

Stillness and Awareness from Person to Person

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Summary: In this paper I would like to clarify how Carl Rogers' "Therapeutic Core Conditions" can assume a meditative character in psychotherapy. I seek to differentiate the concept of 'presence' in so far as it can vary in meaning depending on the very depth from which we are communicating. Then I go on to illustrate how an understanding of self as process or as interaction - particularly after the further conceptual development by the philosopher and psychologist Eugene Gendlin and the resulting practice of Focusing - resonates with certain experiences from meditative contexts.

Key words: Presence, Essential Meditative Practice, Focusing, Stillness, Intra- and Interpersonal Space of Awareness from Person to Person.

As a psychology student in the late seventies, I began to consider how I wanted to practice psychotherapy. I chose the Person-Centred psychotherapy of Carl Rogers and Focusing of Eugene Gendlin. Suffering from an existential crisis, I had started to meditate intensively two years previously.

In his approach, Rogers transmits three basic attitudes that he calls core conditions for a healing, therapeutic relationship: to regard a person in an unconditionally positive manner; to empathise with their experiencing, and to do all this in a state of genuineness. It seemed to me that these core conditions "operationalised", or put into practice, the meditative attitudes that carried me on my path more than other therapy approaches did. As early as 1979, Rogers describes presence as "A Way Of Being". In Gendlin's work, I also saw meditative traces in the bodily experiencing on the edge of awareness. Gendlin refers to the body felt from the inside. In addition to this, Rogers and Gendlin found in

advanced, successful psychotherapeutic processes both in their theory and practice something that I term the 'Liquefying' of what we call 'self. And so, from the very start, psychotherapy was for me a 'Being-With' in awareness and experience- directly from person to person. Over the years, this view of things has developed and has become more refined both on my meditative path and in my Focusing-oriented psychotherapeutic work. I would like to talk about some of this in this paper.

How is it to regard a person in an unconditionally positive manner, to empathise with their experiencing and at the same time as a therapist to be with myself to such an extent that I can really be there, that I don't have to hide behind the role of therapist? Space arises, space for relating. So two people can be there. Space means: to hear, to listen to that which is, that which would like to be there, which does not dare, is somehow unable. A person is accepted in their 'Being As They Are'. I am with that person without judging. Gendlin describes this in the Leuven Conference in 1989:

" The essence of working with another person is to be present as a living being. And that is lucky, because if we had to be smart, or good, or mature, or wise, then we would probably be in trouble. But what matters is not that. What matters is to be a human being with another human being, to recognize the other person as another being in there."

In one of his workshops, Gendlin talks of recognising "what is in there, that which is living there and is looking out through the eyes, that which somehow wants to lead a life."

Here it becomes clear how much the effect of unconditional attention depends on the genuineness of the therapist, on their being mindful, and in tune, with the sensing of their own inner life. It is remarkable that empathy was considered as the primary variable of change at the beginning of person-

centred research. But it was by working with people who suffered under "early disturbances," or who were even considered schizophrenic, that the fundamental effect of genuineness also came to the fore. From a state of genuineness, unconditional regard and empathy can have a deep effect. Rogers formulated these three basic attitudes as conditions for a healing, therapeutic relationship and also as fundamental for any human relationship that promotes growth. It was only later in his life that Rogers discovered presence as a quality on its own. Today, presence is seen by Geller and Greenberg as necessary for realising the three core conditions. However, I would ask you to consider that it is in itself mindfulness practice if one practices non-judging, or unconditional, exact awareness of one's own experience as it changes from moment to moment, thereby developing congruence and genuineness through empathising as a therapist. So I am not surprised that Rogers experienced presence in his later years. Presence deepens the three basic attitudes and presence becomes deeper by realising these attitudes. In Focusing, we work with mindfulness in a special way, which I will demonstrate later.

