

## **The Artistry of Therapy and Zen Practice.**

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#### Abstract

At a time when to become a therapist we may be required to measure our empathy against some sort of growth chart, we may also be witnessing the emergence of a radical battle against such systemizing of subtle and natural human capacities. This discussion will offer a description of the process of becoming and the actualizing tendency, as trust and faith in the subtle and natural opening of *the true dharma eye*. Maezumi Roshi states that “something is subtle not because it is hidden or elusive but because it is right here” (2002, p.4) and perhaps as therapists our task is to be open, receptive and awake to the intimacy of phenomena in order that we may aid a person, who for whatever reason, may have their eyes closed. Openness and receptivity may help nurture a *creative feedback* loop (Loori, 2005) that is inherent in human relating but often unacknowledged explicitly in therapy, and every day living. This explicit acknowledgement may also correspond with notions of *non-conscious affect and affective resonance* (Schoore 2012).

KEY WORDS: Zen; Actualizing Tendency; PCA; Dharma; Affect; Philosophy, Art

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#### **Unreified stance**

Unlike the sense of belonging that I feel in the poetics of Philosophy and Zen Buddhist writings, I feel less at home in the language game of therapy, and it has long been my belief that there is no theory of therapy, despite protestations to the contrary. There are only descriptions of what it might be

to be human, how our distresses may come about and how we may aid one another through such predicament. Furthermore, we do humanity a disservice when we attempt to break the human into parts –. Our capacity to want to categorize is immense; it helps us to take a position within our own understanding of the world, self and others. Yet, when we dare to explore the possibilities of each of these three categories we explicitly lead ourselves down the precarious path of uncertainty, fluidity, and undoing: the full gamut of the existential tensions of our existence. We are of course always in this precarious process – that is precisely what the *process of becoming* is: unstable, changeable, adaptable, and just because of this inescapable fluidity, *becoming undone* is also a necessary constant (Webb, 2016). To see and acknowledge this in the reality of our moment-to-moment experiential living is, as I understand it, one part of what might be meant by the Soto Zen expression *the treasury of the true dharma eye* (Maezumi, 2001) - to see my life as it is; and even if I cannot see it, to accept it for what it is, and even if I cannot accept it, there is no escaping that it is what it is. For these reasons alone counselling and psychotherapy, whether from a client or a therapist perspective, is an immensely courageous endeavour whereby we explicitly engage in the process and acknowledgment of our becoming/undoing: an activity of opening ourselves up towards not just our not knowing, but towards the unknowable quality of life itself.

The work of Carl Rogers (1961, 1980, 2003) not only marked the shift from approaching human beings in therapy as a set of knowable parts, but the

Person-Centered Approach (PCA) derived from his work, aspires to embrace a sense of wholeness as a person, whilst at the same time striving to acknowledge the human propensity for movement and capacity for change, as an unrelenting and inescapable natural process in everyone. The aspiration to embrace a whole is somewhat at odds unless we are explicitly acknowledging that the whole is always partial. This partiality may also correlate with what Rogers describes as the 'tendency to actualize' (Rogers, 1961, p.351): an unrelenting and unrehearsed spontaneous process, which makes explicit the vitality of the unreified person, making certain that we are never static. It is in this spirit, that I refer to the actualizing tendency in persons.

Shunryu Suzuki (2002), states that "wherever I go, I meet myself" (pp.107-110), which is an event borne through a dynamic experiential process, in relation to all that is other to oneself and at the same time reflects back what one is. In relation to other people, it is not just the case that I am a person, but rather that I awake to my personhood because of you and seeing myself reflected back: meeting you whilst at the same time meeting myself. This is the case in therapy that supports humanistic values and attitudes as necessary in the change process: a reflexive activity creating an opportunity for the client to see himself reflected back, through the supportive and attentive presence of the therapist (Prouty, 1994).

