

Wisdom & Compassion: Buddhist Psychotherapy as Skillful Means

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William James, the American writer and psychologist, predicted a century ago that Buddhism would deeply influence Western psychology. Far ahead of his time as usual, James' prediction is beginning to materialise. Western psychotherapists are increasingly incorporating Buddhist principles and practices, applying them in ways suited to our own modern culture. We see this synthesis in Jon Kabat-Zinn's work with stress reduction, in techniques like Hakomi and Integrative Processing Therapy, and in Dialectical Behavioral Therapy, which uses Zen principles to work with personality disorders. A uniquely Buddhist psychology is being articulated by writers like John Welwood, Tara Bennett-Goleman, Mark Epstein, and Tara Brach. This new field is called presence-centered psychotherapy, or sometimes contemplative psychotherapy, after its meditative roots. It's a way of working that uses the wisdom of the present moment, enhanced by a patient inquiry into body-centered awareness, to unfold our innate potential for healing. It sounds simple, but it's radical in practice.

The blossoming of presence-centered psychotherapy provokes a still broader inquiry: What would a spiritually astute psychology look like, and where might it lead? How might basic Buddhist principles like awareness and compassion be applied in the consulting room? When mindfulness meditation is combined with depth therapy, what kind of synergy can arise? What happens when we apply pure awareness to what Daniel Goleman calls "the last great uncharted territory of the mind" – our own emotions?

Meeting the Dharma

In my own life, depth psychology and Buddhism have proven two mainstays of my personal path. I didn't start off as a Buddhist practitioner – in fact, I managed to spend three or four years living in Kathmandu, working as a journalist and trek leader, before I became aware of a growing imperative inside me that said, Go see this teacher. Get to know him, let him get to know you. I wrestled with this inner knowing for a while ("Are you sure you're talking to me?"), feeling excruciatingly awkward. Still, some part of me seemed to know that I would just have to give that up. Finally I went down to the monastery and introduced myself to the lama. It was hard going for me, but I went back the next week, and the next, because that inner knowing was still there, still nudging me. A little later I went to a 10-day teaching seminar, and found the teachings to be pithy, earthy, and utterly sensible. It was hardly a dramatic conversion experience – no visions or thunderclaps – but more importantly, what I was hearing felt workable, and I knew I needed a spiritual discipline, or I'd risk wandering in the woods of dilettantism. At the end of the teachings, I made the decision to take refuge and become a Buddhist.

Since 1988, I've studied and practiced in the Dzogchen tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, which emphasises direct recognition of the nature of mind – the essential pure awareness inherent within each of us. Since 1999, I've practiced a form of depth psychotherapy that's been deeply influenced by my Buddhist background. In my personal life as well as in my work, I have found meditation practice and psychotherapy to be mutually supportive. Each takes me to places the other doesn't necessarily go; together, they open up new territory. The two traditions share a common bond in their focus on deepening and stabilizing awareness. I've also found each to be a profound source of strength in dealing with suffering, an aspect of life that is explicitly acknowledged in both systems — and almost as explicitly avoided by our present society.

Spiritual Bypassing

Buddhism and psychology are both technologies of the mind. Buddhism excels in unbiased seeing, describing both ultimate reality and relative truth with a clear-eyed profundity and a philosophical

astuteness that's seldom been equaled. Like all great spiritual systems, it offers the possibility of breaking beyond the limitations of ego to a completely free and open experience of reality that's known as enlightenment.

Psychotherapy, in contrast, delves into relative reality — specifically, the emotions, images and intuitions that shape our inner lives. Ultimate truth is not the goal here: rather, therapy strives to untie the knots of painful experiences by reworking past experiences and faulty perceptions. Depth therapy adds power to this enterprise by cultivating an active relationship with the unconscious, the uncontrolled but mighty hidden force that shapes our lives. Therapy's forte is instigating emotional growth and refining interpersonal skills — areas that tend to be glossed over in many spiritual traditions.

