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Focusing and Buddhist meditation

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Introduction

I became seriously interested in Buddhism at about the same time as I initially trained as a counsellor. The school of therapy with which I have been especially involved - focusing-oriented psychotherapy - has been of special interest to me partly because the practice of focusing seems to have much in common with Buddhist meditation. Both Buddhism and focusing-oriented therapy are concerned with the relief of suffering, both emphasise the importance of giving attention to what one is experiencing (mindfulness) and both have practices of what one might call 'calming the mind': 'clearing a space' in the case of focusing, and 'tranquillity meditation' in the case of Buddhism. However, I have come to think that the differences need to be emphasised as much as the similarities; this chapter is mainly about differences.

I should emphasise at the start that I will be considering just one of the many schools of psychotherapy (focusing-oriented therapy) and also just one perspective on Buddhism (the Mahayana perspective, with its emphasis on 'emptiness' and 'interconnectedness'). This is the only school of Buddhism with which I have any real familiarity. Whether much of what I have to say would apply in the case of different forms of therapy, or different traditions of Buddhist meditation (to say nothing of meditation in non-Buddhist traditions) I will leave as an open question. I should also say that it is one thing to write about such things as a 'spiritual path', or 'progress towards enlightenment' and quite another to embody the Buddhist teaching in practice. However my belief is that - for some of us at least - trying to be clearer about what is involved in such things can, to some degree, be of help with the practice. So this chapter is an attempt at such clarification.

In theory

In the Buddhist tradition spirituality is oriented toward non-attachment, since it is attachment that leads to suffering. There are blatant forms of attachment, but also more subtle forms that involve attachment to concepts, or ways of seeing things. In Hua Yan - a Chinese form of Mahayana Buddhism (Chang, 1971; Cook, 1977) - it is held that the world can be seen (interacted with) in many different ways, none of which is the reality. The reality is pictured as the (more-than-conceptual) whole that can be articulated in these different ways. There are parallels here with the philosophical system that Gendlin (1997) sees as undergirding focusing, but I will not discuss that point here.

Meditation (in Mahayana Buddhism) is designed to take us from the specific things (ways of seeing) to the reality. Living in the reality - living without attachment to the specifics - enables the 'enlightened person' to live untroubled by those specifics that involve suffering in the case of ordinary people. Meditation, in this tradition, divides into two stages:

(1) sustained attention just one particular thing (such as the breath, or a physical or mental image), so as to calm the flow of thoughts and ideas (this is known as shamatha or 'tranquillity meditation'), and then (2) turning the attention to no particular thing but to 'experience as a whole' (this is known as vipashyana or 'insight meditation').[\[1\]](#)

I have sometimes been inclined to think that Focusing can be seen as a variation on step (1): in this first 'focusing' step one gives attention to the whirl of one's thoughts and feelings, and proceeds to set each 'issue' aside, so that a calm space is reached. But then, very differently from the second step in Buddhist meditation, in step (2) one selects a particular difficulty or source of disturbance, and gives attention, not to its details, but to it, as a limited whole. From such attention new ways of articulating the trouble may arise, which may then lead to new ways of meeting the difficulty in one's life.

The focusing step (1) seems an important aspect of psychotherapy in general; work with psychological problems needs a strong and peaceful place from which to work. So far as its aim of reaching a strong, peaceful state is concerned the focusing step (1) does not seem significantly different in aim from the meditation step (1).

The focusing step (1) could thus be seen as a possible first step on a spiritual path, as well as a first step on a psychotherapeutic path. It is as if, after either version of step (1), one could continue either in the direction of 'therapeutic change' or in the direction of 'the spiritual'.

In practice

The account that I have just given suggests that in focusing one might begin, not by 'clearing a space', but by spending some time in shamatha meditation, so as to reach a calm place from which to begin to focus with a personal problem. Similarly, there is the suggestion that one might begin a meditation session by 'clearing a space', as a preparation for vipashyana. However, in my experience neither of these procedures work too well.

