

In this rather helpless state, which can be overwhelming, you may, through being in projective identification with the part of the client dominated by omnipotence, be rendered unavailable to them as a thinking mind that might be able to help them make sense of things. The disaster that can happen in the transference relationship is that the counsellor repeats a situation in which contact with feelings and with painful reality are avoided. So I think my first recommendation in working with a young person in this 'untouchable' state is to penetrate their omnipotent defence: to stand up to it.

I have noticed in my own caseload, when working with this presentation, that there can exist commonly within the family of origin a relationship between the parents, in which one partner has failed to stand up to the other. It is as if the young person has internalised a relationship in which there are only two positions – controller or controlled, strong person/weak person – and they have little else in their own repertoire with which to make an unconscious identification. For this reason, I think that it is tremendously important when working with this to show that you are not going to collude with this in the therapeutic relationship. They need to know that part of us is actually strong enough and has the authority to stand up to their omnipotence.

Role play – working with the omnipotence

In our workshop, participants were invited to role play a client whom they now had in their mind as we had been discussing omnipotence. Another colleague was to take the part of counsellor, and a third to observe. The role play threw up some rich insights into what it might feel like to be caught in an omnipotent state of mind. What emerged was how much adrenalin and excitement this state could generate for a young person, but also how unsafe it felt, and how much those playing it also wanted – *needed* – to be given a boundary and be stopped. The examples from the workshop are not available to us here, for confidentiality reasons, but I can give something of an example from my work with Jed.

I would brace myself when Jed began another story about wanting to smash Jack's face in. Jed despised him for no other reason than that he saw him trying so hard at school. Jack actually cared about it all. Jed would describe in horrible detail how and when he would do something to terrify Jack; and I would brace myself, and interrupt him: 'Jed I'm going to stop you. When you begin to tell me about wanting to smash Jack's face in, telling me about Jack and how pathetic he seems to you and how you want to fight him, I know we are in danger. You and I both know that you can hurt people like Jack. But I have been thinking there is another danger here. It's the danger that if I don't stop the part of you that does

the hurting, if I am just as pathetic as Jack, then I am going to lose touch with the person I want to help in here – and that's the *inside* bit of you... the inside bit of you that has been hurt.'

What I learnt from Jed, over time, was that, in his case, there had been a trauma, something experienced as a profound shock to his self, something that had not made sense. Jed had been sent away from home in India to a small preparatory school in the English countryside when aged not yet seven. Jed's sisters stayed at home.

You know you have got to the trauma when someone starts to tell you a story in which every detail has been registered, where everything is described as if it happened only yesterday. Having told me so many stories, Jed began to tell me the story of how his mother and father and sisters were there at the airport, of how he thought everyone was coming with him, until right at the very end, when he found himself going through the gate with an air hostess. I sensed with every cell of my body that this moment, followed by the first few weeks away, when Jed would cry for home, was the story of the breaking of his spirit. And although he cried then, and was comforted, this made so little difference to what happened to Jed, because *nobody brought him home*, and so he had to harden himself to tender feeling. Jed became psychologically organised around making certain that nobody ever hurt him like that again.

Here we began to uncover the origin of a hurt that had no name: Jed had suffered the trauma of being separated from his home, family and culture before he was in any way able to comprehend what had happened to him. Jed had become a fighter and had hurt others ever since. As our work neared its ending, Jed had a tattoo put on the inside part of his fighting arm, as if marking on the surface something of the scar he felt beneath. I began to realise, with great sadness because we were ending, that the things we talked about had begun to get through. ●

I wasn't scared of it, when they did the tattoo – I went in on my own.

Man, it hurt though, I will say that – because of where I had it, right? Because I had it right here on the inside – that's the place where it hurts the most.

I am not so scared of you now, Jed.

You are telling me you have an inside, an inside place where it hurts.

And, after all that dread of you showing up, I am really going to miss you, Jed.

Note: All details of the case material used have been changed to protect client confidentiality.

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Zen

and the art of riding the dragon

Meditation and being in the moment – what relationship have these to our client work? And when is it right to make a switch?

