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Painting eyeballs on chaos: on Zen and birth trauma

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This article is an exploration of how reconnecting with the somatic memory of pre- and perinatal life experience can bring to light and help to resolve very early wounding. In the author's experience, meditation and psychotherapy alone could not access this deep, preverbal territory. The key to peace of mind and ease of being may lay in allowing the body to remember and fully process the trauma of birth.

Keywords: birth trauma; embodiment; *zazen*; Karuna; Core Process Psychotherapy

The refuge of Zen meditation

Recently, I found a 30-year-old notebook in which I had carefully recorded a quotation from Peter Matthiessen's 1980 book *The Snow Leopard*:

> The purpose of meditation practice is not enlightenment; it is to pay attention even at unextraordinary times, to be of the present, nothing-but-the-present, to bear this mindfulness of now into each event of ordinary life. To be anywhere else is 'to paint eyeballs on chaos'. (Matthiessen, 1980, p. 243)

The last part of the quotation, which is the bit I like the most, comes from the thirteenth-century founder of the Japanese Zen Soto school Dōgen Zenji himself. It sounds so simple, so possible – so imperative. It struck me at the time because I was acutely aware of how uncomfortable I felt in my own skin. All I wanted was to feel at ease enough to be present to my own life, to any event of ordinary life, without the white noise of anxiety and self-doubt that constantly jabbered away. Meditation sounded like the way forward. Not long after *The Snow Leopard* quotation, I left Australia, ostensibly to seek my fame and fortune, but in reality to do that corny-sounding thing of 'finding myself'. In London I came across a group of Zen students, and began sitting with them.

I feel lucky that since then my Zen practice has been nurtured by some inspirational teachers and a very supportive, evolving sangha, or community of practitioners. The physical discipline of *zazen* has been like a weighty anchor in my life, helping to pull me back to the bedrock of this earth, this body, this moment. Almost from the word go, the white noise began to quieten; it was extraordinarily liberating to discover that it was possible to rest in something more spacious than myself, and to realize that I didn't have to identify with my thoughts (in particular, the judgemental ones). Being on the cushion was a true refuge and a resource. Once off the meditation cushion, however, those non-specific feelings of dis-ease came

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flooding back, especially when I was around other people. It is only now, at this distance, that I can appreciate how difficult it is to do that seemingly natural thing of simply being present to what is. I also now know that spiritual practice alone would never have been enough to resolve the feelings that kept me from being okay in my own skin and at ease with others.

Experiences with Core Process Psychotherapy

Until I began studying psychotherapy seven years ago, I had very little understanding of trauma and personality development, and absolutely no idea that my mode of being tended to be quite a dissociated one. Of course, now I can see that the spaciousness and even the 'anchor' of meditation made it all too easy for me to float free from the troublesome self and so ignore repetitive, dysfunctional process. Certainly, in the early, honeymoon phase of Zen practice, I had no desire to go anywhere near the terrified self – and I didn't have to because it didn't exist anyway! Gradually, though, and in part thanks to other, more relational, aspects of Zen practice, I began to realize that the damaged, wounded parts of myself did need to become known and to be taken care of. Yet, psychotherapy alone wasn't enough to get to the roots of my difficulties, either. I began my own personal therapeutic journey an eye-watering 16 years ago. But despite the commitment of both myself and my therapist, the first 10 years felt like little more than a head-banging exercise. (This was less a reflection of the therapist's availability and more about my own entrenched dissociative way of being.)

Eventually, the balance was tipped when I decided to study mindfulness-based Core Process Psychotherapy (CPP) at the Karuna Institute in Devon, south-west England. The Karuna Institute (*karuna* is a Sanskrit and Pali word for compassion) has been offering a combination of Buddhist awareness practice and depth psychotherapy since its foundation more than 25 years ago. And it was this unique blend that provided a level of personal insight that I don't believe I could have gained in any other way.

Other key ingredients offered in the alchemical mix at Karuna included the excellent level of holding provided by the staff, the compassion that naturally arises within an authentic contemplative context; the regular practice of *Kum Nye* Tibetan yoga, to promote health and balance in the body/mind; contact with the earth (the institute is situated on Dartmoor, one of England's wildest places), and the opportunity to work in a deeply embodied way with pre- and perinatal process. This latter element was perhaps the most powerful and transformative of all. For me, it felt very much like a missing link.

As extraordinary as it might seem to many, it is possible to not only reconnect with aspects of our own birth process in a holistic, somatic sense, but also to access other areas of very early life, including conception, implantation and womb experience. The pre- and perinatal elements of the CPP model have been influenced by the previous work of clinicians and researchers such as Stanislav Grof, R.D. Laing, Frank Lake and Ronald Fairbairn, as well the ongoing work of Emerson (1996), Sills (2007) and others. All have explored ways of accessing and healing unresolved prenatal and birthing trauma and all have recognized the sentience of prenates and newborns.