Quite often, therapeutic work and spiritual work are placed in different categories, with spirituality subtly valued as “higher.” But we need only take a look at our friends, our partners, or more importantly ourselves to acknowledge that a spiritually developed soul is not always emotionally mature. Spiritual ideals can provide the ultimate refuge from our unfinished emotional business. John Welwood calls this “spiritual bypassing” — the temptation to go up into the head, into unembodied spirituality, as a way to avoid our messy, painful emotional and relational issues; to use our beliefs to defend against our feelings of inadequacy. The big problem here is that this strategy simply doesn't work: our unfinished business eventually catches up with us, no matter how hard we try to “meditate” our way out of it. Whether you call it karma or just the nature of reality, a basic psychological truth is that that which is repressed only gains greater power, and that the only way out of an unpleasant situation is through.

Blending psychological and spiritual work thus offers the potential for a remarkably skillful approach, one that can both scale the heights and plumb the depths, working both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of reality — the spiritual and the embodied aspects of our lives. The two methods, in fact, have the potential to be mutually reinforcing. An awareness-based spiritual practice can support our emotional work, providing a spacious arena in which it can fully unfold. Meanwhile, by wholeheartedly voyaging into our own depths, we embrace the embodied and immediate aspect of our lives, mining the prima materia, the raw substance of spiritual transformation. Exploring the depths of our own psyche can broaden our spiritual understanding, grounding it in our own bodily experience and honing our ability to compassionately connect with others. It's not a matter of one method being “better” than the other, but rather a question as to what particular tool is appropriate for a specific aspect of this individual being at this exact time.

By working both sides of the equation — emotional and spiritual, relative and ultimate, psychology and Buddhism — we are able to be grounded and open to larger realities, to “grow down,” in James Hillman's phrase, as well as to finally grow up; to develop both a workable, comfortable human self and a broadened spiritual awareness.

Why Spiritual People Need Psychological Work

Traditionalists may argue that formal psychological work was not necessary for the Buddha, for example, so why should it be for us? I've done a lot of thinking on this question, having spent much of my adult life outside the United States. It's my observation that traditional cultures like Nepal (where I lived for more than a decade) do not experience the level of alienation, self-loathing, and doubt we suffer from here. The stress of life in a highly competitive, insanely fast-paced materialistic society creates an insidious form of psychological suffering that is no less painful for its subtlety.

Barraged with a constant stream of manipulative media messages, isolated from the intricate community and family structures that have traditionally support human growth, it's easy for us to feel isolated and confused. A pervasive inner tension seems to distort our emotional lives, warping the natural unfolding of a human being from child to adult. For many of us, it seems, unconscious patterns from the past block our ability to be happy and fully present. We often feel separated from our own experience by an invisible blockage or vague fear, a subtle disconnection that cuts us off from our own nature.

This is an area where our souls are begging for psychological as well as spiritual work. It may be that we suffer such a deep rift in our collective psyche – the ancient Western split between shadow and spirit, body and mind, materiality and spirituality — that we need a certain amount of psychological and emotional exploration to heal this primordial wound. Without at least grounding ourselves in this process, we may simply not be ready for intensive spiritual practice.

Tibetan Buddhist practices presuppose a normally obnoxious human ego, one afflicted by healthy dollops of aggression, desire, and selfishness. Within this context, an enormous range of techniques exists to skillfully allow egocentricity to blossom into a more spacious state of being. But when these fundamentally gritty human qualities are absent – when early traumas, missed connections, or distortions of the growth process have damaged ego growth — there is no sense of self, but only a hollow void, or a storm of negative voices. I recently read a transcript of a meeting between the Dalai Lama and a group of Western meditation teachers, in which he was stunned to hear the extent to which Americans in particular are tormented by what in psychological language is called “negative self-image.” This kind of “self-directed contempt” doesn’t exist in Tibetan culture, he commented.

