

# Core constructs and Ordinary Mind Zen

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From the Personal Construct Psychology perspective, effective human life requires that we continuously revise our understanding of the universe in response to the events that we encounter. Kelly (1955) formulated the metaphor of the personal scientist as a way of suggesting a parallel between effective living and effective science. Although scientists approach their work with passion and commitment (Polanyi, 1958), when behaving ideally, they conduct experiments to test the validity of their theories and revise the theories in response of the outcomes. We can see one model of this view of ideal science in the familiar example of Einstein's willingness to discard his General Theory of Relativity if starlight deflection measurements from the May 29, 1919, solar eclipse did not validate his predictions (Barnett, 1950).

Analogous to the scientist, each person "copes with the world by erecting constructs or guidelines—verbal ones or reflexive ones—in terms of which he can fathom it and gain some sense of where he and it are going." (Kelly, 1979, p. 178). However, Kelly also reminded us that we should consider our constructs as successive approximations to an absolute understanding, and "subject to revision or replacement" (Kelly, 1955, p. 15). If we functioned as ideal personal scientists, we would hold no attachments to the outcomes of anticipated events. We would recognise that the universe holds no allegiance to our particular interpretations of it, and thus we could make predictions while remaining fully open to the immediate experience of each unfolding event as it happens. Unfortunately, when it comes to our personal lives, we do not act as ideal personal scientists. Instead, we invest deeply in our ideas about the universe, particularly to our image of ourselves.

Kelly (1955) described the nature of our self image in terms of core constructs, which govern our maintenance processes, and through which we maintain identity and existence. We use core constructs to anticipate our own behaviour, our relationships with others, and our ability to survive. We tend to resist change in our core constructs and we respond to potential change in our image of our selves with feelings of threat, fear, guilt, shame, anxiety, and hostility (McCoy, 1977). We often behave ineffectively when we attach strongly to core constructs and respond to the world from the context of these emotions.

We do not always represent all aspects of core constructs verbally or consciously. We begin to develop core constructs early in life before we learn language, so core constructs may contain a pre-verbal component and may

not have clear verbal symbols. Additionally, core constructs may manifest in physical, bodily experience. Leitner (1985; 1997; 1999) draws our attention to the close relationship between personal meanings, core construing, and the body. He describes the centrality of core constructs to our sense of being, and how they "are frequently experienced through physiological manifestations" (1997, p. 17). We may thus respond to events in terms of pre-verbal interpretations and recurrent bodily experiences, with little awareness or understanding that we do so.

Core constructs, whether manifest explicitly or implicitly, verbally or pre-verbally, reflexively or physically, consist of an image of our self, how we believe that we must behave, and how others must behave toward us, in order for us to feel safe and secure. Quite frequently, they include a sense of the self as defective, unworthy, or unlovable, and we develop a life-long pattern of strategies and structures to defend against that possibility. The strategies might involve a set of requirements about how we must behave (e.g., "I must be powerful," "I must avoid conflict," "I must stay emotionally distant from others," "I must be perfect," "I must help everyone," "I must have high status"). Because we have invested so much of our personal survival in these core constructs, we tend to respond to any possibility of change or invalidation of this image with strong emotional reactions. More importantly, these reactions prevent us from attending to and experiencing events as they happen. As a result, we may find that belief in core constructs actually runs our lives rather than serving us.

### **The Ordinary Mind School of Zen Meditation**

We might gain additional understanding of the nature and function of core constructs by examining the view of Zen meditation practice as taught in the Ordinary Mind School of Zen, which emphasises core beliefs, directly comparable to core constructs as articulated in Personal Construct Psychology. Charlotte Joko Beck (1989, 1993), resident teacher at the Zen Center of San Diego, founded the Ordinary Mind Zen perspective. Following training with several Japanese Zen masters, she received authorisation as a Zen teacher in the early 1980s. As a psychologist with affinity for and involvement with PCP for more than 25 years and as a Zen student of Joko Beck for more than 15 years, I have recurrently explored the relationship between these two approaches (McWilliams, 1983, 1984, 1997). This paper discusses some aspects of the major Ordinary Mind approach to Zen practice as they bear on core constructs.

Beck (1996a) describes core constructs as core beliefs, an image or idol (McWilliams, 1993) that we have of ourselves.

