Moment to Moment

A personal account of the effect of core process training and therapy

Els van Ooijen

I was asked to run a one-hour workshop at a local conference recently. The notice was very short, a few weeks only. 'What shall I do', I thought, 'that will be of value and that people are unlikely to have come across in their certificates, diplomas or whatever?'

My usual method with this kind of question is just to let it lie there for a few days. More often than not the answer will emerge by itself without me having to ponder on it too deeply. It was no different this time. A few days later, while I was weeding my flower beds, an idea just popped into my mind — seemingly apropos of nothing and coming from nowhere. I would do a workshop on core process therapy. After all, I had done a foundation course in this at the Karuna Institute the previous year. It was time to share with others what I had gained.

In preparation for the workshop I read through the notes I had taken, a combination of session notes and a reflective journal. I was surprised and pleased to see the extent to which much of what had been introduced during the course I was actually using in my counselling practice. Yet when the conference organiser said 'Core process therapy? Sounds great! What is it?' I had trouble formulating my thoughts and giving a clear explanation. I remembered feeling not dissimilarly when at the end of the foundation course we were asked for feedback. If we had been asked to write a few thousand words I would have found that difficult, too, without recourse to notes and books. And yet, I knew that I had learnt a great deal, in fact I had a real sense of having absorbed the material almost organically, through my body. Somehow it had gone in and become part of me. I knew my practice was transformed and it was probably no accident that since I had completed the course new clients just kept coming. Also, although the course itself was only six months, I was still having weekly therapy with a core process therapist, another source of continuing growth and development.

So what is core process therapy? A number of words and phrases appear in my mind. Gentleness, awareness, space, being in the moment, deep layers and the core — the core of being and nothingness. Core process therapy is about slowing things down, about being in our body, in the here and now. The slowing down I have found

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wonderful. It does not mean that the therapy itself takes longer. On the contrary, I find that slowing things down helps clients to really get in touch with themselves, and to access deep layers of hurt, trauma and defences.

However, this therapy is not about 'let's get at the trauma and get the client to cathart'; the core process approach is a gentle one and the client is always in the driving seat. The task of the therapist is to be with the client, as a witness, and invite the client to go inwards and to go deep, but only as much as the client wants to. In my own therapy, if I hit resistance and say something like 'I don't seem to be able to go further, I feel myself closing down', then my therapist may say, 'Just notice that, that you go down and then something closes ... just be there with it, notice it, and see what happens.' This helps me to tolerate being in that uncomfortable space, the therapist with me, witness to my process, to the space I am in. I verbalise what is happening: 'I can feel myself going up and down slightly; every time I go down, I will move up again ... ah, I can feel something shifting. A door is opening slightly ... some steps appear ... I try to open the door, but it does not open further ...' 'How is that?' my therapist asks. 'I feel slightly anxious about what is down there, but I also want to know ...' and so on.

Core process work is close to existential therapy as described by Emmy van Deurzen-Smith, in that it engages the client at the level of how it is to 'be'. It also has a clear affinity with the humanistic approach in that, according to the Buddhist psychology on which it is based and which Carl Rogers endorsed, there is something that is 'all right' in each of us. This something is the 'core', our Buddha nature. However, as many of us have lost sight of that core, the aim of therapy is to help people find space in order to rediscover what is there, hidden under what has often become encrusted and rigid with the habits and defences of a lifetime.

In my own case I have found this fundamental belief in my own 'all-rightness' tremendously healing and, perhaps paradoxically, also very challenging. From my work with clients I know that I am not alone in secretly harbouring a suspicion that I am '*not* all right', and that it is only a matter of time before it is found out just how 'not all right' I am. Somehow it seems that 'knowing' that I am not all right also absolves me from some responsibility. After all, if I am not all right, how can I be expected to make a success of my life and my relationships? So, in its gentle way, core process therapy helps people to own their own goodness and to take responsibility for the process to health.

Awareness

Core process therapy helps me to get used to the continuous process of being aware of myself. To check in, notice how I am and move out again. When I am with a client it is important to know what it is like to be me, in that moment, to check in 'who am I, how am I', so that I can help the client to become aware. The role of the therapist is to 'receive' the client, to 'take in' their reality and to get a real sense of what it is like to be them. In a way core process therapy is like an arising stream of becoming in the moment. Neither the therapist nor the client knows what will become; both are vulnerable to the 'not knowing'. However, there is believed to be something inher-

ently healing in the awareness itself.

