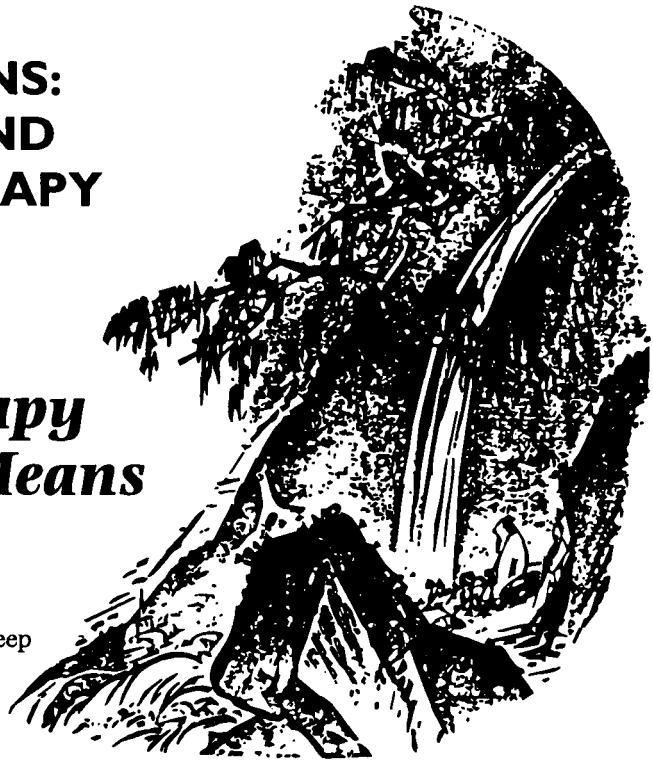
SKILFUL MEANS: BUDDHISM AND PSYCHOTHERAPY



Psychotherapy as Skilful Means

Sue Mansi

I started my adult life with deep but divided interests in Buddhism, psychotherapy, and the masculine and feminine polarity. Life has been a journey of bringing these together into a livable whole.

The word 'skilful' comes into Buddhism in two contexts. On its own, it is a translation of *kusala* and is used within the context of that which is ethical, and supportive of not doing harm. When used with the word 'means', however, it is a translation of *upaya* and describes the work, the activity, of the enlightened being, the compassionate expression of the enlightenment experience. For psychotherapy to be an expression of 'skilful means' seems, on the surface, to be elevating it to something very lofty indeed. Can we claim this ground? We need to look at three areas: the nature of psychotherapy; the nature of psychospiritual psychotherapy; and what we might understand by 'skilful means'.

There is, I feel, much confusion as to what psychotherapy actually is, which in itself arises out of the human desire for things to be other than they are. In the popular imagination psychotherapy promises change, but often does not deliver the change that has been ordered. There seems to be a widespread and naïve misconception that psychotherapists can magically alter and influence their clients

After eighteen years of teaching Iyengar Yoga, Sue Mansi is giving this up to become a core process psychotherapist, which brings together her concern for humanity with the insights offered by Buddhism.

in ways over which the clients themselves have little influence or control.

Now whilst I would not deny that in the psychotherapeutic relationship there exist indeed both the possibility for use of power and the reality of a power imbalance, I do not think these are as heavily weighted in the direction of the therapist as popular culture seems to want to believe. It is as convenient to blame the psychotherapist as it is the teacher, the doctor and the politician; and in some ways easier, because the actual psychotherapeutic agenda may be a more slippery customer. This seems always to have been the case. Freud himself complains how when the conversation turns on psychoanalysis 'you will hear the greatest variety of people passing their judgement on it... It is quite usual for the judgement to be contemptuous or often slanderous or at least... facetious.'

In society we psychotherapists are in a difficult position: we are often turned to by people in distress, even despair, when all else may have failed, all attempts at tinkering, re-adjusting, covering up, hiding or coping, all strategies have reached the limits of their usefulness and the individual is in need of radical help. But if we look at the history of psychotherapy and its predecessor psychoanalysis, it has never claimed to perform miracles, to cure any particular percentage of its clients, nor asserted with any certainty that if you do treatment 'A' with client type 'B', outcome 'C' will invariably result. The claims of psychotherapy have always been much more circumspect than that. We suffer from the public desire for 'a pill for every ill'. To quote Freud again, 'the mass of people themselves take things easily: they call for no more than a single reason by way of explanation, they do not thank science for its diffuseness, they want to have simple solutions and to know that problems are solved.'

What is the problem that the 'mass of people' believe psychotherapy has set itself up to address? The accountant is there to cope with your money difficulties, the teacher to educate your children, the politician to sort out the many and diverse problems of organising society to the benefit of as many people as possible. All of these things are more or less measurable in a world that is fond of the tangible, the measurable. What is the perceived function of the psychotherapist? Nothing less than that of dealing with the *problem of suffering*. And the alleviation of human individual suffering is subjective, difficult to quantify, especially as the well-being of the individual may come into conflict with the well-being of the sub-unit (family, peer group) which they inhabit. We are up against three problems whenever we make any claims at all for psychotherapy, three desires: for evidence that is linear and sequential, where 'A' results in 'B'; for evidence that is 'objective', that rests on something other than the subjectivity of the client; and for conformity, for a result that causes less disturbance or disruption than hitherto. The nature of psychotherapeutic process means that we can meet none of these desires, all of which stem from the human need to have things under control and are in direct conflict with our aim of freeing the restricted and exploring that which has been suppressed.

