This article explores the importance of the relationship between a teacher of meditation and his or her student. Mindfulness meditation is receiving a lot of attention in the psychotherapy literature currently. It is generally viewed as a technique that is taught in groups and then practiced individually by clients or participants. What does not appear to be generally understood is that the teaching and learning of meditation is understood in Eastern traditions as intimately related to the relationship that develops between the teacher and student. This, in fact, is very similar to what we are coming to understand about the importance of the therapeutic relationship to the outcome of therapy, regardless of technique or orientation of the therapist. Personal experiences of the author in a relationship with a meditation teacher are compared with those from a psychoanalytic therapy experience. Meditation is construed from this perspective not only as a technique that is learned and practiced but also as an innate human capability that is activated in the context of a very special kind of relationship with a person who has fully unfolded this capacity in his or her own experience.

Suddenly there is so much attention getting paid to meditation and mindfulness in the psychotherapy field (Davis & Hayes, 2011). But what seems to be missing is the understanding of the significance of the teacher. The parallel here is the discovery in most therapy approaches of the importance of the therapeutic relationship. Meditation and mindfulness are often presented as techniques like those administered in cognitive behavioral therapy. But in psychotherapy, the work of Norcross (2011) and Wampold (2001) has suggested that nonspecific relationship factors may be the variables most closely related to outcome in psychotherapy, regardless of the orientation or technique espoused by the practitioner. This is similar to the work of Carl Rogers (1961), whose famous formula suggests that any relationship characterized by warmth,
acceptance, genuineness and empathy facilitates growth in the recipient of these relational qualities.

In the transpersonal approaches and specifically in the wisdom traditions of the East, where meditation is emphasized, the teacher has the utmost importance. For example, “Dzogchen masters generally transmit a direct experience of the nature of mind (that is, the nondual experience) to their disciples and then teach them how to abide in it at all times” (Bodian, 2003, p. 235). Similarly, Desai Ikeda, President of the Soka Gakkai International, one of the largest, most diverse international lay Buddhist associations in the world today, quotes from the 700-year-old tradition of Nichiren Buddhism:

The mentor-disciple relationship is the core foundation of Nichiren Buddhism. This is because the profound, powerful, and beautiful life-to-life interaction that takes place within the mentor-disciple relationship enables us to break free from our attachment to our small lesser self and realize a state of life based on our boundless greater self. (“Manifesting our greater self,” 2012, p. 8)

In fact, it is generally understood in many Eastern meditation traditions that the qualities of the teacher must be those of an individual who has traversed the path of personal growth and reached an end point that is not typically conceived of in the West. Concepts like enlightenment, being fully realized or liberated come to mind.

In the West, perhaps we even question the possibility of such attainments of personality development. However, Freud (1912) spoke of the importance of psychoanalytic “purification” (p. 122) for the analyst. Carl Rogers (1961) emphasized that the therapeutic ingredients could only be administered by a therapist who had mastered these personal qualities. Rogers concluded that the training of a therapist is in fact nothing more or less than the maturation, the self-actualization of the therapist. The ability to be a therapeutic person is as much something that we are as something that we do or know:

I find that when I am the closest to my inner, intuitive self—when perhaps I am in touch with the unknown in me—when perhaps I am in a slightly altered state of consciousness in the relationship, then whatever I do seems to be fully healing. Then simply my presence is releasing and helpful. At those moments, it seems that my inner spirit has reached out and touched the inner spirit of the other. Our relationship transcends itself, and has become part of something larger. Profound growth and healing and energy are present. (Rogers, 1987, p. 50)

Some who emphasize the therapeutic value of mindfulness techniques like psychiatrist Dan Siegel express a similar perspective. While discussing the value of mindfulness meditation to help psychotherapists develop the all-important capacity for empathy, Siegel (Buczynski & Siegel, 2011) states:

What the studies show is that, in fact, we can try all sorts of therapeutic strategies, which have an important impact to a certain degree, but the most important impact is the presence of the therapist, the ability of the therapist to be empathic to the internal world of the client or the patient, and for that therapist to actively seek feedback on how therapy is going. . . . John Norcross, one of the scientists who studied this, has shown in meta-analysis of psychotherapy that, in fact, these aspects of the therapeutic relationship are the most vital for positive therapeutic outcome. (p. 5)
Kabat-Zinn (2003), in an article entitled “Mindfulness-Based Interventions in Context: Past, Present, and Future,” has also expressed a similar idea when he discusses whether or not it is important for mindfulness meditation teachers to practice meditation themselves:

