

The field of subliminal mind and the nature of being

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Abstract

The spiritual tradition of Buddhism differs from the prevalent tendency in the West to separate mind and body, self and other. Consciousness is viewed as a vast interconnected field of which all of us are a part. There are subliminal aspects of this consciousness that contain our deepest health and wellbeing. These become obscured by the conditions of our existence, especially the personality processes and self-constellations that develop in defence of basic wounding at the level of our being. Psychotherapy and Buddhism meet in an understanding of human suffering that can be described in terms of a self, being and source axis along which we all exist. In this model, self is like the tip of the iceberg. If we are recognised and received at a being level early in our lives, there will be an open and fluid alignment between the self through which we mediate with the world, our being-nature and the deepest ground of inter-connection. Most of us are not fully met at a being level when we first need to be and we come to identify as a separate and fixed self which has cut loose from its deeper moorings in being and source. In this embodied life, however, we have access to subliminal depths through an ever-present faculty of awareness, which can be cultivated through mindfulness practices. Psychotherapists and counsellors can learn these inner practices and facilitate a being-to-being meeting in which their clients can have an experience of their human beingness that is beyond words.

Keywords: *Subliminal mind, awareness practice, consciousness, embodied presence, source, being and self, holistic holding field*

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Introduction

Psychotherapists have become accustomed to inhabiting a profession of many paradigms. It would be surprising if an endeavour aimed at understanding the complexities of the human condition was not characterised by a plurality of perspectives and practices. Among those that have emerged in the West over the last thirty years are approaches rooted in longstanding traditions more commonly associated with the East. In such approaches there is an acknowledgement not only of some of the divergent assumptions and premises characterising world views divided by history, culture and geography, but also a central recognition of the common ground between them.

The 2500 year-old tradition of Buddhism shares with modern psychotherapy a focal concern with questions of the self and the nature of human suffering. The different lineages within Buddhism have given rise to a coherent psychology and set of practices, which support the depth of enquiry involved in the therapeutic relationship. Drawing principally from the Theravadin lineage, but also influenced by the upper Burmese incorporation of Mahayanan perspectives (Teich, 1996), Core Process Psychotherapy has evolved from the confluence of Western psychotherapeutic skills and understanding and Buddhist principles and practice.

Buddhist notions of the self dovetail closely with many of those developed within Western psychotherapy, especially amongst Object Relations Theorists. Buddhist psychology points to a basic confusion in our understanding of who we are. We tend to perceive ourselves in terms of a fixed self-construct, a 'me'. This is to ignore the fluid and ever-changing character of our arising process. Life is in constant motion. Nothing is permanent, including our sense of self. The self is not fixed and immutable. It is a dynamic matrix of ever-shifting psychological, emotional and physiological processes and constellations shaped by the conditions we meet in our relational world. When we ignore this we generate suffering as we identify with positions, roles and solid representations of a constantly fluctuating and changing internal process. This, in turn, is at the heart of our potential to heal and converges with the intentions of psychotherapy. Processes may become fixated, internal objects generated and developmental patterns and characterological strategies entrenched, but all of this is impermanent. Since all things are in constant flux, possibility for change is enfolded within the continuing movement of life. In Buddhist terms, there is an end to suffering and this lies not in actions oriented towards goals and outcomes but in letting go of our identifications and allowing things to unfold more freely.

Within Buddhism, there is a profound understanding of the relational. As well as mistaking ourselves for fixed and enduring entities we tend to see ourselves as separate from every other entity. In the West, much of our experience creates and reinforces a sense of discrete and separate self. Psychotherapy has contributed greatly to our understanding of how this happens. What we are prone to miss is the deep interconnectedness between us. This is distinctly different from merging. There is no individual experience

that does not mutually affect ‘ourselves’ and ‘others’. In the words of the Zen teacher, Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1988), we ‘interbe’. A recognition of this deeply relational web is the cornerstone of psychotherapy in both the interaction between therapist and client and the acknowledgment of all the formative and continuing experiences of the client. Again, this feature of human existence contains both the roots of much suffering and a major means of its alleviation.

A subliminal field of enquiry

Underpinning this sense of interconnection, in the Buddhist perspective, is the indivisibility of mind and body. This is expressed in the Pali word ‘namarupa’ (mindbody). Included in this are all cognitive, emotional, psychological, energetic and physical processes. Conceptual thinking is not singled out and awarded priority in defining reality in the way it tends to be in the West. The mindbody is a sensitively functioning whole characterised by many layers of experiencing, from the most gross to the most subtle. Every mindbody affects and is affected by every other. The cognitive layers are the most formed. We also communicate from the less formed, more subliminal layers of consciousness.

