

Being “Brilliant Sanity”-My journal reflection on mindfulness practice

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“I found the root to mindfulness is being brilliant sanity.”

Background

The term “Brilliant sanity” was coined by Tibetan meditation master Chogyam Trungpa Rimpoche (1939-1987), the founder of the Shambala tradition with its origin in Tibet and, later, the founder of Naropa University in 1974 in the United States. Trungpa used several English wordings to capture the Sanskrit word ‘Tathagatagarba,’ which refers to the unconditional sanity or basic healthiness inherent in everyone. In the Buddhist tradition, this is known as “Buddha nature,” our basic enlightened or awakened- hence brilliant -nature. In Shambala teaching, it is known as “basic goodness.” What does this mean? It means that no matter what physical or mental state of being we are in, depressed, confused, clear, stupid, wise, frightened, psychotic, we are by nature fundamentally sane. Whether we are sick or well in the conventional sense is inseparable from this fundamental nature and is, therefore, workable just as it is. This is the core path emphasized for the practice of contemplative psychotherapy and said to have been born from two parents: the wisdom traditions of Buddhism and Shambala and the clinical traditions of western psychology, especially the humanistic school at the Naropa University; a Buddhist-inspired and nonsectarian university and the birthplace of the modern mindfulness movement.

The term brilliant sanity was later used as the book’s title by Francis J. Kaklauskas Susan Nimmanheminda, Louis Hoffman, and MacAndrew S. Jack (2008). *Brilliant Sanity: Buddhist Approaches to Psychotherapy*, Boulder, Colorado; published at University of Rockies Press in USA. Most of the book contents are still used to deliver the Master of Arts in Contemplative Psychology (MACP) program at Naropa University by creating an “enlightened society” based on bravery and gentleness, which each person’s inherent wakefulness can be acknowledged and nurtured. Later in 2011, the book’s same content was also adopted by the Royal University of Bhutan for the Post Graduate Diploma of Guidance and Counselling (PgDGC) program, delivered in collaboration with the Naropa University to the first batch of School Guidance Counsellors in Bhutan.

I was one of the fortunate recipients of the PgDGC

program at the College of Education in Samtse. The entire two years of the mixed-mode program were based on contemplative psychotherapy - theory and practice with particular emphasis on intensive mindfulness meditation. A hallmark of the program was the transmission of wisdom and the practice of compassion-committed, at the heart of what it means to be a fully awakened human-of being. “Brilliant sanity” is elaborated in three primary qualities: openness, clarity, and compassion. By then, I had just begun my career as a School Guidance Counsellor in Bhutan. Although mindfulness was introduced in schools in 2008 in Bhutan as part of the Gross National Happiness (GNH) program, yet the mindfulness program for the PgDGC was framed slightly differently within a psychotherapeutic paradigm akin to the approaches to contemplative psychotherapy; the so-called blend of the eastern Buddhist tradition of mindfulness and western psychology theories, which amazed me. Since then, I was not only fascinated by the term brilliant sanity but developed a passion for mindfulness practice as well and went to the extent of practicing it with my clients in therapeutic sessions, with the belief that every human being, irrespective of their background, possesses a quality of basic sanity- ‘Brilliant sanity,’ a Buddha-nature, or the innate potential of basic human goodness within.

My intention in this reflection is to highlight Brilliant sanity’s essential features through the theoretical knowledge and practical experience I have gained from the contemplative psychotherapy tradition. I have understood from the contemplative tradition that it comes from the sitting practice of mindfulness/ awareness meditation to develop a highly sophisticated understanding of the mind’s functioning in sanity and confusion. From western psychology comes the investigation of human development stages, a precise language for discussing mental disturbance, and the intimate method of working with others known as “psychotherapy,” where Brilliant sanity I found was the root teaching.

The feeling of ambiguity, a beginner’s mind

As I began my inner journey with the practice of contemplative psychotherapy with mindfulness as the core value and inner wisdom discovering the sanity within myself, I started to get a feeling that the combined concepts of east and west, the so-called contemplative psychotherapy, with my work as a counselor is an epitomic match, and I was curious to know more about the in-depth wisdom of Brilliant sanity. On the other hand, I was confused, and I did not really see how to go about

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it. I had so many questions in my mind, such as. Should I have my clients meditate instead of going to counseling? Should I teach my clients to meditate? What if they were not interested in meditation? Wouldn't that be aggressive of me to require it as a therapist? As a novice mediator and a counsellor, I was utterly stuck. I wondered how the two things might go together?

