Contemplative Psychotherapy Essentials: Enriching your Practice with Buddhist Psychology

An interview with Karen Kissel Wegela, PhD

By Nancy Eichhorn, PhD

"When our aspiration is to let our brilliant sanity invite and support our clients' discovery of their own brilliant sanity, we are practicing contemplative psychotherapy" (p.257)

A teenage boy came to therapy because he thought something was terribly wrong with him. While playing basketball, he suddenly became self-conscious. Now, some therapists might look for what's wrong—performance anxiety, self-esteem issues, teenage angst—their focus on psychopathology in order to create a treatment plan. Karen Kissel Wegela, PhD, however, prefers to recognize her clients' "brilliant sanity".

"I'm more interested in sanity not psychopathology," Wegela said with a laugh then added that she did teach a course in psychopathology years ago.

After speaking with him, she realized that what the teen thought was wrong was not, in fact, a problem. "He became aware of his experience," Wegela said, then explained that brilliant sanity is the non-dualistic, unconditioned mind that all of us have or are. It references the unconditional nature of human experience. The underlying nature of who and what we are regardless of the specifics of what we are experiencing.

"When I write about brilliant sanity, I am talking about mind," Wegela said, then stressed that it is not the dualistic mind. Brilliant sanity is more aligned with the nondualistic mind as opposed to the dualistic mind, the absolute mind as opposed to the relative mind, the unconditional versus the conditional. "Mind is not just consciousness, which is usually dualistic having a sense of

someone who is conscious of something else. Rather, it is the space, the emptiness within which we perceive direct experience.

"For instance as I'm sitting here talking with you, and I am moving in and out of being aware of thoughts, they come and go, and I am not confused about what's a thought and what is reality. Just because I think it doesn't mean it's real. This concept so changed my life. Awareness is a larger perspective than recognition. It is knowing thoughts are coming and going but not getting caught up in them. Awareness offers a larger capacity."

A Bit of Background

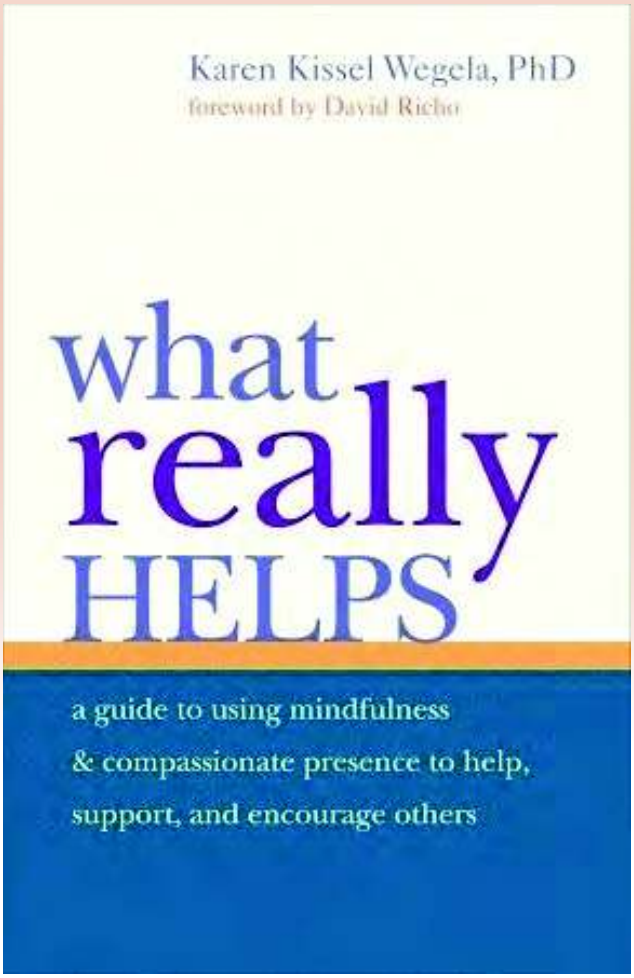
A former East coast high school English teacher, Wegela enjoyed her one-to-one time with students. She listened to their concerns, supported their growth and experience. A short stint in Colorado, the need to earn credits to raise her pay scale, and a serendipitous decision to take a counseling course lead her to psychology and from there to Buddhism.

During the course of her studies, Wegela realized that Buddha's teachings paralleled her psychotherapeutic work: address painful emotions, seek to understand the source of the psychological pain and its relief, and come from a place of authenticity and genuine compassion.

