Spirituality
and Therapy

spirituality and therapy:
a personal view from buddhism and systems intelligence

Stephen Malloch

To define what 'spirituality' is for me, is difficult. In *Care of the Soul*, Thomas Moore writes: '"Soul" is not a thing, but a quality or a dimension of experiencing life and ourselves' (Moore 1992, p.5). Spirituality for me is an experience, rather than a set of beliefs. It has a quality that is somewhat different from the everyday doing and thinking; it has more width, breadth and depth. Simultaneously, it takes me both into myself and out into connection with the cosmos. It is full of heart. It is about trusting, relaxing and appreciating. I saw it clearly at a Benedictine monastery while watching monks celebrate the Eucharist. I said to myself, 'So that's what it's about…' I can't readily articulate what it is I saw, but it was full, very alive and beautiful.

This way of experiencing is expressed in the Buddhist practice of mindfulness (*smriti*). The Chinese character for mindfulness consists of two parts: the upper part means 'now' and the lower 'heart' or 'mind' (Nhat Hanh 1998, p.59). To be mindful means to quieten into the fullness of our 'heart-mind nowness' – its rightness and completeness. It is about letting go of trying to understand with the intellect, and letting come a deeper appreciative knowing. As the Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chogyam Trungpa writes, 'You see the brilliance of the universe. You can appreciate green, nicely shaped blades of grass, and you can appreciate a striped grasshopper with a tinge of copper colour and black antennae' (Trungpa 1988, p.119).

The central Buddhist practices of impermanence (*anitya*) and non-self (*anatman*) also feed this relaxed appreciation. To practise impermanence is to let go of the need to hang on to how we think things are, or should be; every thing is in continual change, so attend to the unfolding nowness and hold lightly to your constructions of reality. To practice non-self is to let go of the thought of being separate, self-sufficient and in control; so practice relaxing into trust, into your environment, and allow what is at hand to be sufficient to afford engagement and the emergence of action.

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These experiences are also suggested in the western disciplines of systems thinking (Senge 1990; also see Scharmer 2007), and systems intelligence (Hämäläinen & Saarinen 2010). A person acting with systems intelligence is described as 'perceiving herself as part of the whole, the influence of the whole upon herself, as well as her own influence upon the whole. By observing her own interdependence in the feedback intensive environment, she is able to act intelligently' (ibid., p.9).

Earlier, I said that spirituality for me was an experience, not a set of beliefs. Yet sometimes it is useful to have a model of an experience to help us talk about it. It is the ideas of systems intelligence that I currently find the closest to a western spiritual model. We are all part of a system, which we could call the cosmos. This system consists of an ever varying feedback environment (an expression of the experience of *impermanence*). We influence the system, and the system influences us. As with all systemic thinking, where we place the boundaries of the system is dependent on our need to chunk the system into manageable pieces – the boundaries exist only in our thinking. So to nominate where 'I' ends in this system is a convenience of thought (an expression of the experience of *non-self*). Thus, spirituality is to listen deeply to this profound systemic interdependence, and express this interdependence as Buddhism's Four Immeasurable Minds – love (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), joy (*mudita*) and equanimity (*upekkha*); these are expressions of our felt sense of mutual relatedness to each other and to all things.

The difference between spiritualty and therapy can be thought of as a difference between western and eastern psychologies. Eastern contemplative psychology emphasises spiritual realisation; western therapeutic psychology emphasises individuation (Welwood 2002). Both are expressions of who we are, each emphasising a complementary dynamic. Movement towards spiritual realisation without individual psychological understanding can lead to what Welwood terms *spiritual bypassing* – using 'spiritual ideas and practices to avoid dealing with emotional unfinished business' (ibid., p.5). Its opposite is seeing oneself solely as 'skin-encapsulated ego' (Watts, 2006,

p.77) – being preoccupied with personal psychological processes and ignoring spiritual experience. The former is looking predominantly 'outward' to the system; the latter is looking predominantly 'inward' to the system. Both overlook the wholeness of the system.

The spiritual teacher and former Harvard psychologist Ram Dass writes, 'The point isn't to deny our Egos, but to extricate ourselves from our *exclusive* preoccupation with them' (Ram Dass 2002, p.150). The spiritual work of extricating ourselves from identification with our personal processes becomes much lighter if those processes are healthy and stable. This is the work of therapy. The therapeutic work of creating a healthy, stable personal psychology is much lighter if we know we are not *only* that. This is the work of spiritual practice.

To be solely concerned with facilitating a client's healthy personal psychology, however compelling that work might be, is only half the story. My role as counsellor includes recognising the client's spiritual dynamic. This aspect is love, compassion, joy and equanimity. It is mindfulness, non-self and impermanence. It is systems intelligence. Because I can only meet my client in these places to the extent I know these

places in my self, I need to do my own work. And as I recognise these places in my client, so my client recognises them in me. It's a two-way street. This challenges me to be all of who I am and to lean in to all I can be. It's a fascinating ride. ❧

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