Shamatha as a preparation for focusing

If I begin a focusing session with shamatha, and reach a fairly peaceful state of mind, the difficulty is that the problems are no longer readily accessible. This may connect with what Gendlin (1996, pp. 65-60) says about meditational states being 'too deep' for effective focusing. One is no longer sufficiently in touch with the felt specifics of one's problems. In an email concerning this point Gendlin once said to me that in working in a focusing partnership with a Buddhist, the Buddhist had experienced a feeling of tension in connection with his relationship with his wife. The Buddhist then felt that he should let this tension dissolve into emptiness, as one naturally attempts to do in meditation. Gendlin suggested to him that instead he might give his attention to the tense feeling, and as he made this suggestion he had an image of the Buddhist's wife thanking him! This little story resonates for me - if we are focusing then I think that we are trying to feel our way through to some resolution of our difficulties; we are not trying to dissolve them. That is why, it seems to me, that shamatha is not a good preparation for focusing.

'Clearing a space' as a preparation for vipashyana

If I begin a meditation session with 'clearing a space', and reach a point where the problems are 'set down', the difficulty is that then I am inclined to continue by getting a sense of which of them needs my attention most. This is the usual next step in the focusing process. I find it quite difficult at this point simply to leave all the problems aside, and give attention to 'emptiness'. 'Clearing a space' is designed as a way of helping us to separate our problems and give us a little distance from them, so that then we can work with them more effectively. It brings the problems and their specific 'feels' very much into focus, but this is not of any particular help in moving towards vipashyana. So far as vipashyana is concerned it matters little what comes to mind: the point is to let whatever comes be there and pass away. One isn't trying to sort out one's problems, and so beginning by identifying one's problems is not very relevant.

These experiences of trying to 'mix' focusing with meditation have made me think that in practice the 'mix' does not work well. I am also struck by the fact that in my practice as a counsellor I have never suggested that clients should engage in meditation. It is as if while I think there may be some link in theory between focusing and meditation, I don't make anything of this link in practice, either for myself or with clients.

This has begun to make me think that, since theory and practice need to be closely related, there may be something wrong with the original idea that the first stages of focusing and of meditation are very similar. I will suggest in the next section that they look more similar than they really are.

The differences

One thing that may incline us to think that focusing and meditation are similar is that both are concerned with the relief of suffering. However, focusing, like psychotherapy or medicine, aims to relieve – in a limited way, or as far as is possible - particular illnesses or other forms of personal suffering, whereas aim of the Buddhist path is that we should no longer be troubled by illness or suffering. I am inclined to agree with John Welwood (1980, p. 135) who writes:

Whether the emphasis in focusing is on problem-solving or on contacting one's wider aliveness, the orientation is usually one of seeking release from personal entanglements. The orientation of mindfulness practice, on the other hand, is not finding release but rather letting be.

In Buddhism suffering is seen as an inevitable aspect of samsara – the 'mundane whirl', in Thomas Cleary's (1994) helpful translation. Within samsara suffering can only be relieved to a limited extent, and if it is removed from one place it is likely to reappear elsewhere. Psychotherapy operates within samsara, whereas the Mahayana Buddhist path leads beyond, to a point at which samsara itself is experienced as nirvana. There is a sense in which the Buddhist path leads beyond suffering altogether, but that is hardly the aim of psychotherapy. For example, Freud remarked in the concluding paragraph of his *Studies in Hysteria* (Freud & Breuer, 1896/2004) that the aim of psychoanalysis is to replace neurotic suffering by ordinary suffering, not to get rid of suffering altogether.

This theme was discussed between Jung and the Japanese Zen Master Hisamatsu in a conversation that took place at Jung's home in Switzerland in 1958. Part of the dialogue is as follows (Young-Eisendrath & Muramoto, 2002, pp. 115-16):

Hisamatsu: ...people suffer in many, many ways. We must almost always live in suffering. I want to ask you whether or not it is possible, within the framework of psychotherapy, for a person to disengage from all these sufferings in one fell swoop.

