

Zen Therapy

Von David Brazier

In this regular feature we invite authors to share their experience of engaged Buddhism and hope more readers will write to us with articles of their own. Here David Brazier writes of the Amida Quannon Buddhist Project.

For many years I have been training people in counselling, therapy and personal growth and looking for ways to integrate this work with my dharma practice. People bring all kinds of personal distress to counsellors and therapists and so the Buddha's message about the way to end suffering would seem to have particular relevance. The principles upon which western therapy is based, however, are not always co-incident with those taught in the Dharma. From a Buddhist point of view, most western therapy would, I think, be judged to be strongly contaminated with the same poisons as give rise to suffering in the first place. Our whole society basically believes that the way to happiness is to get what you want rather than to overcome desire and to separate from what you do not want rather than to overcome aversion. Nonetheless, exploring the similarities and differences has been a rewarding task and I have come to feel that therapy and dharma each have something to learn from the other. In particular, therapy is an attempt to engage directly with the suffering of another person, not in the abstract, but as it is immediately experienced by that person. There is always a danger for dharma practitioners of learning much about the principles of suffering and cessation but neglecting to find out how to actually help other human beings.

My project, therefore, has been to try to evolve something which could be called dharma therapy or zen therapy. I cannot say that this project is complete, nor do I really expect that it ever will be. Rather, I find it a very creative area to work in. One of the fruits has been a training programme, called Zen Therapy, which began earlier this year sponsored by Eigenwelt Amida, an independent non-profit training agency with which I have been involved for a long time, based in Newcastle upon Tyne. Eigenwelt (the word means one's personal world) attracts independently minded students who are interested in personal growth and who generally feel themselves to be on a spiritual or personal growth path of some kind, not necessarily Buddhist. It is a very stimulating atmosphere to work in. Workshops are offered on a wide range of topics, but the ethos is what matters rather than the content: inquiry and experimentation in an atmosphere of mutual support. Sometimes we get into very personal material. Sometimes attention is more focused on ideas, sometimes on action or skills. In any case, there is an attempt to relate to one another in a way which helps people to open up to new feelings, ideas and possibilities and to find the sources of real caring in ourselves.

Many Buddhists become interested in what therapy has to offer both through an interest in right livelihood and simply out of a wish to find out as much as possible about the human soul. We thus are finding an increasing number of practising Buddhists are coming to the courses and enjoying the opportunity to try out their principles and mix with a range of other interesting and interested seekers. What we find is that immersion in this process does change people.

So one of the things I would like to stress here is that engaged Buddhism may not just be a matter of taking on the problems of society at a macro-level, valuable as this may be. It can also be a matter of enhancing our skills in listening to one other person. It may be a matter of

(earning how to facilitate groups in ways that enable people to discover their potential to help and care for one another. Engagement and therapy come to life through dialogue. This, after all; is what the Buddha spent a great deal of his time doing: listening to people and responding in ways which spoke to each in their own condition; helping to free them from it.

The activity of being a therapist is also an important form of dharma practice in another way. Not only is it an attempt to help the person in distress, it is also a way for the listener to arrive at a new understanding, not just of one person, but of life. The western psychologist Carl Rogers is credited with the observation that what is most personal is also most general. When we understand one person in a deeply personal way, we ourselves change. An essential foundation for the bodhisattva path is a change of heart based upon what happens to us when we really hear the cry of another person's suffering. This is the meaning of the imagery we have of Quan Yin who, because she hears everybody's cries, is the bodhisattva example of most comfort to us. If you are interested in what we are doing, do get in touch.

David Brazier's book *Zen Therapy* (published by Constable, 275 pages, 9.95 GBP) was published September 1995. For more information please contact David at 53 Grosvenor Place Newcastle-upon-Tyne NE2 2RD Tel 0191 281 5592

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