In 1981, Wegela relocated to Colorado and joined the faculty at Naropa University in the masters in contemplative psychotherapy program. The past 34 years Wegela has published three books and numerous book chapters and articles. She works in private practice as well as teaches. Her intention in writing *Contemplative Psychotherapy Essentials* was to show how this approach, which originated and was developed at Naropa, offers the potential to enrich the work of therapists with different theoretical orientations.

"I never started out to write any of my three books," she says with a hint of laughter, a sense of humility. She is present, personal. She shares her own journey in person and in her books. And no, you don't need to be Buddhist to experience contemplative psychotherapy.

Her first book (1996), *How to Be a Help instead of a Nuisance* (re-issued in 2011 as *What Really Helps: Using Mindfulness & Compassionate Presence to Help, Support, and Encourage Others*) stemmed from tape recorded class lectures and presentations, the audience's natural desire to want copies, and Wegela's compassionate response to say, "Yes, of course." But, a friend said, "No, you can't give the recordings away. You need that material for your book."



"What book?" Wegela said. Her friend "pestered her" so Wegela sat down and listened to the tapes. She had them transcribed. Then, she set them aside and wrote. "I sit at the computer, and I talk to the computer through my fingers. I'd sit down and knock out a chapter at a time. I'd been teaching the material for 15 years so it was already well-digested. It took me four and a half months to write the book. The second book took eight months. I knew that material well, too, from having taught it a long time.

Wegela sent her first book proposal to a friend and editor at Shambhala publications. It was "an easy entry." She was asked to write another book—got the contract through an email. "Both books flowed."

"My writing style is chatty, like I'm talking. That's my teaching style, how I speak," Wegela shared. "The process of getting words on paper (or on the computer) is not hard for me. I was lucky. In the 11th grade I had an English teacher who admired Hemingway. He required us to write simply; it was enormously helpful."

"When the first book came out I thought, *Oh . . . My . . . God . . . , people are going to read this, they'll hear all of my personal stories*. I don't think about that when I'm writing. I'm pretty out there in all my books," Wegela said.

"This book was harder to write," she continued. "It's not straightforward from a class I had taught. I had to figure out what I wanted to say; I had to ask myself, what do I actually want to say? Once I knew, I had no trouble saying it. I work at making my writing accessible, and when I am stuck I say what I want to say out loud and it comes to me."

"What really helped me write this book was the question one editor asked, 'What do you think about when you are with a client, what is your experience?'"

Another useful technique Wegela employs is to envision an audience when writing. The first book was her brother-in-law. The second a colleague, and the third was her niece who had just finished licensing as a marital and family therapist. "I'm not literally writing to her, to these people, but I thought about the audience as young therapists just starting out

or equally someone wanting to enrich their practice," Wegela said.

The Path to the Third Book

An email appeared in Wegela's inbox from an editor at W. W. Norton & Company who knew Wegela had conducted a workshop in Toronto related to Buddhism and psychotherapy. She invited Wegela to write a book about Buddhism and psychopathology. Wegela said no (not being interested in psychopathology) and then pitched a book on *mandala* (a Buddhist way of looking at situations which highlights not only their entirety but also the inter-relationships within them).

"The Board at Norton rejected it, saying it was too Buddhist. I revised it a bit and resubmitted it to Shambhala. They rejected it, saying it was too clinical. Both sent nice emails/letters saying they'd love to have me write a book for them," Wegela said.

Shambhala suggested a book concept, but Wegela preferred at that point to go with a more mainstream publisher in order to reach a larger audience with different theoretical backgrounds. It took several proposals to two Norton editors before Wegela signed a contract. However, they wanted Wegela to make it more about the application of contemplative techniques.

"The irony is that contemplative psychology is much more about point of view, how one sees things rather than about application per se. It may be more about what I don't do. I was perplexed about how to manage that. There are not many techniques in the book, except for the mandala approaches at the end."

The Norton editor wanted all of the Buddhist psychology to be in the first chapter and the rest of the book to focus on applications. Wegela did her best, though she inserted psychology as needed throughout the book. Chapter 1. Buddha's teachings. "They are as straight forward and accurate as I knew how to be," Wegela said. "I wanted to share the basics: the Four Noble truths, mindfulness, awareness, meditation, the fixed sense of self.