Lake's clinical research (1981) led him to believe that the human being is sentient, can perceive and feel, from the beginning of life and that our very early experiences create the framework for the development of selfhood. His work also encompassed a spiritual dimension whereby the nature of being is understood to be an expression of divine Source. In Buddhist terms, Source is sometimes described as awakened mind, true self, or Buddha nature. Core Process Psychotherapy calls divine Source or true self the Core state. In each case, the words describe the fluid, luminous ground that is at the heart of being, which is not separate from all creation, and which finds its natural expression in love and compassion.

Importantly, for both Lake and in CPP work, whatever difficulties and traumata the self is struggling with, there is always the possibility of orienting towards this underlying health or wholeness, the ground of our being. It may be, however, that some people need to access very early somatic experience in order to reconnect with a sense of wholeness, to physically experience a way of being that is open and at ease, rather than defended and constricted.

One of the first embodied, prenatal exercises we did at Karuna was exploring the somatic memory of intrauterine life. Despite some scepticism, most of the students taking part gained valuable information from revisiting this territory. I knew my birth had been 'horrific', in my mother's words, so I wondered how things might have been for me in the womb. It was a powerful and surprising experience – I found myself connecting to a blissful state of being; my body felt completely free of tension and there was a sense of floating in a vast and supportive space.

In a recent paper about pre- and perinatal life experience, Franklyn Sills writes:

> Mother's inner and outer world permeates the infant's experience. Via the umbilicus, the prenate directly experiences mother's emotional life and literally marinates in her psycho-emotional states. Grof distinguishes between undisturbed intrauterine life and disturbed intrauterine life. During periods of undisturbed intrauterine life, the environment is supportive. In the good womb, there is a sense of total protection and safety, and the infant's needs are continuously met. Feelings of wholeness, oneness, cosmic connection, serenity, joy, and bliss can be part of the undisturbed intrauterine experience. Grof calls this state *oceanic ecstasy*. A reconnection to these experiences can truly change a person's life. (Sills, 2007, p. 10)

Not everyone's experience of this exercise was serene. One student was taken aback by an overwhelming sense that something wasn't quite right. Without knowing why, she kept repeating the words, 'The room's not ready!'. It was only on later reflection that she realized her unplanned conception had followed almost immediately on from the birth of her older brother.

During periods of disturbed intrauterine life, the womb may feel very uncomfortable, and may affect the infant's sense of their world and their relationship with mother. Insecure feelings about contact, safety and intimacy can arise during the earliest of womb experience. A good-enough womb may lead to feelings of the world as good, as a place where needs are basically met and as generally supportive and safe. An emotionally or chemically toxic womb may lead to experiences of the world as toxic and untrustworthy (Sills, 2007, p. 11).

Following on from the above exercise, we spent an intensive few days exploring particular aspects of very early womb experience, before touching into our own birth process. So much happened in such a short space of time, it's not possible to capture

more than a fraction of it in words, but allowing my body to process some of what had been consciously forgotten for so long was a profound experience. Along with the release of trauma came a wealth of information – as well as the possibility of doing things differently.

As part of this initial exploration into birth process and trauma – and supported by the blissful experience of the 'good womb' – I asked my mother what she could remember about my birth and of being pregnant with me. In response, she wrote six pages detailing her recollections. It's clear from her words that my birth was hugely distressing and traumatic. Something that also came to light, which has been key to understanding the dis-ease and dissociation that I wasn't able to access through meditation or psychotherapy alone, was learning how the administration of *pethidine*, an opioid analgesic, late in labour had impacted not only the birth process itself but also my way of being in the world.

My mother recalls:

> The actual birth was dreadful. I don't want to go into it too much, but the feelings that I had during the birth stayed with me for weeks, and now looking back it was like a horror story … I was tempted to ask the nurses or sisters if something happened while I was delivering, but I felt sure that nobody would tell me anyway … Even months later I was still worrying about it, and wondering how I could find out.

A large part of the reason why it is difficult to make contact with these early parts of our life is not because the somatic information isn't there, but because the pain and trauma of birth represent a huge cultural blind spot in our society. Most of us still don't acknowledge the sentience or intelligence of prenates and infants.

Many parents are unaware of their infant's ability to understand and communicate; coupled with this is a long-standing medical view that the nervous system of a baby is too immature to focus awareness, to remember painful events or even to discern differences in the individuals around them. This is a misconception that can lead to enormous damage. In the past, babies were routinely operated on without anaesthesia and were separated from mother as though it made no difference to them. However, the research evidence is overwhelming that babies are extremely aware, even in the womb. They perceive threats, register pain and even comprehend verbal and non-verbal messages with astonishing sensitivity to the affect-feeling environment in which they find themselves (Sills, 2007, p. 4).

