

practical mystics, energy workers and the transpersonal

William Bloom

Teaching meditation and what is now becoming known as 'energy medicine' over the last twenty years, I have often been curious about the background of the large number of professional carers who come on my courses. It is usually obvious why they come: the techniques and concepts of practical mysticism and energy medicine help therapists and carers maintain a clear personal centre; and they also give insights into the energetic dynamics which can distress and release their clients. (Energy medicine and mysticism accept that the universe, nature and human beings are made up of wave-fields of moving energy with which we can consciously work.) Also because of my own therapeutic background, I teach this work in a way that is, I hope, emotionally literate and aware of the psychological dynamics.



My most popular course over the years has been on psychic protection, which teaches very specific and simple strategies for maintaining an attitude of confidence and encouragement even in distressing situations. Originally I assumed that the carers attracted to my courses had some background in transpersonal psychology or psychosynthesis, from Jung or Buddhism or Assagioli. Some did, but listening to my students I learnt that most had no formal knowledge of transpersonal psychology, but were much more familiar with or trained in humanistic psychology. Many of my students have also regularly fed back to me that the energy approach I teach has more in common with existential or humanistic psychology than it does with the transpersonal schools. This surprised me because the techniques that I teach all derive originally from mystical schools. They are essentially metaphysical, which I assumed was the starting point of the transpersonal approaches.

All of this has led me to pondering on the possible differences between the energetic approach of the practical mystic and that of transpersonal psychology. In fact, sometimes, there appears to be a direct conflict. This paper then, I trust, offers something useful to the ongoing 'What is the transpersonal in transpersonal psychology?' discussion in *Self & Society*.

For practical mystics and energy workers, the paramount drive and purpose of life is to achieve a complete and ongoing full-body experience of being an integral part of a benevolent, interdependent and purposeful universe. This is not an intellectual or theoretical concept. It is an existential here-and-now experience. It has much in

common, in fact, with the bioenergetic approach to full body flow and presence. It is also, of course, Maslow's peak experience par excellence. The energy worker, however, is interested in discovering and pursuing the practical strategies which will turn the peak experience into an ongoing plateau. To live continuously and consciously in the peak experience of connection is the energy worker's concept of fulfilment and actualising human potential. All is one. That is the major experience which the fulfilled mystic and energy worker is seeking. That is the cognition, the interpretation, the perception and the experience. The practical mystic is working towards an integration of the self, the psyche and the body with the benevolent power that runs through nature and the universe.

Different mystical schools teach different ways of doing this - from meditation, through dance to attuned love-making. The process is not haphazard but is structured and it is always internally observed by a detached aspect of the mind - a witness who is kind, philosophical and compassionate, and carefully experimenting with energy work and altered states of consciousness. Sometimes the peak experience can be overwhelming and the witness can get temporarily lost.

The practical mystic, the energy worker, however, focusses to maintain a calm and watchful centre. But beneath all this jargon and perhaps for some, banal holistic language, what is actually going on in these peak experiences of connection? It is possible, I believe, to be specific and grounded about it all. There are, I suggest, two major dynamics running through the peak experience of connection.

The first dynamic is body-based and is made up of first, flowing endorphins and second, melting bioenergetic armour. First, the feel-good sensation of connection is experienced physiologically because there is a flood of morphine-like neuro-peptides rushing through the body. Second, they flow easily through the body because the tension and body armour, created by past traumas and usually

sport or dance to reflect, 'Ahhh, I am feeling so good because I am now relaxed and sensing the good vibrations and atmosphere of a benevolent universe.' Though pausing and acknowledging this is precisely what practical energy workers do do.

