
BECOMING A FULL HUMAN BEING

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The basic work of health professionals in general, and of psychotherapists in particular, is to become full human beings and to inspire full human-beingness in other people who feel starved about their lives. When we say a full human being here, we mean a person who not only eats, sleeps, walks, and talks, but someone who also experiences a basic state of wakefulness. It might seem to be very demanding to define health in terms of wakefulness, but wakefulness is actually very close to us. We can experience it. In fact, we are touching it all the time.

We are in touch with basic health all the time. Although the usual dictionary definition of "health" is, roughly speaking, "free from sickness," we should look at health as something more than that. According to the Buddhist tradition, people inherently possess Buddha-nature; that is, they are basically and intrinsically good. From this point of view, health is intrinsic. That is, health comes first: sickness is secondary. Health is. So being healthy is being fundamentally wholesome, with body and mind synchronized in a state of being which is indestructible and good. This attitude is not recommended exclusively for the patients but also for the helpers or doctors. It can be adopted mutually because this intrinsic, basic goodness is always present in any interaction of one human being with another.

There are many approaches to psychology and some of them are problematic. From the Buddhist point of view, there is a problem with any attempt to pinpoint, categorize, and

pigeonhole mind and its contents very neatly. This method could be called psychological materialism. The problem with this approach is that it does not leave enough room for spontaneity or openness. It overlooks basic healthiness.

The approach to working with others that I would like to advocate is one in which spontaneity and humanness are extended to others, so that we can open to others and not compartmentalize our understanding of them. This means working first of all with our natural capacity for warmth. To begin with, we can develop warmth toward ourselves, which then expands to others. This provides the ground for relating with disturbed people, with one another, and with ourselves, all within the same framework. This approach does not rely so much on a theoretical or conceptual perspective, but it relies on how we personally experience our own existence. Our lives can be felt fully and thoroughly so that we appreciate that we are genuine and truly wakeful human beings.

When you work in this way with others, it is very powerful. When someone begins to feel that he is not being pigeonholed and that there is some genuine connection taking place between the two of you, then he begins to let go. He begins to explore you and you begin to explore him. Some kind of unspoken friendship begins to develop.

Although I am speaking as a Buddhist teacher, I do not believe that therapy should be divided into categories. We don't have to

say, "Now I'm doing therapy in the Buddhist style," or "Now I'm doing it in the Western style." There is not much difference, really. If you work in the Buddhist style, it is just common sense. If you work in the Western style, that is common sense, too. Working with others is a question of being genuine and projecting that genuineness to others. The work you do doesn't have to have a title or a name particularly. It is just being ultimately decent. Take the example of the Buddha himself--he wasn't a Buddhist! If you have confidence in yourself and you develop some way of overcoming ego, then true compassion can be radiated to others. So the main point in working with people is to appreciate and manifest simplicity rather than trying to create new theories or categories of behavior. The more you appreciate simplicity, the more profound your understanding becomes. Simplicity begins to make much more sense than speculation.

The Buddhist tradition teaches the truth of impermanence, or the transitory nature of things. The past is gone and the future has not yet happened, so we work with what is here--the present situation. This actually helps us not to categorize or theorize. A fresh, living situation is taking place all the time, on the spot. This noncategorical approach comes from being fully here, rather than trying to reconnect with past events. We don't have to look back to the past in order to see what people are made out of. Human beings speak for themselves, on the spot.

Sometimes, however, people are obsessed with their past, and you might need to talk with them about that somewhat, in order to communicate with them. But it should always be done with a present orientation. It is not purely a matter of retelling stories in order to reconnect to the past, but rather it is a question of seeing that the present situation has several levels: the basic ground, which could be in the past; the actual manifestation, which is happening now; and where the present is about to go. So the present has three facets. Once you begin to approach a person's experience in that way, it comes alive. At the same time, it is not necessary to try to reach a conclusion about the future. The conclusion is already manifest in the present. There might be a case history, but that history is already dying. Actual communication takes place on the spot. By the time you sit down and say hello to the

patient, that person's whole history is there.

You see, we are not trying to figure people out based on their past. Instead, we are trying to find out their case history in terms of who they are now, which is really the point. I always do that in interviews with my students. I ask them how old they are, whether they have been outside of America, whether they have been to Europe or Asia, what they have done, what their parents are like, and all the rest of it. But that is based on this person rather than on that person. It is quite straightforward. The people we are working with might be dwelling in the past, but we as their helpers have to know where they are now, what state of mind they are in at the moment. This is very important. Otherwise we may lose track of who a person is now and think of him as someone else, as if he were another personality altogether.

Patients should experience a sense of wholesomeness vibrating from you. If they do, they will be attracted to you. Usually, insanity is based on aggression, rejecting oneself or one's world. People feel that they have been cut off from communication with the world, that the world has rejected them. Either they have isolated themselves, or they feel that the world is isolating them. So if there is some compassion radiating from your very presence when you walk in to a room and sit down with people, if there is gentleness and willingness to include them, that is the preliminary stage of healing. Healing comes from a simple sense of reasonability, gentleness, and full human-beingness. That goes a long way.

