

SPACE PRESENCING:

A Potpourri of Focusing, Clearing A Space, Mindfulness and Spirituality

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VIGNETTE ONE

She is recovering from anorexia nervosa. From her current weight, she can no longer be considered anorexic. But she keeps thinking about dying. That is why she was referred to me by a physician who had worked with her for many years. This was my first interview with her. We sat facing each other on a large round table. She talked about not wanting to be alive. After a little while, I said to her. “This is our first session, so let’s *lay it all out on this table*. This whole thing about not wanting to be alive, that’s a big heavy issue, so I’m putting it right here.” I stamp on the thick file of medical records. “Let’s see now, what else do we have here?”

She says “Okay.” Then she started to talk about feeling ‘paranoid’, worried about how others look at her. I needed a few moments to take that in. “What do you mean by ‘others’?” I ask. She says it’s women her age. She worries if they may be frowning at her about her dress and make-up. I needed a few moments to take that in. After a few moments I said, “It feels to me like you quite like to be fashionable because if you didn’t care about fashion and make-up and all that, you wouldn’t care about how others think of you.” She is dressed very fashionably with make-up, too.

She nods and says, “You know, that’s where I want to live.”

“Ah! Alright!” I exclaim. “So you are *aware of* (mindful of) both wanting to live and wanting not to live. And that’s great, because that awareness is not one or the other; it’s not wanting to live nor wanting to die. It’s just being aware of both.”

She nods. Then I say, “Let’s put all that about fashion and how people look at you, and wanting to live, *that whole thing*, we’ll put that right here.” I cup my hands next to the thick medical records. She stares at my hands for a little while and nods and says, “Okay”. “And then, what else?” I ask.

Towards the end of the interview, after laying out four or five heaps on the table, she said, “You know, I think too much. I want to give my mind a break...that’s when I want to die.”

“Bravo!” I said. “Let’s be *aware of* that, that your *thinking mind* works too hard; it needs a break. You need to give your mind a break from thinking too much...Of course, let’s do that right now. Let’s give your *thinking mind* a break, and here’s how.” I briefly explained mindfulness of breathing meditation, inviting her to attend to the rising and falling of the

chest-abdomen area with each breath, and invited her to do this for just 3 minutes. I also asked her to tell me if any distractions come to her mind during the 3-minute meditation.

We both started the meditation. About half a minute into the meditation, she smiled and said, “I have a distracting thought. It’s saying, ‘This isn’t going to work’”.

“Beautiful!” I said. “Your *thinking mind* is objecting to this; your thinking mind doesn’t want you to go on meditating. You know why? That’s because your thinking mind will weaken in meditation.” She smiled and nodded and then continued the meditation.

She came out of the 3-minute meditation looking relaxed. At the close of the session we had an interesting conversation about our next appointment. I had heard that she was asking for therapy on a once in two weeks basis, so I asked if she was going to come back for the next session in two weeks. She said, “I was just thinking that I’ve been in therapy for a long time, you know, and it’s not going to change me so fast so maybe I should come next month, rather than in two weeks.” Her comment brought a smile to me.

“That’s fine with me, but do you realize *who* is saying that? I just sensed that it’s your *thinking mind*. It’s saying, “You’re not going to change anyway, whatever you do”. She smiled and said that I was right, and she made an appointment to come back in two weeks.

CLEARING A SPACE

This is how I do Clearing a Space (CAS) in therapy with a new client. I am quite process-directive with beginners. With the aforementioned client, I directed her to *lay it all out on the table*. I call this ‘*therapist-mediated way of clearing a space*’. By this term I refer to the process of CAS in which the therapist assists the process, for example, by suggesting where or how the client’s issues are to be placed. I use therapist-mediated CAS with beginners who may be unfamiliar with CAS or when the client is experiencing difficulties with CAS as shown in the next vignette.

Even though the process is therapist-mediated, the client in the earlier example looked at where the issues were placed and said “Okay,” as if to confirm that the issues were placed there. An inter-subjective experience arose, where for both *she* and *me*, the table was loaded with heaps of her concerns. In that inter-subjective experience, the table is seen as the whole of her experienced life, and she is mindful of the whole, not being attached, identified or overwhelmed by any particular aspect. The emphasis is on observing or witnessing the whole, rather than delving into a particular content of concern.