A familiar example of this for psychotherapists lies in the whole territory of transference and counter-transference. What is involved in this process is essentially an interchange at an energetic level. There is a shift in energetic orientation between client and therapist in present time in such a way that each experiences the other as if they are someone else from another time and place. Object relations are energetically internalised and manifest over and over again. Equally, however, we sometimes have unexpected experiences of moments when something opens up between ourselves and the client which deeply affects us both but cannot be put into words. It feels less defined than thought, cognition or emotion and is sensed through the energies, sensations and feeling tones of our bodies. If either of us tries to describe it, it slips away, yet we both know something significant has changed. We could say that the former example illustrates how this dimension of our existence can sow the seeds of suffering while the latter shows its huge potential for healing. This is familiar terrain for many psychotherapists well versed in the dual possibilities of unconscious processes to both hamper the client’s relationship to themselves and the world and open the way to freeing it up.

According to Buddhist psychology, buried inside the deepest layers of our consciousness is an ever-present capacity for healing. This is a subtle centre of ‘knowing’, referred to in Pali as ‘citta’. This is a different kind of ‘knowing’ than that which is formed through cognition. It is a direct and open awareness of one’s own consciousness: an ability at one and the same time to sense into and notice our own thought processes, feelings, emotions, ideas and opinions without becoming identified with them. Rune Johansson, a Swedish psychologist and Buddhist scholar, has described this as ‘not the same as “personality”, rather a centre within personality, a conscious centre of activity, meaning, continuity and emotionality’ (Johansson, 1985).

It is that potential within us to be moved, to be affected, without anything else getting in the way. It is characterised by clarity, spaciousness and emptiness. But, inevitably, things do get in the way. It becomes enshrouded in the mists of our conditioned experiences (Anguttara Nikaya, I, p. 10). What obscures it most of all are our fixed self-constructs and self-views. It is much easier to sense the forms within ourselves – and to identify with these forms – than to experience the openness and spaciousness that supports them. This is similar to walking into a room and seeing the furniture and fittings without noticing the space. The assumption here is that there is a stable and coherent centre of presence and beingness that continues within the midst of personality processes and changing conditions. It is to do with ‘I am-ness’ rather than ‘I am this or that’. It is not an entity or fixed form but rather a fulcrum of awareness that is ever-available within the continuing stream of consciousness and experience. Citta is at the centre of our embodied existence and is empty in the way that a bell is empty: only if the bell is unobstructed can it resonate when it is struck. Citta – not the conditioned self with which we tend to identify – is what experiences peace and interconnection, that sense of relief when we have been met at a deep wordless being-to-being level. It is this embodied presence that is responding in those moments of silent mutual recognition between therapist and client.

Self, being and source

It is the ‘I am-ness’ of being that is so pivotal to our deepest sense of health and well-being. This is, of course recognised within the Western philosophical tradition too. For Heidegger, the main plight of humankind is ‘ontic obscuration’ – an obscuration of being (Heidegger, 1962). His teacher, Husserl, said that the more we pay attention to being, the more that being will ‘unconceal itself’ (Kockelmans, 1998). This can happen in the therapy setting if a client is met at this level. What emerges as the process deepens is a sense of being, not just the accrued self-identifications and conditions. This often opens the client (and the therapist) into existential territory. In Buddhist terms, this is similar to a bardo state: a transitional place like a doorway opening in two directions. We can either flee back into our self-constellations, our ‘way of being’, as Husserl termed it (Kockelmans, 1998), or we can find ourselves reconnecting to the source from which being emerges.

Franklyn Sills describes this process in terms of an archetypal axis of self, being and source (Sills, in press). Being, or citta, is present from the moment of conception and is also relational. It can only know itself through contact with other beings. As being meets environmental conditions, a sense of self forms – ‘I am’ becomes ‘I am this’. Much depends on our early relational life as to how fluid a self-system we develop, how far our ‘way of being’ flows continuously and coherently from our being. Inevitably, early experiences of being coming into relationships gives rise to varying degrees of wounding because of the impingements we meet from conception onwards.

Our early relational experience is a field experience of connection between mother and baby in the womb, during birth and afterwards.