*My self-centred anger arises when my image of myself is threatened. So: what image of yourself do you hold? "I am a kind person." "I am a good parent." "I accomplish worthwhile things." "I am an authority on (science, plants, cooking, diet, dogs . . . whatever)." Or my image can be the opposite. "I am a mean person." "I am a mediocre parent." "I never accomplish anything." On and on. Our images are deeply rooted. We love them. They run our lives. They are who we think we are.*

*Some psychological therapies attempt to replace a negative image with a positive one. Effective but only to a point. Our attachment to any image, positive or negative—since we will defend our idol—leaves us in the long run in a state of slavery; the idol rules our existence and we are helpless under its domination.*

*Any defended image invariably blocks the open awareness from which effective action springs. And the image "I am the one who sees clearly, who has realisation, who is enlightened" is itself the barrier to true seeing. Being "enlightened" is being without image; undefended and open to life as it is. It is being able to feel the pain of the desperately defended images of others. It is, of course, compassion. (Beck, 1996a. p. 1)*

This view differs from some popular perspectives on meditation that focus on attaining special states of consciousness. It emphasises, instead, awareness of how we respond to ordinary daily life experience, and it supports the view of the Dalai Lama, who says, "The very purpose of meditation is to discipline the mind and reduce afflictive emotions" (Woodward, 1999, p. 34). Although Beck articulates her viewpoint in simple language and emphasises ordinary daily living as the context for Zen practice, her perspective grows out of the insights of classic Zen teaching. Two such classic Zen teachings in particular articulate a foundation for the Ordinary Mind perspective.

### ***The Heart Sutra***

One of the most important and classic teachings in Zen meditation, the *Prajna Paramita Heart Sutra* discusses the insights of Transcendent Wisdom. It provides a valuable conceptual description of the construing process, and its relationship to our awareness of the moment. Similar to some approaches to cognitive psychology, the Heart Sutra describes stages of how we process information by articulating four elements or stages in the experience of events: Form, Sensation, Conception, and Discrimination. First, an event occurs when it stands out as a "figure" against the general "background." We gain awareness of that event through one of the five senses. Based on prior experience, we interpret or conceptualise the event by identifying and labeling it. Finally, we judge the event by discriminating whether it is good or bad in terms of our personal desires. The Heart Sutra, based on insight derived

from disciplined meditation practice, views each of these elements as "empty," or lacking any permanent or fixed identity:

*. . . (F)orm does not differ from emptiness; emptiness does not differ from form. Form itself is emptiness; emptiness itself is form. So too are feeling, cognition, formation, and consciousness. . . (A)ll dharmas (elements) are empty of characteristics. They are not produced, not destroyed, not defiled, not pure; and they neither increase nor diminish. Therefore in emptiness there is no form, feeling, cognition, formation, or consciousness; no eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or mind; no sights, sounds, smells, tastes, objects of touch. . . no field of the eyes up to and including no field of mind consciousness; and no ignorance or ending of ignorance up to and including no old age and death to ending of old age and death. There is no suffering, no accumulating, no extinction, and no Way, and no understanding and no attaining. Because nothing is attained, the Bodhisatva (awakened being) through reliance on Prajna Paramita (transcendent wisdom) is unimpeded in his mind. Because there is no impediment, he is not afraid, and he leaves distorted dream-thinking far behind. (Hua, 1980, p. 1)*

A commentary on the Heart Sutra (Lok To, 1999), summarised here, further elaborates this text. We "normally" view the world as we perceive it as real, thus mistaking the form of particular events as ultimate nature. Form, however, represents matter, which arises out of causes and thus has no fixed substance and no independent self. Sensations, perceptions, and discriminating choice represent activities of mind, which likewise has no permanent self nature. What we think of as "mind" emerges through responding to form and form manifests when apprehended by the human mind. Since mind and form do not differ and depend on each other, the phenomenal world also has no fixed self nature. Thus, constructs of birth vs. death, purity vs. impurity, or increase vs. decrease, when perceived as qualities of nature reflect a confusion of constructs (mind) with elements (form). With the understanding that all experience arises from causes and has no permanent self nature, the Heart Sutra suggests, the mind becomes still and calm, responding freshly and openly to events, and suffering diminishes.

