Contemplative Psychotherapy Essentials: Enriching your Practice with Buddhist Psychology

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"What does the interpersonal relationship considered essential in traditional talk therapy have to do with the solitary practice of sitting silently with oneself in meditation?"

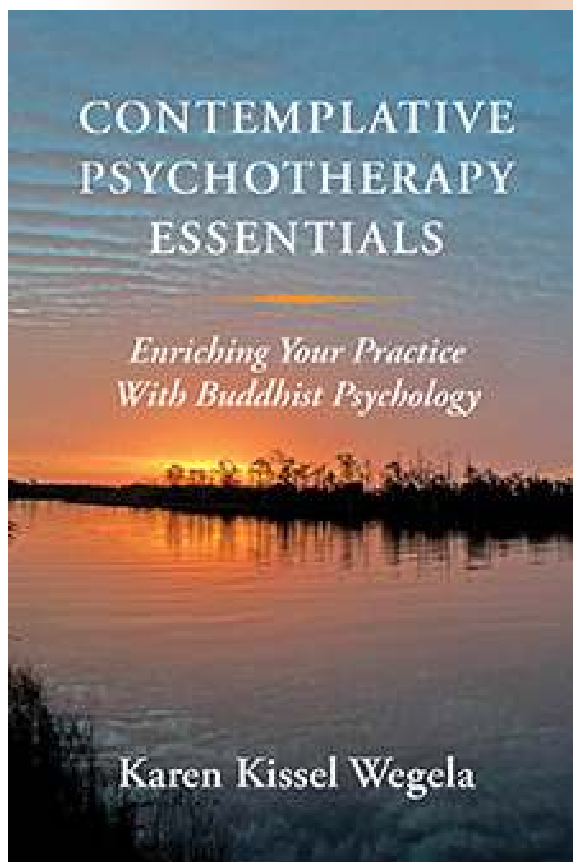
I perched on the edge of a brown leather ottoman. My feet planted on the carpet. My arms folded across my chest. My countenance stern. My clients, a 13-year-old and his mother, were ensconced in two, leather, easy-glide rocking chairs. Their feet raised on another ottoman, throw blankets over their legs. She explained that he had not been back to school for over a week.

Multiple crisis calls the previous week included a SKYPE intervention meeting, an emergency in-person session. Our work to sense into his overwhelm and anxiety, to watch the surge of sensation to circumvent another tantrum, for lack of a better work to describe what his mother offered as a complete melt down, had not worked. He spent most of the week, she explained, lost in a haze of tears, curled in a fetal position on her bed.

Thoughts crowded my mind. *Why didn't she call me? Why did she let him get away with this?* The teacher in me saw a truancy officer on the horizon and human services pounding on the front door to rescind custody for coddling, enabling.

I felt impatient and wanted things to be different than they were. I noticed tension in my jaw—teeth tight together. Felt judgment in my eyes as I made contact with this young man. Sensed an almost aggressive energy wanting to change the current situation. I veered from incrimination to self-degradation: *My attempts to help this have client failed. I am not the right person for him*.

Then a few sentences from a book I had been reading came into focus as if typed across an interior screen: "What we hold in our mind, our clients pick up on" (Wegela, 2014, p.77). I realized I teetered on a precarious edge, potentially planting negative "seeds" versus positive. I wanted to be present, gentle, appreciative of myself and my clients.



So, in order to let go of my wanting things to change, I consciously sat back, relaxed my shoulders. I connected with my heart, found compassion, felt love. I softened my gaze. Eased my tone. Unfurled my arms and legs and opened to the situation. I sat, present in the moment.

The tone of our interaction changed. The chaotic energy in the room decreased. Tears welled up in the young man's eyes when I asked him what he imagined I would say or do when I learned that he had trusted his 'thoughts', got caught up in the stories reeling in his mind, threw himself into his emotions and became lost in the haze, and he replied, "be disappointed in me."

And I almost was. Until I heard Karen Kissel Wegela's voice, on the pages of her text, *Contemplative Psychotherapy Essentials: Enriching Your Practice with Buddhist Psychology*.

Wegela wrote the book to share contemplative psychotherapy's approach—a blend of Western psychological traditions of talk therapy and ancient Eastern teachings of the Buddha—and practical applications of Buddhist principles to the therapeutic journey. She offers clinical case examples, strategies, exercises, and guided meditation instructions.

The book begins with a personal introduction. An overview and thank you to those who influenced her. She mentions meetings and direct teachings with multiple Tibetan Buddhist teachers including His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, Anam Thubten Rinpoche, Chagdud Tulku to name just a few. As well, she notes her "dharma sisters, Pema Chödrön, Dale Asrael, Judy Lief and Judith Simmer-Brown." And her "root guru, the Vidyadhara, the Venerable Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche." Her interactions with more well-known Buddhist teachers include Thich Nhat Hanh, Jack Kornfield, and Sharon Salzberg. You get the picture that this woman has been involved in Buddhism *a long time* and that her experience is steeped in tradition, ritual, belief. You also learn that her life has been spent supporting others through teaching and client work, that compassion is not simply a word she bandies about but is a way of being.