As a therapist, accepting that the other is necessarily vital in our forming, I aspire to create an atmosphere of welcome, and engage in an activity of reciprocity and accommodation, which in fact translates into an immense, intense ethic of emptying myself, aspiring to be open to the other, and aware enough of my own moment by moment experience in order to be honest with it. This ethic also requires recognition that my becoming/undoing is borne from our scene – you and me, and therefore I am inescapably bound to you. Being unavoidably, yet capriciously, bound is a particular kind of forming that persons are: relentlessly, inescapably relational, and therefore also necessarily separate (Bazzano, 2012a). Without separation there can be no relatedness in which persons experience themselves forming. This paradoxical process, because it is a natural process, is also often subtle, and therefore easily loses potency when attempting to describe and illuminate it as a *some-thing*. It might be more helpful to show a process, as art has a tendency to do.

### **Alive in the loop**

I like to sit quietly before I see my clients. Not as an attempt to concentrate, obliterate or anticipate, but just to sit and breathe in my life, and to notice myself there. Often, moments before each counselling session I experience a surge of mild panic, a momentary loss of an assumed self-structure in the awareness of not knowing what is about to unfold. I frequently address the question ‘what do I think I am up to as a therapist?’ I am not a counsellor in order to do society a good turn – there is nothing altruistic about my work; I do

not consider myself to be some kind of natural healer; I am not a solver of problems; and I am certainly nobody's moral barometer; so what am I doing being a counsellor? In all honesty, I feel alive in it: a space in which I get to engage in an intense and intimate way, with a person who wears a human face like me. It is a location in which I am afforded an opportunity to experience what I am, and I am often surprised, perplexed, alleviated, disappointed, and sometimes just utterly frightened. I also experience humour, elation, kindness and generosity.

So what does my 'aliveness' refer to in the therapeutic dyad? Well, it is a location where I momentarily and temporarily feel fully there, in a fleeting, non-static way. I feel myself alert, sensitive, visceral to a scene in which I aspire to be articulate, attentive, and available to another person in their scene of distress or dilemma. I aspire to work at the client's pace, and work hard to ensure that my responses stay attuned to the client's revelations about himself. I also attempt to stay close-in and attuned to my own experience as it is felt and be honest about that. Whilst language is extremely important in my work as it is imperative that I meet the client in his articulation (Warner, 2008), and be an aid for him in re-articulating his life in order to make anew (Webb, 2016), sometimes (maybe more often than we would like to admit) words do not always hit the mark, and often there is something more visceral going on besides.

I have become increasingly alert, attuned and trusting of my felt sense when working with clients, and particularly in moments of silence whereby we are not distracted or masked by verbal nuances and sound. More and more as I develop as a practitioner of therapy, training, and Zen meditation, I have become aware of the experiential riot located in silence, not just mine, but also the riot that passes between us as client and therapist, or friends sitting together in meditation. This riot makes silence a site of activity and not necessarily a passive location of tranquility. This riot seems not only too vital to my living, but is *itself* the very vitality of my living, and so where I find myself, regardless of how riotous it is, how painful it is or how enjoyable it is – that is what it is – my life (Maezumi, 2001): that which is manifest – apparent – concrete and obvious – and also that which is obscured.

In my Zen practice I aspire to stay as close to just breathing as I can without being apprehended by the myriad of thoughts that will be running through me, or the riot of sensations I may be experiencing. Whilst I might want to say I have no goal, I also want to say I do try to notice (be present to my experience), to pay attention without determining or being pre-occupied. As a practice Zen feels very grounded, ordinary and practical: Zen meditation (zazen) is,

primarily a creative mode of expression instead of a means to some personal benefit...zazen is a performance art in which upright posture and every gesture expresses one's present enlightenment-practice...the expression of practice is a dynamic, creative activity...not

fleeing or fearing the realm of everyday experiences. (Leighton in Jin Kim (2004, p.xi).

Viewing therapy as a practice too and perhaps a 'performance art' might mean it would better to take it slow, allowing a space for obscurities in our lives to be revealed naturally. Of course this notion is in stark contrast to the current general attitude of the therapy market, that people are problems to be solved, and that any obscurity can easily be located through interpretation, or medication, and addressed quickly in a systematic, pseudo-scientific way in order to solve the said problem.