Presence-centered psychotherapy offers a creative response to our society’s particular forms of emotional suffering. By blending Eastern and Western wisdom, we are learning to work with our own unique cultural neuroses in a transformative way, as we begin to understand ourselves deeply and compassionately enough to create the space for natural healing.

“Skillful Means” On the Road in Tibet

Thapla khepa or “skillful means” is the Tibetan term for the most effective transformative tool appropriate to a particular moment. Depending on circumstances, it may be placid or fierce, gentle or rough — whatever best fits the situation. Compassion is considered the quintessential skillful means: together with wisdom, it constitutes the basis of Tibetan Buddhist practice. The bottom line is thus clear-eyed awareness and a fundamental sense of kindness and acceptance, applied to oneself and the world with equal generosity.

This is not just theoretical, conceptual truth: it’s the kind of truth that’s meant to be lived. I found the practical implications of these theories fleshed out in living color during my travels in Tibet in the 1980s. Four summers in a row I explored Western and Central Tibet, using my rudimentary Chinese and Tibetan to hitchhike rides on the backs of open trucks — the de facto method of public transportation. Over and over again, I met people who were both grounded and open-hearted, possessed of both a bawdy sense of humor and a bedrock spiritual faith that was unwavering despite forty-plus years of Chinese rule. It would have been impossible to remain untouched by the stories I heard repeated in calm, matter-of-fact voices: parents killed, relatives imprisoned, families devastated, one blanket and no food for the children through the cold Tibetan winter. Nearly everyone I met had a story to tell, especially about the upheavals of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. They did so matter-of-factly, with little bitterness, but all were quietly adamant on certain things: they want their country back; they want their own government; most of all, they want the Dalai Lama to return. “When the Dalai Lama comes back, I can die happy,” my friend Tenzin would say. “If I die before then . . . I cannot die.”

Jolting down the dusty dirt roads with groups of pilgrims and rowdy Khampa traders, I sensed a spiritual grounding that allowed them to accept the ongoing flow of life, be it pleasant or painful, in a solid yet graceful way. When a truck would break down unexpectedly in the literal middle of nowhere, there was no moaning about the misfortune. People just naturally took care of what needed to be done: some gathered dried yak dung for cooking fuel, while others hauled jerrycans of water or set up black yak-wool tents. An emissary would flag down a passing truck to ride a hundred miles down the dirt road to obtain the necessary mechanical part, and the rest of us would settle in for a day, or two, or three, of spirited gambling. There was no sense of impatience, no complaining – just a remarkable ability to deal with reality as it is, rather than how they wished it could be, a complete openness to experience that I’ve come to identify as the essence and fruit of Dharma practice.

In retrospect, I can say that this was my first inkling that Buddhism was a practical spiritual path. If these people, shaped by a profoundly Buddhist culture, managed to live life so completely, I thought, there might be something to this. I don't mean to paint an overly idealistic picture here: I also met up with some troubled individuals along the way. But on the whole I remain convinced that traditional Tibetan society grows exceptional human beings, people who are wonderfully and simply human. This striking combination of strength and warmth is personified most famously by the Dalai Lama, whose charisma radiates from his simple genuineness. You sense that there is no artifice here, just real human warmth, rooted in a deeper strength that is grounded in the transpersonal.

Pure Presence

So my introduction to Tibetan Buddhism began not with the formal theory, but with the end result: the fully developed humanity, the cheerful strength and practical wisdom that is the natural result of Buddhist practice. The Buddhist perspective maintains that these qualities are inherent within all of us, and that the Dharma practices are tools to clear away the obscurations that block the full and radiant expression of our innately complete nature.

Wisdom and compassion are thus matters of practical application, not just concepts. Presence-centered psychotherapy applies these principles of wisdom and compassion to our own internal experience as it is in the moment. Virtually all of us hold tight knots of holding and rejection embedded within our experience. With a little observation, it's easy to see how when something unpleasant happens, we tighten up and reject this unwanted sensation. This kind of response seems natural — after all, it's only common sense. Pushing away suffering in order to attain happiness is a simple equation based on Newtonian physics.