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The endorphin and armour-melting experience is triggered by many different circumstances and may start in different parts of the body depending on the psychological history of the individual. Not surprisingly, many men - often meditators - have this first experience of melting and endorphin flow in the actual tissue of their brains: 'white light' and so on. Equally unsurprising, many women first experience this melting and feel-good in their hearts and bellies. This leads us now to the distinguishing feature of a practising energy worker. Having triggered both a flow of endorphins and a melting of armour, she then consciously works with both the body and the wave-fields to deepen and expand the experience. The contemporary scientific metaphors of wireless and television transmissions, of holographic technology, of quantum physics, of chaos and emergence - all help to make the language and concept of working with energies less flaky and more accessible.

blocking a healthy physical and emotional fluidity, are relaxed. This relaxation can be facilitated by many different triggers - meditation, lovemaking, sport, landscape, art, dance, companionship and so on.

The second dynamic - which is usually new information for therapists - is that as the body armour melts and the whole body-personality relaxes into an endorphin feel-good, it now becomes very easy physically to feel the benevolent wave-fields of energy that permeate nature and the universe. Of course this may not be a conscious experience. In general, people do not pause in the middle of lovemaking or

In learning how to engage with these wave-fields and harmonics - partly through mental focus and kinaesthetic visualisation, and partly through an attitude of receptive surrender - the energy worker also needs to learn balance, discernment and generosity. The worry here is that the energy worker might fall into a selfish state of feel-good, a pool of personally and socially harmful narcissism. In general, though, because the mystic connection

is felt as flowing and interconnected, there is a strong instinct to circulate and radiate the connection as goodwill into relationships and community.

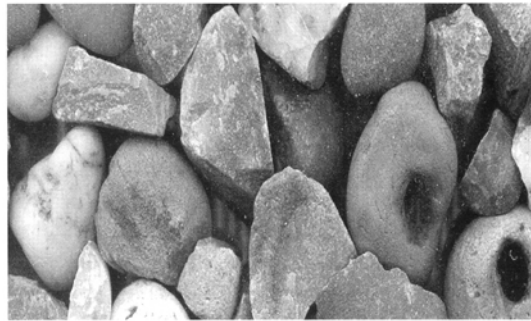
But all of this is meaningless unless grounded in daily life. Although the mystic experience may start for some people as a transcendent head or heart trip, as beautiful experiences of expanded consciousness, of samadhi, of white light and of bliss, all these must sooner or later be guided into full body incarnation and manifestation. This is to say that the whole person must show up. Be fully present. Be here now. Incarnate.

This process of grounding and integrating the feel-good peak experience into our day-to-day three-dimensional reality is painful and long hard work. It requires bringing the feel-good deep into the suffering, the psychological wounds and shadows which have previously been denied. The practical mystic, therefore, needs the skills, taught as practical energy exercises, for staying fully in the body and able to hold a calm and confident centre whilst meeting very uncomfortable psychic realities. All of this asserts that the practical energy approach is, or at least ought to be, fully existential and body-present. It is concerned with here-and-now experience.

This of course is precisely where it is relevant to the humanistic approach. It directly supports counsellors, carers and therapists no matter what their training or methodology. It is concerned with the presence of the therapist. All the strategies of the practical mystic to come fully present are directly applicable to the carer. But more than that, the practical mystic also knows that if she is fully present, then there

is a benevolent wave-field emanating from her which touches and holds her client, companion or friend. There is an atmosphere which directly transmits or radiates to the client. It is not superficial body language or communicated cues. It is a distinct atmosphere and supportive energy. It supports, deepens and sustains compassionate co-presence and 'holding'. And please note that co-presence and holding are worthless if practised with cool detachment and alienated witnessing; they only make the therapist feel clever or, worse still, enlightened.

In a sense, as many of you must have thought by now, this is almost pure Carl Rogers. He was right, I believe, when he said that the actual methodologies of therapists are more or less irrelevant. What really matters is the attitude and quality of the therapists' presence: the degree of unconditional positive regard, authenticity and full presence.