A working principle for MBSR (mindfulness-based stress reduction) teachers is that we never ask more of our patients in terms of practice than we ask of ourselves on a daily basis... In our experience, unless the instructor’s relationship to mindfulness is grounded in extensive personal practice, the teaching and guidance one might bring to the clinical context will have little in the way of appropriate energy, authenticity, or ultimate relevance, and that deficit will soon be felt by program participants... without the foundation of personal practice... attempts at mindfulness-based intervention run the risk of becoming caricatures of mindfulness, missing the radical, transformational essence and becoming caught perhaps by important but not necessarily fundamental and often only superficial similarities between mindfulness practices and relaxation strategies, cognitive-behavioral exercises, and self-monitoring tasks. (p. 150)

Kabat-Zinn (2003) seems to be close to saying that the quality of relationship between the more advanced meditation teacher and the learner is of the utmost importance, albeit on a subtle level, for the ability to meditate to be transmitted in the teaching process. This is similar to the way Rogers (1961) spoke about the client-centered therapist only having the capacity to genuinely offer a relationship characterized by acceptance, empathy and authenticity if the therapist her/himself had truly internalized and developed these qualities in her/his own relationship to self (p. 56).

In The Core Curriculum in Professional Psychology, published by the American Psychological Association, Polite and Bourg (1991) state, “The relationship competency is the foundation and prerequisite for all the other competencies in professional psychology. ... The paramount importance of relationship cuts across both theoretical orientations and professional specializations” (p. 83). Kurtz, Marshall, and Banspach (1985) have investigated what is meant by therapist interpersonal skills in their review of research on relationship-skills training during a 12-year period. They conclude that although a wide array of labels are used, every skill typology they investigated included one or more of what Rogers (1965) called the core facilitative conditions: empathy, genuineness, and positive regard.

A related topic of great interest is the lack of emphasis in clinical psychology training programs of the development of these therapeutic personality qualities. Singer, Peterson, and Magidson (1991) point out that although many have advocated attention to the education of the self in clinical training,

education about the self in professional psychology typically has been either attended to haphazardly or neglected and seen as peripheral, secondary to, and less worthy of systematic thought, systematic inclusion in the curriculum and academic credit than content or technique-oriented courses. (p. 133–134)

They go on to state that, in their view, “the education of the self should be at the very center of the core curriculum in professional psychology, providing its backbone” (Singer et al., 1991, p. 134).

Therefore, in Western traditions it can be established that who the person of the therapist is, is a very important dimension of therapy process related to outcome. Herein lies the pitfall of
manualized therapies that some have stated will one day be capable of being administered by people with minimal training as psychologists. Not so, as the real training of a psychologist is the training of the person, the development of specific therapeutic personal qualities.

Rogers (1961) was fascinated with the concept of experiencing. In On Becoming a Person he discussed openness to experience and ‘‘To be that Self one truly is’’ (Rogers, 1961, p. 173). In language that is strikingly similar to current descriptions of the attitude one adopts in mindfulness meditation, he stated that ‘‘when a client experiences himself as being received, welcomed, understood as he is’’ (p. 156), ‘‘the individual moves toward living in an open, friendly, close relationship to his own experience’’ (p. 173). This is a clear statement of how a certain kind of therapeutic relationship facilitates and supports the growing openness to experience, the growing mindfulness of the client.

In examples in his writings, we see that in the empathic, caring, accepting climate he offers, individuals come deeply in touch with blocked emotions and dimensions of awareness that they previously had no access to nor understanding of. In one of Rogers’ examples, a woman in a group who feels a lot of anger toward Rogers’ daughter discovers profound sadness about the loss of her father just at a time when she was beginning to be close to him (Frager & Fadiman, 1994, pp. 453–457). The anger was being triggered by watching the closeness between Rogers and his daughter. But she did not understand at first what the source of her anger was. In another example, a bitter, remote hospitalized man discovers tremendous sadness when he talks about his hopelessness and Rogers responds spontaneously, letting the man know that he felt that way once and that he does care what happens to the man even if the client doesn’t care himself in that moment (Meador & Rogers, 1973). Rogers talks almost poetically about how this man’s deep sobbing in response to Rogers’ expression of caring is an instance of the heart and essence a therapeutic change, stating that never again can this man be quite the stranger to tenderness he was before this therapeutic moment.