Unfortunately for us, Newton was wrong. We actually live in a quantum universe where all points are connected throughout space and time in an invisible web — and the sooner our emotional intelligence catches up with this reality, the better. Suffering and happiness, samsara and nirvana, are not mutually exclusive opposites; rather, they are as closely linked as the back and front of your hand. Buddhism points out that it's our attitude towards experience, much more than the experience itself, which creates pleasure and pain.

By blindly grasping and rejecting, choosing and pushing away, we slip into a frantic tailspin of hope and fear. Our single-minded fixation only ends up creating more of the pain it seeks to push away. This tangle of emotions becomes like a chronically tight knot within our inner selves. In rejecting our own experience, we reject our own being, and this becomes an ongoing source of pain, confusion and alienation.

As a Buddhist, I am committed to the unfolding of awareness in the present moment. As a psychotherapist, I am in continual awe of the healing that occurs when awareness is brought to our old wounds, our contractions and rigidities. The awareness I am speaking of here is not conceptual awareness, of the “my-mother-did-this-to-me-when-I-was-five-years-old-and-I'm-still-screwed-up” variety. Rather, it's awareness itself, awareness pure and simple, awareness of the type that is cultivated in meditation. This type of awareness applied in the therapeutic context is an exceedingly powerful skillful means, because it taps into what in Buddhism is known as “the spontaneous pure presence of natural mind.”

Postulating the human mind as inherently free and flawless is a radical statement, especially from the disease-oriented medical perspective of mainstream psychology. Our psyches, however, are not merely offshoots of our bodies; nor are they mechanistic pieces of equipment. Our culture errs in describing the personality exclusively through biology and brain chemistry, and errs further in overemphasizing chemical means of resolution for psychic pain. I'm not denying the blessings of psychopharmacology: rather, I'm saying that mainstream psychology desperately needs an enhanced spiritual awareness to open up its claustrophobically narrow view of the human soul.

The truth is that awareness itself is healing. In recognising the truth of our own experiences as they exist in the moment, they are released. The Dzogchen term for this is “natural self-liberation.” Recognising the

essential nature of mind, our holding is naturally released, just as the snake uncoils itself out of a knot, just as a word traced on the surface of water disappears in the very moment it is written.

Mindfulness practice as embodied in meditation cultivates unconditional friendliness towards our own experience. It involves the radical practice of just being, without trying to do anything about how we are. To simply be with our own experience on a moment-by-moment basis and to treat it with a friendly attitude – this is the essence of mindfulness. It is a discipline, a skill, an art, a game, an endlessly fascinating pursuit with the potential to pervade every moment of life, awake and asleep.

Radical Awareness

The simplest proposition is also the most radical: that our basic nature is open space infused with pure awareness. Beyond all our constructs and beneath all our holding, each of us is no more and no less than spacious awareness – the capacity to know, pure and simple. This “empty essence fused with luminous knowing” is our absolute true nature, shared by all sentient beings.

Buddhist psychology is rooted in this fundamental capacity for consciousness, this pure potential inherent in all beings. When we recognise this seed of awareness at our core, we realise that there’s no need to embroider upon the fundamentally pure qualities within us. It’s not a question of self-improvement, of somehow making ourselves into a “good person.” Rather, it’s simply a matter of releasing the temporary obscurations that block us from manifesting our pure nature. Simple but profound, this shift in attitude changes everything. We stop struggling with our own nature, trying to make ourselves into something that we are not. We stop identifying with the steady flow of conceptual thought that normally fills our mind, and start identifying with our essence. Rather than constantly trying to actualise ourselves, we wake up to our own actuality.

For most of us, this is not an overnight event, but the gradual result of study, investigation, and meditation practice, preferably under the guidance of an accomplished spiritual teacher. In the Dzogchen tradition, the nature of mind is directly “pointed out” to qualified students by a master who transmits his or her own realisation in that moment. Even if we lack the opportunity to receive such teachings, simply allowing for the mere possibility of enlightened essence can be psychologically liberating. The need to try hard, to improve the self, to struggle for perfection, is so deeply ingrained in the way we treat ourselves. Natural perfection is a radical doctrine, subversive in its simplicity.