As a cure, psychotherapy cannot, and has never claimed to, fulfil the agenda that society would like to prescribe for it. What, then, is the psychotherapeutic agenda? Psychotherapy covers and has covered a vast range of activity. Freud claimed that

psychoanalysis was a science. What distinguishes science from other forms of activity is not the oft-made claim that it is objective, which has been adequately disproved both inside and outside conventional scientific circles; as Ken Wilber affirmed, the very act of observing is always participatory and therefore affects the process being observed. Nor, as modern physics forges into the description of ever more improbable and exotic phenomena, is science any longer distinguished by being predictable and measurable. Rather, it is seen as an attempted act of exploration into the nature of things *as they really are*. If this is a workable definition of science, then psychotherapy, broadly speaking, is a science. It asks the question 'How does this arise?'. The spirit of psychotherapeutic enquiry is the same spirit the moves the best scientific enquiry; the desire for vision, clarity, knowledge. Does this mean we have left behind 'skilful means'? There is more to look at before we can answer that question.

Eastern religion and Western science have found that they have the most profound meeting-ground. The greatest science becomes indistinguishable from the greatest art, and vice versa. What in the 19th century appeared as division, polarity, profoundly differing perspective, in the late 20th century are ever more apparent as differing aspects of similar human drives. Different languages, perhaps, but remarkably similar human beings attempting to convey universally felt experiences. If there is a core to the *dharma* (it is remarkably difficult to pin down any aspect of the *dharma*, that infinite and rich web) it is that the experience of enlightenment was the experience of seeing things as they really are in such a deep and profound way that it brings about what in the Lankovatara Sutra is known as the *parivrtta*, the turning around, or the turning about in the deepest seat of consciousness. In other words, it is a seeing so profoundly into reality that one can no longer exist in a state of delusion, act from delusion, be in any way influenced by delusion, but can only exist within, and act from, the radiance of profound wisdom. This is scientific enquiry par excellence. What is more, if we look at the first 'noble truth', which was the first expression of enlightened insight, we find that it simply states that life is *dukha*, or suffering. So psychotherapy, as an investigation, an inquiry into how things are, is an inquiry into the nature of human suffering.

Of course it is true that psychotherapists want to help, and always have. But the desire to help is in itself subject to scrutiny; it is not assumed to be any sort of basis, any bottom line. We are in the unique position of being fully subject to our own medicine: cancer specialists do not have to have endured cancer; accountants do not have to have been in financial trouble, in fact better not; even car mechanics do not have to own cars! But psychotherapists must be in therapy, must undergo the inner journey of self-discovery before they can witness that journey in another; indeed, their own limits may prove to be the limits of what they can offer. So the motivations, the desires, the agendas, the prejudices, the blind spots, of the therapist are all up for exposure and continually brought to awareness by the very process of training. In the branch of psychospiritual psychotherapy that I practise, which is known as 'core process', we try to value everything as information, awareness, light; not

wanting to help, if that is what is present, is given as much weight as wanting to help, when that is present.

Not wanting to help, wanting to help, wanting your client to be this or that way, having a view on a 'successful' therapeutic outcome, being disappointed in your client, all of these come from the personality. In core process psychotherapy there is an explicit acknowledgement of something else, and that this something else comes into the psychotherapeutic process, as it comes into everything. The something else is *core*, and one of the natural characteristics of core is that at this level, interconnectedness operates without impediment. At the outer levels, in the personality, in the ego, in conscious awareness and the upper reaches of the unconscious, interconnectedness is not easily apparent; we exist within division, duality, conflict, alienation, separateness. But at core, which is synonymous with enlightenment and with the *Brahma-viharas*, the sublime abodes of love, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity, we partake as drops in the ocean, neither one nor separate. In acknowledging the truth of inter-being, allowing this truth to support and inform our work, we have come a long way from Freud, with his strong boundary between the conscious and the unconscious, and his equally strong boundary between self and other.

A vital step on this journey from Freud to psychospiritual practice was made through Carl Rogers and the development of client-centred psychotherapy and counselling, which has had a profound effect as the concept of listening to the truth of another human being is filtering down into wider professional strata than just those of counsellors and psychotherapists. I truly believe that we see its influence everywhere, from the development of such things as Childline and the explosion of awareness of the problems of child abuse, to the popularity of shows like Oprah Winfrey's, to the training now given to bank employees, public servants, health practitioners, and even supermarket employees in how to listen to the position of the other person. I believe the value of truly hearing another, without interruption or judgement or in some way changing what you hear, is beginning to be glimpsed. Underlying the activity of listening to another is an important value, which may be more or less explicit: that of acceptance.