When sitting silently as part of therapeutic practice with a client, I attempt to just be there and notice my experience. I am fully aware that the clients I have worked with in this way have been able to make an informed decision about choosing this way of working. On our third session, one client tentatively enquired about the 'just sitting' (*shikantaza*) that I offer in therapy, and within seconds, before I had finished responding she erupted into floods of tears, and wept whilst her body became contracted and contorted. For the next three weeks she would bring back up the idea of sitting in silence at some point in the session and then spend a long time in tears, frightened at the thought of just silently sitting. The first time that we did sit, it lasted three minutes and she cried the whole time, eventually standing up and declaring "I can't do this it's too hard". Despite her experience she wanted to continue each week to sit with me in silence. After some weeks of formally sitting

silently together, she came to notice during one sitting that when she experienced a particular feeling in the pit of her stomach, she would feel an urge to make a movement – scratch her nose, move a foot or an arm if not stand up altogether. After continued practice and subsequent exploration in the talking part of our therapy sessions, she became attuned to the feeling for the next time, and the next, and now it is much easier for her to just be still on the chair even if the uncomfortable feeling arises. The recurring, deep-seated feelings that created a response in the client of needing to move the body, were explored and described as feelings of shame and guilt linked to some of the life experiences that would randomly pop into her mind during sitting. Once we had started, the discipline of the practice became crucial to our way of working. She often wondered how many decisions or movements she has made in her life were as a result of deep seated feelings of shame that she had reacted to, without really noticing that shame was the motivation for the movement. I feel it important to add at this point, that sometimes sitting in silence is just boring! This aspect of Zen practice (just sitting) is without props, gimmicks and goal, but not without a particular kind of ethic (humanistic) and understanding (Buddhist), which is necessarily embedded on me. I offer silent sitting in the spirit of “it is, what it is” – we sit in silence together and from there engage in talking therapy in a contemporary person-centered way, with whatever the client feels is important as a result.

This client’s reaction to her deep-seated feeling that went unnoticed in a self-conscious sense, suggests that the non-verbal used in an informal yet

structured, practiced way, can be a valuable and natural way of working. The client came to recognize that in fact she had responded to this deep seated feeling for most of her life unconsciously, and if the latest neuroscientific descriptions are accurate (Schoore 2012), she will continue to do so.

Helping clients being in touch with their bodies and their felt sense has been extremely helpful in becoming aware to the subtleness of experiencing and nuance of responding as a scene of actualizing. That I am there too with my client is an important part of the process; not only is the client's experience witnessed and validated. I am also able to share my experience of the process with the client. This has also been a powerful part of the therapy. What I have experienced with clients who have engaged in *organized* silence as part of therapy, is that the practice has led to an ability to slow down the pace of experiencing and responding which in turn seems to help the client become more aware of the choices and decisions that she may subsequently make.

The experience of silence and subsequent developing awareness, also correlate well with Buddhist notions of awakening – "...you already have what the enlightened one has. It just needs to be awakened, brought to life." (Daido Looi (2005, p.226) and perhaps this is what happens in therapy too as we become awake to who we are in our moment-to-moment experiencing during in our engagement with the practice.

This awakening might alert us to the actualizing tendency, and what Manu Bazzano calls *immanent vitality* (Bazzano (2012b)). The actualizing tendency seen as immanent vitality, reminds us of our spontaneous emergence, our inter-connectedness, our formative tendencies that do not come from a scene of solidity and certainty travelling towards a known or one-directional destination, but instead as an aliveness and a response borne of encounter with all that is other to oneself.

It is my feeling that the actualizing tendency as imminent vitality, is also synonymous with what Allan Schore (2012) describes as *non-conscious affect* and that our task as therapists is to return to humanistic attitudes to, and attunements in therapy, in order to create a site of “affect synchrony...affective resonance” which amplifies “vitality affects in which a positive state occurs.” (p.75)

