Water into Wine

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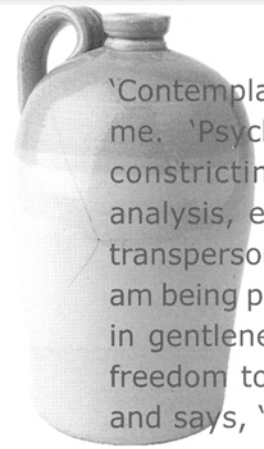

'Contemplative' has a heart-felt, open, expansive feel that warms me. 'Psychotherapy', on the other hand, seems to hold darker constricting qualities with overtones of fragmentation and analysis, even when held within a more holistic, humanistic or transpersonal form. It is also interesting to really feel where I am being pulled by these two words. The former draws me inwards in gentleness to inherent experience and creates space for the freedom to suffer. The latter puts me under an analytical gaze and says, 'this is how you are what you are'.

Contemplation is concerned with identity. Psychotherapy, until very recently, is concerned with the analysis of neurotic behaviour. Is it therefore possible to be a contemplative psychotherapist? And, if so, how would such a person approach therapeutic relationship with this implicit tension held within themselves?

In answer to the first question, my deepest intuition leads me to be uncomfortable with the possibility. Contemplation is a way of being itself, a way of life that in and of itself is its own art. I may well earn my living as a therapist but the act or work of therapy should flow from the contemplative mode of being in the world, which is prior to but includes all activity. As soon as we try to grasp at the form and make a claim to being contemplative psychotherapists, to use a Thomas Merton analogy, 'The birds of appetite' have come and the mystery and unfolding of the present moment is lost. Let's not delude ourselves; the art of contemplation is a lifetime's work on ourselves. 'First take the dust from your own eye' (Matthew 7 v.5). A struggle to really see, to get out of the way so that wisdom and compassion naturally arise. It is inner work that demands no less than everything we think we are.

'Self transformation is precisely what life is and human relationships, which are an extract of life are the most changeable of all ... Lovers are those in whose relationship and contact no one moment resembles another ... (they) must learn love and that wants peace, patience and composure ... So whoever loves must try to act as if he had a great work; he must be much alone and go into himself ... he must work; he must become something'. (Rilke)

From this perspective being a good therapist is of little consequence without the unfolding of love itself. Perhaps being a good 'anything' is

empty without the vision of love. A therapist who engages the path is no more or less a contemplative when sitting on the toilet or digging the garden. I am therefore uncomfortable with the possibility of perhaps finishing four years of apprenticeship as a Core Process student and attaching to the label 'Contemplative Psychotherapist'. After all, is it any different from saying I am a contemplative nappy changer!

My second question: 'What is a contemplative psychotherapist?' is less of a dilemma for me. It opens up the whole question of what it is to be human within our essential identity. Given my previous comments about the a-priori nature of contemplative life, a psychotherapist authentically engaged in this way of being could perhaps be defined as essentially a temporary dwelling place or abode for wisdom and compassion.

There is a story from the tradition of the Desert Fathers that may be useful to recall at this point:

Two monks met each other travelling in opposite directions. 'Where are you going?' asked Brother Steven. 'I am going to see Abba Poem' replied Brother Francis. 'And what is his teaching?' questioned Brother Steven further. 'Oh', said Brother Francis, 'I am not going to listen to his teaching. I am going to watch him tie his sandals'.

I continually remind myself of this story when I become anxious about the lack of intellectual clarity I have around the language of psychology and its concepts, which, when combined within a Dharmic framework, can appear immensely complex. Given also Core Process' openness to other philosophical and scientific disciplines, one can often feel overwhelmed by a lack of knowledge. It is times such as these however, that I am reminded that in contemplation, what heals is what is already present and that whilst information in the form of intellectual knowledge may be useful, it can and often does, in my case, get in the way

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of truly being with another human being. I think Buddhism describes this mode of being or realm as the 'Human Realm', the realm of self-conscious discrimination, which is not to turn it into something negative but, perhaps, to come to understand that *the head* heals nothing, it is *the heart* that heals. 'Heart is not only the open, receptive dimension of our being but also an active expansive opening out to the world' (John Welwood). Or to put it more poetically from Rumi, 'When the heart breaks open the universe pours in'.