A traditional Buddhist metaphor compares our essential nature to the sky, and the disturbing emotions we experience to clouds. In truth, the sky is always there behind the clouds, whether or not we see it — the sky, in fact, accommodates the clouds, without being the least bit disturbed by them. Our mind is the same, in its capacity to remain fundamentally pure as it accommodates these endlessly arising emotions and thoughts. The Tibetan yogi Milarepa said a thousand years ago:

*In the gap between two thoughts
Thought-free wakefulness manifests unceasingly.*

When this understanding is applied to our own inner being, we begin to relate to our problems from the spacious awareness that is our basic nature. We learn to embrace the ongoing process of life with a degree of calmness and acceptance. Problems become somewhat less tight knots to be struggled with, and somewhat more intriguing phenomena arising within our field of awareness. This is not to say that we pretend to like painful situations, or that we paste a smiley face over our very real pain. Rather, through patient practice, we somehow find we can allow space for our dislike, our suffering, and our confusion – our actual and own experience.

And here is the incredibly hard part — we start to drop our addiction to knowing, to analysing, to working things out in our heads. Resting in mindfulness shows how all of these strategies are simply masquerades

for the fundamental need to be in control. It's not that conceptual thinking is bad, so much as it is irrelevant. It clutters our innate spaciousness, chopping up our intrinsic awareness into little bits.

Getting In Our Own Way

All too often, we simply get in our own way. We ornament our innate awareness with concepts, and soon these concepts become a confining prison – a prison we forget we ourselves created. Thinking is a vital skill, intelligence a saving grace. But used without attention to what the heart or the body or one's larger awareness says about the truth of a situation, cerebral intelligence becomes unskillful means.

Letting go of concepts doesn't mean we drop our ability to discern. Far from it! Freed from the fixation of judgment, we find ourselves keener observers, able to recognise the more nuanced aspects of reality and to respond to circumstances in a more flexible way. Discernment doesn't require us to solidify our experience by holding onto concepts about something. We can let go of concepts and take in our experience in a direct, fresh way: the blue vase on the windowsill, the squish of rain-soaked leaves underfoot, the cap left off the toothpaste (again – and here a concept interjects itself).

Relinquishing judgment also doesn't mean we passively accept everything that comes our way. We can still hate the experience of the capless and crusty toothpaste tube created by our thoughtless partner. We can be fully aware of our aversion, and consciously decide how we are going to respond to the situation, rather than automatically reacting to it. Cultivating awareness doesn't mean we turn into a bowl of mush. It does mean we have more tools at our disposal. We are fine-tuning our perceptions, a process which can be painful, but which over the course of time results in a more accurate experience of reality.

In the state of choiceless awareness that is mindfulness, we find the ability to just let things be, regardless of our like or dislike of the situation. This discovery can be remarkably liberating. Over time, it opens us up to a larger sense of trust. We are cultivating the ability to see through all the busy clutter of our lives to the core: to the bottom-line truth that our essential nature is awareness, pure and simple, and that this pure and simple awareness has its own healing energy, its own path and power.

Here's another popular misconception: that mindfulness practice means detaching from one's feelings. Again, this is far from the truth. If anything, we find ourselves feeling more intensely, once we've scraped away the overlay of neurotic angst that formerly filtered our experiences. Feelings most definitely arise within a state of mindfulness, as strong and clear as ever. And they pass away, just as they always have. The goal here is not detachment, but a full and free experiencing of whatever arises in the moment, unobstructed by conceptual judgment. So often we hold ourselves back from our own experience, subtly freezing it into constructs and thoughts. This pulling back from the flow of life is itself the essence of suffering.