True stillness, true awareness in the moment is something very rare in our modern world. Many years ago I read this sentence: 'The present is a moment we continually evade'. It struck me as so profound that I wrote it on the first page of my filofax in order to remind myself of it several times each day. However, to be asked to just be still and be aware and notice themselves — in the moment — is something many people find extremely difficult. Yet the moment is all we ever have. There is nothing else. By being still, in the moment, the therapist allows herself to be touched by the client. It is very healing for a client to know that the therapist has been touched. Thus in core process therapy the therapist is not a blank slate, but a totally genuine, real person, there, in the moment. It is believed that even when we are alone we are always in relationship and the work is therefore about how we are with our awareness in relationship with another.

When defences arise they are brought to awareness and, rather than fighting them or trying to dismantle them, they are worked with, at the client's speed — gently. The therapist may say, for example, 'I am aware that we have been at this place before and I am wondering how is that?' So the therapist does not attack the client's defences, but gently enquires into the process. From experience I know that being invited, in a non-judgemental, equanimous manner, to look at my own resistance is a very challenging experience.

The therapist is in a receptive 'yin' position and 'attends' to the client's psyche, all the time holding the balance between what is happening for themself and for the client. In other words, the therapist holds in consciousness not only the client and the client's process, but also themself and their own process, together with the space in between. Slowing things down is essential to sustain this level of attention, which has the effect of somehow intensifying the level of consciousness. As a real person, the therapist allows the client to have an impact, to be taken in at a conscious as well as an unconscious level. Being touched by the client in this way involves a resonance, which may either be communicated verbally or transmit itself non-verbally, and which may help the client to intensify their awareness.

Two questions are often asked by the therapist to focus the client on the moment: 'What is happening?' and 'How is that?'. Being asked to focus on what is happening now, in the moment, not yesterday or last week, is often experienced as very challenging and not easy to tolerate. This is how core process therapy can be both gentle and challenging.

Equanimity

In core process therapy all experiences are regarded as equal. Whatever its nature, be it joy or pain, each experience is greeted as it comes and given equal value. Nothing is screened out; a therapist will always enquire 'And what else is there?' thus allowing a bigger therapeutic space.

I find that 'equanimous enquiry' is also very useful prior to receiving a client, as it allows me to be still, to get in touch with myself and to see how I am before I let myself be engaged with another person's world. The following is what happened in the few minutes while I was waiting for a prospective new client.

I enquired of myself 'How am I?' Slightly nervous, apprehensive, my heart is beating a little faster, my breath is a little shallower. When I realise this I breathe more slowly and deeply. I enquire 'What is happening?' and 'How is that?' I am tensing up, to do what? Battle? To prove myself? Again? There is an idea in the way, an idea of myself as a counsellor. 'Let go, let go' I tell myself, whilst continuing to breathe slowly and deeply. I feel I am going to be judged, compared. 'Let go, let go, so what, let go.' I know I am all right deep inside myself; all this anxiety, all this ego stuff is peripheral. Everything just is, there is no judging. 'What is happening?' I ask myself again. Fear of what I may be about to hear, touch. The pain, trauma, anguish, as yet unknown, that I may be about to share. 'Let go ...' An image, a red heart, appears in my consciousness. This fleetingly reminds me of another client. I feel a space opening inside ... a vast space. 'Just be, rest,' I feel myself saying. I am still aware of my heartbeat, but it is slowing down. My breath is deep and slow. It is time to stop, to be alert. It is time ... I am ready.

Deep Layers

The aim of slowing things down, of getting clients to become aware of themselves in the moment, is to get in touch with deeper layers. According to the Buddhist view the core is at the centre of our being, a vast 'no-thing'-ness, a space beyond form, an emptiness without individuality. However, as we live our lives the core becomes obscured by a number of layers: the tendencies, felt sense, co-ex matrix, persona and shadow, and periphery. The denser those layers, the less we are in touch with our core. It is not unusual for people to come for counselling saying 'I don't know why I am feeling like this, my life is OK, my relationships are fine, I have a reasonable job and yet I feel so empty inside, as if there is nothing there'. People who feel like this have lost touch with their core; they may have tried to fill it up with work, food, entertainment or addictions, but in the end none of that will work. They need to be helped to get in touch with their core in order to regain a sense of interconnectedness, to dissolve the boundaries between the various layers. However, this takes courage; it may be very frightening, and can indeed involve great suffering, to really let ourselves descend from the outer periphery and enter all those layers upon layers.

