

Reflections on Psychodrama and Buddhist Practice

BY TIMOTHY 'SUGATO' MAPEL

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I first got interested in psychodrama as I attempted to integrate an interest in psychotherapeutic disciplines with my long-standing commitment to my life as a monk and to Buddhist meditation practice. I was looking for guidance and training that would enable me to do some personal therapy work in areas of myself I considered unexplored. I was also hoping to learn skills to be able to share with my monastic community to enhance my roles as group leader, teacher, trainer and counsellor.

Psychodrama was described to me by a friend as 'meditation externalised' or as an 'externalised meditation on the inner and outer worlds'. That description intrigued me and motivated me to join the local training group in Wellington. What I have found over the past three years is a great deal of concurrence between the psychodrama method and the practice of meditation – and a strong complementarity between the two seemingly diverse cultures.

From the outside, the two methods couldn't appear more different. Psychodrama is an

action method, meditation is a movement towards stillness. Psychodrama is expressive and verbal, meditation is silent and internalised. Psychodrama involves groups and group interaction, while meditation, although it can be done in groups, has an individual focus and appears to be exclusively about internal processes and inner things.

But to judge either discipline by its external form is to miss the deeper purpose and aims involved in both practices. And it is in these deeper underlying attitudes and values that there is a great deal of similarity between psychodrama and Buddhist meditation.

Openness to Life

The first thing that struck and excited me about psychodrama was the permission and willingness to allow everything to be a part of a drama. No matter how difficult, painful or conventionally inappropriate or unacceptable the issues were, they could be explored in a session. There was room for it all and consequently room for everyone and everything. There was the demand for and

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the love of honesty. There was permission to be oneself in a full and uncensored way no matter how scary, challenging or conflicted that might be. And with skilful directing and supportive auxiliaries, it was possible for a protagonist to have a new and clearer understanding of themselves, their inner dynamics and the world in which they live. This atmosphere of openness and acceptance is an important part of healing and self-understanding and is one of the central attitudes cultivated in meditation practice.

Developing Consciousness

In both psychodrama and meditation there is a trust in awareness itself and a recognition of the healing and transformative powers of making things more conscious in our lives. It is in the unconscious and conflicted areas of our lives that we suffer. But if we have the opportunity to explore the issues and behaviours that surround suffering then enhanced awareness of our lives brings greater understanding and new ways of approaching similar situations in the future.

In psychodrama we make things conscious through techniques like concretisation, soliloquy and maximisation to make the invisible visible. In meditation we become conscious by a patient, gentle relaxation and acceptance that allows things to come up into our feeling awareness and be seen. This exploration must take place in a safe and supportive environment in order to allow us to move into the difficult places in our lives. Whether that be the safety and support of a psychodrama group or the safety and support of silence in a meditative space, what is crucial is the attitude of acceptance of whatever comes up and the trust that simply being conscious of that is the first step towards understanding and increased freedom.

Focus on Health

Underlying this trust in the value of becoming more conscious is another strong parallel between psychodrama and Buddhism. Moreno made it clear that psychodrama operates from a 'model of health'. He insisted that psychodrama was not to focus on pathology but to recognise, enhance and celebrate the healthy functioning

of an individual. While acknowledging that everyone has areas in their lives in which either relatively progressive, coping or fragmenting roles are operating to one degree or another, the emphasis is placed on the health of the system as a whole rather than the sickness or problems of one area. By focusing on health rather than pathology, our strengths become supports for working on and improving areas that are less adequately developed in our lives.

In Buddhism too there is a fundamental recognition of the health or 'okayness' of each individual reflecting the teaching about original mind as 'pure, bright, and radiant'. This original mind is obscured by our lack of clear seeing and selfish preoccupations like the sun obscured by clouds passing through the sky. Valuing of the health and underlying inherent purity of our lives gives us hope and a feeling of workability with the struggles that we do have. It is not some cursed state of unredeemable sin but our own lack of understanding and unconsciousness which causes us pain.

And this can be remedied by a patient and thorough conscious exploration of the areas of our lives where we feel limited, stuck or in conflict. Trusting that there is health in our lives at a fundamental level gives us the courage and support to explore those less-developed areas with an appreciation that seeing heals and understanding frees. We begin to realise that more important than looking good or appearing 'together' is our capacity to be open to and accept the truth of our lives with all of our flaws and strengths.