Becky Seale shares experience from her practice

As living beings, we all seek comfort – a little longer in bed in the morning, a biscuit with a cup of tea, a warm spot in the sun. When uncomfortable things happen to us, we do whatever we can to avoid feeling them and do whatever we can to change them. A young person seeking counselling wants help to feel better and change – or overcome – the difficulties they're experiencing. Yet the process of counselling will often not be a comfortable one. As counsellors, we need to learn to hold this discomfort, with an understanding and hope that the outcome will offer some relief. We will all find different ways of managing this process. For me, one of the ways I find clarity and support is from my meditation practice; a practice that recognises the rewards of working *with* the discomfort instead of avoiding it.

What is Zen?

Zen is simply the practice of being with whatever is present for us right now, without desiring anything to be different. The more we are able to do this, the more joy we will ultimately experience. We only become disappointed, hurt and upset when things do not meet our expectations, when things are not what we wanted them to be. However, when we accept things as they are, we can no longer be disappointed. More than this, we can find real treasures. Brazier suggests that 'to grow pearls, there has to be some grit in the oyster', and claims that 'by working with our grit, we become a "true being", a true pearl'¹.

Zen is of a highly practical nature. The image of a newly enlightened Zen monk is of someone who simply shrugs and gets on with sweeping the floor. Zen is ordinary and in the everyday, if only we can open our eyes to it.

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And wisdom to know the difference.²*

Managing the turning point

One of the great difficulties for us, as counsellors of young people, is managing the point at which we change from receiving, hearing and simply being with our clients, to having to do something and take some action. This is also a challenge for the meditation practitioner. In a small-scale study with therapists who meditate, Zen monk and person-centred therapist Manu Bazzano discovered that a Buddhist practice can 'in less inspiring moments lead to acquiescence'³. There is a tendency in a meditation practice, with a focus on being with things as they are, to miss the moments when it's not actually right to be with things as they are and when appropriate action should be taken. So we need to know exactly when to move from 'being with' our clients to doing something – but also to notice and explore what it feels like to make this shift.

There is often great tension in making what can sometimes feel like a huge shift, ie going from 'just' listening and following the young client's lead, to becoming a child protector, someone who needs to probe, question and sometimes even cajole. This can resemble the shift from an image of a Buddhist monk sitting in serene meditation, to the image of monks setting themselves on fire, as numerous Buddhist monks have done in recent years in very extreme examples of action and protest in the face of war, oppression and injustice.

A Zen practice – like a counsellor's practice – will involve taking action and it cannot take place in a moral or ethical vacuum. So in my own practice, and in addition to following the guidance of the BACP *Ethical Framework*⁴, I also gain support from a commitment to what are known as the 'Buddhist precepts'. The precepts, from the teachings of the

Buddha, are thousands of years old and have been beautifully and elegantly modernised by Vietnamese Zen monk Thich Naht Hanh in his *Mindfulness Trainings*⁵. For example, his third training states: 'Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct, I vow to cultivate responsibility and learn ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples and society. [...] I will do everything in my power to protect children from sexual abuse and to prevent couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct.'⁵

So in this way, my Zen practice becomes one not only of sitting and being, but very much one of doing and taking action, when needed.

What if the action has already happened?

However, being active in my work can feel hard sometimes, especially when my young client is reluctant for me to take action. At other times, it can be great when I feel I'm making a significant difference to a child's life with one relatively small act – by passing on a bit of information, perhaps. When a young boy is getting upset in school with others in class who keep teasing him, he may want me to tell a teacher what is going on. He may feel he can't find a quiet time to talk to a teacher himself and is worried they won't take him seriously. After a few words from me, the teacher is able to talk with my client and the other children. Things improve quickly and the child doesn't feel the need to see me again. If only it were always so simple.

At the other end of the spectrum, however, another tension and an equally challenging experience is when nothing *can* be done to change the situation the young client finds themselves in. The action has already happened. The abuse is in the past. No support is forthcoming. Maybe the situation isn't 'serious' enough for anyone to act. What can I do?

In the counselling room, we will often recognise in ourselves a strong desire to make young clients feel better, to make everything alright, to fix things. This is certainly, often, what our clients hope for from us. For example, Dan struggles

with his anger in the classroom. He doesn't know why he lashes out at the other boys around him and finds himself storming out of the room. He just wants to stop feeling angry. Amy doesn't

get on with her mum's new boyfriend; Clare's parents want to move to another town for her dad's new job and she's devastated at the thought of leaving her friends behind. 'I'm not going!' she tells me. Although these young people come to see us because they want to feel better, there's not much we can actually *do* to improve things.

