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# Zazen and Person-centered Psychotherapy: Deepening the Relationship to Self

Hugh Ransley

In Western society today we are constantly, relentlessly offered possibilities for external validation. Through the consumption of products, identities and 'life-styles', we impose conditional validation to our selves in an endless cycle. Thus, we are becoming more and more reliant on the mechanisms of consumer culture for our sense of self and our sense of self-worth, leaving us bereft of a connection to our true Self. This disconnection with our internal valuing process leaves us more open to manipulation, self-doubt, and meaninglessness. How do we remain connected to ourselves? How do we continue to touch our inner-most core ... our true Self? When do we make time to listen, to connect, and how do we do it?

For many of us, the therapeutic relationship is the place where this re-connecting takes place. But what about the value of being alone? How can we nurture a personal relationship to self, uncovering Self, on our own?

To learn the Buddha's truth is to learn ourselves. To learn ourselves is to forget ourselves. To forget ourselves is to be experienced by the myriad dharmas. To be experienced by the myriad dharmas is to let our own body-and-mind, and the body-and-mind of the external world, fall away. There is a state in which the traces of realization are forgotten; and it manifests the traces of forgotten realization for a long, long time.

Master Dogen's Shobogenzo, *Genjo Koan*

Zazen loosely translates as *just sitting*, and this is, as Master Dogen - a 13<sup>th</sup> Century Zen Master - expounds, the way to study the self, and to be enlightened by the 'myriad dharmas' - everything. This practice of just sitting has been acknowledged and taught by the Buddhist teachers of the Soto School as the 'true gate' to enlightenment, to being present in each moment, to being our true Self. Zazen is sitting alone on a cushion, facing a wall with legs crossed, back straight, and eyes open. Thought arises, you follow the thought - sometimes ... then you return to the present moment ... and then ... you think again.

My personal practice of zazen during my years of study and practice of psychotherapy has led me to consider the similarities between the two. My experience in both practices and subsequent reflections inspired me to delve further into just what it is that is similar. I discovered that the relationship that I created with my clients in therapy was remarkably similar to the one I created with my self every morning during zazen. I found that in my practice of zazen, alone on the cushion, the three core conditions of empathy, acceptance and congruence, posited by Carl Rogers as being fundamental to therapeutic growth were present. And, being alone enabled a deeper connection to Self.

Part of my process of delving deeper was to complete a heuristic study investigating other people's experience of practicing zazen over a sustained period of years. The research I undertook consisted of informally interviewing seven people who have practiced zazen regularly for between six and 30 years. Two of the participants were Buddhist Masters. I purposefully utilized an unstructured interview format which created a suitable non-directive approach to the collection of data, and made for a fascinating flow of dialogue, sometimes lasting up to two hours. The information collected was then transcribed and analyzed. And finally, themes emerged.

My arguments within this paper are based primarily on this research and my personal experience of practicing zazen. While on occasion I will make direct reference to the research data itself, for the most part, I will not supply quantitative references. It is my intention to elucidate these research findings into an explanation of what I think are the benefits to sitting zazen and experiencing loneliness. I will also expand upon the similarities observed between my understanding of the therapeutic relationship in terms of the core conditions and that of the relationship to self that emerges, gradually, through the practice of zazen.

### **Loneliness**

I would like to start with loneliness, one of the innate characteristics of zazen. Even sitting in groups, one sits on the cushion alone, sometimes very alone. Being alone, quietly, enables pure, unadulterated contact with Self. Allowing our loneliness to be, accessing the often quiet wisdom, *is* enlightening in itself.

Clarke Moustakas has captured this experience beautifully in a short, and, for me, inspirational book, *Loneliness*:

Being lonely involves a certain pathway, requires a total submersion of self, a letting be of all that is and belongs, a staying or remaining with the situation, until a natural realization or completion is reached; when a lonely existence completes itself, the individual becomes, grows from it, reaches out for others in a deeper, more vital sense. (Moustakas, 1961, p. 8)

This simple permitting of what arises in consciousness is recognized in the existential approach to psychotherapy through the significance given to the letting be of whatever appears, allowing into awareness all aspects of experience which inevitably lead to self-disclosures, new understandings, and possibilities for growth.