The mother's state and her responses to the environmental conditions she inhabits are directly communicated to the baby. A lot depends on how well the mother's being can be supported and nourished during this time. Developmentally, it has been well documented how disruptions in our being can take place during these periods. Frank Lake charts the importance of a safe 'womb of spirit' in which the little one can settle and rest into her sense of being, without an activation of the need to defend (Lake, 1980). In the absence of an empathetic holding field, there is no basic attunement between the baby and the mother at the level of being. For Lake, the denial of being is the deepest wounding we can receive: he called it 'true affliction'.

Winnicott's account of the need for 'good enough' mothering addresses similar issues in the first months of life (Winnicott, 1965). It is the 'continuity of being' that gets interrupted if these environmental and relational needs are not well enough met. In Winnicott's terms, the growing infant moves from an open and undefended being, or 'true self', to a closed and defended 'false self'. The sense of self constellates around the need to defend rather than around the wounding itself. As we grow older, we consolidate and repeat strategies for survival and tend to identify with these as who we are. This is how our personality and defensive strategies come to obscure our being. When the wounding is severe and the defenses extreme, the self can become profoundly fragmented. In Winnicott's terms, this is experienced as 'annihilation of being', bringing deep disconnection and disturbance.

Our sense of being is inextricably connected to a deeper field of interconnection and openness that is empty of any self-definitions. In Buddhism, this is sometimes described as 'Bodhicitta', which depicts the state of the citta when it is freed from obscuration. In Core Process Psychotherapy, this is what is called the 'core'. In therapeutic terms, if a client begins to connect to life through their being they also come into greater alignment with the much wider ground – or source – of that being. A more fluid and open sense of self can emerge where personality, as a conditioned form, is not running the show. Personality is held more as something we 'have' than something we 'are' and can rest in the deeper 'knowing' of the citta.

A holistic holding field

In this approach to suffering, spirituality and psychotherapy meet. Both are about an inner experiential enquiry where in order to end suffering we need to turn towards it, to be with it. Both also point to the central role of relationship in this journey. For example, it has long been recognised that the therapeutic relationship is the most important single common factor – across all modalities – in facilitating the client's wellbeing (Carr, 2007). A spiritual perspective helps to highlight both a larger field of enquiry and how the therapist might orientate themselves more fully to the healing potential of relationship. More important than returning to the originating experiences of impingement or than translating the client's unconscious processes, is the capacity for the therapist to be present to what arises moment to moment as

they sit with the client. A holding field needs to be offered in which the client can feel both met in those places of developmental wounding and patterning around which the sense of self has constellated and open to a deeper sense of being.

This requires a particular quality of attunement and listening on the part of therapists: not only to the clients, but also to themselves. This goes beyond a recognition of transference and counter-transference to the cultivation of inner skills and practices that enable the therapist to sensitise the whole mindbody to the numerous layers of personal, developmental, interpersonal, transpersonal, archetypal and existential experience that can emerge through the portal of relationship. A variety of therapeutic orientations, from Bion through to some of the more recent humanistic-transpersonal, person-centred and existential approaches, have broadened the perspective of psychotherapy along these lines. The contribution of Buddhism to this particular project of enriching the therapist's own potential for depth of relationship lies in its well-established tradition of contemplative practices. If relationship is key to therapeutic healing then the therapist's own availability to relationship is also key. This availability needs to extend across the personal and interpersonal into the more subtle, sensing and non-cognitive realms of experience. What is required is a kind of resourced receptivity in which the therapist can attend at all levels to his or her own internal resonances, responses and reactions in relationship. Such an attunement of attention reaches through and beyond the personal, transpersonal and collective unconscious into the deepest expression of interconnectedness, into the experience of non-separateness itself.

In Buddhism, this quality of attention is cultivated through a variety of mindfulness (or awareness) practices. One characteristic of attention is that it can be directed at will. Often it is taken up with objects or events outside of ourselves or, if it is turned inwards, it is simply following the thoughts, impressions, sensations, feelings and emotions parading through us and fuelling that sense of self we constellate around. Most mindfulness practices harness the ability to move our attention by giving it a constant focus. When sustaining attention in this way it has the opportunity to become more subtle and refined. The Theravadin scholar, Nyanaponika Thera, describes the course of this refinement when the focus of attention is 'what actually happens *to* us and *in* us at the successive moments of perception' (Nyanaponika Thera, 1975, p. 30).