How then can contemplative life inform a psychotherapist's practice? The answer to this is perhaps that its disciplines purify and simplify our normal/abnormal way of seeing. Every tradition points to our clouded vision and conditioned perception that arises from our sense of being separate, autonomous, static selves. Rather, therefore, than add to this conditioning process by accumulating more concepts, more information, more knowledge, which only serves to add to our sense of self, in the hope of being a more effective therapist, the

contemplative aims at reversing this process in order to be as fully present as possible without all the baggage of our own conditioned responses to objects. As Maura Sills reminds us, the Core Process therapist must be working harder on their own process so that, 'if nothing else gets in the way, the therapist can become so open to what is happening for the clients that the duality of experience dissolves and there is only the deep relatedness of compassion'. This is not 'my' compassion for, as Maura makes clear, the 'duality of experience dissolves'. It is perhaps the heart being awakened and manifesting unobstructed in a neutral space.

Saint Augustine said that the whole purpose of (contemplative) life is 'to restore to life the eye of the heart whereby the divine may be seen'. I see no conflict here with the work of a therapist. In fact, quite the contrary. A psychotherapist who sits with a client with any other intention is leaning away from the contemplative vision, which sees with the eye of the heart, in addition to the eye of flesh (sensual gross perception) or the eye of mind (mental subtle perception). This is not to deny the reality of the two other principal modes of knowledge open to us but to transcend and include them in a more complete understanding of simply what is standing before us prior to the arising of sensual and mental perception. As a Zen poem says,'It is the mind that leads the mind astray. Guard against the mind.'

A contemplative approach to the healing relationship therefore must include an ongoing discipline to fundamental house cleaning. A regular daily practice and commitment to our own inner journey so that, in the first instance, we begin to make friends with ourselves and learn to love ourselves and to stop the war within. This takes a long time and, from my own experience, is a gradual process of disciplined patience. Trungpa Rinpoche puts it like this: 'We cannot just go out and practice compassion. First we must learn to make friends with ourselves. If we can make friends with ourselves, if we are willing to be what we are without hating parts of ourselves and trying to hide them, then we can begin to open to others. And if we can begin to open without always having to protect ourselves, then perhaps we can begin to really help others.'

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From this perspective a contemplative approach to psychotherapy would seem to turn what is normally regarded as therapy on its head and point to the fact that perhaps what is required from a practitioner is first and foremost a continual, ongoing and regular commitment to see through the veils imposed by becoming a self-conscious individual and to uncover

essential identity. Given this commitment to inner work and its grounding in body and mind, compassion may emerge.

From a contemplative perspective in its pure and utter simplicity, compassion is the therapeutic relationship. Perhaps we could even say that compassion is authentic relationship leaving aside any therapeutic overtones.

'In the sacred kinship of real love, two souls are twinned. The outer shell and contour of identity becomes porous. You suffuse each other.'

(John O'Donohue).

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'Knowing without love is not true knowledge. It is only grasping, apprehending ultimately a robbery, a plunder. To truly know is to become the thing known without ceasing to be what we are.'

(Raimondo Pannikar).

The first step, therefore, in a truly contemplative therapy is to make friends with ourselves and come into a state of non anxiety or calmness, Sammatha, in order to properly see and to be with another.

The implications of this for the therapeutic encounter include perhaps several other principles for it to be held in a contemplative way. These I would understand to be wisdom, non-violence, awareness and mystery.

In Buddhist practice there is the notion of 'Tathagatagarbha', otherwise known as 'Brilliant sanity', or Buddha nature. It is essentially who or what we are beyond our conditioned nature, the 'Core' of our 'Process', the unconditioned element within every human person.

The 'notion' however is open to be experienced and, in doing so, opens up our essential limitless and boundless nature, which relaxes and helps to dissolve the illusion of our egoic sense of self. From the Buddhist perspective, all psychopathology arises from the presence of this self and its innate feeling of 'me-ness' or solidity. In the Buddhas diagnosis of the human condition, all suffering stems from the craving to preserve this seemingly solid, unchanging substance. Clinging to individual existence, narcissism, in Buddhist terms is our most severe form of pathology - Attavadupadana. Perhaps we could say, therefore, that if there was such a thing as a principal therapeutic issue in Buddhism, it would be to see through the illusion and construct of the self, which is also at the core of every contemplative tradition.

Psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, however, are primarily concerned with stabilising or even re-establishing a healthy sense of self. Should, therefore, a contemplative approach to the healing relationship exclude the re-establishment of a healthy sense of self? Christopher Titmus, a Buddhist meditation teacher and author, thinks so. 'Teachings on not-I, not-self, not mine serve the deepest interests of those with an exaggerated sense of their own importance and those with a very low sense of self-worth ...'. Personally, I am drawn to the conclusion that these two views are not mutually exclusive. They simply aim at different levels of what Wilber calls the 'Spectrum of Consciousness'.

Buddhism assumes a healthy intact sense of self prior to practices to enquire into its illusory nature. In bringing contemplative practice, therefore, into a therapeutic encounter, we should not be excluding anything. It is not, for me, a case of self or not self but of both arising simultaneously in the moment. Before we can begin to open to the universe, we must have a sense of where we stop and the universe starts. To approach the optimal state of psychological well-being that the Buddha called 'Nirodha'; the cessation of suffering, means including every aspect of our 'selves', from the hell realm to the god realm. Given this view, however, it does place perhaps a different slant on what ultimately a contemplative approach to therapy is trying to do.

For it seems to me that our task is to be there for the client, in such a way that their 'own' inherent nature or 'brilliant sanity' unfolds. This mirrors in a very real way the 'goal' of the major contemplative spiritual paths and opens up a different way of working with people. A way which at its roots is non-violent and where interventions and activity flow out of reverence for the other and are informed by wisdom and compassion.

Shalom / Shanti / Salaam. All these symbols of peace from eastern cultures convey an inner condition which naturally flows outwards of its own accord. Being in the presence of someone who embodies this is powerful empirical evidence of the symbols' reality. It is linked to the principal of non-violence and generates feelings of warmth and healing to one who is open to receive. 'Peace I leave with you ... not as the world gives do I give to you ...' (John 14 v.27).

Healing, however, cannot be imposed on another from without. As with all growth in nature, so as in healing, the process is from the inside out. Perhaps all that needs to be said here in the context of contemplative psychotherapy is that the therapist is not the healer. It is not the therapist's task to change or alter anything that the client may be encountering. This would be a form of therapeutic aggression, probably originating from the therapist's own sense of dis-ease with the client's pain and torment. Aggression is uncomfortable with things, 'as they are' and I have a sense in both my own character patterning and perhaps in our culture per se that there is a very strong attachment to 'do something' about a situation and achieve positive results. To work against this tendency is hard but necessary work, particularly when one is witnessing a fellow being who is in pain. Paradoxically it needs to be said that a therapist who is working in this way is actually 'doing something' very difficult. Creating peace through non-violence in both an exoteric and esoteric sense is hard work, particularly if there is no sense of our own and another's unconditioned nature. 'The therapist is also concerned with uncovering her own intrinsic nature. In a very real way the client and therapist are on the same journey' (Karen K. Wegela).

Some words come to me from somewhere, although I can't remember who wrote them, they are perhaps a pretty good summary of the principal of non-violence in therapeutic work: 'I'm not okay, you're not okay and that's okay'.

The essential non-violent approach of re-establishing a connection with our own and the client's basic sanity

naturally flows into a way of working with people that could well be a mirror of Buddhist Vipassana meditation. The essential difference is that the enquiry is undertaken in relationship and therefore becomes a form of 'joint practice', 'the mystery of whose journey is this, who is going to help who'. When we open up to the whole realm of interconnection and the

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dissolution of normal self and not self boundaries 'who or what' can actually claim to be the therapist 'understanding everything that can be going on at every level at this point in time'.

The Core Process model of working with clients has its foundations in Vipassana practice. Its three guiding principals of intention, attention and awareness keep the therapist and client in the here and now, where all past conditions and future thoughts arise. The aim being not to alter experience but to sense the how of our relationship to it. To open up the possibility of creating space, less me, around it and hence bring the possibility of greater freedom. In doing this and in tradition with the contemplative vision, the person is held in a deeply holistic view as, 'microcosm' and encouraged to explore in a non-judgmental way all aspects of being which encompass energies, feelings, sensations, mental process and their expression in our bodies. Being present to experience with less identification and increased awareness is a significantly healing moment. There are many times I can recall sitting in a meditation retreat with my body in agony, mind indulging itself in fantasy and feeling about as spiritual as a dirty nappy, when the teacher will say something like 'If you're struggling, just notice how it feels, how is struggling and say to yourself "this is how it is right now". Don't try to change anything'.

It has taken years to come to know for myself the wisdom in those often repeated words and the gradual sense of peace and freedom that comes naturally as identity expands to reveal the space, clarity and warmth of a deeper level of being. These attributes of our essential nature are perhaps the cornerstone of a therapist walking the razors edge of the contemplative life and their relationship with their work in the world.

Space is the quality of equanimity in inner work. Its capacity is to hold all experience, be it joyful or sad, aggressive or tender, in an equal manner without pushing anything away. Equanimity, in his Holiness the Dalai Lama's words: 'Is the mother of compassion', the 3rd quality which, as we have discussed, is the healing energy.

Compassion essentially is a natural warmth that arises from uncovering the root behind our suffering which gives birth to a gentleness to our own experience and that of others in understanding the existential truth that: 'There is suffering .... suffering has been understood'.

Clarity is the a priori capacity to slow down perception and mental formulations, Sanna and Samskara, so that sensual and mental experience is not coloured and distorted by our historical patterns of conditioning. It is the innate capacity to really see, unclouded by our sense of self. 'When conceptually understood, the lifting of a finger is one of the ordinary incidents in everybody's life. But when it is viewed from the Zen point of view, it vibrates with divine meaning and creative vitality' (D.T. Suzuki).

Perhaps to bring the enquiry to a conclusion it would be useful to try to reflect on the principles that the life of contemplation would bring to a therapists practice:

WISDOM:
Sees individual as a contraction of energy around the word 'me'. Sees 'person' as essentially free, unbounded, the ground of being itself. Spirit.

AWARENESS:
Opens the possibility of the freedom to suffer rather than freedom from suffering.

COMPASSION:
The inherent capacity in us all for self healing which arises when self-view is let go of and we open to 'listen' with the suffering of the world.

NON-VIOLENCE:
'Waiting', in the mystery, unknowing and chaos of another's and our own pain.

WORK ON ONESELF:
To deepen our own capacity for compassionate presence.

In a sense, nobody actually does contemplative psychotherapy. It comes to birth quite naturally and spontaneously in the space where there is no self-view, where deep reverence for the other exists; the space that is filled with the intelligence of love. It is simple. It is the awakening of 'the heart'. Simple, but not easy. Not easy but a source of joy.

When the water of consciousness is transformed into the wine of intelligent love, the vision of our life deepens beyond our dualistic fixations. It is this, I believe, which makes a contemplative approach to psychotherapy different, not just to other psychotherapeutic disciplines, but to any way of life that remains at the level of dualism. For, 'They have no wine' (John, ch.2 v.3).

Further Reading

Chogyam Trungpa *The Myth of Freedom,* Shambala 1976

John O'Donohue *Anam Cara,* Bantam 1997

Jacob Needleman *On Love,* Arkana 1996

D.T. Suzuki, *Introduction to Zen Buddhism,* Rider 1991

Christopher Titmus *Light on Enlightenment,* Rider 1998

Raimondo Pannikar Essay 'The Contemplative Look' *Monastic Studies* 1991, Benedictine Publication

John is a third year student of Core Process Psychotherapy with no previous experience in the therapeutic traditions. He lives in the Yorkshire Dales with his wife and two young children, who challenge and teach him daily. He feels deeply enriched through his encounter with Dharmic Enquiry and is inspired by the teachings of Dzogchen and the writings of Ken Wilber and Nagarjuna