One could say that the silence and denial around the truth of pre- and perinatal experience is just another way we 'paint eyeballs on chaos'. It seems odd now that neither my mother nor I had ever really talked about the trauma of my birth. But until the opportunity presented itself, we had never been invited or encouraged to do so. It was in the past, over with, forgotten.

Immediately after my birth, near midnight, I was taken away and not given to my mother until early the next morning. I was very sleepy and unresponsive in the days that followed, a likely result of the pethidine, which is known to cross the placenta and cause drowsiness as well as breathing difficulties in newborns, if given late in labour. In coming back to the full impact of this experience, my sense was of a highly stressed system overlaid by the toxic, paralysing effects of pethidine – an extreme state that was further 'locked in' by the lack of any human contact during those first hours of life outside the womb. The more I was able to be with the very

particular feeling tone of all of that, the more familiar it seemed to be. I realized, in a visceral, physical way, that my first relationship outside the womb was not with another person but with a state of being that was stressed, sedated and isolated. It helped to explain why for much of my earlier life it felt easier to spend time alone, quite often comfortably stoned. It explained the impossibility of coming into easy, intimate contact with others, as well as the elusive anxiety that had driven and unsettled me for so long.

Studying the self and finding the self

It is simplistic to think that my way of being hasn't also been shaped and influenced by many other experiences (later as well as earlier ones). However, my personal sense – which is supported by substantial research and which also connects to the part of us that *just knows* – is that birth experience reverberates through life as both a somatic imprint and a blueprint for how we come into relationship with the world. Thanks to the embodied pre- and perinatal exercises and teachings offered at Karuna, and the subsequent birth process work I've done with Bristol-based psychotherapist and craniosacral practitioner Matthew Appleton (2011), I have been able to access and resolve some of the tremendous energy held in the body-mind since the trauma of birth. This has been inspirational on both a personal and a professional level. In a way, it's only now that I can properly *begin* Zen practice. To quote Dōgen Zenji again, 'To study the Buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by the ten thousand dharmas…' (Maezumi & Glassman, 2002, p. 145). In order to study the self, it may well be necessary to *find* it first – to spend some time resolving any trauma that has prevented the soul from fully inhabiting the body, and the body from fully landing on this earth. So it wasn't at all a silly or corny thing to set off on a journey to find myself – it was a good and true impulse. It wouldn't have been so good, however, or have contributed to the ease and peace of mind I was seeking, if once found I had then tried to hold on to or consolidate the self. As Dōgen says, Buddhist practice is about enquiring into the self in order to understand and embody the fact that it is not separate from everything else, from the ten thousand dharmas. With the 'white noise of anxiety' resolved, I can do what I've always dreamed of, which is simply to be present to each event of ordinary life. I can move into relationship without wanting to run away, which is just as well since I work as a psychotherapist. Seriously, though, it is all of this, the depth of my own journey, that makes it possible for me to be present for my clients.

Being able to access the territory of the prenate and the newborn for myself opens up a deeper level of possibility for clients. Simply being open to and aware of this level of being, without necessarily working overtly with birth process, can help to facilitate change. The more I can be with the felt sense of this realm, the more I can recognize the preverbal language of the prenate or the newborn in the therapy room. This underlines the need to be able to touch into the wisdom of the body, to drop down into new depths of the nothing-but-the-present. It is a reminder that mindfulness, 'the clear and single-minded awareness of what happens *to* us and *in* us at each successive moment of perception' (Goleman, 1988, p. 21), is very much a 'bodyful' process.

As Buddhist teacher Reginald Ray writes,

> It is often quite a shock for people when … they begin to find out that actually the body has ideas about us. The body has things it wants to accomplish, and the body has a kind of very definite sense, intelligence, and intentionality toward us. It has an agenda that, unlike ours, is always changing and always up to date. It has its own pace and is most skilful in the ways in which it works with us. All we have to do is begin to actually listen. (Ray, 2012)

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributor

Originally from Melbourne, Australia, Dorinda Talbot has been based in London since 1986. She has a background in writing and editing and a strong interest in meditation, movement and bodywork. She received a Diploma in *Shiatsu-Do* from the British School of Shiatsu in 1995 and has practised Zen since 1987. Dorinda received an MA in Core Process Psychotherapeutic Practice from the Karuna Institute/Middlesex University in 2014, and is currently working towards accreditation with the UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP). She has worked as a counsellor with Mind in Camden's Minor Tranquillizer Project, and now runs a private psychotherapy practice in central London.

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