

The Contemplative and Dharmic framework of Core Process Psychotherapy,



What is Dharma?

Dharma is defined by the Buddhist scholar Jack Kornfield as meaning '1) Ultimate truth, reality, and universal law, 2) Buddha's teachings revealing these truths, 3) all physical and mental elements, 4) our destiny or spiritual path.' (Kornfield, 1994) These various aspects of how dharma may be defined all contribute to the framework in which the psychotherapeutic relationship evolves in Core Process Psychotherapy. If we examine each of these definitions of dharma, we can begin to experience the particular ambience of Core Process Psychotherapy, which pervades the relationship between client and therapist.

The first definition is 'Ultimate truth, reality, and universal law'. What does this mean? By stating that Core Process Psychotherapy has a dharmic framework, does it mean that we operate within a conceptual framework of 'ultimate truth, reality and

universal law'? It would be extremely arrogant to do so. Nor would it be conducive to the development of a therapeutic dialogue. However when we speak of ultimate truth in Core Process Psychotherapy, we are not holding a conceptual framework. We are holding an inquiry into the conditions we encounter within the context of a deeper reality that is beyond conception and is ultimately mysterious. Yet it is also accessible. The psychotherapeutic relationship does not therefore consist of the expert (therapist) who has all the answers, and the seeker of answers (client). Instead there is a 'joint-inquiry' at work, into what is arising in the present moment. The client is being accompanied in the inquiry, rather than objectified. Both client and therapist are continually challenged to remain present and alert to what is arising within the therapeutic relationship.

The Buddha's Teachings.

The second definition of dharma given by Kornfield is 'the Buddha's teachings revealing these truths'. The Buddha was clear that the ultimate truth couldn't be grasped. Therefore it cannot be conceptualised. He urged his followers to inquire into the ultimate reality of life and death themselves and to trust their own experience, rather than blindly follow his teachings. What he taught was essentially a method of inquiry, not a dogma.

"Dharma practice, " says Buddhist scholar Stephen Batchelor, "requires the courage to confront what it means to be human. All the pictures we entertain of heaven or hell or cycles of rebirth serve to replace the unknown with an image of what is already known." (Batchelor, 1997)

Contemplative practice enables us to notice how we habitually try to grasp at reality and fit it into neat little conceptual boxes. The Tibetan master Chogyam Trungpa required his students to simply notice during contemplation when they began to conceptualise and run story lines in their minds about what was really happening and to say to themselves "thinking" before returning their awareness to the breath. (Butterfield, 1994) In the same manner we can support therapeutic work by developing our awareness of how we freeze the flow of what is arising in the therapeutic relationship. This freezing prevents us being open to truly experiencing

what is present in the moment. Instead we stay stuck in familiar stories. We immediately label what is happening, instead of experiencing the subtle feeling tones and flux of imagery that underlie our more formed story lines of who we are and what the world is like. Yet when we are able to remain open and unfixated with our attention the process of moment-to-moment awareness often leads to an insight or opening that we could never have predicted. This open-ended inquiry is an expression of what is sometimes referred to as ‘brilliant sanity’.

Brilliant Sanity.

Brilliant sanity or Basic Intelligence¹ can only emerge when we are spacious enough to let it emerge. As long as we are trying to cajole our sensibilities into patterns we already know and recognize we obscure our brilliant sanity, even though it is always present.

“Basic intelligence,” stated Chogyam Trungpa, “is what is revealed after the defences are let go.” (Butterfield, 1994)

To step outside of our habitual experience we need to cultivate the capacity to open to the unknown. One of the roles of the therapist in Core Process Psychotherapy is to accompany clients on this journey, rather than interpret and label experience. The poet John Keats described this ability as “being capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without an irritable reaching after fact or reason.” He called this ‘negative capability’ (Pearsall, 1998). Negative capability opens us up to possibilities, instead of closing them down. By keeping our awareness narrowed down to what is known and comfortable we solidify our stories. We can then easily become so identified with the habitual story all other possibilities become lost to us. It is important that our stories are heard and honoured in the hearing, but without losing the openness of ongoing inquiry. The writer Whitney Strieber describes this openness of inquiry as ‘true agnosticism’. He writes,

¹ Both these terms are derived from Chogyam Trungpa and are interchangeable.

“True agnosticism is a very active mental state, a sort of eager unknowing.” (Strieber, 1988)

In our desire to label our experience we can dull this active mental state and lose our ability to eagerly inquire. If we can keep our inquiry open and alert our underlying brilliant sanity can begin to shine new light on old problems. In Core Process Psychotherapy we adapt contemplative inquiry from the meditation cushion to the therapeutic relationship. We listen in deeply to what is arising in the present moment in the therapeutic relationship. We notice what arises without pouncing on it. It is as if we marinate in the experience of what is arising, so that we can truly imbibe its flavour. This allows us to hold a wider field of awareness than when we narrow our focus down to include only the story. Deeper truths can then begin to emerge from the flux of sensations, imagery and ‘emotional tones’ that we begin to pay attention to. Our stories become less a labelling of past experience and more of an alive present moment unfolding.

