Contemplative Psychotherapy

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A few days ago, as I was meditating by an open window, a breeze caused the candle flame to flicker violently. In immediate response, I could feel a tension rising in my body; muscles contracting, breath shallow. Images and sounds came into my mind of raised voices; a felt sense of unease, anxiety, disturbance. In the symbol of that flickering candle, I seemed to re-experience the turbulence of childhood. In those brief few moments, I was again reminded of the power of awareness, how it helps us to make sense of our process, to learn how we do ourselves through past conditioning and experience. This is the essence of core process psychotherapy: the 'Exploration of how we are in our present experience, and how this expresses the past conditioning and conditions of our lives.' (Donington, 1995)

Contemplative psychotherapy involves a way of looking at how we are with awareness and compassion, and informing our understanding with Buddhist teachings on the nature of suffering, of self, and the process of becoming. It is not about skills or techniques or doing; these may be there as part of the process, but it is more fundamentally about our attitude towards the client, ourselves and our relationship and how this is expressed in the process, and perceived by the client. Meditation lies at the root of contemplative practice, as a tool for training therapists to gain familiarity with their own process, as a way of working, and in encouraging an attitude of mindfulness in the client.

The Role of Meditation.

Wegela observes, 'the most valuable help we can give to another begins with developing our ability to simply be'. When we start to meditate we become aware of how out of touch with ourselves we become. We seem to live in a sort of half-life detached from our emotions and experience and reacting from our past conditionings rather than present reality. As Levine suggests, we often experience life as 'a reflection of what has just occurred rather than a direct participation in the unfolding moment.' Meditation is just stopping; stopping to become aware of our thoughts, feelings, emotions and how they are experienced in the body,

literally breathing space to see how things are and to observe ourselves in the process. This precise moment-to-moment attention is non-judgemental, non-discriminating. It helps us to see events just as they are before we have attached labels or meaning, as Epstein puts it, ' to separate out ones reactions from the events themselves.' We open ourselves to the confusion, gently bringing our attention back to the breath to avoid getting lost in the chaos of thoughts and feelings.

Contemplative psychotherapy is about our attitude to the client, ourselves and our relationship and how this is expressed in the process

We try and develop the quality of Maitri or unconditional friendliness towards ourselves and our experience, accepting ourselves just as we are, the loveable and the unlovable, learning to reintegrate those split off parts of ourselves. When we open to love we open to our core; that clear, unfettered, unconditioned self that is pure awareness, our brilliant sanity. Developing Metta towards ourselves is the first step towards extending it to others, towards recognising their brilliant sanity, and as the Buddha said, 'You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection.' Those words bring a sense of relief and expansiveness that I connected with again in the words of Galway Kinnell's poem *St Francis and the Sow:*

'Sometimes it is necessary
to re teach a thing it's loveliness
to put a hand on the brow of the flower
and retell it in words and in touch
it is lovely
until it flowers again from within of self blessing'

Self as process

That specific quality of awareness looked for in meditative practices is described by the Buddha as mindfulness and is a powerful tool for understanding and exploring one of the great Buddhist truths which underline core process psychotherapy; that of self as process rather than self as fixed and permanent. Suffering arises by our tendency to not allow the natural tendency of phenomena to arise and fall away. By attachment to the validity of personality factors, described in Buddhist teachings as skandhas, we become fixed and limited in our ways of being and lose sight of that within us which is essentially free and open. Meditation provides an excellent arena in which to investigate the frailty on which our sense of self depends. As we tune in to our thoughts and feelings, and are able to slow the process down, we can follow the convoluted twists and turns of our process, when some mental or physical arising is given judgment and meaning, in turn leading on to more association and interpretation, taking us further and further away from our original experience and distorting it with our own mental confections. We see how we create ourselves in each moment, conditioned by past experience into more and more solid

layers of existence that we recognise as me. Without recognising our constructs and their beginnings we are unable to break free of the bonds of attachment and fail to appreciate our potential for choice and transformation. Meditation practices sharpen and give us more control over our actions and reactions. It often takes a split second between event and response. Somebody says something which causes us offence. It may be very trivial but somehow it manages to get under our skin, causing us to respond angrily or defensively. Our response seems so instinctive that it is difficult to recognise the layers of conditioning that have contributed to it or notice the lightning flashes of thoughts, emotions and sensations that preceded it. Gradually, over time, meditation can help us become more attuned to these flashing processes, questioning their veracity and giving us choice over our response.

