and alluring—helps such a young woman put distance between herself and her mother.

AN OUNCE OF SPACE

In Benjamin’s view, the phallus serves a similar symbolic function in both young boys and young girls: it is cherished as a means of individuation and as an expression of active desire.⁴

But there is another dimension to desire that she gendered as feminine, although it is clearly an aspect that is shared by both sexes. This feminine desire is not for penetration but for space. The space that is longed for is not just a space within, as a concrete equation with the vagina might lead one to suspect, but is for a space that is also without: a space between individuals that makes room for the individuality of both parties and for meetings at the edge. It is a space that permits discovery of one’s own voice. It is this that Sita found in her isolation and imprisonment in Lanka.

Perhaps a vignette from one of my patients can help explain what this means. Andrea was a young doctor in training: smart, beautiful, independent and just engaged to be married. Her fiancé was older, a writer who worked mostly at home. They had recently moved in together in a small apartment in Queens. Andrea’s fiancé was clearly in love with her, but he sometimes seemed excessively needy of her presence. He would drop everything when she walked in the door and hover around her. She longed for a return to the early days of their courtship, when he had seemed more remote and she had been able to pursue and even seduce him. Now he was so available, Andrea

recounted a small event from a recent evening together when he had eagerly pulled her toward him as she was getting into bed, both of them knowing they were about to have sex. He was already under the sheets and she was just climbing onto the bed when he reached for her.

“Just give me an ounce of space to love you from,” Andrea had said at the time, but he had felt rejected by her spontaneous comment and threatened to go sleep on the couch. She had just wanted to get under the sheets before he grabbed her, she told me, wondering why he had objected so vehemently to her comment.

Andrea wanted to be more in contact with her own desire. Her fiancé’s need for her made it too difficult for her to stay in touch with herself; his desire tended to take over and she lost the sense of separateness that allowed her to know her own longing. She could experience his “male” desire, but it made her feel as if she were just an energy source that he needed to tap, rather than a person in her own right. Since he was so offended by her attempts to confront him, we worked to develop her capacity to stay in touch with herself, even while permitting him to feel close to her. Andrea felt obligated by her boyfriend’s affection, and she felt that she had only two choices: to submit, and lose herself, or push him away. Rather than seeing things this way, I tried to help her feel less swayed by his need, allowing him to calm down so that she could see something more than his dependence on her. While she might not be able to pursue and seduce him as she once had, from this place of calm she could still reach out for him, an agent in her own right.

Benjamin’s vision of feminine desire describes an interpersonal expanse within which lies the potential for both self-discovery and connection. She echoes the findings of the

seventeenth-century Indian mystics who determined that the flavor of separation was the most critical ingredient in an erotic relationship. This is a concept that can be found all over the world. In Japanese garden design, there is an important organizing principle called *miegakure*, or "hide-and-reveal," that portrays this truth in another way. In a Japanese garden, only a part of any object is ever made visible—the whole is never exposed. It is commonplace, for example, to have a meandering waterfall come in and out of the line of vision of someone walking a path. Each new view allows the waterfall to be temporarily glimpsed from a different perspective, imparting "not only an illusion of depth but also the impression that there are hidden beauties beyond."⁵ The eye is teased by the water—we see it, then lose it, then find it again as we wind our way through the garden. By preventing the object from ever being known completely, the design encourages the viewer to imagine the invisible parts. The result is just what my patient Andrea was longing for in her relationship: "a sense of vastness in a small space,"⁶ the feeling of mystery that keeps something interesting even when it is known very well.

It was this vastness that Andrea missed with her fiancé, confined as she was in the limited space of her new relationship. She needed more hiddenness in order to open up the possibilities of play that move a sexual relationship into the realm of eros.⁷ When there is room for two subjects, a relationship becomes more like a Japanese garden. A call and response of sounds, gestures, feelings and sensations can unfold that allow unfurling desires to be known, appreciated, delighted in, and returned. The result allows something akin to what the British psychoanalyst Masud Khan once called an "ego-orgasm,"⁸ the intimacy that comes when emotional surrender joins with phys-

ical release. When Andrea felt that she was nothing more than an energy source for her boyfriend, this kind of mutuality did not seem possible between them. While he might have been the "I" in the relationship, he was still relating to her too exclusively as an "it."

BEING VERSUS DOING

The tribulations of another recent patient of mine, Tina, help to flesh some of this out. Tina was a talented teacher in a local private high school, kindhearted, smart and amiable. Catholic, the daughter of a wealthy New Jersey family, she was all too conscious of her beauty, or, it might be more accurate to say, of the fragility of her beauty. It was the primary link between her and her mother. Discussions of food, of what was fattening, of how much each of them ate, and of how their weight fluctuated dominated their interactions. But the price of this closeness was a secretiveness that Tina developed around food and a heightened concern about her body image.

