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# MEDITATION AND CORE PROCESS PSYCHOTHERAPY

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by

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## Introduction

The intention of Core Process Psychotherapy is compatible with most meditation practices, that is to contact pure experience within the arising moment. Pure experience is that manifestation of the life energy as it takes its many forms within the body and mind.

This contact involves an ability to be in the experiential moment combined with an awareness of the experience. This involves an ability to follow the movement of the unfolding process, to gently touch the inner experience with awareness and like two good friends, to dance together, experience the director, awareness the follower.

Difficulties arise due to our tendency to find certain experiential states pleasant and certain unpleasant. This provokes subsequent reactions to inner experiential states.

These reactions distance us from the dance and we lose our partner. We then redirect our attention, engaging our energies in a complex process which attempts to shape and control the arising experience. To a large extent it is successful, as each experiential moment is directly conditioned and indeed programmed by the preceding experiential moment. All aspects of the person are involved in this attempt to impose acceptable conditions on our experience. The body and mind become bound together in this task.

Each person's particular mechanism is unique and gets reflected in cognition, fascial patterning, emotional masking and preferred states of consciousness. The overall effect, whether it works or not, is to deprive the person of potential experience and indeed to form experiential ruts or grooves.

'Whether it works' in this context means whether the reactive process we initiate and support keeps the unacceptable at a comfortable distance from our awareness. The system is in a constant state of tension as the arising experience is constantly and unpredictably changing and so the system has to be constantly on guard.

So what determines acceptable from unacceptable experience? Fundamentally, it depends on our ability to be in that experience and tolerate it. The experience itself need not be a negative one. Indeed, an intensely pleasurable experience may be less bearable than one with intense negative associations.

To try and reduce the charge and associations of pleasant/unpleasant, good/bad, it may be useful to see experience as that which invites expansion and that which invites contraction. Although we link different mental attitudes and emotional states with each of these, these attitudes are reactive.

The reactions are based on past similar experiences, the contextual situation, the preceding state of mind and tendencies to create certain known form.

The movements of expansion and contraction in themselves are natural, pulsating activities. The difficulty occurs when we get stuck in one or the other extreme or reduce our range of experience. A bit like only being able to get one channel on TV. That may be alright until we begin to know or hear of the other channels when we may feel the entrapment of our position.

When we start to become aware of our condition or if the channel starts to fade, we may begin to feel the 'static' or feel the dissonance within our own inner process. We may then be drawn to expanding our range of contactable, tolerable experience.

#### *What brings the Meditator to Psychotherapy?*

Considering this question I realise that what I started to ask myself was "What problems bring the meditator to psychotherapy?" and although I will address this question later, first I will spend a little time considering the question.

Usually psychotherapy is seen as a response to some distress or pathology. During the past few years I have perceived a considerable change in what brings meditators to therapy.

The majority choose psychotherapy as a positive statement of enquiry. This is not a negation of meditation, more a realisation arising from their practice that they need a different environment for practice.

This exploration usually involves both inward reflection and outer relationship, a joint practice between therapist and client. This looks at that which was inner and thus private and contained, in a more expansive way. Indeed certain experiences which surface during the meditation practice need expanding and "bringing into the light of day".

The meditator's practice must move from the inner ground of cultivation to the outer of daily life. Most Western meditators are lay people whose practice may be solitary and isolated with contact only at intervals with fellow meditators and perhaps even less with their teacher.

In the East or within a monastery there is more of an opportunity to bring meditation and its insight and awareness into relationship, to get support and encouragement during difficult times and to be given instruction which is personal rather than general.

To some extent the therapeutic milieu within Core Process Psychotherapy allows the client to bring inner awareness into outer form, humanising a process which may have become stuck in contraction.

When we contact experience that was once unbearable we need to deepen or broaden our ability to tolerate. We also need to include the defensive process around the avoided experience. These defensive processes include that of transmarginal stress - one response to need frustration or the fight/ flight response to a threatening experience.