Loneliness, *the process*, Moustakas describes above, is present in the experience of zazen and, in my estimation, has striking similarities with what occurs within the therapeutic relationship. In my research, it appeared that through a regular and sustained effort of sitting zazen, each person developed a relationship to self that contained the same aspects of the healing therapeutic relationship posited in Person Centered Therapy to be sufficient for constructive personality change, namely: the conditions of acceptance, empathy, and congruence, within the *essential presence*.

### **Presence**

When exploring the characteristics of the therapeutic relationship in regards to the experience of practicing zazen, it is necessary to acknowledge that the core conditions do not exist in isolation, they are whole in *presence*, often balancing and supporting one another. This point is crucial, because when one is present, or we could say, whole, it is then that the core conditions are so powerful and so tangible as one.

The practice of zazen develops this ability to remain present in the moment. When a person is in the moment, he becomes whole and forgets the self and becomes the Self. It is in *this* moment that he embodies the core conditions and is able to provide healing and enable the 'actualizing tendency' in others and in himself.

In light of the specific findings of the research, it is important to highlight each of the core conditions as experienced, developed, or uncovered through the practice of zazen and make the connection to these conditions of the therapeutic relationship.

### **Acceptance**

Acceptance of 'what is' is one of the most significant developments that came to light in my research. Sitting in zazen loosens a person's grip on his ego through the gradual acceptance of and dissolution of

self. This acceptance has implications with regards to a gentle lessening of resistance, a major component of psychotherapeutic work. The importance of this aspect of the practice of zazen must not be underestimated, for it is the ability to accept one's self that allows a person to begin to accept reality as it is, rather than as he wants it to be. After all, we humans do not like to be seen as stupid, unkind, confused, greedy, selfish, etc., and do not like to see ourselves as such. However, when sitting zazen, and in psychotherapy, we do see ourselves as we really are, in all our glory – or otherwise. In both zazen and psychotherapy, this is a gradual process that can cause anxiety and can be disheartening and disappointing. However, this is a necessary part of the process to develop awareness of self, and towards acceptance of self. In order to constructively change one's personality, a person must accept himself as he really is. In seeing ourselves, constantly, in the practice of zazen and in psychotherapy, we are able to begin to accept all qualities of ourselves and recognize and accept those in others too.

Thus, it is through this process of seeing ourselves that we lessen our defenses, or our defensive selves, and are able to see 'things' *as they are*. The acceptance of 'what is' is important for living more fully in the world, accepting it, *as it is*. With less of a gap between what one actually experiences and what one desires, there is more room for a simple happiness with the present moment, just as it is. The practitioners in my study report, over time, that they stopped trying to change their experience into something different from what it was, and thus were no longer trying to distract themselves from the world. They stopped trying to run away or escape from reality, rather, as one put it: 'Leaning into it'. With this acceptance of reality comes self-acceptance and also acceptance of others. Other people are seen as separate, and thus more real, and are no longer merely projections of how the practitioner would like them to be to suit their ideas and egos. As the defenses of their egos lessen through acceptance, the practitioners found that they were able to interact more freely with the world, to lean into experience rather than away from it.

This valuable acceptance, in terms of working *alongside* psychotherapy, would enable the person in therapy to become aware, access, and symbolize his or her experiences with less resistance and thus, at his or her own pace, be able to move forward.

The safety and companionship that allows him to enter his existential processes and share that world with the counselor ... he shares his very existence as he is experiencing it – the fundamental needs, fears, conflicts, the utter desolation and the life giving hope. This territory which is life itself – which he would yearn to share as strongly as he would fear to share ... He does not seek to protect himself from being seen either by the counselor or by himself. In his existential process he cannot lie – lying belongs to a much more superficial level of relating.

(Dave Mearns, Personal Communication 20<sup>th</sup> December 2007)

It can be argued that '...his very existence' as described above, is his true Self, and is egoless, i.e. who he *is*, and the self who needs to be protected is simply an illusory self we only believe is real.

Thus, acceptance, or Unconditional Positive Regard, can work towards creating the space to enable our Self to be safely and unconditionally in therapy, just as it is in zazen. With this in mind, it is possible to assert that when one's ego dissolves somewhat, in therapy or zazen, the Self emerges. In the context of just sitting, in 'existential process...' the Self can then give a relationship to the self, can see the self, and offer presence. And with presence comes acceptance and empathy, and with acceptance and empathy, perhaps some 'forgetting' of the self occurs.