When we are in touch with our core we perceive no separation between ourselves and the world around us. This is something many of us may already have met in the natural world, where it can be experienced spontaneously. Some protagonists of the 'deep ecology' movement, such as Naess and Leopold, refer to this interconnectedness with nature as 'deep experience'. Redfield, too, in his bestseller *The Tenth Insight* describes how just by being still and being with, say, a tree or a bush can help us get out of our limited everyday existence into an expanded awareness.

Tendencies and Felt Sense

Closest to the core is the layer of tendencies which is believed to contain a germ of our personality. It is a transitional layer in which we form hardly perceptible preferences from moment to moment. As we move from experience to experience we somehow move more towards some than

others, without being aware of it.

Next to the tendencies layer is the 'felt sense' which is a fuzzy, not fully formed sense which is expressed in the body. Gendlin describes how by using focusing we can learn to access this layer. This fuzzy sense is not easily named, and is often best described as an image, phrase or sensation in the body. As the felt sense is fairly fluid there is less resistance here than in the more outer layers, which means that change is more easily achieved. In my own therapy as well as my work with clients I find that focusing can be a very direct way to get in touch with how things really are, in that moment. All that is needed is attention, awareness and trusting the process. By giving it attention the sense will move and shift. Often when people focus they do not at all like what they find; there may be something very dark or painful. So it needs courage. However, if we want things to change we have to see them just as they are: 'Ah, so that is how it is ...', without judging, and trusting that given attention and space something will transform.

Felt sense often has an inclusive 'all about' feel. For example, I may want to get in touch with my relationship with my son. My therapist may say 'How is the relationship?' and help me look for its inclusive, 'all about' feel. Having focused for a bit he may say 'And what else is there?', to give the all aboutness time to form and speak to me, in a word, phrase, image, sound, or movement. When I focused on the relationship with one of my sons, who is abroad for a few years, I felt my womb expanding and expanding, until it encompassed him, in that distant country. Somehow I knew that, although I had let him go, I still held him and that he probably knew that and felt secure in that knowledge. Perhaps paradoxically, I felt that it was precisely because he felt held that he was able to go.

The Co-ex Matrix

Each time we have an experience something about that gets laid down in the 'co-ex matrix', the next layer, which gets denser the older we get. Because of the co-ex matrix we greet each new experience through our layer of previous experiences. In other words, our experiences are 'conditioned' through what has gone before, a view not unlike that of the psychodynamic approach. If, for example, we did not receive much love in our early life, we will meet each new experience with the expectation of receiving little love, which is then likely to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Thus the layer of experiences in the co-ex matrix colours our everyday perceptions and helps explain why people's impressions of the same situation can be so very different. It also contains strong feelings and emotions, which may need to be expressed as they have nowhere else to go. As in gestalt therapy, that expression may be physical; people may want to hit cushions, cry, shout, or whatever. However, just expressing the emotion is not enough; having released it, clients are then helped to become aware of 'how it feels'. In other words, they are invited to go back to the felt sense layer in order to become aware of where they are now. It is important not to forget this stage, as expressing an emotion without then becoming aware of how it feels to have expressed it may not achieve anything, and can in fact be destructive.

The role of the therapist is to be a facilitating presence, to help clients reconnect with themselves and witness their own process, as it were, from the body. It is important to realise that the whole of the co-ex matrix does not need to be dealt with all at once. After all, it has taken a lifetime to build up! If we look at it, a bit at a time, it will help the client develop more resources. I find that some clients, particularly those who have been abused, have a tendency, an almost irresistible pull, even, to go too fast, to plunge into the pain that is contained in the co-ex matrix, thus running the risk of re-damaging themselves. Therefore it is important that we slow things down, not only in order to prevent clients from hurting themselves all over again, but also to protect ourselves from becoming overwhelmed. The pull of the damage and pain can feel like a vortex, it is important not to get sucked in. In core process therapy the client and the therapist go together to the edge, look at a small part of what is there, only move in a bit if the client is ready, and then move away again. So there is a gentle in–out movement, a going towards and a moving away.