As Brazier explains in *Zen Therapy*¹: 'We are apt to seek a therapist to help us get the dragon back into its cave', wanting to take away the uncomfortable feelings we are confronting. 'Zen, by contrast,' he goes on to say, 'offers dragon-riding lessons, for the few who are sufficiently intrepid.'

Riding the dragon

Many adults, in the face of a child's suffering, do everything they can to alleviate it – from offering sweets when they hurt a knee or telling them 'it's not that bad!' to trying to protect them from the realities of disease and death. As Nick Luxmoore suggests: 'Young people think and worry about death far more than adults would like to believe.'⁶ These things become dragons that we would rather hide in a cave from young eyes. Yet we counsellors have a real opportunity to enable young clients to face up to the reality of the human condition and show them how, instead, they can learn to ride on the dragon's back.

As Frankl⁷ says: 'Everything can be taken from a man or a woman but one thing: the last of human freedoms to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.' And it is this hope of existential freedom that is the precious thing we can offer our clients, regardless of their current lack of power to change things.

Bazzano's study³ on counselling meditators also found that these counsellors valued their 'willingness to stay with discomfort', and that 'the ability, fostered by meditation, to stay with the client's discomfort is invaluable to a therapist who values the ethical principle of non-directiveness'.

I don't know how I would do this work without my meditation practice, and in many ways, I consider my work in the counselling room to be a continuation of my meditation practice.

Sometimes, when I sit on my meditation cushion, it feels easy to be there. There's a flow; my mind is calm. I'm aware of the ticking of a clock, the birds singing, my breath coming in and out. Most of the time, though, it doesn't feel easy. My feet hurt; my back hurts; 10 minutes into some convoluted plan about what I'm going to cook for dinner, I remember I'm supposed to be watching my breath and there's a tune I just can't get out of my head.

I also experience a range of emotions: fear, boredom, sadness, excitement, joy. I practise watching each emotion with a calm steadiness. Can I stay balanced with whatever feeling comes up in me? Can I allow myself each emotion?

Likewise, in the counselling room, sometimes it's easy to be there – the time and relationship with my client flows; the client's story is easy to follow. But often, it can feel hard to be there, to stay there. I may have to work hard to concentrate

on the details of my client's story, which is not always easy to do with young clients (X told Y that A doesn't like B and C, and X and Y all want to gang up on A); my mind might drift to my rumbling tummy; and listening to the details of what happened in the next level of *Skyrim* (virtual dragon-fighting) can be greatly challenging.

Did I dare to say I get bored sometimes? Just as I experience boredom when I meditate, of course I have that experience occasionally, listening to clients. At times like these – just as when sitting on my meditation cushion, battling the dragons of my own mind – I remind myself to come gently back to my breath, the voice, words and presence of my young client. The more I am able to be with each emotion that comes up for me in the counselling room, as when on the meditation cushion, the more I can allow my clients the whole range of emotions that come up for them.

Brazier¹ writes: 'Space is a womb; room to grow. The most important skills in learning to be a therapist have to do with giving the client room to grow.' He suggests that creating space in our heads as therapists is essential to creating space for our clients. Space in my head certainly enables me to create space in the counselling room; enables me to be with the pleasant and the unpleasant, the comfortable and uncomfortable experiences of both me as listener and the client I'm listening to.

Mindfulness is not only for CBT

As a humanistic, person-centred, meditating counsellor, I feel a little miffed that 'mindfulness' appears these days to be the domain of the CBT world. Bazzano³ points out that 'it would be a little unfortunate [...] if all we were to understand of meditation were to be confined to one-sided concentration and miss its wider applications, namely a deep inquiry into the existential dilemma of the human condition'.

I have been interested to note in my work with young clients, however – and without my needing to talk about or teach mindfulness – how many of them comment on the peace and space they get from the counselling session. Some may enjoy sitting in silence, playing quietly with play dough, doing a jigsaw, or painting a picture with great concentration and hardly any words between us. We are present together in this moment, and maybe, for a few moments at least, we are both able to lay our dragons to rest. ●

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