Jung: Are you asking whether there exists a method by which suffering is healed?

H: Yes, is there no generally valid remedy for it?

J: Are you asking whether there is a method through which one could spare a person suffering?

H: Yes. Can psychotherapy liberate us from suffering in one fell swoop?

J: Liberate us from suffering? One tries to reduce suffering, yet some suffering is always present.... We need suffering. Otherwise life would not be interesting...

H: Suffering is, in a sense, necessary for life. You are right. Nevertheless, we have a genuine wish to be liberated from it.

J: Of course, if there is too much of it! The physician strives to reduce suffering, not put an end to it.

They may seem to agree, but I doubt that they really do. Hisamatsu, I think, holds that Zen can liberate us from suffering 'in one fell swoop', although 'in a sense' suffering is necessary for life; that is, it is necessary within samsara. However, Zen aims to transcend samsara. Jung, along with psychotherapy in general, aims to reduce suffering. Hisamatsu, I believe, following the Buddha, would say 'What I teach is suffering and the cessation of suffering' (Alagaddupamasutta, 38).

This, I suspect, is why focusing and meditation don't really mix - they are aiming in different directions: focusing aims to resolve particular problems; Buddhism aims to free us generally from samsara.

Overcoming illusion

Another way of looking at the relation between therapy and Buddhism is that they are both concerned with overcoming illusion. In the person-centred tradition to which focusing-oriented therapy belongs, the process of therapy is held to move in the direction of greater authenticity, that is, of the client becoming more real and genuine in their life. Similarly in psychoanalysis there is said to be a transition from hidden, unconscious motivations to motives that are fully conscious and transparent. Freud said his aim was to 'make the unconscious conscious'. Another way of putting it would be to say that the process involves overcoming self-deception, or eliminating bit by bit the illusions that we have about ourselves.

Now Buddhism also is concerned with the elimination of illusion. The three central 'troubles' (kleshas) in human life are said to be greed, hate and illusion, but the first two are seen as arising out of the third, which is the most fundamental of the three: it is because we live in illusion that we become snared in greed and hatred. However Buddhism is not talking here just about our personal illusions and self-deceptions. It is talking about the fundamental illusion, which is that we are separate, self-existing individuals who have a definite nature and essential needs. In Buddhism it is that which lies at the root of human suffering, so that release from suffering consists in a transformation of our whole way of being and of our experiencing of the world.

Here we come to the same sort of point that we reached before: that psychotherapy aims at reducing personal inauthenticity and hence neurotic suffering, but it does not aim at destroying any grand illusion about the nature of the world. It is not committed to the view that we live in any such grand illusion, and hence does not try to remove the suffering that, according to Buddhism, comes from that illusion. It aims to remove everyday illusions in order to remove neurotic suffering, but it does not hold that there is a grand illusion whose removal would eliminate all suffering 'in one fell swoop'.

Insight and compassion

However, there is a further aspect of the Buddhist path to be considered, which suggests that there is a sense in which the focusing step (2) can involve a 'spiritual dimension'. In the Buddhist tradition it is held that the achievement of 'wisdom' or 'insight into the emptiness of things' is only one dimension of the spiritual path. It would be possible in principle to progress along this dimension alone, and such a path is well-recognised in Buddhism as 'the way of the individual realisers (pratyekabuddhas)'. This path is not altogether disparaged in Mahayana Buddhism, but it leaves out something important about the nature of 'emptiness', namely that the 'other side' of the emptiness of things is their interconnectedness. Things are 'empty' in the sense that they cannot exist in independence of everything else. In particular, human beings exist in interdependence with each other and with all other beings, so that it is not really possible to reach enlightenment on one's own.