MINDFULNESS

The reader may notice the elements of mindfulness in this CAS vignette. With whatever comes into the client’s consciousness, I first say, “be aware of” that. The session (as well as the following vignette) was done in Japanese. I used the verb *kizuku* in Japanese, which roughly translates as “be aware of” or “notice that.” What is actually intended is the *Pali* word *sati* which is translated into English as “mindfulness.” The emphasis is on mindfulness

rather than the specific contents of thought. For instance, I said that it is important to be mindful of both wanting to die and wanting to live.

Another element of mindfulness here is the distinction I am making between the client and her *thinking mind*. I often call this *ga* (我) in Japanese, which can be translated as ‘ego’ denoting an assertive, obstinate, superficial portion of the self. It is a mind-set that controls feelings, perceptions and cognitions. In this case, it was asserting that “You are not going to change, whatever you do.” In this paper, I will be referring to *ga* as the *think-ego*. In the vignette above, the client introduces this distinction, when she says that *she* “wants to give her thinking mind a break.” There is a *she*, as separate from her think-ego which seems to control her.

VIGNETTE TWO

The following is a complete verbatim record of a demonstration at a workshop. The session went on for about 10 minutes. The client was new to Focusing.

ME 01: Bring your attention to the middle of your body. By “middle of the body,” I mean the area around your throat, chest and abdomen. See how you are in there. Or see if something, or some situation, some concern is wanting your attention. If something arises, just say a few words about it, like “There’s something there about work, or a relationship”. You don’t have to say all the details.

SHE 01: If I were to say it in one word simply, it’s ‘wanting to let it go out and not being able to’.

ME 02: So there’s ‘wanting to let it go out and not being able to.’ Let’s first be aware of that. There’s a ‘wanting to let it go out and not being able to.’ So where can this be placed?

SHE 02: On top of that building over there. (She looks out the window.)

ME 03: Okay, let’s put all of that on the rooftop of that building over there. Okay? All right, so that’s there, and what else?

SHE 03: There’s something about the company.

ME 04: The company, yes, yes. There may be a lot of facets to that, but how is the whole thing felt in you?

SHE 04: A rock, a big rock.

ME 05: A big rock. And when you said that, I noticed that you smiled.

SHE 05: It’s big for sure, but there isn’t a bad image about it.

ME 06: It’s not a bad rock, but it’s big.

SHE 06: Huge.

ME 07: It’s huge. Where can we put this?

SHE 07: It’s huge so I can’t move it. Right now, I don’t seem to be able to move it.

ME 08: So where does this rock belong?

SHE 08: In me?

ME 09: Oh no, I mean, huge rocks like these might belong to a volcano.

SHE 09: Oh, oh...if...uhm (silence)...someplace that is scenic...(ME: yes, yes)...like the Australian rock.

- ME 10: An Australian rock? (SHE: yes)
- SHE 10: Ayers Rock.
- ME 11: Ayers Rock. That huge?! (smiling) Then can we let this be side-by-side with Ayers Rock?
- SHE 11: Yes.
- ME 12: Okay then, we have two things here. One is on the rooftop over there on that building. The other is next to Ayers Rock. Let's see if there's anything else.
- SHE 12: Then there's the family issue.
- ME 13: The family issue.
- SHE 13: Yes.
- ME 14: And how does the family issue feel?
- SHE 14: Let me see.... I'm always so concerned about it, but it's always in the sidelines.
- ME 15: You're concerned about it, but it's in the sidelines.
- SHE 15: It's always there. But it's not in the center of my vision; it's always on the side.
- ME 16: Okay, it's always there on the sidelines of your vision. Uh hum, and what does that feel like?
- SHE 16: It doesn't feel bad at all. Ummm...let me see...It feels like I can never forget about this, I must always remember this; I must always carry this around.
- ME 17: I'm hearing you say, "I must never forget about the family, I must always keep that in my mind, I must always carry this around, it's this kind of thought." (SHE: Yes) Okay, shall we put this thought somewhere?
- SHE 17: Yes (silence).
- ME 18: And where does *it* want to go?
- SHE 18: The sky.
- ME 19: Wow, the sky!
- SHE 19: The sky.
- ME 20: What kind of sky?
- SHE 20: Blue and high.
- ME 21: Blue and high....
- SHE 21: (She sobs for 66 seconds.)
- ME 22: And what's happening in you?
- SHE 22: (Inaudible)...the moment I threw it to the sky, tears came. I don't know what's happening, I've never experienced this before. (She is speaking as she sobs.)
- ME 23: And what feeling accompanies your tears?
- SHE 23: I've never talked about this before, not in these workshops, so...(silence)
- ME 24: You're feeling a sense of relief, or...?
- SHE 24: Yes, because I never talked to anyone about this...It was the first time I ever talked about this.
- ME 25: So let's be aware that you talked about this for...(SHE: Yes)...And now that you've talked about it for the first time, how does it feel?
- SHE 25: Wow it's like, the guarding feeling came off.
- ME 26: Oh, it's like the 'guarding' came off. Yes, yes. So now, you are aware that you were guarding all this time. And now the guarding is off.
- SHE 26: Really, it feels warm.