If we look in the direction of presence, there is a qualitative jump in contrast to mindfulness, which we cannot make, cannot control with our will. I can direct mindfulness to something. Presence simply is; it is effortless. It can come when bodily sensation, feeling, and mental activity such as thinking, are synchronised to a great extent. However, what I still don't necessarily mean here is the non-dual state of undividedness, of absolute presence. I will come back to that later. Rogers (1980) describes an opening in the direction of presence in the sense of this spontaneous state of effortless clarity, precision, lightness and earthed expansion of perception or consciousness as follows:

"When I am at my best, as a group facilitator or as a therapist, I discover another characteristic. I find that when I

am closest to my inner, intuitive self, when I am somehow in touch with the unknown in me, when perhaps I am in a slightly altered state of consciousness, then whatever I do seems to be full of healing. Then, simply my *presence* is releasing and helpful to the other."

Gendlin (1992) puts it this way when he writes of

"times late in therapy when there is suddenly a clearer perception. The world seems poignant and sharply etched; it is as if the windows had just been washed - one sees the same things as before, but what a difference! (...) at such times experience is vastly better than all the meanings in one's perceptual set."

The simplicity with which Gendlin describes the decisive effective factor in the therapeutic relationship - namely that nothing should stand between oneself and the person who comes to therapy - touched me deeply. No techniques of giving back, or mirroring, or Focusing - put all that to one side and simply just be there, person to person. If that doesn't happen, Gendlin says, therapy may become ever more "professional", but in the end it is useless and expensive.

Mindfulness and Presence in meditation

Of equal simplicity is the discovery of an Indian prince that it is helpful to place non-judging awareness in what is: breathing, feeling, thinking, bodily experiencing. In his inner inquiry, he realised that suffering arises if we make an image of ourselves and think this image to be true. If we believe there is a solid self, we suffer when we experience ourselves differently to what we believed this supposedly solid self to be. Then, as today, that may well have caused fear, or to put it more generally, suffering. Why else would someone then sit down and simply be there and become aware? We suffer if we

do not become aware of, and experience, our transitoriness, our selflessness, our interwovenness and thus the conditional co-emerging, being aware and experiencing. Here the depth of awareness plays an important role.

I would like to make it clear at the outset that I do not wish to simply equate the discoveries made in meditative and in psychotherapeutic inquiry.

I would like to let both breathe with each other and beside each other, to let both nourish each other in the way I have experienced it. The longer I practice both, the more I can see that on both paths the depth of opening up to the process and of lived through experiencing have to be considered. I sense that the same words vary in meaning depending on the different depths from which we are communicating. This applies in particular to the word presence.

When we meditate, we sit alone on our cushion or chair, each and everyone for themselves even when we are sitting together in a group and experience the presence of the others as giving us strength and our common presence as supportive. When I talk of meditation in this paper, I am referring to the essential practice: awareness from moment to moment.... now. This essence of meditation appears in all the schools of Buddhism known to me and also in meditative inquiry even though different exercises in mindfulness and concentration and different religious rituals surround this profound simplicity. This simplicity is profound insofar that in the final analysis it means the realisation of undividedness, non-duality, absolute presence - and this carries into everyday life: What does not stand in the way of that is that mindfulness is also useful in dealing with everyday life and in healing at different levels.

In the process of meditation, three states can be roughly outlined:

- Arriving in a certain quieting of the mind. This is possible just by pausing in stillness (samatha), a 'sensing-and-becoming-aware' of existence. However, many schools teach observing the breath, counting, visualising, or softly concentrating attention on various objects or on the body.
- The transition to the illumination (vipassana) of the nature of our self, in other words insight, is fluid. Thus a kind of disidentification is practised for years first. "When we sit, we will notice that there is space between the thoughts, words and pictures that perhaps come to us; therefore we do not have to think incessantly. Emotions appear in this space, too. If we begin to sense this space and do nothing with the thoughts and emotions - such as chase them away, look into them or lose ourselves in them - this discovery of the wide space in which these phenomena arise is like a great relief." (Schillings, 1989). We notice that we are more than these phenomena.
- At a later point in time - in Zen often very early - an instruction of the teacher may be: "Be your fear completely, do not move away from your fear one iota." What is meant by this is, of course, that you are to be aware in your fear - undivided: "Fear-Aware" Fear and aware are one. When this happens, staying there fully, the non-dual state can open. There are no limits placed on the depth to which non-duality is realised. It is a being awake that is not separate from what is there - like pain, feeling, joy, birdsong. At the same time, this wakefulness is more than pain, feeling, joy and birdsong. Presence. Today, this word is used frequently. In Toni Packer's meditative language, presence means undivided wakefulness, which is simply there. It differs from attention directed at something; this presupposes an active use of the will to some degree. What I mean by undivided presence is that all resistance to what is falls away. In this state there is no act of will between "the awaring" and "the awared", and "the awarer" and "the awared", to use Toni Packer's language. The human presence that Gendlin talks about does not have to mean this non-dual, absolute presence. However, it can mean this quality of presence if the depth has been realised.