In Buddhism there is a great deal of emphasis on 'seeing things as they are', not with the purpose of changing or fixing ourselves but with the patient and humble acceptance of exactly who and how we are now. Change will happen and healing will occur naturally if we can see clearly the truth of how it is for us and open to and acknowledge that fully. For Buddhists, this is our refuge in Buddha (clear seeing), our refuge in Dhamma (the Truth of the way things are), and our refuge in Sangha (the practice of opening to the truth of our experience in the moment).



Psychodrama has many different tools to deepen our ability to 'see things as they are' including doubling to increase self-acceptance, mirroring to promote self-understanding by seeing ourselves from another's perspective and role reversal to broaden our ability to inhabit many and various different roles.

Development of Spontaneity

Psychodrama places a lot of emphasis on spontaneity. Spontaneity is an expression of health; it enables new responses to old situations and adequate responses to new situations. Increased spontaneity is in many ways the goal of psychodrama. Moreno described spontaneity as 'the arch catalyser of creativity'.

Psychodrama is designed to increase spontaneity rather than problem solve. It recognises that with an increase in spontaneity, problems will be solved and new ways of seeing things will indirectly emerge through increased warm-up. One expression of spontaneity is ease of access to different roles that are appropriate in any given situation. The greater the spontaneity, the more choice and flexibility we have in life. The more choice and flexibility we have in life, the greater freedom we have to move through the world allied to our purpose in a conscious way, rather than reenacting old scripts in a habitual or compulsive way.

Spontaneity is the key to healthy role functioning and the cornerstone of a meaningful and fulfilled life. The more role options we have in a given situation, the healthier we are. The more spontaneous we are, the more easily we can role reverse and thus have a greater appreciation and understanding of our diverse world.

Non-Attachment

Buddhism also places a lot of emphasis on the ability to respond to life with flexibility and freedom of choice. In Buddhist language we talk about the practice and development of a life based on non-attachment. Non-attachment is not some split-off state of profound indifference and disinterest in life. It is not about pushing

life away and keeping everyone and everything at a safe distance where there is no feeling and no pain.

Non-attachment arises through being fully present and receptive to life in a willing and wholehearted way and allowing life to touch us as deeply as we can. When we open to our experience without resistance or demand then life passes through us unhindered since we're not holding on to it. There is mindfulness and reflection and the opportunity to make choices since we are witnessing our experience rather than being identified as it.

This practice of non-identification with the contents of our experience (of not taking all of life so personally as 'me' and 'mine') enables us to empathise with, open to and accept the whole range of possible human experience, sensation, thoughts and emotions.

To me, this is the essence of role reversal and the connection between spontaneity and freedom. If we are not limited by our identification with a particular role or roles, then we are free to experience any and every role available. The possibilities are limitless since we are not placing any limits on ourselves.

For Buddhists, this is the essence of non-attachment and the central meaning of the experience of Anatta or 'not-self'. Freedom and happiness lie not in the ability to gratify our wants and desires but in the capacity to live life free from the limitations of attachment and identification. In meditation we are exploring this directly and experientially all the time. 'Where am I attached? What am I identified as? Where do I feel limited, without choice and options?'

And we are learning how to see, feel, accept, open to and release out of these self-imposed definitions and restrictions as they happen to us in the moment. We begin to really feel the pain of our limitations and the unsatisfactoriness of being exclusively identified as a particular role, a particular kind of person or anything at all for that matter. Seeing this happening clearly and consciously gives us the opportunity not to do it and to do something different instead.

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Focus on Experience

Both psychodrama and meditation are experiential in nature. It doesn't matter how many books you've read or how much you understand the theories, you've got to practise it. An experiential method requires us to be as fully present in the moment as we can possibly be. To the extent that we can we are increasing our awareness of ourselves, our thoughts, sensations, moods, feelings, conditioning, environment, relationships – all of it.

With increased awareness, whether it be of internal or external things, there is an enhanced relationship with ourselves and our world around us. In both psychodrama and meditation there is only this present moment. It is all happening now. Whether we are dramatising a childhood incident, fantasising about a future outcome or feeling a pain in our knee, what is important is that which is happening to us now.

