

Inner Processes of the Practitioner

This is an edited version of the talk given by **Maura Sills** to the CSTA AGM on the 14th of October 2000

I am the director of a psychotherapy training programme, which is in the same location as where my husband, Franklyn, teaches craniosacral therapy. The psychotherapy training has its foundations in Buddhist meditation practice and Buddhist enquiry and develops the inner skills of the practitioner, as opposed to the practitioner becoming a psychological expert on the client. The bulk of the training is about the inner processes of the practitioner. It is based on an experiential belief that it is the practitioner who actually holds the client stuck at some point in time; that any major healing or shift or movement towards a wholeness is, at some point, going to be restricted, not by the client's pathology, not by the client's lack of co-operation, of awareness or of sophistication, but by the practitioner. That indeed, if the practitioner is truly practising at depth then the client will benefit.

*the practitioner... holds
the client stuck at some
point in time*

As I have said, it is based on Buddhist practice, not on Buddhist religion nor on Buddhist dogma. Buddhism offers a way of enquiry that is rigorous and is based on enquiry at subtler and subtler levels. It is traditionally an enquiry that is practised on your own, sitting on a cushion, or sitting with other people on cushions, but it has always been seen to be quite an inner, reflective, contemplative practice. You don't have to be anything to actually benefit from some of the Buddhist inner practices and you certainly don't have to be a Buddhist. In fact, I have a sense that the Buddha would be amused at what we have turned Buddhism into. People tend to take even the subtlest and purest of experience and try and make it into a form, a thing, something that is cerebral, identifiable with, recognisable. This movement towards form, towards appearance, towards manifesting something, getting something, having something, is a very difficult impulse to resist in the Western world. If you come to the inner workings of Buddhism you are challenged not to have any belief. All beliefs are to be enquired into, even my belief that Buddhism is a practice of enquiry. Nothing is to be taken for granted. Concepts are not reality and so the tools that Buddhism offers are excellent to deepen into your own truth, your own experience, your own present moment at subtler and subtler levels.

Healing occurs in emptiness

I am going to start off with some of the assumptions on which our work is based. I cannot cover them all because it is a four-and-a-half to seven-year training but perhaps we can get some idea of them.

One of the assumptions is that healing occurs in emptiness. Healing occurs in silence. Healing occurs not when you are doing something, and healing generally occurs in a mysterious fashion. I am sure as practitioners you have got a good sense of that. You can be trucking along and doing the best you can and you are following this, doing that, listening to the other and sometimes it just seems to be as though you are at a tangent. Healing comes in an unlikely manner. It sometimes seems like a benediction or grace descending. It is almost nothing that you are doing but everything that you are doing.

Healing is a wholeness as opposed to an outcome. So we are not talking about getting better or no longer being depressed. We are talking about the possibility of more and more potential moments of reality, of waking up in the present to how things are, how things are cognitively, how things are emotionally, how things are on a feeling or a tonal level, energetically and with the subtler energies. It is like a waking up that allows us to expand the potential impact, or our potential to receive the impact of what is actually happening in the present moment. You will only know a tiny amount of that. You will never know the whole thing. You will never know it no matter how good you are. So to try and accumulate knowledge about the work, (though obviously quite important at one level) to accumulate knowledge about the client in the belief that knowledge alone will forward the wholeness of the client, will not get us there. If you just go on collecting, and if you are attached to collecting, you will always have a full hand and you will always have a forward movement, even a very subtle movement, you will always be propelled into the next moment.

There is health in everyone

Another assumption is that in everyone, no matter how apparently unwell, in whatever way that we are unwell, there is health. And this health is inherent. It is ubiquitous. It is not something that some of us have and some of us don't have. Within the Buddhist practice this quality of health is called different things: Pristine Awareness, Compassionate Intelligence, Awakening, Enlightenment or Basic Mind. So there is an aspect of us all in which there is no problem. This inherent health is not conditional. It is not available to be used in the way that certain aspects of our personality and our physical form can be used nor is it bound up in patterns of fixation and dysfunction. It is empty and part of this inherent health, this inherent wisdom, is that it is not personal. It is to be experienced personally but it is actually universal.