The underlying philosophical assumption of Personal Construct Psychology, constructive alternativism (Kelly, 1955), likewise cautions against our tendency to view our interpretation of the world as real, and emphasises the transparent nature of our beliefs and the benefit of revising or replacing them. From the PCP perspective we can thus also view constructions of the perceptual world as impermanent and devoid of fixed self nature. Modern physicists embrace a similar perspective that "since every object is simply the sum of its qualities, and since qualities exist only in the mind, the whole objective universe of matter and energy, atoms and stars, does not exist except as a construction of the consciousness. . ." (Barnett, 1950, p. 21).

## ***Hsin-Hsin-Ming***

A teaching called the *hsin-hsin ming*, or “Verses on the Faith Mind,” attributed to Sengstan, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Chinese Zen patriarch, further elaborates this perspective:

*The Great Way (of spiritual awareness) is not difficult for those who have no preferences. When love and hate are both absent, everything becomes clear and undisguised. Make the smallest distinction, however, and heaven and earth are set infinitely apart. If you wish to see the truth, then hold no opinions for or against anything. To set up what you like against what you dislike is the disease of the mind. . . . The Way is perfect like vast space, where nothing is lacking and nothing is in excess. Indeed, it is due to our choosing to accept or reject that we do not see the true nature of things. . . . Do not search for the truth. Only cease to cherish opinions. . . . When no discriminating thoughts arise, the old mind ceases to exist. When thought objects vanish, the thinking subject vanishes, as when the mind vanishes, objects vanish. Things are objects because of the subject [mind]; the mind [subject] is such because of things [object].* (Kornfield, 1996, p. 143-145)

The *hsin-hsin-ming* reinforces the intimate relationship between events and construing, and it points to the fundamental challenge we face because of our discriminating mind. Because we view the world through the lens of self-centred desires, we have a strong view of what should occur to meet the requirements of our self-image. This creates suffering and dissatisfaction, because, holding no allegiance to our constructs, events often fail to correspond to our desires. Additionally, we fail to experience the actual events as they unfold, weakening our ability to learn from experience.

## ***The Four Practice Principles***

Beck (1993) reformulated the Four Noble Truths which provide the foundation of the basic teachings of the original Buddha, and the principles underlying the vows taken in traditional Japanese Zen Practice. These four principles succinctly summarise the preceding points.

*Caught in the self-centred dream, only suffering.  
Holding to self-centred thoughts, exactly the dream.  
Each moment, life as it is, the only teacher.  
Being just this moment, compassion’s way.* (Beck, 1993, p. 275)

We create dissatisfaction, unhappiness, and suffering by separating ourselves from the experience of the moment because we remain in a self-centred world of our own creation. We hold to that view by focusing on seeking what we want, avoiding what we don’t want, and ignoring everything irrelevant to

our desires. "Life as it is" refers to the right-here-now, the actual events as they unfold. To the extent that we can embrace these events, regardless of whether they suit us, we can learn from experience. The insights of the Heart Sutra and the Faith Mind teachings point to the "perfect" nature of reality. When we fully experience the moment independent of our desires, we perceive more clearly and can serve the world and others effectively.

### ***Ordinary mind Zen practice***

We have considered the essential concepts of the Ordinary Mind Zen view of core constructs, the relationship between core constructs and experience, and how attachment to core constructs may impede effectiveness in relating to the world. Understanding the concepts alone, however, does not benefit our understanding of core constructs. A regular, disciplined practice provides the opportunity to gain freedom from the constraints of constructs or identities, and their associated opinions and strategies. Beck (1999) articulates the essence of Zen practice:

*What we have to do in spiritual practice is pay attention to this very moment, the totality of what is happening right now. And the reason we don't want to pay attention is because it's not always pleasant. It doesn't suit us.*

*We constantly dream about the future, about the nice things we're going to have, or that are going to happen to us. So we filter anything happening in the present through all that: "I don't like that. I don't have to listen to that." This goes on constantly: spinning, spinning, spinning, always trying to create life in a way that will be pleasant, that will make us feel safe and secure, so that we 'feel good.'*

*But when we do that we never see this right-here-now, this very moment. We can't see it because we're filtering what it says. And when we do that, this moment is clouded over. Just ask any ten people who read this page. You'll find they all tell you something different. They'll forget the parts that don't quite catch them; they'll pick up something else, and they'll even block out the parts they don't like. Even when they go to a spiritual teacher they hear only what they want to hear. Being open to a teacher means not just hearing what you want to hear, but hearing the whole thing. And the teacher is not there simply to be nice to you.*