Focusing – The "innerly" felt body in therapy

Rogers and Gendlin first found that people who were successful in therapy developed from experiencing their self as a solid and rather rigid state to experiencing their self as a continually changing process. In the penultimate stage of the process continuum, "Incongruence between experience and awareness is vividly experienced as it disappears into congruence. The relevant personal construct is dissolved in this experiencing moment and the client feels cut loose from his previously stabilized framework." (Rogers, 1961). I have described what this can mean from a meditative perspective in "Wisdom and Compassion in Psychotherapy" (Schillings, 1997)

It was especially Gendlin who examined what actually brings about change. He found that it is a combination of precise listening from moment to moment and attentive being with

what is bodily felt. Listening in the sense of the three core conditions shapes the space for relating which develops between two people through understanding. 'What is bodily felt' refers to the relationship to inner experiencing. I notice that in there inside of me "something" is living, is experiencing. There is "something" there that I can relate to. By my relating attentively to this "something", a space opens, a space of the body felt from inside. That is Focusing.

In Focusing, language is used in an "experience-emerging" way, in a way that invites experiencing as it emerges, as it appears. And this language gives space to stillness, to stillness which is necessary in order to listen into a depth in which this unclear, fuzzy, perhaps still vaguely sensed "something" would like to emerge and take shape step by step. In Focusing, we call this "something" Felt Sense. The felt sense is the bodily felt meaning, which arises moment to moment quite specifically, afresh. It lies "beneath" the emotions we are familiar with, such as anger, joy, or sadness. The felt sense is experienced as something that comes from inside, that is more true, more precisely "me myself" than these emotions in conventional contexts. It is on this level that we experience the liquefying of the image or concept of self that stood between us and our organismic experiencing.

Here is an example: I am sad because my dog has died. Of course I am sad; who wouldn't be in such a situation? In Focusing we allow space to unfold by feeling how this "sad" lives in the body. And so what is specific in this person, in this situation, with this dog, can open. In this way, a seemingly fixed feeling can lead us into the depth of what Gendlin calls the fine, complex "intricacy" of aliveness if we remain aware of this and don't skip anything in the process of unfolding. So what is meant is a continuous 'staying-there', 'being-with'.

I will proceed now with a segment from a therapy session so that my further discussion is more comprehensible. During

the first four interactions, the process develops and corrects itself in the rhythm well-known to person-centred psychotherapists. The client says something; as a therapist I feel the resonance in my body and I respond from there. If the client feels understood, her process moves on after a short pause. Perhaps she corrects herself, finds more precise words, which I then say back to her. This goes back and forth until there is a stillness in which something new, deeper can come. At this place I invite the client to feel in her body, in her felt sense. By doing so, she can consciously take up a relationship to inside herself. In Focusing, we learn to particularly recognise this stillness in which the something that has not yet become can unfold, can become explicit. We support the person we are accompanying in holding their awareness on this still unclear something that they are sensing, so on the felt sense. The person experiences a space of relating to inside themselves. In Focusing, not in therapy in general, our 'Being-With', our relating human presence as a therapist is to hold the space for the unfolding process and, if necessary, to act as "process-midwife" by using a specific, process-inviting language to promote the process. As we shall see, it is this pausing, this slowing down, that paradoxically enables a process to move rather quickly from a superficial level and through different layers to become deeper and to unfold.

Segment from a therapy session.

Anika studies pedagogy and has taken on a job looking after a paraplegic woman three days and nights a month.

A: I don't understand. The work is really well paid. The woman is friendly and correct. And I feel terrible after one day. Now I don't feel like going there at all anymore.