Chapter one begins with the foundations in contemplative psychotherapy. I had no concept of this approach, and relatively little personal experience or knowledge where Buddhism is concerned other than what I've gleaned from reading (and reviewing) other books on the topic and my own meditation practice. I read chapter one twice actually: once while on the exercise cycle and then again after my interview with Karen when I realized that I hadn't paid close enough attention to the foundational teachings of Buddhism and contemplative psychotherapy. My second experience with the material created the schema, or scaffolding if you will, to construct a deeper, more enriched understanding.

When I reread the five competencies of the contemplative psychotherapist presented in chapter three, I noted how simply they outlined an approach to therapeutic interactions: be present and let go; see clearly and not judge; recognize and appreciate differences; connect with others and cultivate a relationship; and act skillfully and let go.

First and foremost, Karen stresses personal meditation practice—the focus in chapter two. The need to be clear and aware, to be with 'oneself' in a place of acceptance, surrender, compassion, love. "The essence of mindful practice," she writes, "is to be present, gentle, appreciative of oneself as one is" (p.129). She offers several exercises to begin and practice a mindful, meditative way of being. Readers are invited to experience "the unique opportunity of mindfulness-awareness sitting meditation" (p.21). Wegela asks, "What can happen when we do take time to just sit down with ourselves?" (p.22).

Throughout several chapters, Wegela offers meditation and mindfulness practices to do and to teach clients. She also discusses her struggle with teaching meditation: "Should therapists teach their clients to meditate?" she asks (p. 153) then reveals that she has "struggled with this question" and that she "still feels torn". Wegela is a certified meditation instructor and yet, for more formal meditation work, she refers clients to local meditation centers.

Her writing, for me, was a slow, methodical pace. When I sat down and started to read with an agenda in mind, felt rushed to get through the chapter, I found myself slowing, breathing. I settled into the chair. The have-to-do's vanished. I was simply and completely present with the text. Wegela offers quotes from other Buddhist teachers, case examples from clients and students. Terms are defined and demonstrated. The material is accessible, user-friendly. A true invitation to not only read about but to also personally experience it, try it out, let it flow within and through. I know my presence with the material is why I shifted during my client session mentioned in the opening scene. I didn't think about the book, didn't think about judgment, compassion, love. I was quite close to being lost in old patterns of thought and response. But, the concepts Wegela taught me in this book, rose to consciousness and changed my approach, altered my behavior, and in effect lead to a more genuine, connected, loving relationship with my clients.

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The remaining eight chapters interweave information, instruction, and interaction. Topics include: creating genuine therapeutic relationships; recognizing brilliant sanity; sowing the seeds of mindfulness; working with clients' existing mindfulness and mindlessness practices; exploring emotions; cultivating compassion; contemplative approaches to anger; and finally mandala approaches to supervision and consultation.

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I read the entire book, cover to cover, then, when I felt my curiosity piqued, I reread certain sections. I was fascinated by the concept of brilliant sanity, which is noted to be the root teaching in contemplative psychotherapy. As I understand it now, it is closely related to what is called our Buddha nature—all beings have a nature that is fundamentally good. We all have the potential to be wise, compassionate and open. The overarching goal in contemplative psychotherapy is to help clients connect or reconnect with their own worthiness, their own brilliant sanity (wisdom). Suffering, Wegela writes, occurs when we confuse what is really happening with our own version of what is happening (p.155). "We mistake our thoughts and opinions about yourselves, others, and the phenomenal world for reality itself" (p.155). Within this vein there are three main qualities to explore through meditation: openness, clarity, and compassion that will allow us to recognize our brilliant sanity, our fundamental wisdom and goodness.

We can, with practice, discover or recover our natural compassion for ourselves and others.

The idea of "exchange" as opposed to transference or counter transference intrigued me as did her discussion on exploring emotions. She wrote about two common, mistaken ways of approaching emotions: suppressing them and acting them out and ways to work with them: acceptance, boycotting (redirection), and antidotes (for example rejoicing is the antidote to jealousy, resourcing is an antidote to fear). She writes extensively about *maitri*—loving-kindness, compassion, friendliness toward oneself. Cultivating maitri and compassion are drawn from the Buddhist teachings based on the ideal of the bodhisattva (people who have committed themselves to benefiting others) (p.181). Wegela offers a Maitri practice on page 183 that involves a mantra of sorts:

Continued on page 85

Eichhorn continued from page 79

(p.181). Wegela offers a Maitri practice on page 183 that involves a mantra of sorts: “May I be happy. May I be safe. May I have food, shelter, and comfort. May I be free from suffering. May I be peaceful.”

I have extensive notes, ideas that I want to pursue. And, I think I would overwhelm readers if I tried to write about it all. As well, it would be a disservice to both potential readers and Wegela. For me, this is the type of book that one needs to experience in its entirety, to explore contemplative psychotherapy—its precepts and practices—and to play with the concepts presented, first hand, not just in a book review.