Relevance of meditative practices to psychotherapy

Therapy for me started a process of awakening at so many different levels that I was drawn into meditation to further explore that spiritual element, which in turn further informs my process and allows me to make deeper connections. I find them both mutually supportive but not the same. I'm aware sometimes of a sense of conflict particularly around the question of self-identity and self worth. I enter therapy to feel better about myself. Meditation tells me this self is just an illusion. Indeed, this question may be pursued in therapy. The question 'who am I?' may be the same but the focus is different. The task is to differentiate between the absolute view of self as non-solid, impermanent, and the relative point of view of self as separate and important, necessary far day to day functioning. The task of therapy in helping to heal the split and reintegrate recognises and values the importance of self worth and self-acceptance. In emphasising the conditioned process of self we can gradually loosen our attachment to a solid identity but we need to have honoured and acknowledged our woundedness and to have it honoured and acknowledged by others first.

What are the particular values and lessons of meditative practices and how may they be relevant to psychotherapy practice? I would include:

- The development of mindfulness and awareness practices.
- The recognition of impermanence and how we create our suffering.
- Developing an attitude of maitri or unconditional friendliness.
- Developing discipline.

Until I started therapy training I had very little conception or acknowledgement of the demands of therapy on the therapist. I would expect her to be totally focused on the client, accepting, caring, compassionate, alert and understanding of all wants and needs, spoken and unspoken; a perfect mother. I had no appreciation of the stamina, commitment, and powers of endurance required. In core process work the emphasis is very much on joint process so there is no hiding behind a mask of professionalism. The therapist reeds to be open in order to receive the client, which includes being vulnerable, and allowing himself or herself to be touched by the client. Conversely, in order to maintain one's

own boundaries and continue to work effectively, there needs to be a sense of perspective. There is also a demand on the therapist to be congruent and authentic; the client will surely pick it up if she is not, which may seem to point to a conflict of interests. The therapist needs to be prepared to sit and navigate through confusion, her own as well as the client's, through strong expressions of anger, hate, love, pain and despair, through times when it seems there is nothing to be done but hold the process. She needs to be prepared to be surprised, angry, joyful, sad, happy, fearful, jealous, repelled by and attracted to the client; to be open to the subtle energies of relationship, to the physical, emotional, cognitive, imaginal and spiritual dimensions of expression. She needs to be flexible and creative in her capacity to explore and be with the uniqueness of each individual client, while recognising and maintaining her own sense of integrity and self. She needs to be aware of her own limitations and strengths, and support needs and recognise when she needs to stop. She needs to demonstrate with warmth and empathy her acceptance, compassion and concern for the client and create a place of safety and space for the client to explore their process. In short, she needs to be as fully human as she is able to be, to allow the full humanity of the client.

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The key requirement enabling us to fully expand ourselves in this way in order to help another is awareness, and this is where Buddhist teachings and meditative practices are so helpful. First and foremost we need to start with ourselves, for the more we can know ourselves, understand and accept ourselves, the more we can understand, and accept the other, and bring more awareness and understanding to the transference and counter transference of joint enquiry. This need for self-awareness is important in any Western psychotherapeutic perspective, but Buddhist teachings bring a much wider dimension of awareness, which goes beyond the individual and is central to the contemplative approach. This bigger sort of awareness enables us to get a sense of perspective on our personal concerns and problems. It unites us in the common human condition of suffering, this is such a profound realisation, which really exposes the illusion of separateness, but in the midst of our own pain it can be so difficult to allow this reality.