To attend to the very process of perception itself, he says, we need to notice what arises through the five physical senses and the thinking mind (which, in Buddhism, is regarded as another sense organ). If we do this, it is possible to observe the self-referential labelling that happens with every act of perception. With consistent practice we see how everything gets filtered through our added subjective judgments. For example, a smell is not just a smell but is a pleasant or unpleasant (or possibly neutral) smell and may give rise to an influx of memories and associations. As we become more aware of how we add to our experiences we become more like that empty bell that can resonate more clearly without interference. The 'white noise' of our accrued

self-definitions does not get in the way as much. Self-definitions still arise but we have more space around them as we see them for what they are. What is fostered is what another Theravadin scholar, Ajahn Thanissaro, refers to as ‘appropriate attention’ (Thanissaro, 2007). Inevitably, subtle self-accretions are arising all the time but a focused and intentional practice increases our awareness of how these influence us.

The cultivation of this kind of practice for the psychotherapist is both a resource and a skill. It gives the therapist more internal space to rest in and nourishes a non-judgmental, observing attentiveness to whatever is arising in the relational field. It provides a strong base of support for that ‘evenly hovering attention’ that has been widely advocated ever since the days of Freud (Riordan Speeth, 1982). It is not necessary for the client to undertake the same practice or for therapist and client to share the same world-views. The very act of bringing this quality of awareness into relationship includes the client within its field and increases the possibility of the client attuning to the subtle layers of meaning that begin to emerge when there is an orientation towards emptiness.

There are many forms of practice available to the psychotherapist. In Core Process work, most of the practices relate to three fields of attention. First, we focus on ourselves through an individual meditation practice where we investigate our own internal processes. Often this includes two interrelated components. One of these might be a concentration practice (*samatha*), such as following the breath, for slowing down and quietening the mindbody. Another might be an insight practice (*vipassana*), in which we notice the rising and passing of the constant internal stream of thoughts, memories, feelings, sensations, emotions, ideas and so on. This helps to establish that embodied presence which – as it becomes subtler and more refined – allows more and more information to surface. It’s like throwing a big stone into a pond. We might just notice the initial contact with the water, but if we keep paying attention it takes a very long time for the ripples finally to cease. A stillness and spaciousness is fostered which enables us to meet the sensitive, evasive and refractory nature of consciousness. The qualities of sustained attention and embodied presence can open into subliminal layers where there is an expansiveness that can hold whatever is arising in the mindbody (Nyanaponika Thera, 1975, p. 33). As a ‘vertical’ orientation, this is an important practice to build into daily life but it is also a reference point when we sit with a client, a place to attune to, time and again, in order to sustain attention in the second field.

This second field is where we extend into a ‘horizontal’ connection by coming into energetic relationship with the client. As we sensitize ourselves to our own condition, we also become more sensitive to that of the client. In the therapeutic relationship, information can be communicated directly through subliminal field awareness. We don’t have to know cognitively what to say or do. The question is, can I just open myself up to the experience of ‘the other’, whoever they are and whatever their experience is? Can I allow myself to be affected and notice how I am affecting them, how they are experiencing me? Can I be as sensitised as possible; as fully embodied as

possible; as fully available to impact as possible – at all levels? This is where it is as important for the therapist to bring as much attention to what is happening inside for her as to what is happening for the client. This is a ‘joint practice’ where awareness is brought to whatever arrives through the gateway of relationship. There is recognition of mutuality in the human condition that allows attention to deepen into the third field.

This is an attentional field that is much wider than either the therapist and client or the impact. It is what is possible to be directly contacted – at the level of the *citta* or being – within a much wider relational field when we let go of the task, the agenda, the focus, and just allow an expansion of awareness into the room and beyond. The intention here is to listen to the whole of a client, even when focusing on a particular process or strategy. This includes opening more fully to the unknown and the implicit: that which is not possible or necessary to access with the cognitive mind and that which is yet to come into being. The therapist’s awareness extends to non-verbal, tonal qualities of subliminal communication and remains open to the unexpected. When attuned to these layers of contact, there is greater opportunity for responses of both therapist and client to come from within the field of awareness.