In my own life, it's an ongoing process – I sometimes want to say “struggle” – to apply this knowledge to my everyday experience. Although I'm privileged to witness the transformative power of awareness firsthand as a psychotherapist, this doesn't mean I always apply it gracefully to myself. But I do have the conviction, based on personal experience, that the practices of mindfulness and compassion have an enormous power to relieve suffering and generate healing.

Breaking Open the Heart

Much of this I learned the hard way. My husband and I awoke on a rainy March morning in 1993 to find our 15-month-old son dead in his crib, victim of an illness that should not have been fatal, but was. The shock, the horror, the enormous guilt that I immediately locked away because it was too much to bear – it was all too much to bear. The event shattered my defenses utterly. That night, I laid down in a haze of grief and exhaustion and sensed a very fine pain at the core of my heart, like a straw had been inserted in a subtle channel deep inside. Heartbreak, it seems, is a literal experience.

I had to get through the days and weeks and months that followed; I had to somehow survive. Killing myself to escape the pain was not an option, though I certainly entertained the notion. But we had a four-year-old daughter to take care of, and I had an intuition that physical death would not resolve the situation; that I would wake up on the other side and find my disembodied grief a hundred times worse. I had to take care of myself in a way that I'd never done before. I had to be present for my own experience and somehow contain it without trying to control it, because my control mechanisms had been blown to bits.

I dragged a cushion into Nick's room, and sat there every day with my grief, anger, and pain. Whenever I felt the waves coming up inside, I'd sit and be with my feelings with a ferocious intensity. Somehow the awareness took off some of the pressure. It let the waves flow in their own rhythm, battering the shore, then receding for a few hours. I learned that if I could just be present for whatever emotions arose, if I could just embrace them as fully and completely as possible, the storm would pass more easily.

I began to practice tonglen, the Tibetan meditation on 'sending and receiving,' in which you imagine yourself taking in the suffering of others with every inhalation, and with every exhalation send them all your happiness, all your joy, all your strength. This worked like nothing else did to ease my own suffering. In some mysterious alchemical fashion, the pain in my heart melted when I connected with the pain of others. I didn't stop to think why this might be so, or how it worked. I simply sat and took in more, grateful for even a few breaths of relief.

Grief took away my life energy in the way that serious illness does. Those first few months, I'd wake in the morning to find my body lying peacefully in bed — then remember what had happened, and feel the physical weight of irreversible loss descend upon me like a ton of bricks. In the middle of the tempest, though, I found a sort of peace. Seated in the eye of the hurricane, emotional currents swirling all around, I experienced a steady sense of grounded presence that alone helped me bear the grief. It became clear that this awareness was not going to run away, though I at times might choose to. It was always present, spacious and accommodating, despite the awful turbulence of my emotions. It was as if uniting with the seed impetus of those emotions allowed them to unfold as they would, unencumbered by the added pain of resistance. It was an awareness that was larger than thought, larger than emotion, an awareness that preceded and contained both of these

Mindfulness: The Practice of Awareness

Staying with our own experience as it unfolds moment to moment can be the hardest thing we'll ever do. Painful feelings are avoided or repressed for good reason: they hurt. Facing the emotional traumas embedded in the body requires intention and a great deal of courage — the kind of courage that doesn't deny the presence of fear, but rather acknowledges the fear and does it anyway, with consideration and kindness for one's own pain. Spiritual practice is where the "Big No" — our basic rejection of experience — meets the "Big Yes" — our compassionate awareness.

It can take only a few weeks of self-investigation to reveal the suffering that arises when we freeze and contract around our own pain — a reaction which creates a whole new layer of suffering on top of the original pain. One could say it's the essence of neurosis, the places where we block ourselves from letting in life.