"A fixed sense of self or ego is not same ego as in Western psychology. With a fixed self we believe something is in us that is unchanging, separate, and solid. The Buddhist teachings emphasize impermanence: everything inside of us and outside of us changes, nothing remains the same. The main obstacle to experiencing brilliant sanity is our attempt to maintain and

defend a mistaken sense of who and what we are."

"I wanted to be sure these ideas were in there, to be sure and talk about Buddha's teachings and the practice of compassion. I wanted to go beyond simple mindfulness as presented as the latest *in* thing."

Mindfulness, Meditation, Maitri

"What would make me happiest is for readers to become interested in meditation as a way to work with their own minds. There is nothing else like it. Beyond that, mindfulness, exchange, obstacles to recognizing the mistaken belief in solid self. I don't care what people do with it as much as wanting them to connect with themselves and to bring more curiosity to their experience," she said.

Meditation, Wegela shared, is not about adding anything extra, you simply sit with your mind the way it is. It is quite ordinary. Her current, favorite traditional metaphor for meditation is seeing how a glass of dusty water settles on its own and becomes clear. The dust settles, the water becomes clear.

"Most people don't know how to do that even if they are curious about the mind," she said and stressed again that the mind is not thoughts. "Because we don't generally experience our minds and bodies directly, we are confused about what is really happening. That leads to suffering. Meditation is a powerful way of working with emotion, too. As you can tell, I'm big on ordinary."

Wegela is also big on *maitri*—loving-kindness—which, she said, is the antidote to self-aggression. According to Wegela, self-aggression is rampant in Western culture—it's dominate in American culture, European, Asia, Australia, New Zealand. "When teaching in Chile, it was rampant," she said. Advertisements, the constant barrage that you are not okay the way you are contributes. The opposite of self-aggression, however, is not that I am okay, Wegela said.

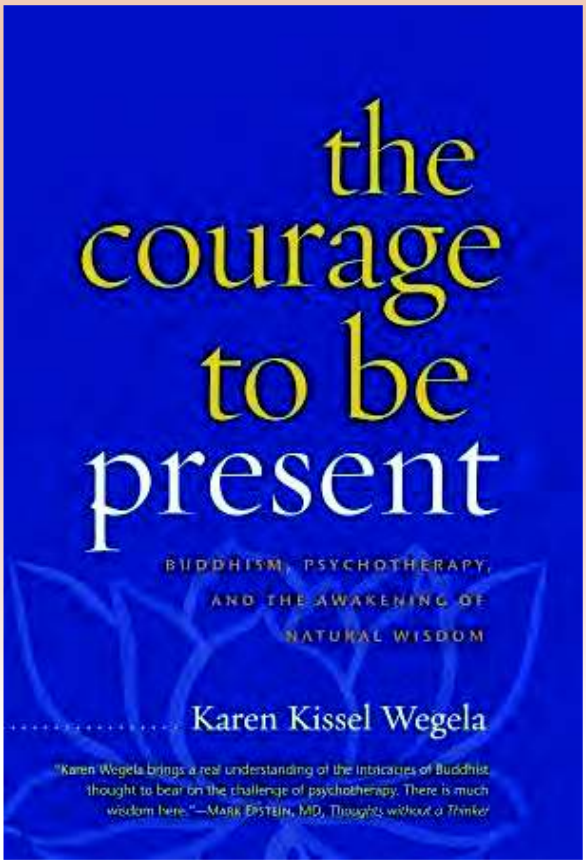
"It's that you could be with yourself the way that you are, you don't reject yourself. What is important is making friends with oneself. To accept yourself is not the same as saying you like yourself. We can experience ourselves, be with ourselves and we may not always like what we find. Accepting ourselves means being willing to see what is actually happening in our experience and letting it be what it is.

Bringing it Together

The key part of the path for Wegela is the therapeutic relationship itself, to cultivate genuine relationships. The most important thing in therapy is having an authentic relationship.

"It's more important how you are with yourself not what technique you use. It's about showing up and being a real person. The heart of the matter, whether you meditate, whether your mind is empty or not, is kindness. That tops the list. It's hard to be kind if you are not mindful."

Karen Kissel Wegela, PhD, a therapist in private practice, has been studying and teaching the integration of Buddhist principles and psychotherapy for over thirty years as a professor in the MA Contemplative Psychotherapy program at Naropa University. She is also the author of The Courage to Be Present and What Really Helps.



To read excerpts from Karen's books please visit our website:
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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: "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.