Schore describes that whatever neurological pathways were laid down in the first year of life in emotional experiencing, particularly from the realm of insecure attachments, will remain forever indelible in non-conscious affective memory, as bodily-based attunements that inform motivations. It is a “non-verbal, pre-rational stream of expression” (p.36) that remains as a “primary medium of intuitively felt affective-relational communication between persons” (ibid) throughout the life span. They become our first port of call in particular situations – like my client needing to move her body when she experienced shame. Non-conscious affect, as a primary process associated with

motivation, seems utterly compatible with the actualizing tendency in its obscurity. Schore advocates a paradigm shift away from interpretation towards a more humanistic and experiential attitude in therapy, and in particular allowing nonverbal tendencies to be the focus of our work, stating that,

[T]he more therapists facilitate the affective experience/expression of [clients] in psychotherapy, the more [clients] exhibit positive changes, and that therapist affect facilitation is a powerful predictor of treatment success.(p.72)

As a person-centred therapist whose work is deeply informed by existential and philosophical understandings of what it is to be human, I am tempted to ask, “weren’t we doing that anyway?” I admit I was incredibly excited as I read Shore’s work but I was also jumping up and down in annoyance that science is telling us something we already knew, and my source of anxiety now is that right-brain language is seeping rapidly into the language game of therapy as a “new approach” called “creative therapies” as though the PCA to therapy isn’t a creative practice in itself. What concerns me about these apparent revelations in the name of neuroscience is that the PCA is in danger of being diluted and broken down into three core conditions (sometimes just one: empathy!), that can be tagged onto all other modalities, or learned and measured as ‘skills’ without adequate consideration for the subtle yet profoundly ethical stance of such an embodied practice. I am frequently

shocked to encounter training of the PCA being delivered in a very limited way, and where the significance of practitioners and writers such as Garry Prouty, Margaret Warner, Richard Worsley and Manu Bazzano are not included on reading lists, let alone whose work is not brought into the training room itself. How we use the findings and descriptions from neuroscientific 'awakening' is going to be crucial in order that we do not inadvertently fall into hubris and create yet another deterministic therapy that dominates therapeutic practice.

It is unfortunate that Schore uses very left-brain language to describe right-brain activity, and in all honesty I care little about what might be firing in my brain at the moment I have a particular experience or insight, as it adds nothing – my experience is right there if I can find a way to become self-consciously aware of it, articulate it and perhaps do something different with it if it causes me trouble. Besides P M Hacker (2009) warned of the inaccurate use of the language in this area some time ago:

Human beings possess a wide range of psychological powers, which are exercised in the circumstances of life, we perceive, think and reason, feel emotions, want things, form plans, make decisions. The possession and exercise of such powers define us as the kind of animals that we are. We may enquire into the neural conditions and concomitants for their possession and exercise. This is the task of neuroscience, which is discovering more and more about them. But its

discoveries in no way affect the conceptual truth that these powers and their exercise in perception, thought and feeling, *are attributes of human beings*, not of their parts – in particular, *not of their brains*. (p.6)

I have encountered many banal conversations and workshops about the apparent 'use' of my right-brain as though I could choose it and then direct it, which is a nonsensical way to speak about such activity, but what Schore does describe is interesting in my work as a therapist: if I can empty myself of suspicion and interpretation, and be with the client as he is, and notice, be alert to every nuance, gesture, and expression that he presents, not just in our silence but especially so, and also be awake to what is happening in me, trust it, acknowledge and share it (because I am not exempt from non-conscious affect), we (the client and I) might find ourselves *becoming* in the flow of affective resonance – a kind of creative feedback loop that reveals our lives, moment by moment as they actually are.

As well as a Zen master, John Daido Looi was also a photographer and teacher, and he describes occasions that when he had photographed something, and afterwards shared it with his feedback group, he was often asked questions as to why he takes such angry pictures. He seemed completely oblivious that they were at all angry or that they would be experienced in this way. After repeated feedback he recounted the experiences of his day as he photographed the images and realized that he could not escape talking intimately, without verbal utterance, about his life

through his photographs. Inexplicably his anger had seeped through the lens of his camera into the captured image. His anger was not hidden and had subtly and naturally immersed itself in his photograph, which his group had also experienced upon viewing it. Loori calls this activity a *creative feedback loop*. This loop is the experience of the ineffable, the ungraspable phenomena that we inexplicably encounter from our being with one another as well as being in the environment that surrounds us. (Daido-Loori, 2005)