### *Transmarginal Stress*

During our early development we have certain basic needs which seem essential and must be satisfied. A small infant who needs either physical or emotional nourishment will make this need known. This may start by whimpering and progress to crying or screaming.

If there is a delay in response the infant mobilises what he can in breath, sound and movement in a searching, reaching reaction. Longer frustration may produce anger, panic and terror which continues as long as the child has the strength to react.

The initiators of these reactions of frustration, anger, panic and terror come from the unbearable need, longing, yearning and desire. The infant then stops reaching for contact thus reducing the pain of unfulfilled longing.

When the parent returns, the child's reaction seems paradoxical as the parent's presence and contact re-stimulate the pain and terror. The infant may remain withdrawn and contained rather than reconnect with the painful feelings. This response denies contact, nourishment and renewal and locks the pain, fear and longing deep inside and deeply effects the child's self-regulatory response curtailing the pulsation of movement from core to periphery. If the state persists as a life stance the meditator can use his practice to support this introspection and self sufficiency thus suppressing longing, need and interaction.

Another way the infant may respond to the now painful contact of the parent is to work through the former defensive process. If contact is maintained and emotional or physical nourishment offered,

the infant may go through distress, terror, anger, rejection and tears possibly returning to the longing and reaching behaviour which now can be satisfied. However the infant may maintain the defensive aggressive behaviour as a pattern of response to need. If the need cycle can be satisfied the pulsatory, self regulatory process returns.

When the client has become stuck in withdrawal as a protective reaction and may also experience this contracted state within his practice, it may require once more, contact with someone to encourage completion of the interrupted process, indeed, to work through the transmarginal stress.

Contact with another person may indeed be an essential part of the resolution of the defensive withdrawal. The client can be supported and given permission to feel and express feelings and emotions which may have seemed confusing and disturbing.

The somatic armouring may soften to allow the appropriate expression from inner need to find external expression. The client may now find more freedom of choice in relationship and within the meditation practice, no longer using the practice as a refuge which avoids contact. The inner regulatory process is strengthened.

The other defensive response of anger and rejection of potential comfort may also hold the meditator stuck in a conditioned response which deprives the client of contact which satisfies the underlying need. The only tolerable contact occurs within aggressive interaction.

This interpersonal pattern is usually expressed within the practice as an attitude or response to the inner needs as they arise creating a hostile

inner environment. It may also seem to the meditator that he is always dealing with anger arising in him which seems resistive to change. He may express feeling full of anger. As he cannot penetrate this layer he may doubt the existence of any other feelings and experience difficulty in both giving and receiving love.

#### *Fight/Flight - Avoidance of Threatening Experience.*

The natural response of an infant to threat, either physical or emotional, is to get rid of it or move away from it - fight or flight.

Before the infant is physically mature enough to fight or run away, he will find ways to withdraw and hide or resist and defy either emotionally or psychologically. If this inner process is fluid and reversible it supports the child's self regulatory process.

If however the response to one becomes preferred, the person becomes stuck and rigidified in maintaining the reaction. The maintained defensive reaction becomes a filter to colour perception of subsequent experience, both inner and outer.

We no longer allow full and open contact with experience. We get caught in an aversive, avoidant mode, engaged in the defensive reaction and distanced from the underlying fear. Our neurophysiological arousal level is maintained. The individual may experience constant anxiety or exhilaration, indeed be addicted to such states as they are preferred to that of fear.

Occasionally the organism collapses with fatigue ensuing as these arousal states eventually lead to exhaustion.

These responses, once appropriate to threatening behaviour, become inappropriate when we adopt one of them as a life stance. Misperception of new arising experience is inevitable, once again true contact with new experience is difficult.

In both of these examples of Transmarginal Stress or the Fight/Flight Response, we are describing difficulties in contacting arising experience. The former is based on the frustration of the love response, the other on the frustrations of the fear response. When either has been severe the organism is in shock. Neither has successfully responded to the situation and the person is left isolated and needy or fearful or angry.

These are just two reactions to unbearable arising experience which restrict the pulsatory life movement of expansion and contraction from core to periphery. The individual's solution to these impasses is unique, he will find his own way. The intervention of psychotherapy is to free up the defensive reaction so as movement is possible. The therapeutic encounter moves towards increasing the range and depth of inner experience. The renewed flow may involve interpersonal as well as intrapersonal reorientations. In this process, the therapist may be of use.

#### *Controlled Contact*

In the introduction the importance of focussed attention was discussed, an ability to concentrate or focus attention towards a prescribed object or experience at will.

This cultivation of concentration allows the mind to move as directed by the meditator. The person is now less 'run by the mind', the mind is more 'run by the person'. This ability brings with it an enormous sense of liberation and power. The person is able to direct the mind at will to contact thinking and feeling.

This ability is the foundation of a more inclusive awareness and if used skillfully, allows us to 'tune into' more channels or frequencies. However only with continued contact can we get more information which allows us to get more of a sense of the nature of the channels - to hear the story-line and the quality of production, the message, the landscape and the strength of the broadcast. We risk getting lost as we enter into each channel, we might even forget that there are other channels or indeed that we are watching TV.

However this depth and duration of contact is important, an importance of not understanding as well as understanding. To look without looking for meaning. We need a level of absorption with each channel balanced by an awareness of watching.

Sometimes we have too much "witness awareness" therefore too much distance which creates strong boundaries of watched and watcher. This distance can be maintained by constantly changing channels - like having a remote control - seeing what is on each channel but not choosing to stay with one to its conclusion; constantly scanning and making brief contact with many things or maintaining distant prolonged contact with one. A bit like some outer relationships.

At some time we have to risk losing the power and control gained through focussed awareness. The meditator who has become attached to controlled awareness may express a feeling of "dryness" or "something missing". This is usually linked to an absence of depth of contact. The client may report that there is nothing in it for them or reverse the statement to "there's nothing in me". Encouragement to stay longer with each object of experience and to develop a depth of awareness, to surrender some of the controlled will may be useful.

A continuing superficial distanced or constantly changing contact usually means that the person has a need to control or seem to control experience to avoid the anxiety of constant change. The person may have controlled experience in the past to avoid anxiety, now he can control the mind's contact with avoided experience. Both avoid contact with the arising moment.

#### *Therapy as an Expansive, Joint Awareness Practice.*

During this article we have looked at the difficulties experienced first when we have trouble in contacting experience or maintaining that inner focus at depth and secondly when we get stuck in a reactive, contracted and rigidified conditioned response.

That which was located within a natural pulsatory movement becomes bounded and unmoving. Even when contact with arising experience is resonant with the quality of that experience, this second difficulty in conditioned response deprives the client of a more inclusive sense of self. His attitudes and judgements in relation to certain experiential

states direct his volitional attention and diminish the range of possible experience.

We have briefly explored some of the origins of particular defensive responses and ego processes. It is not possible here to describe more individual responses. A summary of divisive personality process might however be helpful at this point. An understanding of personality formation lets us examine the possibility of a less segmented and contracted ego process and of how through awareness a more expansive experience of self may be supported in the joint practice of the therapeutic encounter.

Our attitudes and state of mind which both precede and prescribe our reactive responses to experience and are also a result of these responses, govern the contact with and range of possible experience. Our attitudes and states of mind determine what is to be allowed and what is to be avoided and unknown. It divides and separates the conscious from the unconscious.

These states of mind colour our perceptual processes, indeed, to a large extent they determine our reality. How we see things becomes how things are. This discriminating and divisive process mobilises body and mind in holding that which is unacceptable away from awareness, away from contact.

An awareness of perceptual relationship to our inner process of feelings, thoughts, emotions and body sensations along with our attitudes, judgements and mental states is the key to a less fear bound way of being which is not afraid of the dark, not afraid of the unknown.

As long as we continue to label arising experience as good or bad, whether consciously or unconsciously, our lives are being directed by our desires. We are involved in a constant reactive push and pull state. In Buddhistic psychological terms this is seen to create much suffering as everything arises and passes away, nothing is permanent. To try and maintain a consistent reality which is not all inclusive is both life denying and doomed to failure.

Unconsciously, what we mostly maintain is our conditioned way of reaction, perception and judgement. Our perceived experience is probably so distanced from the arising moment, that at best we are maintaining reactions, perceptions and judgements which are conditioned by preceding reactions, perceptions and judgments. And so it goes on, we are living in the past, denying the potential of current experience. We are living in reaction to that which came before.

This perceptual, attitudinal set describes the relationship we have to experience. If this fixed relationship can be softened and loosened and expanded - a whole inner process or stream can be revealed which takes us towards the less and less conditional, towards the expansive and boundless realm where there are no judgments, where we can see without adding or subtracting and the response to experience is acceptance and permission.

Difficulties in the toleration of experience gradually diminish and we stop directing the inner process and start allowing and supporting it. Some experiential states and memories may take time to tolerate and accept and then be able to let go of. It is only with an attitude of open receptivity, of patience and

tolerance that progressively deeper and less revealed states can be contacted.

The first stages of this unwinding process may expose the more difficult to accept states of sadness, anger, rage, resentment, longing, helplessness and hopelessness. Gradually the more acceptable states of happiness, joy, bliss and forgiveness may arise. We are then confronted at a deeper level with the perceptual attitudes and responses to these more desired experiential states. These also will direct the range of possible experience as we cling on to them, become attached to them. This attachment, as opposed to the preceding aversive relationship, contains its own kind of suffering as the client sees their transient nature and the person experiences the pain of separation from the object, state or person of attachment.

As the inner process continues the client confronts deeper awareness of the true nature of the life process. They begin to see how everything arises, lives and then passes away. Whether it is thoughts, feelings, sensations and indeed insight itself. Sometimes we are awake and in the present and sometimes we are asleep.

This more inclusive and expansive awareness of how things are may shake the person's foundation of how they viewed themselves. It may erode the ego processes and that of the construction of the personality bringing existential questions relating to the less personality controlled life experience.

The experience of a life less bound, by personality and ego is vast, expansive, non-dual and interconnected where states of compassion, unconditional love, equanimity and joy support a different way of seeing both our inner and outer worlds.

The transition between a well formed and recognised sense of self and one which is less dense, leads to clearer perception. However, within this transitional territory or zone great terror, fear, panic, helplessness and hopelessness may arise. This occurs when the conditioned ego process is perceived to be empty and without foundation. There is no known ground to stand on. Now the therapist must support the client in experiencing the great potential of this less bounded state. This allows an opening to awe, wonder and vast expansion. This transitional zone is extremely important as a corridor to greater freedom.

### *Psychotherapeutic Intervention*

In Core Process Psychotherapy the role of the therapist mainly focusses in supporting the change and surrender of the contractual, judgemental relationships that the client brings to conditioned experience.

The therapeutic milieu represents and reflects this intention to the therapist as opposed to the application of technique, interpretation and analysis. It is not as if the therapist will not have a cognitive understanding of the process, however this understanding is secondary to the ability of the therapist to offer unconditional presence.

Unconditional presence reflects the qualities which, if internalised by the client, allows a more open relationship to inner experience, a relationship of 'fair witness'

This is presence which is all inclusive, which is patient, tolerant, supportive and permissive; reaching through the defensive personality to that which is arising and reflecting back to the client

with less reactive charge; trying to give back with nothing added and nothing taken away; following the client's process and not directing, trusting that given unconditional attention, the self regulatory abilities of the client will soon take back and internalise this more open, less

reactive perceptual set. The therapeutic encounter becomes a 'joint practice'. Both client and therapist are involved in an awareness practice whose sole aim is just to be here, that is as stated at the beginning of this brief article, 'to contact pure experience within the arising moment'.

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