It is interesting to consider that perhaps when one offers one's self a relationship to Self that embodies acceptance, empathy, and congruence, then one is more able to adjust one's self concept and constructively change one's personality. Robert Browning asserts that:

Truth lies within ourselves; it takes no rise from outward things, what'er you may believe. There is an inmost center in us all, where truth abides in fullness and to know rather consists in opening out a way whence the imprisoned splendor may escape than in effecting for light supposed be without. (Dass, 1974, p. 1)

It has come to my awareness through this study and my own experience, that the 'actualizing tendency,' as Rogers (1961, p. 351) describes it: 'The directional trend which is evident in all organic and human life – the urge to expand, extend, develop, mature – the tendency to express and activate all the capacities of the organism, or the self', is very much akin to my understanding of Buddha nature. The way to actively facilitate this growth tendency described by Rogers is to be in a relationship characterized by the core conditions communicated from another person in a person-centered therapeutic relationship, and/or as my research suggests, from the Self to the self, through the practice of zazen, alone on the cushion. As Suzuki eloquently, pragmatically and simply asserts:

The way to study true Zen is not verbal. Just open yourself and give up everything. Whatever happens, study closely and see what you find out. This is the fundamental attitude. (Suzuki, 2002, p. 63)

Suzuki also skillfully acknowledges the presence of our 'innate nature', or, as I think Rogers (1961) would say, 'actualizing tendency', and clearly offers encouragement through practicing zazen to listen:

To open your innate nature and to feel something from the bottom of your heart, it is necessary to remain silent. Through this kind of practice you will have a more intuitive understanding of the teaching. Not to talk does not mean to

be deaf and dumb, but to listen to your intuition. (Suzuki, 2002, p. 69)

Unsurprisingly, beginners to zazen and sometimes psychotherapy often experience anxiety alongside this increased awareness of self. Research investigating the effects on beginners who practiced zazen for approximately one year suggests that the practice raises levels of anxiety (see Compton and Becker, 1983). The self, still tied to the seemingly obligatory conditions of worth, resists the existential process, the aloneness, in much the same way in zazen and therapy. In zazen, the beginner can feel anxious when faced with his self, how he really is. And in therapy, the client becomes anxious to begin to feel his feelings and give voice to his experience.

However, if we seek to understand ourselves, to really see ourselves, and this does not happen overnight ... a little anxiety along the way is par for the course, and a healthy part of one's process, for if aspects of the unconscious surface too quickly, it may not be useful, perhaps too threatening and off-putting. Therefore if one does not become disheartened or set back by one's anxiety and carries on regardless, or as Tillich (1952) might say '...in spite of,' then this anxiety will typically dissolve. Acceptance reigns eventually, what else is there to do... 'Oh well, this is what I am like; how disappointing!' The gap between ideas and reality disappears.

It was also noted that with the development of acceptance, judgments of self and others lessened, and one became less defensive of the way one was, leading to, or better, uncovering, a state of congruence.

### **Congruence**

Congruence refers to a person being who he is. Through acceptance in both psychotherapy and zazen, there is the opportunity for a person's growth toward becoming congruent. In the therapeutic relationship, the therapist, when he is genuine, mirrors congruence by being his feelings and communicating them if appropriate. Rogers (1961) asserts:

It is this quality of congruence which we sense which research has found to be associated with successful therapy. *The more genuine and congruent the therapist in the relationship, the more probability there is that change in personality in the client will occur.* (pp. 61-62) (My italics)

Similarly, when one is sitting alone in zazen, just being, the Self mirrors congruence in accepting the thoughts and feelings that arise. Permitting oneself to be in this way resembles the condition of congruence: '...openly being the feelings and attitudes which at that moment are flowing in him' (Rogers, 1961, p. 61). Does the ego experience this process in zazen and find healing in the letting be, dissolving yet further? Perhaps in this state of being, self in relationship with Self – alone, one is able to see who, how, and what they are, and perhaps more importantly, who, how, and what they are not. In either relationship, with the therapist or with the Self, a person is

safe in the relationship, being congruent, and being acceptant – just being present – a whole human being:

When I am in touch with myself, my feelings, my thoughts, with what I see and hear, I am growing toward becoming a more integrated self. I am more congruent, I am 'whole,' and I am able to make greater contact with the other person. (Satir, 1987, p. 23)