Then there is the point, if we are realistic, that the following of a spiritual path depends to some extent on the existence of favourable conditions (Gampopa (H. V. Guenther, Trans) 1986, p.14). In the picture-language of Buddhism, one cannot reach enlightenment directly from a hell-realm, or the region of a hungry ghost, or even from the realm of a god. The denizens of hell (including us, at times!) are too full of pain to be open to the Buddhist teachings, the hungry ghosts are too full of longing and the gods are too happy in a mundane way. In order to be open to the teachings one must first enter the human realm, where the obstacles are not so great. Of course, if a person is already 'far advanced', their calmness of mind will not be affected by such things as physical pain, mental illness, extreme poverty or wealth, chaotic or entrancing situations, etc. But for the rest of us these things will interfere. Hence, the spiritual path requires giving attention to the overcoming of such obstacles, and – because of the interconnection of beings – not just for oneself but for all. The Buddhist view, as I understand it, is that 'ultimately' everything can be seen as nirvana. The Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna wrote:

There is nothing whatever which differentiates samsara from nirvana; and there is nothing whatever which differentiates nirvana from samsara. The extreme limit of nirvana is also the extreme limit of samsara; there is not the slightest bit of difference between these two. (Mulamadhyamakakarikas 25: 19-20, in Streng (1967)).

For someone who has attained this view, their own sufferings do not cloud their joy, or we might say that they can live in the light of nirvana without in any way retreating from the darkness of samsara. Such a person would have, purely for themselves, little use for focusing, psychotherapy or medicine. However, precisely because of the identity of emptiness (nirvana) and interconnection (samsara), someone who is 'enlightened' is necessarily concerned with the enlightenment of all, and that requires attention to factors that interfere with other people's (as well as their own) ability to seek enlightenment, such as illness, physical pain, psychological suffering, poverty, etc. None of these things necessarily obstruct a person's path (and sometimes they can work in a facilitative way), but in practice most of us need a modicum of favourable conditions if we are to be able even to think seriously about spiritual progress.

It is because of this that Buddhism sees 'compassion' as arising naturally out of 'insight into the nature of things'. The nature of things is their emptiness, but this cannot be realised without effort of the sort that the Buddhist teachings outline, including meditation practice. Further, because of the interconnection of beings, the realisation of nirvana for one person inherently involves such realisation for all. The 'bodhisattva' or 'enlightening being'[\[2\]](#) therefore not only engages in meditational practices, but also in practical compassionate activity. 'Insight' (into the emptiness of things, and their interconnectedness) and 'compassion' (active help for those in trouble) are seen as the two essential pillars of Buddhism.

From a Buddhist point of view, then, practices such as focusing, or psychotherapy generally, are of great value, but they belong with the 'compassion' aspect of Buddhism rather than with the 'insight' aspect. Meditation is designed to increase 'insight', which will lead to increased 'compassion', but meditation is not primarily concerned with sorting out personal difficulties in the way that psychotherapy is. Hence I am inclined to think that focusing – and psychotherapy generally – should not be mixed up with meditational practices. They are both valuable, and both can be elements of a spiritual path, but their aims and functions are significantly different.

What I have said may point in the direction of a larger theme – that of whether there are dangers in taking a practice (such as tranquillity meditation) out of one tradition (Buddhism) and transplanting it into a quite different tradition (psychotherapy). Mindfulness-based therapies do just that, and there is evidence that mindfulness can be therapeutically valuable. But from a Buddhist point of view the danger is that one may then be led to see mindfulness as a technique for sorting out one's psychological difficulties, and so lose sight of what mindfulness is really about in Buddhism, namely, noting what one experiences for the sake of gaining experiential insight into the emptiness and interconnectedness of things. Robin Skynner (1976, p. 219) writes in connection with psychotherapy and the spiritual traditions:

If these two endeavours are in fact quite distinct, then forms of psychotherapy that confuse them could be much more harmful to the possibility of spiritual development than those that do not recognise the existence of the traditions at all.

There seems to be a danger here, although I cannot at present formulate it very clearly, of the 'psychologising' of spiritual traditions, and thereby losing what is distinctively spiritual. And there is also the converse danger of 'spiritualising' psychotherapy, that is, of making systems of psychotherapy into a substitute for religion.

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