Experience is co-emergent

This brings us to another assumption which is very much tied into this aspect of mind. (Mind in Buddhist terminology doesn't mean cognitive mind. It means awareness. It includes the body. It is not separate from body.) This aspect of healthy

and the Cultivation of Equanimity

mind also has a quality that is universal, not separate. At this level of awakening or just being quiet we are actually able to enter into the non-separate relational field. I am sure as practitioners you can translate what I am saying into your experiences of being still and quiet with a client: allowing everything to be going on just as it is going on, knowing what it is you can know, and being all right not to know what you can't know, accepting that there is much more there than you can possibly know in that moment in yourself or between your hands. At that moment there is synchrony, a mutuality, there is information that is available to you that is not coming through the normal routes. It is not being processed as - "this equals this, this equals this, ah, that is what is happening". It is direct information.

I am suggesting that experience is co-emergent as opposed to linear. Therefore concepts of transference and counter-transference are going to be changed. Whose material is this? Whose experience is this? Does it matter if we know, or is it perhaps more important that we meet the experience no matter where it is coming from?

Awareness is curative

And my final assumption is that awareness in itself is curative. That if we are able to open enough in the present moment, open to the experiential field, open to both our inner experience and what the impact of being with the client is, whilst holding that within an even wider field, if we are just able to be there, that awareness is curative. What does that make of someone who has just had twenty years in training? I know that our psychotherapists, when we suggest this, flinch just a little bit. But if awareness in itself is curative, if that is true, or even if it is partially true, why do we have to learn to become skilled in what we do? Well, I actually believe that being skilled in working with the various problems is very important. You have got to have something to do while healing occurs! I am being a bit facetious, but I do believe that if you are practising in a way that moves towards a depth of awareness, that moves you into the present moment with the other person, this will help clear some of the obscurity to the field of emptiness in which healing can occur.

*All beliefs are to be
enquired into*

So, the task isn't to heal or to diagnose. But of course we can't stop doing that. I can't stop doing that - I don't know if you can stop doing that. I can stop doing it for a second or two at a time, but then judgements, thoughts, beliefs and ego keep churning

this stuff up. If there is nothing coming up that is useful, I am not feeling good as a practitioner, but if some things are coming up that look as though they are useful - I feel good! If we are not aware of how to work with these ego processes, ego will obscure the healing.

Equanimity

When I first came across the term equanimity I thought it was something like peacefulness: calm, soft and expansive - a good feeling. Over the years I have come to believe that equanimity is the hardest earned experience for a practitioner. Equanimity simply means space for everything. It is based to a large extent on our capacity to receive. If our capacity to receive is restricted - as of course it is because we are all limited - equanimity, or the possibility of there being space for everything, is reduced. If you are open, you are not only open to the mind of the client, you are open to every mind in the universe. The experience of being open means that there is going to be an impact, you are going to be affected, be affected in good ways and in difficult ways, be affected cognitively, emotionally, energetically (particularly this, I imagine, in the work that you are doing) and psychically. It is not just a case of "ah, there's this, there's that, there's the other". It is a case, for most of us, of how can we host the effect of being a human being, how well do we host the effect of being a human being?

I sort of scurry into London at the last possible minute, get my raincoat on, get on the tube and get off again and come to a talk like this, and get back on the train again, because for me coming to London occasionally is so overwhelming that I have few choices. I can either be so overwhelmed that I would probably cry at Paddington station and wouldn't be here right now, or I can close down and can work within a much narrower limit of my potential experience. You have got your own ways of coping. But in the present moment with your client, how you are able to hold the impact of that present moment of co-emergent experience is one of the most important practices of the psychotherapist. I will give you some basic examples. You look at your schedule for the day and you go "uughh!" Sometimes not even consciously, it just registers. Or you look at the name of the next patient, "aah, easy one!" I don't think we can have too many "uughh's" and survive but actually they are really challenging. They are challenging first of all because they challenge something in us. They challenge our ability to have equanimity. The ones that are "oh, these are easy" are just as challenging because quite often we are asleep with them because we are not challenged. They are all going well, they like us, we like them, they are similar to us - if they weren't our client, they would be our friend. But they put you to sleep. The ones that give you that "uughh", they wake you up. We could actually be grateful for being woken up to our difficulty at receiving, but we also have to monitor our falling asleepness with clients. Some of it is just because it is easy, because there is nothing being challenged. In psychotherapy, it is called

Inner Processes of the Practitioner

collusion. It is not an awake state. You know it yourself. You know it is easy but you know you are not awake. If you really consider it in supervision, it leaves you with a kind of feeling of "I didn't do my best there. It slid. Everything seemed to be going fine but I didn't do my best. I wasn't really evoking my awareness."