*So the crux of meditation is this: we must constantly create a little shift from the spinning world we've got in our heads to right-here-now. That's our practice. The intensity and ability to be right-here-now is what we have to develop. We have to be able to develop the ability to say, "No, I won't spin off here"—to make that choice. Moment by moment, our practice is like a choice, a fork in the road: we can go this way, we can go that way. It's al-*

*ways a choice, moment by moment, between the nice world that we want to set up in our heads and what really is. . . . Zen training is designed to enable us to live comfortable, beneficial lives. But the only people who live comfortably are those who learn not to dream their lives away, and instead to be with what's right-here-now, no matter what it is: good, bad, nice, not nice, having a headache, being ill, being happy. It doesn't make any difference. Did you think it did?* (Beck, 1999, p. 1)

The essence of Ordinary Mind Zen meditation practice thus lies in the willingness to accept and experience life "as it is" regardless of whether it meets our expectations, desires, or convenience. If we manifest the right-here-now awareness that Beck describes, we would act as good personal scientists. For most of us, however, right-here-now awareness remains a continuing challenge and requires a disciplined methodology like Zen practice.

Beck views such practice as a life-long activity. "Our practice is about our life, and we practice forever" (Beck, 1996, p. 1). She regularly emphasizes that, while most people experience some immediate effects, the benefits begin to manifest more fully after about twenty years of disciplined daily practice, regular intensive practice retreats, and working directly with a capable teacher. Additionally, Zen practice focuses on the conduct of daily life as well as the specific activities involved in formal sitting meditation. When students ask her "How is my practice going?" Beck responds, "How is your life going?"

Regular daily sitting forms the fundamental base of Zen practice. The proper physical form of formal sitting meditation provides an essential foundation of an effective practice. Whether sitting cross-legged on a cushion or on a chair, the body should feel balanced and at ease, erect but not stiff. Regular practice requires daily sitting, not missing more than one day per week. Sitting practice provides a formal time to develop awareness of the two basic elements of life experience: present bodily sensations and mental process and thoughts. Clarity, calmness, or insight may occur during sitting, but they do not represent its goal; rather the process should focus on observing and attending to the reality of the moment, including confusion, discouragement, anxiety, etc.

Three interrelated techniques support the practice: 1) focusing or concentrating, 2) labelling thoughts and experiencing bodily sensations, and 3) attending to emotional reactivity (Zen Center of San Diego, 1999). While students of Ordinary Mind Zen practice typically begin with the first, move to the second, and later to the third, experienced students may choose among them depending on differing conditions.

Focusing or concentrating provides a ground for practice. "Often such a practice is required at the beginning of a sitting to settle our speedy monkey mind" (Zen Center of San Diego, 1999, p. 1). By focusing on a specific

stimulus, concentration practice enables us to quiet the mind and develop stable sitting. It might consist of attending to the in-and-out movement of the breath, or counting each breath from one to ten and then starting at one again. As the mind wanders away from the breath, attention gently returns to the practice. Concentration practice by itself, however, tends to shut out life experience, instead of opening ourselves to it, so while serving as an important step in practice this technique alone has limitations.

As focusing or concentrating helps to settle sitting, we can then move to "wide open awareness," observing thoughts as they continuously arise and fall away while attending to the variety of bodily sensations. To a great extent this mode of practice forms the core of everyday sitting and daily life awareness. In the beginning of practice, and typically the beginning of a sitting period, after concentration enables the mind to slow down, we may become aware of the constant flow of thoughts that arise, and we begin to see recurrent patterns and themes in these thoughts. We do not have to "do anything" about these thoughts; rather we may take the position of a witness or observer to the thoughts. We may benefit from labelling or categorising the type of thoughts as they arise, which assists us in seeing their recurrent nature. Although thoughts continue to arise, after time we begin to see them from a more distant perspective, and they lose their sense of importance or urgency. At some point we may find that we become bored with the repetitive nature of these self-centred thoughts, and we begin to lose interest in many of our cherished opinions and ideas.