## **Artists**

I have referred to the therapy work that I am engaged in as art, and that is a firm belief of mine. I am engaged in the philosophical, the social and the political aspects of being a person who is frequently looking into the face of other persons and seeing herself there. For all my uncertainty about therapy, and life, I am certain that I am not a scientist, linguist, biologist, or psychologist. What I aspire to engage in could be called affirmative art (Bazzano, 2012); the everyday ineffable ordinariness of our lives, acknowledging that I am inextricably bound to you and resonate through you as you do through me. The world of therapy, including psychoanalytic and cognitive approaches (Schoore, 2012) is beginning to recognize the significance, relevance and appropriateness of more humanistic ways of working with clients as perhaps a more naturalized process than may have once been considered. Zen Buddhism for all its emphasis on ritual is also an ordinary practice engaged with the everyday naturalizing process of our existence.

“Zen is experiential” (Loori, 2005, p.7) and in contrast to artistic endeavour via explanation and directive instruction, Loori states that, “In Zen and its arts, space is created for the process of discovery to take place” (ibid p.6) – rather like space created for the therapeutic process. The process of discovery in Zen is through the practice of Zazen – Zen meditation - Shikantaza, which is just sitting without agenda; no wish for peace and tranquility; no hope for Technicolor illuminations; just sitting. I find it very difficult sometimes, which amuses me. What is so hard about sitting on a cushion? Perhaps the difficulty has something to do with not reaching for comfort, or trying to avoid uncomfortable feelings, push away rapid and perhaps distressing thoughts, ignoring shameful or hurtful memories, as well as not getting carried away by all the good stuff too. I have noticed recently how ‘content’ has become the buzzword that has replaced ‘happy’ as a goal in life – it is trendy to espouse wishes to be content with life rather happy. It seems to me however, that our challenge in the twenty first century is not so much to be content but to find a way to be discontent and be OK in it.

Sitting on my cushion I feel the air on my skin; hear the sounds around me out there that somehow feel in here – my body. In my stillness I become aware of the simplicity and spontaneity of the moment, and when sitting with others, well, the mystery of this life can be intense. Zen, and its art, just like therapy, is a creative process that puts me in touch with the vitality of my everyday living, including my aching body, my sadness, and my boredom. Unlike a

technical skill applied to do something, it is to be engaged in an experiential process that is vital and immediate.

Zen arts are also known as 'artless arts' (Loori, 2005, p.5), transcending technique by engaging in activity as ceremony in the process of insight to our lives. We can call it spiritual insight, though I am unsure what the term spiritual really means. Art in Zen is not representational or iconographic,

It did not inspire faith or facilitate liturgy or contemplation. It did not function to deepen the devotees' experience of religion. It was not used in worship ceremonies or part of prayer. Its only purpose was to point to the nature of reality. It suggested a new way of seeing, and a new way of being that cut to the core of what it meant to be human and fully alive. Zen art, as sacred art, touched artists and audiences deeply, expressed the ineffable, and helped to transform the way we see ourselves in the world. (Loori, 2005, p.4)

The closest I can get to an answer when asking 'what am I up to as a therapist?' is that I engage in this artless art that is also an affirmative art.

The most interesting aspect of these [Zen] arts, as D.T.Suzuki has said, is that they don't exist for the sole purpose of creating a work of art, but they are rather a method for opening the creative process [itself]. (Loori, 2005, p.5).

What I would like as a therapist is more silent art, less talk, less movement, and more stillness in our ordinary everyday living as it appears in the therapy room. This is also a scene of occupation, a space occupied by the bodies that we are, and these bodies speak volumes without utterance (Butler, 2015). Zen meditation as I understand it is to engage with my life as it is, in the stillness of the riot that I am, and preferably on a cushion next to you so that I may experience your riot too, and in that we may naturally find a way to accommodate one another and experience our connectedness to all things. The actualizing tendency and non-conscious affect are our source of movement and capacity for change, intimate talk informs and confirms our separate existence together. In therapy the process of becoming may also be the site for the opening of *the true dharma eye* and seeing our lives for what they are: unknowable, ineffable, and unreified.

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