A Buddhist Abbot, who gave a talk at our Institute, was asked to define spiritual progress. He gave a definition which fits really well into equanimity. It was something like "our capacity to receive". How is your capacity to receive, your openness and availability?

Embodiment

I am going to introduce another couple of notions which tie into this. First, embodiment is what it is all about for me as a practitioner. Within Buddhism the body is pointed to as the answer to the dilemma of "what is the point"? Why am I here? What is important? What is the meaning? The practitioner is pointed back to themselves. And the expression is "within this fathom long form all of the answers exist". This is based on the assumption that the person who is told this realises that they are not discrete or separate from the rest of the universe.

Healing is a wholeness as opposed to an outcome

Human experience cannot be fully fathomed unless we are fully embodied. How fully am I here to the impact of the present moment? How fully embodied can I be? I come from a psychospiritual tradition where life is seen as a spiritual journey, as opposed to a psychological journey and the viewpoint is that you will not be fully enlightened unless you are fully embodied. Partial embodiment, partial enlightenment. So to try and think your way to a place of wholeness without the whole body in co-operation does seem to be foolish, like playing without a full deck of cards.

The three realms of experience

The body is experienced of course in its gross level, but also in its subtle levels of manifestation. The Buddhist concept of the three realms of human experience (Kayas) seems to help us locate where the experience is; not where in the body but where in the spectrum of gross to subtle. The first realm of human experience is the physical - the body, the forms. Thoughts are forms. Judgements are forms. It is not just the physical body, it

is all forms. Behaviour is a form. Action is a form. These are the forms: the active realm, the doing realm.

The second realm, the middle realm (which is called samboghaya) is the realm of the subtler experience of oneself. I think that most of you as practitioners would, if you think about it or experience it, sense that most of the work happens in this middle territory, the subtler territory, where we are less separate and yet fully present. The third realm is the realm of emptiness and, as I said, healing happens in emptiness.

So what do we do as practitioners? We increase our capacity to receive the impact of the other, if that is something that is useful. If you think it is useful to be able to be affected by the client at subtler and subtler levels, non-cognitive levels of experience, what then is your responsibility? What do you need to know about? There is no point in being open and vulnerable if you are going to be keeled over by that position. Your clients don't want to overwhelm you. They want you to be there again and again and to be able to meet them at some sort of a level. So it is not just a case of sort of "open up" and be affected. If that is possible for you, great, then you don't have to go through stages 1-22, go directly to the end process. But for most of us, our opening, our awakening is multi-level, it is a progressive opening up.

The three levels of impact

Parallel with the three realms of human experience are the three ways in which we can receive information. The first way is that we can be reactive. Something is said, or something isn't said and we feel a strong charge of good or bad reaction in ourselves. We either have a strong reaction like "I like this, want more of this, we are heading on the right track now", or the opposite reaction of disgust or "this is a bad person" or "I am bad". Reactivity has got a charge to it. It can be very energetic or it can be identified very cognitively. It has usually got an emotional push to it.

inherent health is not conditional

Obviously there needs to be an inner monitoring as things come in to you, as reactivity really does obscure space. Never mind what the judgement or the reaction is, it can take up all the space. It is energised. It takes up all of your attention. It becomes the whole truth and nothing but the truth - there is nothing else happening in that moment apart from your reaction. So it is not a good thing, not because of the

and the Cultivation of Equanimity

conditioning that has led you to that place, just because it doesn't give you much space. It usually means that the client has touched your history. When it comes to reactivity, it really is not about the client usually, but it is about your history. It is your difficulty in being as equally open, equally present with someone that you don't like as with someone that you do. It is a personal challenge to you. Working with reactivity is an important aspect of beginning to clear the space towards more and more capacity.