T.: You don't feel like going there anymore when you feel so terrible.

A.: Well yes, terrible, how shall I put it, so artificially strained. And then I want to be friendly as well. A complete cramp.

T.: You are sensing a cramp between artificial strain and wanting to be friendly.

(She nods. Stillness*)

T.: How would it be for you to sense in the body how the whole thing with the new job feels inside? (She closes her eyes. Stillness)

A.: It is like a hard plate in the chest and down to the stomach. It's really heavy.

(Stillness:...She seems to still be sensing inwardly) A.: Like pressed back, heavy.

T.: Ah, there is something like a hard plate, something like pressed back, heavy.

A.: As if there's something inside that is being pressed back by the heavy plate. (Brief stillness) It feels like paralysed underneath the heavy plate. T.: Something feels like paralysed under the heavy plate. Is it okay to stay with the something that feels paralysed inside of you? A.: Not yet somehow. It is like - it is paralysed and it needs a heavy plate. I don't understand it.

T.: There is something that is like paralysed and it needs the heavy plate. Is it good to still be with it? (She nods....Stillness)

A.: I'm sensing what it is about the whole thing with work that makes it so. (Stillness) So paralysed pressed back.. (Then a deep sigh of relief.) Yes, I feel as if I ought to stop being here when I go there. It is only about the woman, every movement. It's as if I'm not there. (Stillness....She is still sensing.) A.: There is something like dough that wants to rise. T.: Something like dough wants to rise. (Long stillness)

A.: Yes. That feels good. I have to take my life with me; that is the dough. It wants to rise. (Stillness) If I take my life along to work, I'll be able to go there for three days.

T.: Give yourself time to really feel it so that it can live.

She remembers that her parents were so overtaxed with her brother who had a disability that they "pressed her back". She helped them, but she somehow pressed herself back "under the plate" in order not to feel herself.

In the next Session, Anika tells me that she had never felt so clearly connected and at the same time felt for herself...."even if it sometimes slipped away at work." She would like to go back again to "her dough". She lets her attention stay with what is bodily felt. We are there in stillness. I tell her that I am there if she needs something. Her breath becomes deeper and slower.

A.: I feel so clearly connected as never before (brief stillness) and somehow the words aren't right. There is the dough... (Stillness). Something is pulsating and I can't say that it is me although it is me."

T.: In the pulsating you are fully there and you are not doing it.

*When I use stillness here, I mean deep listening into what is unclear. I do not simply mean silence.

After our being in stillness together for some time, Anika leaves my practice. She wants to go outside and to be on her own again.

During this process it becomes clear that it is to be hoped that the therapist in person to person presence does not want any particular content other than to promote and help the process that would like to unfold from deep down within, other than to hold the relating space both interpersonally and intrapersonally. When Anika feels I understand how she feels in her situation at work, she becomes still, she experiences enough relating space and can follow the invitation "how all that with her new job feels in her body". She dives beneath the thoughts, concepts and feelings that she already knows in relation to her situation at work and relates directly to what is being bodily experienced. By doing so, she first taps frozen, structurally bound experiencing from her childhood. It was so painful that "it" still needs the plate before she can move on in the process. She feels that it is a "still-needing", and she already feels that it wants to live on in a different way. And it is from inside of her that she senses this - and not as a given concept coming from outside of her. She stays in what "it" still needs at that point and does not skip the process. By her staying moment for moment, the process can carry itself forward, as Gendlin would put it. Neither she nor I could know beforehand what she recognises immediately after by sensing: "I feel as if I ought to stop being here." By "that" also being allowed to be there and to be bodily felt in stillness, the next step arises and emerges out of itself: her "dough wants to rise". We are still and wait together on the edge of awareness. And then what comes is the following: "If I take my life along to work, I'll..." Thus, if she lives from her inner being, she can work there for three days. She has a precise bodily knowing of the implication - for three days, and not for longer.

The process continues during the week - she feels clearly

connected and at the same time feels for herself; indeed, she had never felt so clearly connected as she does now. This is a step into individuation, which opens inner space to be able to relate and feel connected. When she returns to her "dough" again, a movement opens up somewhat transcending herself and thus lets her just be (herself) directly.