As a client I have found the willingness of the therapist to accompany me to the edge of the vortex and to venture in there with me a very healing experience. It made me realise, too, how important it is for the therapist to keep clients safe and to prevent them from plunging in unguardedly, because for the client the pull can become too strong. Conversely, in my own practice it has confirmed to me the importance of respecting the client's pace and helping them to be in charge of their own process and of choosing how much to do. In other words, the gentleness of core process therapy supports people in going at their own pace so as not to retraumatise themselves.

Persona and Shadow

The persona and shadow layer, which lies between the co-ex matrix and the periphery, is reminiscent of Jungian psychology. Whether an aspect of ourselves is persona or shadow depends on how acceptable we perceive it to be to others. For example, if we grew up without being allowed to express anger, we would have received the message that our anger is unacceptable to others, leading to its suppression. In fact, this is an experience may women can identify with, for, as Andrew Charnock and I have argued, anger is an emotion often regarded as unacceptable for girls and women. Or we might have been told 'stop walking around with such a long face, come on, smile', which might have given use the message that only happy feelings are acceptable. However, the act of suppressing some parts of ourselves has the effect of bringing other parts forwards. As a consequence some people may feel that they have lost the capacity for joy, spontaneity or wonder.

In the persona and shadow layer we do not so much present a false self, as a self that is not integrated with the rest of us. Therefore the aim of therapy is to integrate the good parts with those we usually hide (sometimes even from ourselves). So what is needed is for us to acknowledge what is there, 'Ah, so that is there, and that, and that'. In my own therapy I find that my therapist's equanimous acceptance of whatever comes up gives me the courage to do this and in turn to help my clients own their shadows.

Periphery

This is the last layer, which is of all the most formed and the most rigid. It is our armouring, that which we put between ourselves and the world as protection. The periphery shows itself most obviously in our body, both in its shape and in the way we move; in effect our body shows what we are trying to suppress. Of course in everyday life we do need something between ourselves and the world. If we were always totally open, all layers accessible right to the core, we might not be able to function, or if we did, it would not be acceptable. Many of us have probably had the experience of having been at a particularly good experiential workshop or course where we found ourselves relating totally differently to people, in a much more open and spontaneous manner than in our normal everyday life. However, on going back to work it is very difficult to continue being in that state; we may fear that people will think we are weird, or react with blank incomprehension.

So it is clear that we do need a bit of periphery to function in the world. It only becomes a problem if we start to believe in it ourselves. Thus core process therapy will work with the body, to see where the armouring is, to make us aware of what we are expressing and suppressing. I have been amazed at what an effect an act of awareness, such as a hand placed softly on the defended area, can have. Again, emotions can be strong and unexpected. Care needs therefore to be taken to support the client, to allow plenty of time and to always go back to 'How is that, to have expressed that?', back to the felt sense.

There is a great deal more to core process therapy than I have discussed here. Also I am very aware that I have only experienced the first introductory six months and that the full training requires another four years. My account should therefore be understood in the context of my being an experienced humanistic counsellor who has incorporated elements of the core process. I am not claiming to be a core process therapist. At the same time I feel the core process therapy experience has deepened my work and, perhaps paradoxically, helped me appreciate the humanistic approach even more. Perhaps ultimately it is less important which theoretical framework we employ in our work with clients, as where we find ourselves, emotionally and spiritually. I believe that we can only accompany our clients to those places where we have had the courage and the support to go ourselves and that the therapist's own work therefore never stops.

I conclude with the main goal of core process therapy, which is 'to be aware and to be here'. After all, what else is there?

Further reading

Emmy van Deurzen-Smith, *Existential Counselling in Practice*, Sage, 1988

Eugene Gendlin, *Focusing*, Everest House, 1978

Stephan Harding, 'What is Deep Ecology?', in *Resurgence* 185, 4–17, 1997

Els van Ooijen and Andrew Charnock, *Sexuality and Patient Care: A guide for nurses and teachers*, Chapman & Hall, 1994

James Redfield, *The Tenth Insight*, Bantam Books, 1996

Carl Rogers, *Client-centered Therapy*, Houghton-Mifflin, 1951