I have spoken elsewhere of my own experience of this phenomenon (Cohen, 2012). As a graduate student in a nearly four-year long psychoanalytic therapy, the process resulted in my frequently shifting levels of awareness. I began to regularly move between anxious states and states in which I had a clear vision of my deeper emotions, insights about troubling issues and a profound sense of well-being. These alternating states became so typical of my experience that I found myself routinely waiting to understand and solve problems by the mere shift of experience that would inevitably come.

After years of experiencing this process, I met a world-renowned meditation master who was traveling around the world. He spoke about the importance of the spiritual teacher who had the ability, as a result of his own inner state, to catapult a student or seeker of deep inner truth to levels of experiencing comparable to the discoveries the teacher had made during his journey to enlightenment. I tasted this experience in workshops with the teacher and became aware that many hundreds and even thousands of other people were having a comparable experience while attending the teacher’s talks and programs. In fact, certain images dating back more than 30 years have left an indelible impression on me. I often picture in my mind the scene of how a line of people five across would move rapidly in front of my spiritual teacher, each person bowing briefly and moving on. This line would continue for hours. So many people were willing to wait for a moment to have a glimpse of this individual, to be in his presence for just a few seconds. These were accomplished, sophisticated individuals; doctors, lawyers, well-known musicians and people in the entertainment industry. Once, a weekend workshop was organized for
mental health professionals; three thousand psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and psychotherapists traveled to upstate New York to be there, myself among them, exploring how ancient Indian philosophy and meditation could enhance our work with our troubled clients.

I reached the conclusion that I was witnessing the farther reaches of the capacity of an evolved human being to catalyze depth experiencing in another person along exactly the lines that Rogers was talking about, and that the psychoanalysts sought by way of the process of free association, interpretation and analysis of the transference (Maslow, 1993; Ullman & Reichenberg-Ullman, 2001). In one experience I asked my spiritual teacher a question that embarrassed me. He responded in a firm way and I felt a little ashamed but happy to have his response. Later that evening as I was driving home a song came on the radio with the title of “Found a Cure.” To my amazement I was transported back to the moment when I asked the spiritual teacher my question. Suddenly, instead of shame, I felt a tremendous sense of being loved and cared about by the teacher. I sensed that the heart of his admonishment was love. I reached a simple conclusion—that is what is meant by the concept of a saint: a person who radiates a kind of universal love and caring for everyone who comes before him, whatever their problem or confession.

A key concept in the yoga of meditation is described in an ancient Sanskrit chant in a verse that states:

What is the use of practicing for so long all of those hundreds of windy pranayamas which are difficult and bring diseases and the many yogic exercises which are painful and difficult to master. Constantly serve only one Guru to attain that spontaneous and natural state. When it arises the powerful prana immediately stills of its own accord. (SYDA Foundation, 1978, p. 37)

Here the concept of service to the guru is comparable to establishing a therapeutic relationship with the therapist. Service is the means to being around and in a relationship with the guru. The open and receptive attitude one cultivates with this spiritual teacher is also important. A related concept is that it is not so important for the guru to be pleased with his or her student. Far more important is that the student be pleased with his or her guru for the relationship to have its transformative effect.

What all this leads to is the idea that there is something somewhat misguided about all the emphasis now days on mindfulness. The benefits of meditation derive as much or more from the power and the state of the teacher, and therefore the effect that this relationship between student and teacher has on the student, as they do from the application of the technique. The relational ingredients induce a capacity for meditation in the student.