### **Empathy**

In practicing zazen, one develops self-knowledge. Becoming familiar with one's inner world through quiet solitude on the cushion, allows one to become intimate with meanings and experiences of the self. This awareness paves the way for seeing another person's experiences as separate, as their own. Clearly, by connecting with many of one's own inner worlds, with all of its connotations for oneself, one is better equipped to make associations on information received concerning another person. If a familiar situation is recounted or seen, the zazen practitioner is aware of his own response to such an event. This then enables him to make an association based on his own experience, acknowledge this association, and then enquire with the other person what the experience is like for them. The practitioner may perhaps make a leap of understanding based on his own personal experiences, but nevertheless is still aware that it is not the same as the other person's. This self-awareness permits the practitioner to avoid identifying too much with the other person, but at the same time, enables him to tune into shared experiences and acknowledge the 'as if' quality that Rogers expounded (Rogers, 1961).

The Self offers the self a relationship characterized by the core conditions of empathy, acceptance and congruence. Through being present sitting in zazen one becomes whole, thus embodying the conditions necessary for self-healing and self-actualization. The Self is unknowable, but it appears able to be experienced, and the experiencing of this Self promotes awareness of self and possibilities for growth and altering of self-concepts. This is true of process in psychotherapy. One enters into a relationship with the person centered psychotherapist who embodies empathy, acceptance and congruence, which enables the person in therapy to become aware of self, experience Self and explore possibilities for change of self-concept.

### **Summary**

As Master Dogen states in *Bendowa*, the opening chapter of the *Shobogenzo*,

The practice of [Za]zen, in the erect posture, has been established as the authentic gate. This Dharma is abundantly present in each human being, but if we do not practice it, it does not manifest itself, and if we do not experience it, it cannot be realized. (Nishijima & Cross, 1994, p. 1)



It cannot be stated more simply.

My research has shown that zazen typically facilitates a gradual unfolding of one's authentic Self in the world. One becomes more able to be present, more self-aware, accepting and in touch with one's inner process through a relationship with Self that is similar to that of the relationship with a therapist who embodies the core conditions.

In being-there, silent, prepared, and open to listen to what arises in awareness on a moment by moment basis, one offers oneself a relationship, which resembles that of the therapeutic relationship characterized by empathy, acceptance and congruence. In the beginning, this relationship of Self to self is typically dominated by the protecting ego – the self trying to do what it is accustomed to do, protect aspects of itself which are deemed too vulnerable, unsightly, or too hurt to let go. Eventually though, according to my research, it appears that over time, one's 'intuitive self,' Self, 'prajna' (intuitive wisdom), or 'organismic self' comes to the fore, and when this occurs, through the lessening of the need for one's ego to 'hold on' in the practice of sitting alone in zazen, then the relationship to the self becomes therapeutic.

This is a similar process to the initial resistance that many clients experience in the therapeutic relationship with a therapist embodying the characteristics of empathy, acceptance and congruence. Prior to trusting, to letting be of what arises, self-disclosing and so on, one may tend to edit, choose inauthenticity, until one's defenses lessen as the caring of the therapist melts our ego and the perceived need for defense. Once this relationship of Self (therapist) to self (client) emerges then the free flow of thoughts, feelings come into the light more readily without so many judgments or resistance, and when allowed to be, will enable insight, giving way to movement into the future with new understandings of oneself.

The *becoming* me is not informed through conditions of worth or expectations of others or society, it is a direct becoming from the inner core, from the actualizing tendency, innate wisdom, and it is seen and experienced by the person through the process of just sitting zazen. That is, while the person is able to experience processes in his or her self with acceptance, it enables the person to recognize through the 'experiencing' Self. The feedback or reflection of self is brought into awareness, symbolized and thus made real in the person. It is direct feedback in silence – in much the same way as the person centered psychotherapist might offer an empathic reflection of the client's words and emotions in enabling them to go deeper or grasp what they have said in an experiential flow in the session. This occurs in zazen as it does in psychotherapy.

It is the relationship characterized by presence that provides the healing. Whether this is a solitary relationship to self by Self, or between therapist and client, or simply one human being with another. If the conditions embodied in caring, wholly, are present then healing and actualization will occur.

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### More comments about the AHPB 2008 Summer Festival

For me, this is what AHPB is about - connecting deeply and honestly with so many people.

This weekend gave me a glimpse of a new possibility.

Roll on next year!

My batteries have had the most wonderful topping-up - thank you all!