These are precisely the attitudes developed by the practising energy worker. The only difference is that the energy worker understands what is going on here in a metaphysical and energetic way. Following the hierarchy of human needs, the energy experienced and radiated by a practical mystic - by someone who senses their connection with a benevolent universe - creates

an atmosphere and presence of supportive safety, a prerequisite for many first steps in psychological growth and the process of self actualisation.

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unconsciously, have this sense of connection with the creative and benevolent power of life burn out. They burn out because they have no real support. Holidays, relaxing baths, watching television, good meals and so on are not tangential requirements in a therapist's life. They are central planks of sustenance because they all create opportunities to connect back with life.

Equally, I am prepared to suggest that there comes a certain point in a client's progress when she can go no further without some internal joie de vivre whose precise source is of course this sense of connection. It is this connection with the benevolence of life which provides the ultimate resource

for healing and transformation. The good therapists - whether or not they are conscious of it - precisely provide this connection. The good therapists actually model it: full presence, unconditional positive regard, authenticity. In fact, we can easily say that when therapists are not actively intervening, it is the warmth of their presence which feeds and holds the client and is (whether their therapeutic model owns it or not) healing. And here let me point out another fine and very relevant paradox. This experience of connection with the benevolent wonder of nature and the universe requires no religious belief system. In fact there are self-professed atheists and agnostic humanists who are filled with the joy and brilliance of life; just as there are self-professed mystics and transpersonal therapists who are miserable wallies.

My own analyst was a famous atheist, but he loved me. Occasionally therapists use me for supervision and recently one man phoned me, overwhelmed by one of his clients. He described how he lost centre and became uncomfortable with this client, and I asked a few more questions. We then decided to move his chair so that he could see out of the window when working. When he started to feel overwhelmed, he would then withdraw attention from the client, calm his breath, centre his body energy and look out of the window - using the sky and clouds to connect with the universe and nature. Using this method, he stabilised his relationship with his client and was then able to look more contemplatively at the psychodynamics that were triggering his abreaction. His own process and his usefulness as a therapist were supported by something as simple as looking at the sky.

But there are many criticisms levelled at both the transpersonal psychologists and the mystics. The major fear of humanistic, biologically based and existentially oriented therapists is that the mystics' basic concepts and methodologies will abstract away from their clients' actual situation and experience. A subtle form of conceptual denial will inform both the therapists' life and their client work. To put it at its most harsh, the mystics or transpersonal therapists may be more interested in their clients' symbolic stories and mystic realities rather than in the flesh and blood experiences

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which require help. But as I have already written above, the practical mystics are also profoundly concerned about any tendency to space out or lift away from reality, either theoretically or when dealing with life challenges. Time and time again, practical energy workers - drawing on strategies as widespread as Taoist medicine, Jewish Qabalah, Wicca or Yoga - are using breath and centring to bring them back

to their bodies, securely anchored in their lower bellies, compassionately watchful, sensing everything.

Equally, the practical energy worker understands that you cannot radiate a benevolent atmosphere unless you are first fully in your body. I wonder then whether the transpersonal schools need to adopt this form of energetic body awareness, not as a useful add-on, but as a primary plank in their training - especially as so much transpersonal and mystic stuff goes on in and out of the head, in the imaginal realm. The actual psychological model of the transpersonal and mystic schools is of course absolutely necessary. All the dimensions of the psyche must be on the map and understood, and then drawn into play at appropriate times in the therapeutic process.

But there is this ongoing suspicion that, conceptually and in practice, transpersonal and mystic therapy does abstract away from the real problems of the client - and the therapist. This appears to be a clear tendency in transpersonal sources. Let me give a few well-known examples.

A. The Buddhist and Eastern sources of transpersonal psychology often regard daily reality as an illusion to be transcended. Everyday life is Maya. Wisdom comes from transcending it. As a therapeutic approach, therefore, it may encourage strategies of escape into an inner world. The enlightened man, according to this approach, is therefore observant and not engaged. This is not a functional full bodied human being.