As we slowly decrease interest in thoughts, we may become more acutely aware of bodily sensations, particularly noticing areas of the body where we tend to hold tension (e.g., stomach, shoulders, neck, etc.). Leitner (1999), writing from the PCP perspective, describes the extent to which "core constructs govern our physiological processes" (p. 8), and that "our original constructs, those that serve as the basis of the entire construct system, have been created in tight relationship to our bodies. Through the years, these sensed bodily confirmations become more entrenched as we develop a meaning system based upon them" (p. 9). Thus, experiential understanding of core constructs requires that we develop awareness of these entrenched bodily sensations. Again, rather than trying to change or relax these sensations, Ordinary Mind Zen practice directs awareness towards them, allowing ourselves to fully experience the sensations. In doing so, we may experience change in the quality of the sensations and the tension.

The third aspect of practice emphasises attending to emotional reactions to experiences and events, and the thoughts that create the emotional reactivity. By recognising that we create the emotion through attachment to a self-centred belief, we can observe the emotion-thought spiral. We see that emotional sensations lead to thoughts which, due to our attachment to the

thoughts, generate more sensations of physical tension. In attending to emotions and thoughts, and examining what we gain from holding to the beliefs, we understand more fully the core beliefs or requirements (core constructs) and the patterns or strategies we have developed to avoid awareness of them. This third aspect of practice consists of attending to the total experience of our distress, particularly in terms of the physical, bodily sensations, so that we can see directly how the core beliefs reside in the body itself.

A description of the methods does not convey the extent of the challenge of actual practice. Resistance, turbulence, and emotional upset may follow an initial "honeymoon" period. Meditators often experience fatigue, boredom, and leg pain. These experiences provide more opportunity to gain awareness of thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations. Beck (1996) cautions against avoiding sitting during times of emotional upset and notes the particular value of sitting when difficulties arise. Further, she suggests that once a week we should sit 10-15 minutes longer than we wish to as a way of enhancing reactivity. As Beck states:

*What we learn from having to sit quietly with that discomfort is so valuable that if it didn't exist, it should. When you're in pain, you can't spin off. You have to stay with it. There's no place to go. So pain can be really valuable.* (Beck, 1999, p. 1)

Although consciously creating discomfort and pain may seem unusual, we can recognise the value of devising circumstances that enhance awareness of core constructs and how they function in our lives. The PCP perspective would also anticipate that an individual would experience challenge and resistance to activities that could lead to detachment from or change in constructs that maintain identity and existence. Greater awareness of core constructs, even in a context that does not focus on changing them, would generate negative emotional responses. Kelly (1955) and McCoy (1977) emphasised the extent to which emotions derive from *awareness* of the status of our construct system, such as imminent change in or dislodgement from core structures. Activities that enhance awareness of core constructs can generate feelings of threat, guilt, and anxiety, and can lead to defensive actions and resistance, in an attempt to avoid that awareness. When awareness leads to a new view of the self, or a clearer view of the actual current self, the individual "... can be threatened by a new 'realisation' of what he has been doing. He can be threatened by the mounting propositions of an alternative interpretation of himself" (Kelly, 1955, p. 493), even if this alternative interpretation might ultimately prove more useful.

## Contemplating core constructs

Kelly (1955) described healthy mental processes as following "core structures which are comprehensive but not too permeable" (p. 482). We function more effectively, therefore, when we experience a wide range of events as compatible with our identity, and when this comprehensive identity remains stable, and not overly threatened, in the face of the events we encounter. When we "see too many new events as having a deeply personal significance" (Kelly, 1955, p. 482) we tend "to be less detached and objective" (Kelly, 1955, p. 482). Greater experiential awareness of core constructs may help to support more healthy processes by increasing acceptance of a variety of events as compatible with, yet not threatening to, a more detached sense of self.

Ordinary Mind Zen practice can help us to learn more about core constructs and attachments to them, develop greater awareness of the thoughts and the bodily sensations that accompany these self-images, and experience directly the pure physical sensations of core constructs, independently of the verbal commentary (Beck, 1996a). By developing greater experiential awareness of our core constructs, along with a more detached perspective toward them, we may have the opportunity to maximise our effectiveness in relating to the world, and to find the peace and fulfilment most of us seek. While never reaching a conclusion, and perhaps requiring many years of discipline, persistence, patience, and ruthless self-examination, practices directed at enhancing awareness of core structures may help us to gain some measure of freedom from the potential tyranny of core constructs—the self-centred images that can run our lives.

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