Resourcing subliminal contact

Such depth of relational connection depends upon a strong focus on the resources of both therapist and client. The internal and external resources supporting the work of individual therapists vary considerably, but their own contemplative practices have a huge part to play. These might include body-based practices such as *Kum Nye* – a Tibetan form of relaxation/movement meditation (Tulku, 1978) – as well as daily sitting and walking meditation. In addition, awareness practices begin to release more unhampered qualities of deep empathy and resonance which support the capacity to include more and more within our field of experience. One of the consequences of the self-constellations that form around our need to defend against wounding is the crystallising of emotions and reactions serving to accentuate separation. Aversion, hatred, ill-will, indifference, envy, jealousy, critical judgment, to name just a few, largely arise in response to perceived, or actual, threats to the integrity of the self. They contribute to the obscuration of being that cuts us off from a more subtle sense of interconnection. Bringing contemplative attention to these aspects of our experience allows a greater acceptance and integration of them in ourselves and enables us to meet them more readily in our clients. We begin to access what arises when some of these reactions are de-potentiated. It is not that we don’t have them any longer, but we become more available to what is possible when they are not at the forefront.

The empathy and unconditional positive regard that are advocated within the psychotherapeutic world cannot be manufactured. Rather, we need to pay attention to what gets in their way. As we become freer from the grip of our own negative emotions – or as these actually begin to transform – we can be more open and welcoming to the client at both a being level and at the level of

all the conditions that are present. We can resonate more compassionately at a feeling level whether we are responding in the form of a direct challenge or in silent, internal acknowledgment. We can celebrate the positive experiences of the client and the health underlying their process. We can connect more strongly to an expanding internal sense of space that can include and attend to more and more experiences without discrimination. Grounding ourselves in this orientation in turn supports the capacity of the client to open to more empathy and compassion for themselves.

This is in itself resourcing for the client alongside their own varying forms of support. It also contributes to the client's ability to deepen their contact with the 'felt sense', which is both a valuable resource for the client and a major means of accessing being and source. Gendlin describes the 'felt sense' as 'a body-sense of meaning' (Gendlin, 1988). It is more subtle than emotion, 'something you do not at first recognise – it is vague and murky. It feels meaningful, but not known.' It is located, he says, at 'the "border zone" between the conscious and the unconscious' (Gendlin, 1996). Gendlin developed a method of 'focusing', where the client is helped to tune into subtle bodily experience in this 'border zone'. The client gets a sense of 'all of it' – a kind of global perception of the whole of inner arising process. All the sensations, emotional tones, mental constructs, symbols and images that characterise the self-constellations are directly experienced as an embodied whole. It starts off as fuzzy and unclear and gradually reveals more meaning.

This can take many different forms in a session but usually includes a movement on the part of the client from a more gross expression of their current feelings or perceptions about themselves to a slower, quieter inner-directedness. Contact is made with soupy, wordless sensations. From a sense of 'something inside', a handle begins to present itself. The meaning that begins to emerge makes itself known through a 'felt shift' inside the body. The client doesn't even have to put it into words. She has 'got' it at a deep embodied level. She experiences some space in the self-structure that was erupting into a surge of reactions but now senses a direct 'knowing' that this was not all of who she is. She has been able to explore the experience of suffering without becoming it all over again. She has been a witness to her process rather than getting lost in it. This 'witness consciousness' becomes a major resource in therapeutic journeys that can range from gradually creating more room in one's psyche to embarking on a gigantic descent into the most unbearable realms of suffering.

Conclusion

Therapists can learn inner practices that help them to work in a wide field of consciousness that includes subliminal experience of the mindbody. Perspectives drawn from outside the familiar paradigms of the West have contributed to a considerably expanded understanding of what lies beyond our conscious knowledge. The unconscious, as conceptualised in Western psychotherapy, is part of a much wider field, which is described – in the Buddhist approach – in terms of the nature of subliminal mind itself.

Clients can learn how to attune to the subtlest of experiences through the skills of ‘focusing’ and the development of ‘witness consciousness’. The recognition, through embodied feeling tones, that the seemingly solid sense of self is made up of interacting internal processes often marks the stirring of a new relationship to experience and to life.

Engaging with non-cognitive experience takes very little effort. In the West, we are used to pushing ourselves and to wanting to get things ‘right’. Contemplative practices invite us to relax our sense of striving, to surrender to what begins to happen when we loosen self-view and open to a being level. What they offer to psychotherapy is a central orientation to layers of subtle reality that hold a depth of health and well-being. In them there is a reminder to hold an awareness of an open and empty ground state as well as the self-constructs and personality positions of the client. When both therapist and client sit in a holding field of deeply resourced awareness, defensive self-forms can begin to unravel and a depth of reconnection can take place.

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