The gift of hospitality

Psychotherapist and Zen Buddhist monk Manu Bazzano explores the concept of hospitality and its significance to both Buddhism and the therapeutic relationship

There are several threads linking counselling and psychotherapy to Buddhist practice. One of them is the aspiration to offer genuine hospitality. What is hospitality? And why is it crucial to both counselling and Buddhist practice?

A Buddhist practitioner is inspired by the Dharma (the body of teachings given by the Buddha); by embarking on the path, he/she aspires to become a bodhisattva, a word which literally means ‘awakened being’. In its long history from early iconography to the present day, the figure of the bodhisattva has gradually shed the otherworldly garment of Buddhist archetype in order to assume the features of an ordinary human being. Accordingly, if it once described someone akin to a saint or a person to whom a special revelation had been granted, the term can now be read existentially, i.e., someone who has developed an aspiration to be useful to others. A bodhisattva has realised the unsatisfactory nature of life and has acknowledged the inherent suffering of the human condition: rather than chasing after enlightenment, special knowledge or the ability to perform wonders, he or she aspires to act with wisdom and compassion for the benefit of all beings. Rather than a Platonic archetype outside everyday reality, he or she is an ordinary person like you and me, living and breathing in the phenomenal world. Rather than the carrier of special messages from some higher dimension, the awakened being cultivates spaciousness in his heart/mind so as to make room for the presence of another human being.

There are some similarities here with Christianity, particularly with the unswerving way it is expressed by Søren Kierkegaard. Inspired as well as haunted by the biblical figure of Abraham, in his book Fear and Trembling he comes up with a mesmerising creation, a figure he calls the knight of faith, someone who paradoxically renounces and embraces the world. Kierkegaard’s spirituality was grounded in everyday matters yet harboured a tremendous faith, which could be appreciated, I believe, as a fundamental trust without an object. Some counsellors would perhaps define this faith as trust in the actualising tendency: this notion, now under attack in a landscape which places great emphasis on neo-Darwinism and evolutionary psychology, is nevertheless valuable in renewing a pledge in favour of the ineffable nature of life in general and human life in particular.

As a consequence of this pledge, a counsellor might strive to host both the ‘positive’ as well as the ‘negative’ aspects of a client, bracketing the desire to see positive change taking place in its more obvious manifestations. Upholding a more neutral yet benevolent attitude towards different Gestalts may in turn help the client be a better host/container of his/her own emotions and feelings, including those which are troublesome, painful and disruptive. Rogers had of course a phrase for this: unconditional positive regard, a notion which has been variously understood and often misconstrued.

An act of generosity

A bodhisattva is committed to the practice of the six paramitas, or ‘perfections’ – the first of these being the practice of generosity. By this very willingness to open up to others, he/she is granted admission to the legendary palace of truth. As it turns
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receive another. Perhaps what we are trying to cultivate as counsellors is negative capability, to use the felicitous term employed by the great English poet John Keats in a letter of 1817. Keats defined negative capability as the talent for ‘being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’. He saw it as an intuitive, insightful way of relating to the world which respects its ineffable, unfathomable nature, rather than desiring to capture it and ‘understand’ it.

Right-brain and left-brain responses

Our individual response to the presence of another human being certainly awakes similar perplexities, to which we might respond in a variety of ways. One way would of course be a ‘left-brain’ response: cognitive, geared towards encouraging the client to implement positive changes and a certain degree of control over his/her life. Another way, if I were to try a translation of Keats’ powerful poetic insight into the language of science, would be a right-brain response. We know that, broadly speaking, the right-brain rules over empathy and inter-subjectivity, emphasises the journey over the arrival, asserts the primacy of perception, resists a reduction of lived experience to mere utility. We now recognise that interdisciplinary developmental research (as evidenced by pioneering neuro-psychoanalyst Allan Schore) suggests that ‘the evolutionary mechanism of creation of a right-brain to right-brain attachment bond of social-emotional communication and the maturation of affects, represent the key events in infancy more than the emergence of complex cognitions’. One significant upshot is that effective therapy needs to be right-brain to right-brain communication, something which might call for a redress of the balance after three decades of dominance of cognitive approaches and neuro-behaviourism.

Counselling as gift

It has been argued that therapy is a form of potlatch. The term, loosely translated as ‘gift’, refers to the
primary economic system practised by indigenous people of the Pacific Northwest coast. Theirs was a gift economy rather than an economy based on profit. It was banned in the late 19th century at the urging of missionaries and government agents who considered it a ‘worse than useless custom’ – in their eyes a profligate, fruitless practice and even contrary to civilised values. It was widely practised, much later, during the heyday of May 1968, within the Situationist International network, a cultural and political movement which gave us art and architecture, inspired social insurgence as well as seminal philosophical works such as Guy Debord’s The Society of the Spectacle, where we read of the ‘parodies of real dialogue and gift-giving’ of alienated existence, and conversely of how uncommon and precious authentic dialogue and gift-giving can be.

It is easy, from our supposedly more sophisticated, at times cynical, ‘postmodern’ perspective to see these modes of exchange as naive and earnest. The fact remains that a real gift is not only rare, but quite difficult to match; it even creates a subtle (and not so subtle) obligation. The gift of therapy is in a sense most unusual; perhaps the client’s payment represents a way – our accepted way as modern Westerners – to respond to this extraordinary gift. Of course this gift is remarkable only if the counsellor has practised the ways of hospitality.

What do we mean when we say ‘welcome’?
What makes a good host? First of all, the recognition that an autarchic existence is a delusion: no one is free from the need to be mannered or overly precious. Offering a cup of tea to the guest involves both guest and host. In the Zen Buddhist tradition emphasises the beauty and simplicity of the tea ceremony. This does not need to be mannered or overly precious. Offering a cup of tea to the guest involves both guest and host. Both need to be present to the interaction. The offering, and the acceptance, is also immediate, and both step into a shared domain, the

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