Often people complain that they have tried meditation many times, but they cannot meditate or find any satisfaction in meditation. They cannot still their restless minds. I learned to meditate as a result of the success of my psychoanalytic therapy. It was the ability to shift my awareness to deeper levels that was my training in meditation. I began having glorious insights and states of joy in that therapy. It would happen while listening to music, while I walked around the University of Michigan campus, and when I spent time with friends. It especially happened when I was driving and listening to disco music. So for me, the therapeutic action of therapy and the benefits of meditation became synonymous. I have told the story many times about the first time I went to a meditation ashram, where we chanted in the dark. I immediately began to have the experience of the deepening of my awareness and the upsurge emotion that I associated with my therapy. It was easy for me to conclude that the spiritual teachings I was learning about on
this meditation path were in fact an ancient psychotherapy technique developed in India. The practices were a little bit different; chanting was new to me, but the results were obvious and identical to what was happening to me with my psychoanalyst.

This notion is being overlooked in the emphasis on mindfulness in therapy these days. It is being taught and talked about as a technique. It is a technique that derives its power from relationship variables. How like our discoveries regarding therapeutic technique (Norcross, 2011; Siegel, 2010; Wampold, 2001). A therapist, teacher, or guru who cannot meditate, who does not experience peace, who is not comfortable in her or his own skin, cannot teach meditation effectively to a student. My teacher would say a true guru is one who robs his students only of their unhappiness. It goes without saying in general that one who has not mastered something probably cannot teach it to someone else to a level of proficiency beyond his or her own. But the most important point here is that in the teaching of meditation the attainment of the teacher is communicated to the student and facilitates the student’s development of this capacity to meditate. This point is not being sufficiently emphasized nor is it generally understood at this time as mindfulness is being discussed, practiced, researched and integrated into a variety of therapeutic methods.

This point of view is similar to the psychodynamic object relations view. Winnicott describes this approach as a corrective emotional experience where a client regresses to the point of maternal failure and is then re-parented in the holding environment of therapy (as cited in St. Clair & Wigren, 2003). The client metabolizes and expels the negative introject, the bad internal object and incorporates a good object and positive sense of self in work with a good enough therapist. This allows the client to develop an increasingly benign inner state comparable to what the client would have grown up with had he or she been consistently nurtured and mirrored by a consistently caring parent. Here again it is the primacy of the therapeutic relationship that produces a positive outcome.

In fact, the spiritual teacher can be compared in his or her realized state to a perfect parent. The spiritual teacher exists in bliss and radiates nonjudgmental love and acceptance. In meditation, the student is taught to consciously identify with the teacher, going so far as to begin meditation by mentally identifying the parts of his or her body with those of the spiritual teacher (actually touching one’s body and mentally repeating ‘‘these are the guru’s eyes; this is the guru’s head; these are the guru’s arms and legs,’’ etc.). This identification is considered to be both the means and the end or goal of meditation: to replace one’s ordinary consciousness with the vast, stable bliss of the teacher. So again, there is a very close parallel between the notion of a client internalizing the benign attitude of this object relations psychoanalyst to achieve a healthier frame of mind and that of a student of meditation internalizing the mental and emotional state of well-being of his or her teacher as he or she learns to meditate.

‘‘Let me love you until you learn to love yourself’’ says a popular song playing on the radio (Eriksen et al., 2012). Breger (2012) asked patients he had seen in his long career, in what he calls contemporary or modern analytic therapy, to reflect on what had been most helpful to them about their work together. The most important thing one patient got from analysis was that ‘‘I no longer hated myself. . . . I only got to like myself because I finally felt that YOU liked me’’ (p. 72).

Contrary to popular belief, meditation is not a solitary but rather a relational activity. The great paradox which is a problem in psychotherapy as well is that the notion of a guru conjures up images of an overwhelming dependency, an abnegation or loss of individuality or identity. However the essence of the Eastern traditions is that the true guru or teacher, having achieved
an egoless or selfless state, serves the disciple and aids her or him in finding her or his own inner self. The guru helps the disciple to tap into that innate self actualizing tendency Rogers, Maslow, Rollo May, Eric Fromm, and Jung spoke about (Maslow, 1993, p. 70). Meditation techniques much like therapeutic techniques are the means of learning nonjudgmental acceptance of mental and emotional contents which creates a pathway to the locked, hidden inner potential of the student or client.