B. Then there is Jungian archetype and dream work, which may very easily become more interested in the client's story than the client's actual

lived experience. The clients become walking symbols, like weird tribal folk observed by a visiting anthropologist. The pain in your left breast is interesting, but even more interesting is the fact that it is in your breast and your left one at that. So much for the client's distress. But the symbolism is engaging. This is therapy as a headtrip.

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I remember my fury at Van der Post as he surveyed a group of boys and adolescents going through circumcision rites. He commented ingeniously, obviously fascinated, on the archetypal symbolism of the rite, without a nod to the boys' fear and physical wounding.

C. The psychosynthesis model deliberately seeks to connect individuals with the source of their being and creativity - their soul. But, in so doing, there is a tendency to lift away from physicality. There is for example a well known and much used psychosynthesis mantram: *I have a body, but I am not my body. I have emotions, but I am not my emotions. I have a mind, but I am not a mind.* This is very similar to another awful Buddhist mantram: *I am a sack of skin filled with unpleasant things*

Interestingly Assagioli, the founder of psychosynthesis, was a dedicated mystic and student of meditation but he tried desperately to keep the two sides of his life separate. He feared that if his mystic tendencies were known it would devalue his academic credibility. And I have to note that in general the transpersonal schools from Jung onwards have separated from universities, thus avoiding the real rough and tumble of academic challenging; whereas the humanistic approach has a firmer base in higher education. Nevertheless the transpersonal schools are eager for formal academic accreditation. I would rather the psychosynthesis mantram read: *I have a body and I am more than my body...*

D. Within the transpersonal and mystic models there is also a tendency to create a hierarchy of importance. The soul or core self is very important. The mind is less important. The emotions even more unimportant and the body itself is an irrelevant nuisance. But what are the criteria for this valuation? Possibly that the core self lasts longer than the rest of the package. But this is akin to asserting that a butterfly is less important than an elephant, less worthy of attention and appreciation. It is an absurd approach. Historically this approach tends to belong to religious patriarchs, seeking to transcend a bestial body and incapable of harmonious relationships and honest sex.

So what in the end am I saying? I am clearly suggesting that it is right to be suspicious of those approaches which abstract away from the body and existential suffering, but do not place and judge practical energy workers and mystics in the same framework. I am

also suggesting that all therapies can benefit from the strategies of practical mysticism and energy work which centre and connect us. No one surely will argue against any strategies which support and inculcate the warmth of compassionate co-presence. Practical energy work also provides a clear and integrating bridge between the body-based and the transpersonal schools of therapy. The comfortable acceptance in bioenergetics of flowing waves of energy running through the body and the universe can be an essential building block in the foundations of transpersonal psychology. Equally, the energy worker goes one step further than the usual transpersonal approach, asserting that true health comes not only from an alignment with the individual's core or soul, but also from an experiential connection with the benevolent energies of nature and the universe, with the soul of all life.

Further Reading

Candace Pert, *Molecules of Emotion*, Simon & Schuster, 1998.

Alexander Lowen, *Bioenergetics*, Penguin, 1976.

William Bloom, *Psychic Protection*, Piatkus, 1997.

John Rowan, 'The Transpersonal' : *Psychotherapy & Counselling*, Routledge, 1993.

William Bloom has a doctorate in social psychology from the LSE where he also taught. He spent three years in formal psychoanalysis with Edward Glover and worked with special needs teenagers and adults for ten years. He has also benefited from and worked with co-counselling, gestalt, psychosynthesis, holotropic breathwork, rebirthing, dance, yoga, deep tissue bodywork, eating and sex. He is the author of many books and a founding partner of Holistic Partnerships, an educational consultancy which trains people in core energy management.

*William Bloom Ph.D. 48 Roman Way,
Glastonbury BA6 8AD
tel/fax: 0 1458 835701
william.bloomg@ukonline.co.uk*