So the first step is to project ourselves as genuine human beings. Then beyond that, we can help others by creating a proper atmosphere around them. I am speaking literally here, extremely literally. Whether someone is at home or in an institution, the atmosphere around them should be a reflection of human dignity, and it should be physically orderly. The bed should be made, and good meals should be prepared. In that way, the person can cheer up and be able to relax in his environment.

Some people may regard the little details of the physical environment as mundane and unimportant. But very often, the disturbances people experience come from the

atmosphere around them. Sometimes their parents have created chaos--a pile of dishes in the kitchen, dirty laundry in the corner, and half-cooked food. Those little things may seem incidental, but they actually affect the atmosphere a great deal. In working with people we can present a contrast to that chaos. We can manifest an appreciation of beauty, rather than just pushing the crazy person into a corner. The appreciation of the environment is an important part of Tibetan and Zen Buddhist practice. Both traditions consider the atmosphere around oneself to be a reflection of one's individuality, and so it should be kept immaculate.

The conventional therapeutic approach is to try to straighten out people's minds first, then give them a bath, and finally help them get dressed. But I think that we have to work with the whole situation at once. The environment is very important, and yet it is often overlooked. If the patient is presented with a good meal and is acknowledged and received as a special guest, which is what he or she deserves, then we can work from there.

We are talking about creating an ideal, almost artificial life for seriously ill people, at least in the beginning, until they can pull themselves together. We may actually bathe them and clean their rooms, make their beds and cook nice meals for them. We can make their lives elegant. The basis of their neurosis is that they have experienced their lives and their world as being so ugly, so full of resentment, so dirty. The more resentful and ugly they become, the more that attitude is reinforced by society. So they never experience an atmosphere of compassionate hospitality. They are regarded as nuisances. That attitude doesn't help. People are not really nuisances at all. They are just being themselves given their circumstances.

Therapy has to be based on mutual appreciation. If people feel it is just your "trip," they may not like the environment you create for them. You may present them with a nice tray of food, but still they may be outraged if they know that your attitude is not genuine, if they feel your generosity is hypocritical. If your approach is completely unified, if you treat your patients like princes or princesses in the fullest sense, then they may want to respond. They may actually cheer up and begin to extend them-

selves. They may begin to appreciate their bodies, their strength, and their existence as a whole. It is not so much a matter of finding techniques that will cure people so that you can get rid of them. Rather, it is a matter of learning how to actually include them as part of a good human society. It is important for the therapist to create an atmosphere that makes people feel welcome. That attitude should infuse the whole environment. That is the point.

The ability to work with another person's neurosis, or even their craziness, ultimately depends on how fearless you are when you deal with them, or how inhibited you feel. It depends on how much you are embarrassed by somebody or how much you can actually extend yourself. In the case of a mother's relationship to her infant, there is no problem because the mother knows that the child will grow up and one day become a reasonable person. So she doesn't mind changing diapers and doing all sorts of things for her child. Whereas if you are dealing with people who are already grown up, there is some kind of basic embarrassment which has to be overcome. That embarrassment has to be transformed into compassion.

Crazy people in particular are very intuitive. They are somewhat brilliant and pick up messages very easily, even just the flicker of your thoughts, and that goes a long way with them. Usually they chew it, or they swallow it, or they throw it out. They will make a lot out of it. So it is a question of your basic being and how open you are in those situations. You can at least make an attempt to be open at that moment, which is a tremendous commitment to training and educating yourself. Then there is the possibility of developing fearlessness.

It is necessary to work patiently with others, all the time. That is what I do with my students: I never give up on them. No matter what problems they come up with, I still say the same thing: just keep going. If you have patience with people, they slowly change. You do have some effect on them if you are radiating your sanity. They will begin to take notice, although of course they don't want to let anybody know. They just say, "Nothing has changed. I have the same problems going on all the time." But don't give up. Something happens--if you take your time. It works!

Just do what you have to do to keep them going. They will probably keep coming back to you. You are their best friend anyway, if you don't react too neurotically. For them, you are like a memory of eating in a good restaurant. You remain the same, and they keep coming back to you. Eventually you become very good friends. So don't jump the gun. It takes time. It is an extremely long process, but if you look back at it, it is very powerful. You have to cut your own impatience and learn to love people. That is how to cultivate basic healthiness in others.

It is very important to commit yourself to your patients fully and not just try to get rid of them after they have been cured. You shouldn't regard what you are doing as ordinary medical work. As psychotherapists you should pay more attention to your patients and share their lives. That kind of friendship is a long-term commitment. It is almost like the student-teacher relationship on the Buddhist path. You should be proud of that.

LOVE ALL GOD'S CREATION,
THE WHOLE AND EVERY GRAIN OF SAND IN IT.
LOVE EVERY LEAF,
EVERY RAY OF GOD'S LIGHT.
LOVE THE ANIMALS,
LOVE THE PLANTS,
LOVE EVERYTHING.
IF YOU LOVE EVERYTHING, YOU WILL PERCEIVE THE
DIVINE MYSTERY IN THINGS.
ONCE YOU PERCEIVE IT, YOU WILL BEGIN TO
COMPREHEND IT BETTER EVERY DAY.
AND YOU WILL COME AT LAST TO LOVE THE WHOLE
WORLD WITH AN ALL EMBRACING LOVE.
-FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY
THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV