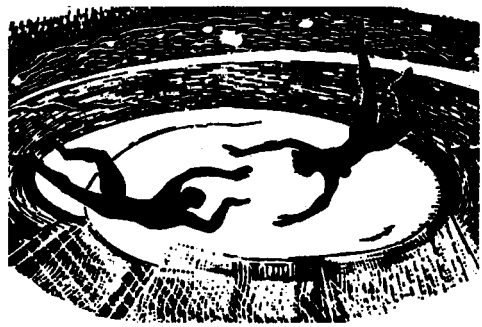
Psychotherapy as a Spiritual Journey



Rosamund Oliver interviews Maura Sills

Ros: In the psychotherapy training you offer at the Karuna Institute you've brought Buddhism and psychotherapy together in quite a new way. What took you into Buddhism and therapy?

Maura: I trained as an occupational therapist, originally. Although I had been working within a drug community, I hadn't experienced any formal training in psychotherapy until I went into analysis. I've always been involved in the humanistic, transpersonal fields of psychotherapy. I was always more interested in the mind than in physical illness, so I was attracted to working with people in psychiatry with emotional or psychological problems. My psychotherapy and Buddhist interests started together because I went into my first Reichian analysis just as I started to explore Ch'an Buddhism with a teacher in London. He was offering Tai Chi and through that I became involved in Chi Qung, Chinese medicine and then meditation. So from having a once-a-week interest in Buddhism, it developed to the stage that I was there every evening, seven days of the week, and all weekend, so for a while it got quite intense. There was work and then there was practice.

Ros: Did you see those two as separate at that time?

Maura: Yes. Even the friends were separate. It was like two different lives. It reached the stage where I was working in order just to go and practise. I was working as a group psychotherapist with drug addiction by day, and studying Ch'an Buddhism at night. I immersed myself in my studies of Chinese medicine and Buddhism with a view to practising as a Chinese doctor, but it became apparent after a few years that this didn't fully satisfy all of my needs for understanding, practice and right livelihood. There were times when I would stop practising because the tension between the two worlds was too extreme, and there was also a period when I wanted to stop practising psychotherapy.

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I came to a point when I felt I had reached the limit of my learning with that teacher and also I needed to take a break from seeing clients, so I decided to take the whole of August off, and go to see some friends in America. One of these was Franklyn, who later became my husband, and he started to tell me about his experiences with another teacher. At that time I had absolutely no knowledge of Theravadin Buddhism, and my first contact was Rina Sircar, a nun who taught lay people. Her teacher, who became my teacher, was Ven. Taungpulu Sayadaw from the Burmese forest tradition. He had spent some twenty years in solitary meditation in a cave in Burma before being encouraged to come out and teach. His teaching was very, very simple and very pure, in the sense that it was very pure to the lineage. He was from that generation of teachers who had not attempted to change the teachings to suit the West, and I continue to feel incredibly privileged that I received that first impact.

Before I met him, I was biding my time to see what relationship, if any, I was going to enter into with him. When Taungpulu Sayadaw came for the second time to America, he arrived at San Francisco airport and I went with the other people to meet him. I was curious, very curious. In the airport at that time there was a glass wall between the Arrivals hall and where people come through. I saw him come in with his monks, or rather I felt them come in, and without any volition on my part I was bowing, the bow happened to me, the mind didn't enter into it. It surprised me deeply to find that this was the relationship. It felt absolutely clear to me that I needed to pay attention, to free myself up as much as possible in order to spend time around this teacher.

I was ordained as a nun for a few weeks, but I was around the monastery for six months. Before I was ordained, I spent three months at the Nyingma Institute in Berkeley where I studied Kum Nye, a set of Buddhist yoga practices. My contact with the Nyingma Institute was very powerful, it's the deepest contact I've had with Tibetan Buddhism.

Ros: So during that time in America there was a series of quite important meetings for you?

Maura: Very important meetings. I was being intensely steeped for short periods of time in all that I needed to embody psychotherapy in a Buddhist way. After this I did some training at Esalen, where I came into contact with neo-Reichian gestalt. The main teacher was Dick Price who had also studied with Nyaniponika Thera from Sri Lanka. Dick brought awareness practice into gestalt, breath practice and bare attention. If you watched Dick work, there weren't any techniques, not only that but he could follow people silently. When I worked with him I was inspired: here was someone for whom there was no difficulty in being a psychotherapist and being mindful of Buddhist practice. He inspired me to start offering a way of working which was much more a following of process, and the focus in this became attention, awareness, and intention.

We then returned to Britain. When Franklyn was teaching polarity therapy in London, people started to become interested in what I was doing too, so I started doing a weekend here and a weekend

there, and soon it became a nine-month training. The growth of this training has reflected my own spiritual deepening. To begin with, the Buddhist aspects of the training were the notion of not-self or Buddha-nature, and the obvious healing qualities of a compassionate relationship which was non-directive and non-aggressive. We did not focus on Buddhist psychology and Buddhist ethics. But over the years I've learned that Buddhism has more and more to offer as a psychotherapy in its own right, rather than as an adjunct to a western psychotherapy training.

Ros: Do you see psychotherapy and Buddhism as the same or different?

Maura: Current western psychotherapy is different from Buddhism, in as much as ninety per cent of it does not acknowledge anything other than personality. Even the transpersonal psychotherapies may have some difficulty in coming into dialogue with Buddhism around the attribution of higher states of consciousness. There are very few spiritually-based psychotherapies, and in most of those one has to take on the religious or metaphysical beliefs of that particular paradigm. Buddhist psychotherapy can offer a non-religious therapy based on the nature of consciousness. I feel less and less that we have to dip into western psychology for understandings that we can't find within Buddhism itself.

At the Karuna Institute we have nearly completed our work with core process, but the stumbling block has been the lack of developmental psychology within Buddhism since, especially in the early teachings, the developmental model of personality has not been offered. Buddhism has focused more on how the self arises within the moment. In view of the cultural, social, political, economic, and ecological conditioning we have today, and how that colours personality and biological development, a psychotherapist needs to have an understanding of how these influences create certain strategies and structures developmentally. The developmental model is important because of the belief that this understanding could free a person from their problem.

I believe that there are ways to re-context the understandings of Buddhism so that they can be useful to us today, whether it's in Freudian stage theory, Piaget, Reichian characterological or Jungian terms, it doesn't matter. My own particular interest at the moment is working this within the *skandhas*, the five 'aggregates' which constitute the personality according to Buddhist psychology. The skandhas are form, sensation, perception, mental formations and consciousness. Craving or desire attaches itself to them and attracts them to itself, thus making of them objects of attachment, and bringing about suffering. If the psychotherapist has the ability to work within the self-reflection of the skandhas, there is no need for a developmental model. They can work with discernment to see where the problem is for the person in relation to the skandhas. It may be in their perceptions, or their emotions or in one of the other skandhas. If the psychotherapist can see where this basic link is then we can perhaps open that out so that past and present become revealed. We see how the person is creating their suffering. Psychotherapy is an examination of how we create our suffering.

If we work within the skandhas we have a model not to diagnose but to ascertain, with precision and clarity, what the actual problem is. This model is non-judgemental, it is not blame-orientated, but it's still very discerning, and much more precise than most other models in seeing how the person continues to re-embody the past situation or condition, and is stuck in the problem. Clients tend to discover that the door to the past is contact with the present, and through this things become revealed.

This model does not take the place of a developmental model in all respects, but it certainly offers a way for the psychotherapist and the client to work. For example the client may constantly be hearing voices saying 'I'm a bad person', 'nobody's going to like me'. We could look at that historically to see where those voices came from, or we could dialogue with them, do gestalt with them, and so on, but it boils down to the fact that it is an incorrect perception. Once we've found that the difficulty is within the perceptual framework, then both psychotherapist and client can work with this.

Ros: It's as though you are working with how perception contains a situation and what you are doing is turning your attention to what is supporting that situation and keeping it going, rather than what's in the container.

Maura: That's right. It's the template, the connecting system or glue that holds the problem together. What I'm suggesting is that if we understand the different ways that a person creates him or herself — and within the skandhas there are five — then our work is not to clarify in terms of cause and effect the confusions, thoughts and feelings, but to see how the person is in relationship to each skandha.

If you consider the skandha of form, for example, then you really understand what a fully embodied form is: a form that is full of mind, full of awareness. Thought processes are forms, they don't exist outside of the body, so the body is the vehicle. Co-dependent arising comes right down beyond the nervous system, to the nature of cellular intelligence, and that's why we go back to birth and pre-birth experience in our training and work. In each of our cells we are conscious at a cellular level, the cells are in contact one with the other and that doesn't depend on the nervous system. This is interconnectedness, interbeing. Psychotherapists have to know this as real to be able to context the individual journey within the whole, within society, within relationship, within the world.

Ros: One of the things you emphasise is joint practice, which you see as one that is shared by the client and the psychotherapist. Does this come from the understanding of relationship and interdependence?

Maura: Yes. If you're on a silent retreat and you're sitting in a room with other people, you know that connection. There is a mutuality, and it can be just a vague feeling, or it can be quite striking You realise that there's someone across the other side of the room who you've never met in your life before, and you have the sense that you are both connected to the same reality. Whose reality it was to begin with doesn't seem to matter at all.

Why don't we also assume that this interconnectedness is happening within

the therapeutic situation? Perhaps the most powerful impact of psychotherapy is in the contact that is happening non-verbally, despite whatever we *want* to do. The positions of client and psychotherapist are artificial and created for usefulness, that's the form. They are only a small part of what is happening in the whole encounter between two people who have been plugged in to each other, in the moment, in the room, in the world and beyond.

In psychodynamic therapy, there is transference and counter-transference, with an assumption that the transference is what the client brings, and the counter-transference is the response. There are exceptions, of course, such as where the psychotherapist would be seen to be initiating material and the client would be in response. However in joint practice you will never know who started it, and where it started. There's the call from someone, and that call is everything that is being communicated and demanded in the situation, and then there is the response of hearing the call from the other.

Ros: Where would you bring karma into that?

Maura: There are many ways of bringing karma in. Rina Sircar taught that when this arises, that will arise; that once things are in relationship, they're always in relationship. So it would be said for you and me that now we have met, we will always be in relationship. There's also an argument to say that we have met because we were already in relationship. On one of Rina Sircar's first retreats about eighty people turned up and nobody knew quite what to expect. She came into the room and sat down in silence with her eyes open. She was looking, and everyone thought it was fine, but then it continued. She looked at everyone, all eighty people, one after the other, it took forty-five minutes and then her comment was 'It's nice to see you all again'. She hadn't actually seen any of those people before, but in taking that time there was a recognition. One of my points about psychotherapy is that our clients come and we don't recognise them.

Ros: Core process is a psychotherapy that works for people of all religions and backgrounds, it's not specifically for Buddhist psychotherapists, or Buddhist clients. So where are these understandings held? If a client comes along, they are not necessarily going to think, 'I've met you before'.

Maura: As you know, our training is nearly one hundred per cent geared to the cultivation of the psychotherapist. Things are interconnected. The client's journey will be assisted by the psychotherapist's ability to be present at greater and greater depths, and subtler and subtler places. If the psychotherapist cannot do this the client will be restricted. So the client's growth or movement will be determined by the psychotherapist's limitations. You say 'where is it held?' This way of looking must first and last be in the domain of the psychotherapist. This includes the mystery and the challenge of: who is going to help whom? whose journey is this? what journey will we have together? These attitudes keep the psychotherapist in the right relationship to the work. It is important that the therapist has known the mystery of joint practice experientially, so this is a reality as he enters the relationship with the client.

Ros: What do you mean by mystery?

Maura: Well, for me life is a mystery. I'm actively involved and engaged in the mystery in the sense that I'll never truly be in control through understanding everything that may be going on at every level at this point in time. There's no way that I can hold that, that I can own that, that I can have that.

Ros: I've found that the joint practice is something I can rest in, where I don't know everything, so the space has something more than what I'm holding.

Maura: It is a joint enquiry, and also you have to let in other forms of inspiration and help. You asked about what the karmic connection might be. Sometimes I, and my clients, have been unable to get a handle at all historically on what they may be experiencing or working with. It wasn't that they were abused as a child, or whatever. So there may be a recognition at some level that some of the things we happen to be working with seem not to be personally based, and that's for me quite understandable, because if you really do open to interconnectedness, you are opening to much more than to individuals.

Ros: I wonder how emptiness comes into this joint practice?

Maura: Emptiness and space have to be at every level, in our thoughts, our feelings, our heart, and our body. It really is important for psychotherapists to be challenged to see where this emptiness does *not* exist for them, in particular looking at people in situations that they have huge judgements about. For example, where does the possibility of sanity and the enlightened mind happen in the act of murder, in power-based behaviour, in dependency, in madness? If you don't see Buddha-nature in everyone, in everything and in yourself, then you are going to be in difficulty. Even in personality there is Buddha-nature, it's not separate. Unless the psychotherapist can truly hear, receive, take in, and become affected by the other's complete reality, then spaciousness or emptiness will be harder to see.

Ros: I remember you saying once that the psychotherapist has to be prepared to be hurt. Could you say something about the vulnerability of the psychotherapist?

Maura: It's an interesting one, because although I would agree with you that the psychotherapist has to be vulnerable, it's the vulnerability of the warrior as opposed to the vulnerability of a vulnerable person. It is the ability to meet whatever is coming at them. It's about the capacity to hold, to take things personally and not personally at the same time, the capacity to hear the full call of the client and to allow whatever arises in us to arise. Then to be able to watch that and to see it as much as possible. It's not just about being vulnerable and affected, it's about what you do with the responses, and what arises. How are you with that, how do you hold it, what is the nature of the relationship?

In practices that work with the examination and inquiry of your own nature it's absolutely vital that you can hold your attention at will, that you can direct the mind to the different skandhas, that you can navigate. Any meditation practice that helps equanimity and endurance is very important. These practices are to do with wisdom and clarity, with the mind

working skilfully, but I also think devotional practices are very important: without the heart meeting the person unconditionally, with love and compassion, no matter how brilliant the psychotherapist is technically, it would be an empty practice. The opposite also isn't helpful — the psychotherapist who is only able to offer unconditional love and positive regard is going to miss a lot of the sharpening activity that is necessary.

Ros: In your training do you ask people to do meditation practice?

Maura: Yes. We used to say students could do any meditation practice, but it's become clear over the years that while some practices lead to devotion and sense of unity consciousness, other 'transcendent' practices can make it easier for someone to be OK anywhere through *not* being directly present, through avoidance.

We do actually say that psychotherapy is a post-meditative practice. It's absolutely obvious that every human being should have these skills, but certainly a psychotherapist should be rigorous in their mental discipline.

We're getting to the stage in the training where we need to ask people to develop certain mental abilities. The Kum Nye work is the main focus for that. It develops endurance to different mental states, physical conditions, feelings, and energetic states, so it works throughout the system and develops the stamina. It would be hoped that it also develops equanimity, so people can be with more experiences than normal and become more spacious. If you continue with the Kum Nye practice, eventually what opens up is emptiness.

Ros: I would like to ask you about catharsis. I've met people who in following the Buddhist path do not feel free to express the so-called negative emotions. In psychotherapy expressing these emotions might not necessarily be regarded as negative. There might be some purpose in getting people to express anger. I wonder how you have brought the Buddhist view together with expressing or helping people to get in touch with and work with these emotions.

Maura: It's a huge area. If we deal with emotions and understand them in the same way as we work and understand any of the other skandhas, then we learn they have a purpose, a function, and they have their own pathology, their own difficulty. Many western teachers within the Theravadin tradition of insight meditation have realised that the practice itself opens up our repressed emotions. Twenty years ago, some teachers who had no experience of what was happening with western people were saying this must be contained, you must stay with it internally no matter how intense. Now there's much more comprehension that sometimes that is appropriate and sometimes it is inappropriate.

Generally speaking, within a meditation situation, expression affects the other people in the room, and some people would say that's a good thing, and others would not. I remember an abbot of a Theravadin Buddhist monastery saying that the difficulty for him with young novices was that the environment of the monastery really can't support someone in the expressive mode. It wasn't a judgement, he was just saying that's a limit, certainly in public. In private in many of

those institutions, in my experience, there's a lot of support for helping people to work with their feelings and emotions. Emotional expression is neither good nor bad. It can be used as an avoidance or it can be used as part of the human process. It's the perception of this that's the problem mostly, and this is linked to what purpose the expression is serving and what consequences there are subsequently. Consequences can be viewed in terms of: was that helpful? did it free something? was that part of the journey? have we moved on, or are we re-enacting and reinforcing patterns of emotional response?

Most of what looks like catharsis is actually re-traumatisation. Often the angry person, the crying person, the hateful, spiteful person is simply going through the series of emotions that were either expressed or not expressed during the original trauma or stress. It's still a stuck state. In expressing their anger again and again and again, maybe they are just digging into the pattern. If somebody is expressing emotion from a post-traumatised position, the basic freezing and shock will not change. Where true catharsis can take place is where we get much more into the trauma cycle, the shock.

The things that usually make the expression of emotion more appropriate are presence, contact and relationship. It is not necessarily that the anger, tears, love or hate are being expressed to the psychotherapist, but that the expression comes naturally out of the relationship. Unless there is this contact most emotional so-called catharsis is not a catharsis. Catharsis is when something bursts open and cleans out. So it's the skill of the meditation teacher and the therapist which will determine what is appropriate.

Ros: How do you see the future?

Maura: Whatever psychotherapy develops in the west, if it truly includes the centrality of the spiritual journey, it must be encouraged and supported by all of us. My fear is that the existing milieu of psychotherapy in the west, because it's becoming so good at working with personality, is not on the right track. It's only working with the psychology of psychotherapy, though some psychotherapists are doing much, much more. I'm not trying to knock psychotherapy, but if we're not going to include non-duality as a basic foundation of our practice, we are headed in the wrong direction, towards a split, heading away from interconnectedness and real responsibility. Five years ago, maybe, I would have crept around apologetically about the Buddhist implications and nature of our approach, but now there is a growing certainty within me of the rightness of making it known where I can.

The last thing I'd like to say is it would be much more appropriate to talk about core process as dharmic psychotherapy, as opposed to Buddhist psychotherapy. *Dharma* is not special to Buddhism. Everyone can look at the nature of things, so Buddhism is a vehicle for dharma, and core process psychotherapy can also be a vehicle for dharma. Core process can become a new language for dharma without denying its Buddhist roots in dharma. Maybe in thirty years time core process psychotherapy will have found a really fresh, new language in which to communicate.