- ME 27: Let's be with this warmth for a while. (SHE: Yes) (silence 40 sec) Did something come just now?
- SHE 27: (Smiling) My grandmother (ME: Oh) I have an image of her.
- ME 28: And is she saying something to you?
- SHE 28: She says nothing, she's just watching over me.
- ME 29: So there's the warmth and your grandmother watching over you. (Silence 34 sec.) And how are you now?
- SHE 29: My feelings...my shoulders feel clear...(ME: clear?) Like stiff shoulders I had for a long time is gone.
- ME 30: Okay, the stiff shoulders are gone, so be with the warmth as long as you like, and can we end the session whenever it feels right to do so.
- SHE 30: Yes...(silence 20 sec.) yes, (laughing) I feel good now!
- ME 31: Okay?
- SHE 31: I feel good. Yes, yes, let's end.

It was interesting to me that she said that it was the first time she ever talked about this issue (SHE 23, 24). Although, as clear as it was from the excerpts, she did not talk about the content at all. It must have felt to her like she had talked about it; in other words, this issue was experientially processed, even though she did not talk about its contents. Let us now examine this process in more detail.

CLEARING A SPACE AND SPACE PRESENCING

Three issues came during the session. It felt to me as if the issues got progressively more difficult. The first issue could be handled by the think-ego. *She* put the issue on the rooftop of a building (SHE 02). The next issue about the company felt like a huge rock. *She* could not move it (SHE 07). In other words, her think-ego could not distance itself from this rock. Notice that I consequently changed my response here to: "where does this rock belong?" (ME 08). She didn't seem to understand my response initially (SHE 08) but what I meant became clear to her after I shared an example (ME 09). Now the rock was as big as Ayers Rock (SHE 10) so I suggest putting it side-by-side with Ayers Rock (ME 11). This *therapist-mediated* way of clearing a space was introduced here because she seemed unable to move the huge rock. I suggested some place in nature which led her to the image of Ayers Rock, and I also suggested putting it side by side with Ayers Rock.

Interestingly, it felt to me as if we were seeing the same vision. This rock side by side with Ayers Rock is an inter-subjective experience. It felt to me, at least, that an inter-subjective world of she and me had emerged. Perhaps because of the emergence of this inter-subjective world, an issue that she was 'guarding' in the confidentiality of the interiors of her existence suddenly appeared onto our inter-subjective world. This issue was 'guarded' and she had never talked about it, hence it was 'structure-bound', a 'frozen whole' to use experiential terms (Gendlin, 1964). The structure to which she was bound in regard to this family issue was that she must always keep it in the 'sidelines of her vision' (SHE 14; 15); she must 'never forget about this'; 'must always remember this'; and 'must always carry this around'

(SHE 16). So how can *she* clear a space from this? Her think-ego will not let it go. She “must always carry this around.”

To overcome this rather frequently observed conflict, I changed my response to “where does *it* want to go?” (ME 18) I am relying on, or entrusting the situation to *another power* greater than her think-ego. Then the sky suddenly appeared, a high blue sky with grandmother watching over her (SHE 18-21; SHE 27-28). As she let’s go of this issue, an experiential process unfolded, as is evident from her sobbing (SHE 21). This process was not yet conceptual, so she didn’t know yet what was happening (SHE 22). An explicit, conceptual understanding of the process that unfolded here may not even be necessary, as is evident from the change happening to her, including the changes in her body. A ‘responsive combodying’ (Ikemi, 2014a, 2014b) is evident here, where her “guarded” mode of embodied being-in-the-world has shifted. She has changed, and it seemed important for me that she live in this newly generated way, with her warmth and her relaxed shoulders.