The guru and the psychotherapist teach the disciple, student, or client to love herself or himself, to become self-accepting in a way that allows them to tap their potentials for growth, adaptation, creativity and intimacy. Meditation and psychotherapy are relational processes of restoration of the self with much in common. The real meaning of meditation is to learn to love and accept oneself completely. The means is a teacher who loves and accepts her or his student totally. The object of meditation is the self.

Yogananda (1998) describes encounters with his guru. “An indescribable peace blossomed within me at the masters glance. . . . To be with him. . . . was an experience which changed my entire being” (p. 37). Later in his account, Yogananda says, ‘‘His eyes held unfathomable tenderness. ‘I give you my unconditional love’. Precious words!’’ (p. 90).

The great Indian philosopher Shankaracharya wrote,

No known comparison exists in the three worlds for a true guru. If the philosopher’s stone be assumed as truly such, it can only turn iron into gold, not into another philosopher’s stone. The venerated teacher, on the other hand, creates equality with himself in the disciple who takes refuge at his feet. The guru is therefore peerless, nay, transcendental. (Yogananda, 1998, p. 92).

Carl Rogers (1961) hints at this phenomena in this powerful description of genuineness:

Being genuine also involves the willingness to be and to express, in my words and my behavior, the various feelings and attitudes which exist in me. It is only in this way that the relationship can have reality, and reality seems deeply important as a first condition. It is only by providing the genuine reality which is in me, that the other person can successfully seek for the reality in him. (p. 33)

In a book that explores the applications of the non-dual wisdom of meditative traditions to Western psychotherapy, Wittine (2003) discusses the view of contemporary psychoanalytic theory that:

For us to evolve and maintain a vital, mature personal self out of our inborn potentials, we need caregivers who facilitate our individuation by meeting certain developmental needs. We have a “holding need,” a need for caregivers who suspend the expression of their own subjectivity and are “present” simply as loving onlookers who give us room to discover our own subjective reality. We also have a “mirroring need,” or need to be affirmed by our caregivers for our value and creative spirit. We have an “idealizing need,” or need to experience ourselves as part of calm, wise, loving authorities who possess qualities we admire and are latent within us. (pp. 276–277)

How closely these concepts drawn from humanistic and psychodynamic descriptions of therapeutic, growth promoting ingredients resemble the descriptions of the guru in the guru disciple relationship presented by Yogananda and Shankarachharya. And from the ancient Malinivijaya Tantra (Singh, 1979a): “Absorption of the individual consciousness in the divine
results from an awakening imparted by the guru in one who has freed his mind of all ideation” (p. 31).

In the Guru Gita (SYDA Foundation, 1978), we learn that the guru imparts the power of self-knowledge (p. 37). He is “aware of his own Self” (p. 43). “By this path of the Guru, knowledge of one’s Self arises” (p. 47). “The Guru . . . who always bestows bliss, and who is seated in the center of the space of the heart, shining like a pure crystal, should be meditated upon” (p. 48).

The experiential therapists—psychodynamic, humanistic, existential (and now even the cognitive behavioral therapists using dialectical behavior therapy)—developed the idea that looking inward, facing one’s unconscious, one’s shadow, embracing and accepting all of one’s experience leads to something positive, integrative and adaptive for the individual in treatment. Eastern meditative traditions, especially of the Vedanta and yoga schools posit a higher self, available to everyone by accepting, loving and searching within oneself. And the guru, like the therapist, is the means (Singh, 1979a, p. 102). Like in the earlier Rogers quote about the importance of the therapist’s providing her or his genuine reality to help the client search within her or himself, the guru’s self-acceptance, willingness to be fully her or himself offers this possibility of profound self-acceptance to the student. With the help of the Guru, the student discovers her or his own inner guru, her or his own deeper self. She learns to love herself.