I am a very reactive person - I don't know how reactive. Sometimes I think that other people just hide it better than I do. When I sit on meditation retreat, it is reaction after reaction after reaction, then a little snooze because I am tired, and then reaction after reaction, whether it is a judgement or a liking or a disliking. It just keeps turning over. Most of us, if we are really honest, are reactive - just check it out - how are you? Are you reacting to anything? - something that I have said, my energy, an association? Some people will be sitting thinking "Oh, she's nice, I find what she says quite interesting". Other people will be thinking "Grr, she said something I don't like about psychotherapy"! We are all capable of reaction, it is human and, in its purest form, that energy is wonderful stuff! But because it gets distorted and because it usually gets linked into conceptual reality which has got nothing to do with what is actually going on in the moment, it can lead us towards ignorance. It can lead us towards making something of a situation that it is not and behaving as though it is real.

Reactivity is a very strong way that we take things personally. Reactivity is contagious, as well. For example, people going around



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gossiping about someone they don't like in the profession. Of course, that is against our Code of Ethics but you know...! You don't like them either and because that energy is very strong, it is difficult to resist. So the first responsibility we have is to have some practices to start paying attention to our levels of reactivity and then some ways of working with reactivity. When you're reacting, you don't get a lot of information about the other person; you can distil it from your reactivity but that takes practice and that takes time.

The next level of impact, the middle range of impact, we call response. It is when you are affected by the other and it impacts on your own experiencing, then there is a response. Someone comes in and they say, "I am feeling just incredibly anxious, I have been anxious

Inner Processes of the Practitioner

all night and I haven't slept," and the reaction could be "Oh, no, not again! We are going to end up this session like before, and I am not going to be able to help, like the last six times". Response, on the other hand, would be much more, "How is that, how is that for you now, how does that feel - are you tired?" It is like trying to find out more about it. Even if someone uses a trigger like "I feel suicidal", (which perhaps doesn't happen as much within your line of work, I don't know). You can react to that or you can respond: "well, how is that? When you first said it to me, my first jolt was: that feels very strong, that brings me really into the present moment. What is it like for you? Can you describe it?" It is more of a descriptive territory. You are in there; you are certainly in there but in a way that helps lubricate the exploration, the enquiry. You have got to be dreadfully careful, of course, that you don't feel that your response is reality either, so you can respond to what someone's saying. And it is not about being sympathetic. It is about genuine curiosity. How is it? How is it to be like that? And this is how it affects me when you say it. It gives you more space. There is more movement in it. There is more possibility. There is not an outcome that you are being propelled towards.

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This territory of response has got its inner practices, because if you are going to be deeply responsive with the other person, it is going to take you deeper within yourself than you have been before. If you are going to be deeply responsive, if you really want to know how it is to be that other person in that moment, if you want to be truly responsive to the messages that are coming, cognitively, physically, in the subtle energetic field, the whole of that person's present experience, past experience, archetypal experience, ancestral experience and beyond their personal experience is in the room. Do you want to hear it? Are you open to being affected? I don't know how many of you have felt that there are other people in the room. How many people are in the room at any one point in time? Do you really want to take on that there is a whole universe of information there to affect you? But mostly we obscure, we obstruct. So the depth of our ability to respond doesn't come from trying to understand the other person, it comes from an openness and a willingness to respond, to have an inner response. What is available to be *heard* is implicit in the field that is co-generated by you and the client, or their ancestors, or

the animal field and so forth and so on. The only way to continue to open up the capacity to know what is going on is through your receptive ability. Your ability to be available for the impact of the present experience, and that will be conditioned and limited by how afraid you are. What limits most of us is our inability to stay with anxiety, uncertainty, confusion, fear and terror. My suggestion is that the more uncomfortable you are feeling as a practitioner (other than the reactive part of the feeling) the more available you are, the closer you are to getting yourself out of the way and to receiving the information.