Awareness, which takes us beyond the two players in the therapeutic encounter, can also provide a huge resource and resting place. It takes the pressure off the therapist to get it right,

knowing that there is help available, and can bring an important sense of humility in the knowledge that the work engaged on is supported and held at a much more universal level. Awareness also acts to remind us of the intrinsic health of the individual, to maintain if not to recognise a sense of their inherent core qualities or Buddha nature. It is important for the client to know this from the therapist, especially when the client is unable to make or perceive that connection for herself. It is also important for the therapist to hold this for herself.

The discipline of meditation practices is a fundamental training ground for developing the high levels of stamina and commitment required, and the necessary vigilance in attuning to the client's process and one's response to it. It has very practical benefits in terms of focusing and concentration, and provides a clear reminder to the therapist of the fine balance between vigilance and surrender. In the straight back of sitting meditation, we learn how to enter and surrender ourselves to the unknown. The straight back conversely allows us to relax, to let go, to fully enter into and experience our pain and confusion. The capacity of vulnerability may not be a comfortable place for the therapist for it means letting go our assumptions, our need to do, our need to make things better, our agenda, but without it we may prevent our clients from fully entering into and knowing that place for themselves and thus limit their own capacity for growth and transformation.

In opening tip to our vulnerability we develop the capacity for spaciousness, which is so fundamental to our growth. Spaciousness is like putting the light on in a darkened room illuminating and making sense of the contents. Our capacity for spaciousness rests on our ability to recognise how we create form out of emptiness, how what arises is changed by our response to it. It rests on our capacity to be as empty as possible to allow ourselves to be filled up by the client, and by our capacity to recognise that essential spaciousness in the client especially when he or she is too full to recognise it for themselves. It involves our capacity to see the wider picture, to recognise health in the midst of chaos. Space, held with compassion and safety, is like providing a womb for the client to re experience herself. It has very practical implications for the therapist in terms of the messages she

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gives, consciously or unconsciously about what is allowed, how silence is managed, what interventions are used and when, and as a model for the client in terms of allowing and trusting the process.

When spaciousness is present the capacity for clarity is greater. When we can allow the process to unfold, resisting the urge to intervene or analyse, the shapes of the process become clearer, the pattern becomes obvious without one having to work it out. Observing our process through the skandhas in meditation helps to reconnect us to the truth of events, to see self as process rather than self as fixed and unalterable. This, in turn, allows us to be more flexible when witnessing another's process. We acknowledge the unique shaping process of conditions and experiences, but we hold the potential for change and transformation in the recognition of *how* that me is created.

The quality of the space we provide and how we meet the other is very much determined and in itself reinforces our capacity for warmth and compassion. The quality of maitri or unconditional friendliness is hugely powerful; to feel I am totally accepted by another, even if I cannot feel that for myself, starts the healing process. It accepts me and paradoxically humbles me into recognising I am more than me. Compassion arises out of space, *is* space. It acknowledges what *is* without bias, discrimination or attachment. It allows the natural ebb and flow, beginning and ending and so points to the root of our suffering. Compassion arises out of mindfulness perpetually and painstakingly returning to the source, anger is just anger, pain is just pain; fleeting emotions, sensations. We can touch them, fully feel them and in doing so experience their transient quality, but they are not *me*, as soon as I identify with them, I close myself off.

Compassion lies at the heart of the joint relationship, questioning our separateness and ego identity. There is just suffering, and it is *universal*. As soon as we can let this in, our boundaries dissolve, our need to do, to act evaporates. We experience the nature of Karuna, I suffer with. To quote Stephen Levine, 'When you say, "I am" and when I say, "I am", we are referring to the same being. We are referring to being itself. Everybody's *I* is the same *I*. It only becomes separate when we attach a this or that to it. When you say, "I am this", the universality of being is lost. When you say I am this joy or this fear or this mind or this body, the truth is shattered like a rock hitting the mirror. The One is broken into the many.'