Presence-centered psychotherapy works with these frozen feelings, thawing them into fluidity through the patient heat of our attention. So often we run away from our own experience. We avoid being present because we are so unhappy. Yet we only make ourselves unhappier through clinging to stories and concepts that further alienate us from what is going on in the moment. The key, the turn-around moment, is in just giving our own experience the space to exist: in paying attention to it and actually experiencing it rather than compressing or contracting or running away, rather than attacking or rejecting or judging it, rather than drugging ourselves numb against it or exaggerating our reaction into hysteria. Each of us has a virtuoso repertoire of negative responses to undesirable experiences. And life provides us with endless opportunities to realise that ultimately, none of them work.

Our fear, our disbelief, says, “What’s the point?” It believes that paying attention to painful things only leads to more pain. Obsessing or fixating on painful matters certainly does create more pain — but open awareness is a different matter entirely. It’s the difference between being squeezed in a closed fist and resting lightly on an open palm. Held in the open palm of awareness, painful experience has a chance to decompress and expand, to gentle itself into its own true nature. So much of the pain we experience is in the contraction, rather than the original wound.

Connecting Directly With Experience

The key, again, is asking the simple question: “*What’s going on right now? What am I experiencing in this moment?*” Turning inside, we check out our experience at the inner level of felt bodily sensation, not the cerebral level of what the head says, yammering away. To be mindful is to be fully present in the moment, relinquishing the urge to control our experience. Just being aware, just noticing: the ache in my right shoulder, the breath going in, the hiss of a car moving down the rain-slicked street, a catch in my throat, a flutter of fear, a tightening in the lower back. Underlying this never-ending process, we subtly notice that which notices. Just noticing, just being aware.

The essence of this process is direct experience: noting what arises, and staying with it as it unfolds. Slowly we discover that it’s our resistance to our own experience that makes certain situations so painful, more than the experience itself. Even overwhelming emotions like grief can expand and blossom in the moment-by-moment attention to what is happening, and the commitment to stay with the experience for just one more breath. We learn to open to the actual quality of the feeling, the pure painfulness of the pain, rather than trying to control it or reject it. And it is in this precise attention to detail, this exquisitely scrupulous awareness of exactly what is happening, that the knot unties in space. We learn to ride the waves of emotion, to move with them rather than struggle against them. Emotions are inevitable; they exist to the point of enlightenment and no doubt beyond. Spiritual practice in the Dzogchen tradition does not involve suppressing our emotions or overcoming them, but simply allowing them to flow freely through us, without grasping. The same applies to psychological health.

When we practice mindfulness, we are cultivating a deliberate vulnerability. As Ron Kurtz, the founder of Hakomi, succinctly sums up: “Mindfulness is undefended consciousness.” It is an exquisitely poignant process of dismantling our armor, our expectations, our efforts to control; a bittersweet unfolding of the pleasure and pain inherent in every moment. And this fuels the therapeutic process with some very high-octane energy. When we open up to our own inner process, we open the gates of self-exploration and new discovery.

Psychologist Eugene Gendlin has found that the single determining factor in a therapy’s effectiveness is how well a client is able to stay with his or her own experience. The type of therapy practiced, the duration of the work, even the particular therapist, did not matter nearly as much as this basic ability to simply experience what one is experiencing. And this ability, Gendlin notes, is seldom taught in therapy (though he developed his Focusing technique around this very point). It seems that the client walks in the door either with it or without it, and flails away valiantly regardless. By bringing aspects of mindfulness meditation into the therapeutic process, we tap into the potential to go beyond superficial cognitive-behavioral solutions to the deepest roots of body, mind, and psyche.

Applied Compassion

Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche uses the term “fundamental sanity” to describe the solid and clear ground of our basic nature, our birthright as human beings. Dharma practice is meant to bring us back to this place of our original essence. It seems to me that we Westerners have developed a particularly imaginative repertoire of ways to cut ourselves off from this basic state. Apart from our superb collection of distractions, we can choose from addictions, denial, busyness, workaholism, rationalisation . . . the list of accredited, socially approved ways to flee our ourselves goes on and on.