Psychodrama and meditation help us increase our sensitivity and enable us to develop greater understanding and nuance in our lives. Moreno said that psychodrama was concerned with two questions: 'Who am I? And where do I fit in?' Basically it is about Life and how to live it. Thankfully, there are many supports along the way to assist us, and meditation and psychodrama are but two of them.

Differences

Having outlined some of the major points of congruence between Buddhism and psychodrama, it might be good to point out some of their differences. One of the main shortcomings I have experienced in my own monastic culture which has a strong emphasis on meditation is the prevalent attitude of 'working things out in silence'. There is the belief and the hope that all conflicts, difficulties and suffering are resolvable in one's own mind through individual effort and insight. While perhaps this is true in an ultimate sense, this meditative attitude tends to fixate, looking exclusively to the transcendent and transpersonal dimensions for answers to life's challenges. This is often done by dismissing and devaluing the importance of the interpersonal

and immanent dimensions of one's life. There can be too much emphasis placed on awareness itself and not enough on action and participation in life. Meditation, when practised like this, becomes a way of 'spiritually bypassing' the relationships, responsibilities and more 'mundane' aspects of life in favour of a detached and non-relational stance towards life. From this view 'life is suffering' and the best thing to do is weave myself a spiritual cocoon where I don't have to feel or deal with life because I am above and beyond it. This is a danger in the meditative culture and one that psychodrama seems to nicely compensate for.

For while Buddhist meditation practice emphasises the transcendent perspective towards life, psychodrama begins with the nitty gritty personal and interpersonal areas of life. Psychodrama works with ordinary scenes from life and distils universal meanings from them, revealing the transpersonal dimensions of experience.

Where psychodrama can fall short is in an over-fascination with the details or content of a drama while failing to bring out the universal features of the protagonist's situation. Often it is in the sharing section immediately following a drama where the audience offers reflections, connections and feelings of what touched them in the drama they've just witnessed that the larger dimensions of what might have been a very ordinary situation are revealed.

Psychodrama's emphasis on group learning and group process is also very different from the personal practice and individual spiritual development of a meditator. When there is an emphasis on group process and group participation it very quickly becomes apparent if someone is avoiding dealing with issues in their lives by taking a detached and 'spiritually' superior stance. The directness of psychodrama can be a very refreshing and effective challenge for the detached meditator who denies there is any work to do in their interpersonal life.

Psychodrama promotes greater awareness of thinking and feeling through an action method. Buddhist meditation practice places a lot of



emphasis on developing calm and tranquility. The way to 'see things as they are' is by sustained attention and a stillness or one-pointedness of mind. When our minds are still and calm then we see life clearly and our innate wisdom faculty can operate with fewer distortions. I have not been aware of psychodrama placing much emphasis on stillness or concentration of mind. Having said that, if one's warm-up is strong then concentration will be present. And increase in spontaneity is connected with a greater degree of awareness. But perhaps more comment could be made on the exact qualities of mind that promote integration, resolution and understanding in a psychodramatic enactment, and how those qualities could be enhanced and developed.

Meditation's emphasis on the mind and on developing wholesome mental states means that meditators get a lot of training and practice in this area and are presented with a highly articulated structural framework to work with. There are clear maps that point to the areas of our lives that need our attention and allow for self-assessment of strengths and weaknesses – what is developed and what needs to be developed. Role theory is an alternative

mapping system and seems nicely complementary to the more spiritual focus of the Buddhist teachings. Many meditators need to keep being encouraged to take these qualities of mind out into life and to develop them in other contexts beside the silence of their meditation practice.

Complementarity

Buddhist meditation practice is just one part of a very broad culture of training and purification of body, speech and mind. If non-attachment, freedom and abiding as awareness itself are the goal then there are innumerable tools and practices to aid us in making our hearts strong and our minds clear. These include generosity, discipline, patience, loving kindness, virtue, renunciation and the qualities of serenity and equanimity which allow us to be open to all of life and covered by none. This is seen as a lifetime's (or many lifetimes') work and involves learning that will bring great benefit to our lives and the lives of others. For me, stillness and action go together. Group work and individual work are inseparable. The inner and the outer are one. And psychodrama and meditation are compatible and mutually supportive systems to bring out the best in all of us.

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