This understanding is central to core process psychotherapy, emphasising the mutuality of the journey. Our connection to each other is held at very deep and subtle levels, as well as in our more immediate and accessible emotions and feelings. Often it is only during periods of retreat or meditation that we pay attention to these more subtle communications when the silence and the slowing down bring our internal world and responses into sharper focus. When we allow silence in the therapy relationship, really allow it as an end in itself rather than a gap between words, that is often when the work really begins. We take stock of what has gone before, feeling the impact, the inter connectedness resonating within us. Mutuality emerges in silence where we experience, often with painful clarity, how it is to be with another. The supposedly solid

boundaries of transference and counter transference dissolve in the unknown mystery of who started it. Here we discover with our resistance or our openness, through our defences or our vulnerability the nature of joint enquiry. The expertise of the therapist

The therapist needs to be prepared to sit and navigate through confusion- her own as well as the client's, through strong expressions of anger, hate, love, pain and despair, through times when it seems there is nothing to be done but hold the process

rests with her capacity to acknowledge and truly experience this. Her limitations in opening up, letting go and trusting the process sets boundaries for the client's own experience and growth.

For the client, learning how to be with another in the therapeutic encounter can be a terrifying and powerful journey recreating the pains and disappointments of our earliest intimate contacts. Ideally, the therapy space will be one in which our past conditioning and experience, and its relationship to our present experience is explored in trust and safety. The therapist acts as a reflective mirror, clarifying and illuminating the process, and as a role model teaching us how to be with our process with awareness and compassion. The client will often enter therapy with resistance and apprehension. The therapist's task is not to change this, but to gently enable the client to allow more and more of his experience in a gradual unpeeling of layers that leads to a greater connection and integration. The therapist encourages an attitude of unconditional friendliness in the client towards his process by first modelling that acceptance for the client herself. It is not necessary for the client to practice meditation to gain insight into his own experience. However, the more the therapist is able to gain from her own meditative practices and is able to bring that into the relationship, the more likely it is that the client will begin to expand this contemplative approach to his life and relationships outside the therapy situation; the ripples of a pebble thrown into water.

Summary and Conclusion

The focus of contemplative psychotherapy is to enquire into the nature of our experience just as it is, moment to moment, becoming aware of the layers of conditioning which create our understanding of self.

Similarly, in meditation, in harnessing our attention to a specific object we become witness to the arisings and passings of our experience, like players on a stage, or clouds in the sky. We learn to let go because to resist or hang on is contrary to the laws of nature and causes us suffering. We learn to get underneath the fuzziness and fog of our jumbled thoughts and emotions, seeing how our grasping, resistance, dissatisfaction, our desire for things to be different, obscure the clarity of pure

perception and inhibit our growth and transformation. We learn how compassion and spaciousness bring perspective and enable us to move beyond the petty preoccupations of self into a greater Oneness with the universe.

In contemplative psychotherapy the aim is to bring the same quality of stillness, openness and compassionate inquiry into our relationship with the client. The discipline of meditative practice develops and strengthens the clarity of awareness and stamina, and by our example and encouragement we try and foster these characteristics in the client. In psychotherapy the whole perspective of enquiry and awareness is changed with the dynamic of the relationship. Our fears, thoughts and emotions are infused by the drama of how it is to be with the other. Our past conditioning and experience are brought into sharp relief as we engage in relationship. It can be hugely difficult to find a resting place when we open ourselves up to this impact. Again and again we return to the practice of centering ourselves, establishing contact, finding space. We open ourselves up to the vulnerability of mutual process, but as therapists we need to hold the perspective, and a sense of the intrinsic health amidst the chaos and confusion.

No longer caught up in the past there is the prospect of immediate choice and change in our awareness of how we are in the present. This is the essence of contemplative psychotherapy

The emphasis in core process psychotherapy is focused on the how of our experience rather than the why. It seems so natural, so normal to seek explanations. We imagine that if only we knew *why* we could stop striving, stop searching. Knowing why we are as we are provides context, understanding, rationality. Indeed, why is important; it often does help to make sense of our experiences, and that awareness and insight can enable us to let some old habitual pattern go, but for every why discovered there seems to be another, constantly gnawing away. When we look at the how, however, that tension falls away. No longer caught up in the past there is the prospect of immediate choice and change in our awareness of how we are in the present. This is the essence of contemplative psychotherapy. Being with our experience, moment by moment, holding it with acceptance and compassion can release us from the burden of our past and re-connect us to our core qualities.

Further Reading

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