Tina was in her early thirties when she came to see me and had had a succession of boyfriends since her late teens. One of the issues she brought up in her first session with me was her discomfort when her current boyfriend attempted to have oral sex with her. Always conscious of how her body looked, Tina was disturbed at the idea of a man "going down" on her. All she could think about was how "gross" it must be. Only when she had some alcohol to drink could Tina begin to explore cunnilingus, but she found on several occasions that, although her boyfriend assured her that she had enjoyed (and even initiated) the activity, she had no memory of it. She was obviously worried about where she was heading.

Tina was stuck in an object-based mode of relating. She could only think of herself through the eyes of another: be it her mother checking to see how fat she was, or her boyfriend (in her imagination) evaluating the attractiveness of her body. Her fears of oral sex were probably indications of this object-based mode, as she seemed to experience her boyfriends primarily as "devouring objects" intent on making food out of her. The space of her own subjectivity, her own emotional experience, was not safe or available in such circumstances—it seemed to open only when she shared her inner experiences with her closest girlfriend. Luckily for Tina, soon after she started therapy she met a man whom she felt an immediate kinship with. While he was less sexually experienced than many of her previous boyfriends, she found, to her surprise, that she was not inhibited in speaking her mind to him. Although he could certainly be self-involved at times, he always respected her insights. They shared a sense of humor and formed a close friendship while beginning a sexual relationship. Soon they moved in together and relocated to another city. Tina left therapy with me. Her belated movement from object to subject had begun.

While the psychoanalytic formula spelled out by Benjamin affords the male the first subjective sense of agency, it is a mistake to think that the need to shift from an object-based mode is solely the journey of the woman. Whether a man is seeking an object or a woman makes herself into one, the mode of relating is the same. Both parties have the potential to see things differently. Desire, while it can be inflamed under the object mode, is unlikely to be satisfied with it. It is much more likely to be diverted into clinging in the frantic effort to secure some kind of unforthcoming security. The opening up of subjective appreciation, on the other hand, involves a recognition of the unpos-

sessability of the other. This recognition, which literally "gives space," allows desire to operate as it would in a well-crafted Japanese garden. Since the other is never capable of being totally revealed, he or she is also capable of being continually inspiring. Desire feeds off otherness, and otherness inspires desire.

The journey from an object-based way of relating to one that permits two subjects is begun in early childhood, but it is rarely completed then. If we are lucky, it can be continued in intimate sexual relations and further elaborated in meditation and spiritual life, or developed in meditation and brought to fruition in sexual intimacy. This progression is one of the links among emotional, relational, and spiritual life that coalesces in the path of desire. It can be talked about in mythic, psychodynamic, sexual or sacred terms, but at its core is the need for the "male"-based objective mode to be balanced by the "female"-based subjective one. This is no easy task. To give up the conviction that people can be related to as objects (or "energy sources") is harder than it sounds. If people are not objects, then how can we think about them? Our minds balk, the way they do when trying to understand Einsteinian relativity or the wavelike nature of a photon. We are conditioned to think in terms of things, not in terms of unknown processes like ungraspable personal subjectivities. Our language even stumbles over them. Yet our own desire keeps revealing the insufficiency of the object model.

While the primary function of formal Buddhist meditation is to create the possibility of the experience of "being," my work as a therapist has shown me that the demands of intimate life can be just as useful as meditation in moving people toward this capacity. Just as in formal meditation, intimate relationships teach us that the more we relate to each other as objects, the

greater our disappointment. The trick, as in meditation, is to use this disappointment to change the way we relate. Out of our failure to find a compliant object can come the appreciation of others as subjects in their own right. While we might sometimes feel frustrated by their failures to give us what we think we need, this very frustration has within it the spirit of emergence. For when we accept the fact that no adult person can satisfy all of our needs, we are on the road to appreciating our adult partners for who they are, not for who we wish they would be. It is this scenario that Benjamin's understanding of "male" and "female" sought to explain. The "female" desire for space is an expression of a need that both sexes have. It is a need that Winnicott expressed most succinctly in his famous phrase, "It is joy to be hidden, but disaster not to be found,"⁹ a need for recognition of one's self as a subject.

But a subject is not an object. While it can be found, it cannot be captured. Finding it is more of an ongoing process of discovery than it is a onetime act. The acceptance of an inner, private, personal and even silent aspect of self and other is a gift that opens up a continuing exchange with the world. This is the secret capacity that desire is in search of, a capacity for "being" that can only be found when the more dominant need to "do" is undone. In this light, it is no longer so mysterious what a woman wants. Like a man, she wants a partner who cares what she wants, someone who desires her desire, and is able to dwell in the space it creates.

8

A Facilitating Environment

In 1912, Henri Matisse visited Morocco and was struck by the softness of the light there. It changed the way he approached painting. Trying to express the spirituality that he felt in that light, he began to remove many of the features that he would ordinarily have included on his canvas. Faces became impersonal, stripped of the attributes that give them their individuality. Outlines of objects vanished and uninterrupted areas of pure color began to emerge. No Western painter had ever taken such liberties. It was a technique that came to be known as "less is more," and it allowed Matisse the freedom, warmth and exuberance that was to define his work.¹ In letting go of the conventional approach to representation, a spirit of emergence took hold. In a manner completely consistent with Benjamin's description of the discovery of the "feminine," Matisse opened