One pattern I see quite often is how we give absolute credence to the ghost in the machine, the neurotic soundtrack that accompanies our lives, unleashing its negative commentary as our life unfolds. This superficial narrative cuts us off from our own complexity and depth. We believe the voices in our head as they unreel in a devastating commentary on our own self: *“You’re too this, too that. Too shy. Too fat. Too needy. Too ugly. Too stupid. You never do that. Screwed up again, didn’t you? Who do you think you are? Why bother, it’s always going to be like this.”* And on and on, endlessly.

It’s difficult to argue with these voices, because they are primed for debate. Apply the clarity of aware emptiness to this scenario, however, and gradually it starts to dissolve. Embrace it with compassion for the suffering involved, and it melts like the Wicked Witch. Rejection can’t hold a candle to compassion.

Awareness or mindfulness on its own, however clear it may be, is not enough to support deep change. Love, in the sense of basic warmth and compassion towards ourselves and our own experience, is also necessary. These twin qualities, self-awareness and basic kindness, are inseparable. In the Tibetan tradition they are called wisdom and compassion, or “warmth and wakefulness,” as Trungpa Rinpoche phrased it. Compassion is said to be an intrinsic quality of the nature of mind, radiating automatically and effortlessly from the empty, aware essence that is our basic nature.

Compassion plays a major role in psychotherapy as well, though it isn’t a subject taught in schools or discussed in seminars. Emotional healing requires a warm, receptive, attentive listener; someone who is willing to take in our own experience and feel it fully. The power of this “suffering with” – the root origin of the word “com-*passion*” – cannot be overestimated. It extends far beyond the unburdening we experience when we talk about our problems with a sympathetic friend. That kind of conversation often concludes with a bit of well-meaning advice or an attempt to cheer us up. That is different than exploring our difficulties in the presence of another who is open, relaxed, and aware; someone who is willing to completely be with us without having to change our situation in any way. In some mysterious way, being fully seen and understood by another, even if that understanding is entirely wordless, can support us in understanding ourselves.

It’s as if awareness is contagious. By being fully present for our difficult feelings, yet not needing to manipulate reality in any way, the other models self-compassion. This unconditional loving presence provides the context for deep emotional healing. It is profound, fundamental, open-handed love, with no expectations and no judgment. Compassion provides non-egocentric nourishment. It’s the kind of unconditional positive regard we all need as children, yet we don’t always get. However late it comes, it is always a most welcome experience. It creates the space in which we can unfold ourselves and grow.

Loving kindness applied to ourselves helps us fully experience our own feelings, however negative or difficult they might be. Breathing in, we embrace our pain with compassion. Breathing out, we stay with our present experience as it unfolds in the moment. It’s that simple. Over time, this process of compassionate attention heals our restless need to struggle with reality, to strive for something better or different or more. Eventually, it heals our separation from our own selves. To be able to stay with our own experience and allow it to be just as it is – this is the practice of awareness and compassion combined. Presence-centered psychotherapy uses these as tools for awakening and deepening. Through cultivating awareness, we create a container for our experience. Through cultivating compassion, we open this vessel to the world.

Awareness and compassion are thus two key elements of spiritually oriented psychotherapy – skillful means for the heart and soul. Unlike so many external goals we strive for, they are intrinsic to our nature. Unlike so many pop psych fads, they are grounded in millennia of actual practice. They manifest as regularly, as inevitably, and as naturally as the breath itself.

Presence-centered psychotherapy blends the wisdom of meditation and psychology. Psychotherapy uses the presence and awareness of the other – the therapist – to hone self-awareness. In meditation practice, we refine the application of awareness on our own. Quietly seated by ourselves, we become aware of the

faintest aspect of the breath, the subtlest movement of the mind. Therapy happens once or twice a week: the rest of the time, you might reflect on the hour and muse a bit, letting the resulting awareness percolate through your system. Meditation can happen any time, any place, but again, the process of letting the resulting awareness filter through the body/mind is as important as the practice itself. The precise methodologies differ, but the goal is the same: to immerse ourselves fully in the flow of life by embracing our awareness of our own experience.