Christina Feldman has said that acceptance is the greatest gift one human being can give to another. Why should this be so? To the person who is frightened, angry, oppressed, in any way distressed, it may seem that the greatest help would be to change things, to act, to get rid of what is perceived as the cause of the discomfort or pain. But it is not within our power to do this, especially in psychotherapy. Too often we are dealing with the legacy of the past, the effects of having been abused, unloved, unheard, unrecognised, unsupported. There is a paradox at the heart of things, a *parivrtta*, and that is that nothing changes until it is fully accepted for what it is. Resistance actually solidifies positions, fear gives power to that which is feared. Total acceptance of the inner fabric of the moment allows a correspondingly total moving on — nothing is held on to. This is beautifully expressed by Carol Pearson, who proposes six fundamental archetypes, ending with the Magician, whose alchemical power is to transform all experience into growth. Contrasting two images of creativity, the masculine creator God, to-

tally under conscious control, and the feminine Goddess (every woman) giving birth, she writes: 'Instead of struggling against powerlessness, loneliness, fear, or pain, the Magician accepts them as part of the fabric of life and hence opens up to discovering the lessons they bring us . . . At the basis of life is eros, passion, sexual energy. Creation comes from opening up to that energy and allowing the natural process of spontaneous creation to occur. To do that, we need to be courageously open. Sometimes, though, we get hit with genuine tragedies. Sometimes . . . birth begins not with love, but with events that feel more like rape. While the pain and suffering involved is not invited or deserved — it may simply be the price we all pay for living in a world still at a very primitive level of development — even such catastrophes can be used by the psyche for growth, and hence eventually bring us treasures — if we allow the resulting growth to take place.'

In learning, with our clients, but first of all in ourselves, to be with whatever is there in an open, loving and non-judgemental way, we actually allow that change which, if we tightly and desperately pursue it, eludes us. My experience of core process psychotherapy is that this is its underlying intention, in a very deep way, and that its lineage is traceable both through Western psychotherapy, via Rogers, Wilber and others, and also through Eastern thought, especially the Buddhist tradition. Let us turn now to this.

We have looked, briefly, at the First Noble Truth, the truth of suffering, and I have said that this insight lies at the centre of Buddhist doctrine. In as much as we are dealing with the enlightenment experience, with wisdom, so it does. But wisdom is the inner face of enlightenment, and compassion is the outer face, the enlightened activity, the stream of energy that flows into the world. And *upaya*, skilful means, is the form that that activity takes. With the development of the Mahayana the emphasis subtly shifted from the inner to the outer, and the Bodhisattva, one dedicated to the attainment of enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings, became the central figure, representing in all his and her forms the myriad ways in which beings can be helped and aspects of the enlightened mind made accessible. There are, as always, many, many formulations of the Bodhisattva path, the six or ten *paramitas* or perfections, the *bhumis* or stages and many more, but I would like to look briefly at something pivotal to the Bodhisattva heart, and these are the four Great Vows. The traditional formulation comes something like this:

May I deliver all beings from difficulties
May I overcome all passions
May I master all dharmas
May I lead all beings to Buddhahood

Some years ago I wrote an article dealing with sexist language for what was then the Buddhist Peace Fellowship and has since become the Network of Engaged Buddhists, in which I reformulated the Vows to read:

May I deliver all beings from difficulties
May I dissolve all passions
May I absorb all dharmas
May I nurture all beings to Buddhahood

Now, I do not believe that one formulation is inherently more right than the other, but rather that in our language, as in all else, we are struggling with the problems of polarity and duality. To get a feel of both formulations might give one a more whole felt sense of the inner meaning of the Vows.

To deliver all beings from difficulties. To be there for all beings. Not to deny difficulty, but to hold the person in a space where deliverance, change, becomes possible.

To dissolve or overcome all passions. Passions entrench us in positions. Passion, in this sense, is narrow, resistant, obsessive. To dissolve passion is to allow space. It is not to lose feeling, but to emerge into something wider than the self, something in which the passion has space to change its shape, to follow its course, to rise and fall with intrinsic energy. To dissolve passion is to see passion, rather than to be locked into it. To witness.

To absorb/master all dharmas. To be looking deeply for the truth in all its aspects, all its nuances; the heart of scientific enquiry.

To nurture all beings to Buddhahood. Never to give up on the inherent wholeness of the person sitting in front of you, no matter how distressed, how angry, how deep in grief that person is in the moment.

It is a very subtle thing, to have contact with a space in which there are both no agendas and judgements, and yet the intention is manifest as the spirit of the Bodhisattva vow. It is beyond the conscious scope of most of us, most of the time. But acknowledgement of core is acknowledgement of the possibility of contact with the place where we can partake of this spirit, because it is bigger than just the individual, it is in our connectedness that this possibility dwells. To the extent that it is attainable, I believe that it is where psychotherapy can meet Skilful Means, and our work can take on a depth that is hard to explain or quantify, but is none the less a real contribution to deep human growth.

Further Reading

Sigmund Freud, 'Lecture 34: Explanations, Applications, and Orientations', *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1964; Pelican Books, 1973

Christina Feldman, 'Acceptance', talk given at Gaia House, July 1993

Carol S. Pearson, *The Hero Within: Six Archetypes We Live By*, Harper, 1986.