This leads us into the third definition that Kornfield gives of dharma: “All physical and mental elements”. Stephen Butterfield, a student of Chogyam Trungpa, elucidates on this use of the word dharma;

“The early schools of Buddhism.... analysed the self into component perceptions, tiny processes called ‘dharma.... a process could be imagined as flashing on and off, like successions of light reflections in water. These processes clump together in heaps [known as skandhas] to form the illusion of a self.” (Butterfield, 1994)

The notion that we are separate, discrete beings, existing in a vacuum, keeps us isolated and frozen in our experience. However in our contemplative practice we begin to notice that what we believed was frozen is actually fluid and our sense of separation and fixation on self-limiting definitions begins to soften. We experience ourselves more as living process and less as inert identity, which has rigidified through the repetition of habitual storylines.

The Fixation of Self.

The more fixated we become in our storylines of who we are the more fragile we become. It is like water, which when it is frozen may be easily shattered, whilst flowing water is able to adapt, move around obstacles and even wear them away. Philosopher Ken Wilber describes this as ‘self-contraction’:

“When I lost access to pure open awarenessI was left only with my self-contraction, with Narcissus, hopelessly absorbed in his own image.” (Wilber, 1991)

Self-contraction closes down the internal sense of spaciousness. We become imploded. We are unable to access our brilliant sanity. Yet even when we are caught by self-contraction brilliant sanity is never totally lost, it is only obscured. Even in this obscuration there is brilliant sanity, for the self-contraction protects us from being overwhelmed by experiences that we do not have the capacity to process more fully in that moment. Karen Wegela, director of the Naropa Institute, describes brilliant sanity thus:

“Brilliant sanity is understood to be our very nature, it is understood to be who we already are in that, when we relax, that’s what we experience. When we stop trying to be somebody else, it’s already there, we don’t have to go and find it. In fact from a Buddhist point of view it’s constantly coming through, it’s constantly showing up anyway. It’s more a question of uncovering than developing.” (Wegela, 1998)

Sanity, in this context, does not have the same meaning as sanity as it is usually used. Wilhelm Reich described the individual who is well adapted to a sick society as ‘homo normalis.’ Such an individual, and we probably all have something of the ‘homo normalis’ about us, would never be considered anything other than sane, and yet is capable of great intolerance and cruelty to those who do not conform to the same way of being (Reich, 1991). The psychiatrist R.D. Laing, points out the same limited paradigm at work when the terms ‘sane’ and ‘normal’ are culturally defined:

“The condition of alienation, of being asleep, of being unconscious, of being out of one’s mind, is the condition of the normal man. Society highly values its normal man. It educates children to lose themselves and to become absurd and thus to be normal.

Normal men have killed perhaps 100, 000, 000 of their fellow men in the last fifty years.” (Laing, 1967)

Brilliant sanity does not belong to any one of us any more than any other. It is a function of the shared ground of our underlying unconditioned nature. The question is whether we access our brilliant sanity or whether we act out from the place of self-contraction: our defended, fixated sense of normality and habit or our true potential.

Ripples in a Pool of Pefection.

The fourth definition Kornfield gives of dharma is ‘our destiny or spiritual path’. Our sense of destiny or spiritual path can begin to emerge through contemplative awareness. As we become more aware of how we habitually reach out for certain experiences and recoil from others, we cease to be so at the mercy of what the Buddha called ‘grasping and aversion’. We can be more open to the full spectrum of experience.

As we inquiry into how we have become who we have become and what else we might possibly be, we can open up to new possibilities and bring more spaciousness to the small, fixated self that is in pain. Brilliant sanity naturally emerges when given space and we begin to bring compassion to the aspects of ourselves that have recoiled and contracted in response to painful experience. It is an inherent expression of what Zen Buddhists call ‘big mind’: the mind unfettered by concepts, open and expansive, alive to the present moment. The Zen master Shunryu Suzuki writes,

“Big mind is something you have, not something to seek for.” (Suzuki, 1983)

Thus an open mind allows more than just the storyline to surface. It allows the unconditional core of our true nature to permeate the more conditioned and shaky defensive strategies we have adopted in response to life’s hurts and injustices. The dharmic framework of Core Process Psychotherapy holds a wider perspective on our nature than that of our conditioned and fixated self-image. It also encompasses all that is perfect, brilliantly sane, unconditioned and active in each of us at every moment, however dark and desperate it may feel at the time. Our dramas are not then so all

encompassing, but more like distorting ripples in a pool of perfection. The words of the Taoist sage Lao Tzu encapsulate this understanding;

“If it isn’t broken, don’t fix it.

The Universe isn’t broken

And neither are you.

So don’t attempt to fix others

Until you realise that you yourself are perfect. “ (Lao Tzu, 1963)

As such the therapeutic journey is not about fixing anyone, but about realising potential. It is about connecting with that which ‘isn’t broken’, whilst developing compassion towards those aspects of our self that feel ‘broken’. This can enable a deep transformation to take place whereby we can honour our stories, without being imprisoned by them.

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