Rogers admired the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard, who pointed out “that the most common despair is to be in despair at not choosing, or willing to be oneself; but that the deepest form of despair is to choose ‘to be another than himself.’ On the other hand ‘to will to be that self which one truly is, is indeed the opposite of despair’” (Rogers, 1961, p. 110). Roger’s monumental conclusion was his “growing recognition that the innermost core of man’s nature, the deepest layers of his personality, the base of his ‘animal nature,’ is positive in nature—is basically socialized, forward moving, rational and realistic” (p. 90). And Maslow (1993) described the acceptance, spontaneity and awareness of the subjective experiences of self-actualizing people, leading as well to a wonderful capacity to appreciate, trust and savor life. “For such people, even the casual workaday, moment-to-moment business of living can be thrilling, exciting and ecstatic” (Maslow, 1954, p. 215). Surely the joy and freedom Rogers, Maslow, and Kierkegaard, to name a few, attribute to self-actualizers who are accepting and open to inner experiences is quite similar to the inner ecstasy of the meditating yogi who seeks and establishes contact with her or his deeper self as described since ancient times in eastern meditation texts (Singh, 1979a, 1979b, 1980).

The living, relational context of learning to look inward in both meditative and western therapeutic traditions is well captured by these remarks by Chogyam Trungpa (1973) in Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism:

As far as the lineage of teachers is concerned, knowledge is not handed down like an antique. Rather, one teacher experiences the truth of the teachings, and he hands it down as inspiration to his student. That inspiration awakens the student, as his teacher was awakened before him. Then the student hands down the teachings to another student and so the process goes. The teachings are always up to date. They are not “ancient wisdom,” an old legend. The teachings are not passed along as information, handed down as a grandfather tells traditional folk tales to his grandchildren. It does not work that way. It is real experience . . .

The teachings have the quality of warm, fresh baked bread; the bread is still warm and hot and fresh. Each baker must apply the general knowledge of how to make bread to his particular dough
and oven. Then he must personally experience the freshness of this bread and must cut if fresh and eat it warm. He must make the teachings his own and then must practice them. It is a very living process. There is no deception in terms of collecting knowledge. We must work with our individual experiences. (p. 17)

An integrated meditation-psychotherapy perspective might be as follows. What the therapist or spiritual teacher offers her or his client or student is her or his own self-love, learned from her or his own teacher; that the client or student is noble, worthy of the highest love and respect. Having learned in some measure to love and respect her or himself, the therapist or spiritual teacher sees that same self in others, in one’s clients or students, as a result of which she or he loves and accepts them unconditionally, warts and all—the full range of their experiences, emotions, behaviors, all of them. The therapist or spiritual teacher loves that same essence of her or his clients or students that she or he has learned to love in her or himself, an essence that is worthy of the deepest reverence, the greatest honor and respect. And so the clients or students learn to love themselves, and they in turn pass this on to others.

In this process the client or student learns to identify and accept their inner experiences. They moved toward a state of wholeness, of integration, and of self acceptance. They discover, “I am ok. I can love and accept myself. I have worth.” This journey involves inner discoveries and inevitable suffering. Gradually a deeper connection with oneself and loving, enduring, intimate connections with others occur, with a growing appreciation of life just as it is. Meditation is the ‘homework’ of this process, best done in conjunction with a powerfully accepting, caring relationship with a therapist or spiritual teacher. Meditation is practicing the exploration, observation and acceptance of one’s interior experiences.

The acceptance of the teacher, so critical to this process, is no mere superficial pose. It must be a deeply internalized attitude. The attitude of self-acceptance so permeates the therapist or teacher that it is available to the client much in the way that the fragrance of a rose wafts to anyone near it. And the trust and dependency necessary to this transmission of self-acceptance result in a far more profound independence on the part of the client or student, as she or he discovers the power, joy and love of her or his own inner self.

REFERENCES


**AUTHOR NOTE**

Victor Cohen received his PhD in clinical psychology from the University of Michigan in 1981. He has been an Associate Professor at the California School of Professional Psychology—Los Angeles of Alliant International University and a California Licensed Psychologist since 1994 and is also in private practice in Manhattan Beach, California. Dr. Cohen has been a practitioner of meditation for over 30 years. He has published articles, [Cohen, V. (2002) Looking Inside; My Perspective on Adding to Our Knowledge Base in Psychology. *Psychological Foundations, The Journal, Special International Issue*, IV(2), 64–69. Cohen, Victor (2004). Spiritual “technique” in psychotherapy; a humanistic/object relations approach infused by the teachings of the yoga of meditation. *Journal of Research and Applications in Clinical Psychology, IV* (i & ii), 1–7], done numerous presentations and is preparing a manuscript about the spirituality–psychotherapy interface.