To describe the third and most open way in which we can receive information, we use the word resonant. To be resonant is to be open to the impact of the other at a non-verbal level. No words, just direct impact of experience. No questions of its reality, generally no understanding of it cognitively or in terms of linear understanding. A sense of meaning has coalesced into the present moment and you have just been fortunate enough, awake enough at that moment to hear it. It is about hearing. And resonance is a place in the relational field, where there really is a possibility of a huge opening into inclusiveness, into a real equanimity, which is full. Emptiness is not nothingness; it is full of the potential of the moment. We don't know how it is going to turn out but at least the potential of the moment is no longer being held back by our own limitation.

Therapeutic presence

What is it that you can be doing while healing occurs? You can be giving some help in terms of the forms that the client brings, because a client wants to be received completely. They don't want you to ignore their depression or their problems with their husband or whatever it is they bring to you. They need to have that heard. They need to be met where they are. You, as clients, know what I mean. I think it is really useful to keep turning yourself back into a client because the client knows the truth of it much more than the therapist. And if we can be therapist/practitioner with our awareness still alive in the moment of what it is to be a client, we have got support in having some deeper integrity and not being trapped in the role of therapist. So I am suggesting working without role but knowing what your tasks are, knowing what your responsibilities are. And if you come to the inner practices of the practitioner, I think there is a responsibility and a task to develop an inner practice of contemplation, of seeing what the impact is of being with the other person, of paying at least as much attention to yourself, as a practitioner, as you are pay to the client. Most therapists, especially new therapists, spend far too much time with their attention out on the client. Whether it is listening, listening, listening, their attention is out. There is a feeling that, if you don't hear everything, you won't get it all, you are not doing your job, you missed and you won't be able to do the work or whatever. But I am suggesting you are missing it anyway, because you are not going to know

and the Cultivation of Equanimity

it unless you are monitoring what is going on in you. All of the time you could be just dipping in and out of that place. The awareness practices that one can develop are personal but there is a 2,500 year old tradition of practice within Buddhism that can help, so you don't have to reinvent the wheel as to how to develop the inner muscles of hearing, of receptivity with the whole body. How to stay resourced, how to stay centred, how to stay present, how to enter the present moment as fully as you can or to know when you are not in it.

We can really help each other in our healing journey... by being affected

I suggest that if the client and the therapist are non-separate at a deep and potent level, if the therapist is able to be in communication with that depth in him or herself, even if the client is unable to consciously tap into that place in themselves, then if you are non-separate, it doesn't matter who is doing what. We always tend to assume, or I tend to assume, that it will be the therapist, the practitioner who is taking the load of the awareness practice. I can honestly say that I have benefited at least as much from my clients at profound levels of spiritual opening or awakening as probably they have benefited from my presence. Once this way of working opens out, it is limitless, it is boundless. It is not effortless until we are somewhere I have not been yet, but it opens up a way of working with clients, which is basically to work through the effect of the impact in yourself. Take full responsibility for that and you don't have to attribute whose material it is or where it came from. It actually doesn't matter at a profound level and it may not even have come from that client. I can be sitting in a room with somebody and another student/client comes into the room. There has been an opening and they have come in and there has been an effect. It doesn't matter who is impacting you. It doesn't matter about the origin of the impact. If you are taking responsibility for all of the impact, you are digesting the material that obscures and keeps us back from wholeness, then you are developing your capacity to receive and to be present and to offer your own equanimity within the situation.

We can really help each other in our healing journey, in our spiritual journey, and my assumption is we have to do it by being affected. There is no other way. There is no protection from this. There is no bypassing. There are no shortcuts.

There are three other qualities apart from equanimity that there isn't time to talk about today. There is no equanimity without compassion. By compassion, I don't mean just sympathy. I mean a genuine interest in our human condition, a genuine interest in the well-being of the other person. There is just no equanimity if you don't like them or the process. There is no equanimity without unconditional presence. Some people call that unconditional love. Unfortunately love gets translated so many different ways, but if love is the answer, it's fine. Unconditional presence. The presence you have towards a child, your child, or the sort of presence you can imagine with your child. You don't have to like their behaviour, but there is a real respect for their being which continues. So it is a respectful presence.

And the last of the four qualities that are said to co-arise with equanimity is called *mudita* - sympathetic joy - and it is a lovely term because it is about a confidence that arises out of this process, you then rejoice in the well-being of the other. The confidence comes out of the practice, as opposed to anything I could say or anything that you could read. It comes out of just being with people. _



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