Space Presencing (SPR) is a name I am using to describe the process by which the sky emerged in the vignette above. *She* could not clear a space; it is *space* that presented itself. Interestingly the Japanese/Chinese character for space 空 also means ‘the sky’ and also the Buddhist term for ‘emptiness’. In vignette two there was a progression from CAS, to therapist-mediated CAS, to *Space Presencing*.

MINDFULNESS AND THE THINK-EGO

In a Japanese book called *Buddhism Updating* (2013), authors Issho Fujita (Zen monk and Focuser) and Sudhammacara Ryodo Yamashita (Zen monk turned Theravada Bikhu) discuss the issue of ‘who’ is meditating or ‘who’ is being mindful. They agree that as long as what they call “the monkey mind” or “the thinking mind” is meditating, meditation will not be effective. In this article, I have been referring to the ‘thinking mind’ as *think-ego*. Essentially the same observation can be made in Focusing as in Buddhist meditation. For example, Gendlin (1981/2007) writes: “Asking questions in the head, or trying to make the head dominate the body, never works...”(p.97)...Any of these processes might help lead you to “it”, but “it” must respond...”(p.98)

The think-ego may be referred to as ‘mental formations’ (Sanskrit: *samskara*) among the five skandhas in Buddhist philosophy or as *manas-vijnana* in Mahayana Buddhism, a level of consciousness which localizes and gives meaning to experience. Being mindful of mental formations constitutes one of the four establishments of mindfulness (Hahn, 1993).

THE TRANSPERSONAL / SPIRITUAL DIMENSION

What has been referred to as ‘the other power’ above signifies *tariki* 他力, a term in Japanese Pure Land Buddhism (*Johdo* and *Johdo Shin Shu* sects) that refers to the openness to the power of the other — Amitabha Buddha, working in our lives. The antonym of *tariki* is *jiriki* 自力, which means self-power. Commonly Zen is depicted as a *jiriki* (self-power) practice, where practitioners use their self-power to discipline themselves to meditate. Pure

Land Buddhism is commonly said to have abandoned such self-power techniques and stayed with the faith of Amitabha Buddha's works implicitly functioning in our lives. Using the terms of other-power (*tariki*) and self-power (*ji-ri-ki*), we can differentiate CAS and SPR. While CAS is a self-power method, SPR entrusts space to present itself.

Interestingly, in SHE 22, she says: "The moment I threw it to the sky, tears came. I don't know what's happening..." Did *she* throw it to the sky with her self-power? As I try to re-experience this, it appears to me as if there was an interplay of self-power and other-power. I believe she is saying that *she* threw it upwards, but obviously no human arm would have the power to throw things up to the high skies. They must have been sucked up into the sky the moment she "threw it" and let go. Thus, it appears to me that when we let go of self-power, the other power comes.

There is absolutely no need to limit our discussion here, using terms of Pure Land Buddhism. I use these terms because these terms are easy to understand and because I was born into a Pure Land family. But since I went to Catholic school from kindergarten to college, I also feel comfortable in expressing the emergence of the sky in this vignette as the guidance of the Holy Spirit (The Holy Spirit *descends* from heaven, so the Holy Spirit is in the skies). Readers can read their own faith into this vignette. Rappaport (2013) has shown how elements of mindfulness are found in virtually all the major religious creeds.

For our purpose as Focusers, I would like to show that there is a more-than-think-ego operating in our Focusing practice. Perhaps we might say that whatever terminology we use, we can observe the workings of a transpersonal or spiritual dimension in our Focusing practice. It would amount to a contradiction if I were to elaborate of how to make space presence itself in Focusing, for such modes of *doing* remain in the realm of the think-ego. Nevertheless, in our *being* a listener, we can be open to, and mindful of, the transpersonal or spiritual dimension about to unfold in our Focusing.

A POTPOURRI

Since much is condensed into this article, more can be articulated about the ways I engage space in therapy. Endeavors akin to my work with space and the think-ego seem to be articulated in different ways in different orientations of psychotherapy. For example, there are some parallels between what I am calling the 'think-ego' and 'automatic thoughts' in cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) resulting in similar practices, as 'distancing' automatic thoughts (Beck, 2011). Moreover, 'distancing' and 'clearing a space' are ways of 'letting go' that is emphasized in mindfulness practice (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Thus the subject matter of this article is indeed a rich potpourri of Focusing, Clearing a Space, Space Presencing, mindfulness, spirituality, CBT and more.

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