Gendlin (1984) also calls the felt sense "the edge of awareness". He sees it as the centre of the personality.

"The felt sense, which I also call "the edge of awareness" is the center of the personality. It comes between the usual conscious person and the deep, universal reaches of human nature, where we are no longer ourselves. It is open to what comes from those universals, but it feels like "really me". The felt sense and each small step comes already "integrated" and not as so-called "unconscious material."

Interaction comes before Perception - The body lives from itself

I would like to talk briefly about what is most fundamental in Gendlin's philosophy of the implicit so that the language of process that is so typical for Focusing is comprehensible. Gendlin sees all being as in interaction.

Interaction comes before perception. That means that the body always interacts with the environment; it has never existed separate from the environment. The body's feeling itself is at the same time a feeling of the environment. (Gendlin 1999). The body knows how life should be lived. It only exists in interaction and, as such, the inner-felt body knows more than we can consciously know as the small, seemingly separate I. When Gendlin emphasises that interaction has priority over perception, he does not mean by this that there is no subject, no self; rather, he assumes that self and interaction are not two different things (A Process

Model 1997).¹ I would like to put it this way: the more deeply I experience that I am interaction, the more deeply I experience myself self (Ich selbst). This experiencing is directly bodily. Even when we are alone, we experience ourselves as being in responding interaction with ourselves, and also with our environment. When I sense, when I feel, something, then it is always about something that is being sensed and felt. Thus, the environment is experienced and lived inside the body.

So life proceeds in interaction. The steps come in interaction. Neither a form nor a pattern is imposed on or given from the outside. It is the "body sense" of the form, of the pattern, that is able to continue the process emerging out of itself. Our bodies are such that they absorb all training, all language, all social forms, all culture and all that we read, and then they still imply more. It is the "body sense" that can proceed. Thus, it is the interaction, the crossing, that brings the new step, the new bit of living - what Gendlin calls "carrying forward". Life knows how to live.

Some final Considerations.

Dorothee Sölle's description of the soul comes to mind. The theologian writes in "The Journey Home" that " the soul is only shorthand for experience". In person-centred and Focusing-oriented therapy, awareness unfolds from person to person; the soul of the person, their experiencing, is accompanied. And where it is confused, hurt, distorted and blocked, we sit there together and listen to what wanted to live. If I manage to hold the space open just long enough so that the person before me can stay there and go through the horror, and so that she knows she is being accompanied and safely held whilst she begins to touch what is cold, frozen, dissociated. Not that I can spare her anything on her path. No. It is that she hopefully knows that she is safely held in the heart. That she knows that what wants to come, no

matter how distorted it may be, will be accepted and honoured. I remember a woman who felt the edge of her trauma of violence for the first time and froze again, and I asked her what it needs just now to live. She sensed a picture in her that warmed her somewhat: "It" needs a small treasure chest that is softly lined in blue velvet - a treasure chest that is kept safely on the moss in the woods. After a few weeks we are allowed to visit "it", from time to time, when "it" dares to want us.

Now what are the meditative qualities in Focusing? These qualities are this minute, precise listening and a bodily felt staying there from moment to moment. An attitude of being aware unfolds, which does not want anything in terms of content. There is also the quality of the anticipated trust that the suffering person has lost - that she can live her life out of herself in resonance, in interaction with the other, with the environment. The quality of empathic pausing that I offer as companion - holding what is unclear, messy, misty, until the answer comes out of the bodily felt depth. The only advantage I may have over the other person in such a moment is this bodily felt knowing that there is an answer in the "Not-knowing" - an answer that perhaps has no words, that simply wants to live itself out of the stillness of inner listening.

When I work with expatriates and people from other countries, it is this trust in the awareness of bodily feeling, in other words the felt sense, that is the decisive common basis beneath culture. We can communicate slowly and with a stutter and let the next step in life emerge. This has major implications for the people who have got lost in the postmodern world. We can really refer to that which is sensed, felt inside of us. It changes from moment to moment, it is no clearly outlined thing, and yet it is reliably there. And this is how the self liquefies.

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