As the PgDGC program combined a retreat cum theory and practice lead by Dr Karen Kissel Wegela, a western born Buddhist scholar, author, and a professor at graduate contemplative psychotherapy program, who had been teaching the integration of Buddhist principles and psychotherapy at Naropa University for about 35 years, my ambiguity towards luminosity of mind became more apparent. It was so exciting for me to meet her, to be a part of the program, and to share my passions at once in the entire retreat of the mindfulness meditation program at the college. Since then, my spirit of mindfulness practice remained consistent for the entire retreat program and later became the core value of my personal life and professional wellbeing.

In the following year, when I ended up moving to Drukgyel as a full-time school guidance counsellor and began counseling and the practice of mindfulness meditation in school. I found the brilliant sanity stood out to me; a reminder of that in myself, it means kindness, spaciousness, allowing things to happen the way they need to happen, clarity through stepping back and seeking perspective, and I started loving to be able to offer those things to my clients. In working with two students who had struggled with depression and trauma for years after the significant car accident that occurred in 2012 in which three students died on the spot, I came to know it is kinder and more effective to let my clients go at their own rhythm. I was not ready to directly address the clients' trauma, but I trusted the brilliant sanity of their own self-chosen pace.

From then, I was able to practice mindfulness consistently as a strategy for self-care and prevent burn-out for myself and the clients in the therapeutic sessions. Since then, I have had many opportunities to go for several retreat campaigns coordinated by the Royal University of Bhutan presided by various professors from the Naropa University, joined by other Buddhist monks and scholars who came as tutors for the residential graduate exchange program at Samtse College of Education. I must say that it was a very enriching and in-depth learning experience for me as a counsellor. I have learned that the integration of Buddhist psychological principles with the practice of psychotherapy is called "Contemplative Psychotherapy," which is a bit of a misnomer since to "contemplate" means to "think about." Like meditation itself, Contemplative Psychotherapy is about experience: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, and recognizing thoughts as thoughts without getting caught up in them. It is somewhat attuned with the pace of our own nature of mind by simply being fully aware, spacious in the present moment, and through befriending our own emotions.

The Awakening - We have "Brilliant sanity," but we do not always know it.

Mindfulness practice in the close context of Brilliant sanity, as I realized, is said to be established in four ways: 'watching the body as body,' then 'feelings as feelings,' the 'mind as mind' and conceptual 'qualities as qualities.' A mediator must be 'determined, fully aware, mindful, overcoming his longing for,

and discontent with the world' (Trungpa, 1984). As I continued learning more and more, I realized that the first focus is breath. 'Just mindful, he breathes,' the Buddha says of a monk. 'As he breathes in a long breath, he knows he is breathing in a long breath; as he breathes out a long breath, he knows he is breathing out a long breath.' Shallow or deep, he inhales and exhales, 'experiencing the whole body' while 'watching the way things arise and pass, so 'his mindfulness is that there is a body' becomes 'knowledge and recollection in full degree' (Trungpa, 1994).

Gradually, the more I practiced and be myself of my own qualities of who I am, I realized that the "root teaching" of the program is "Brilliant Sanity." I was intrigued by this term. It means that who we most fundamentally are 'Is brilliant sanity.' Professor Dr. Wegela taught in the retreat that it is our nature; it is what we are, no matter what we might be feeling at any moment. We are brilliantly sane if we feel happy; we are brilliantly sane if we feel depressed. We are even brilliantly sane if we feel crazy and totally out of touch with reality. Brilliant sanity describes our human nature, who we most basically are. We are not always in touch with our brilliant sanity, but it is still there and available for us to tap into. Usually, we experience glimpses of brilliant sanity and do not even recognize it. It is never easy to describe brilliant sanity because, while it is something we can experience, it is not something we can capture in words.

Brilliant sanity can be understood better from the three main essential features of the path to contemplative psychotherapy, adopted from the first family of the five "Buddha families" of the Buddhist tradition. The first Buddha family, the "Buddha," is related to the element of space and to the recognition of brilliant sanity, which includes spaciousness or openness, clarity, and compassion described below:

Openness or spaciousness means that we can experience whatever comes to us through our sense perceptions, our emotions, or our thoughts. "Well, of course, we can," you might say. The idea here, though, is that often we turn away from our experience. We usually pull away from intense feelings or awkwardness or discomfort of all kinds. We try to distract ourselves because we simply do not want to include some things in our experience. For example, we might drive by the scene of a car accident and avert our gaze. We do not want to feel the feelings that might come up. It is almost as though we think we could hurt our very beings by feeling anything negative. In the brilliant sanity sense, openness means that we CAN feel all our experiences; pleasant ones, painful ones, and neutral ones. It does not mean that they will all become pleasant or even neutral. They will still be just what they are. Openness means that we do not have to shy away.

Clarity means that we can bring mindful awareness to all our experiences. Not only are we able to be open to them, but we can also receive them with a sense of accuracy and precision. To return to the car accident example, clarity means that we might notice glass on the road, a policeman directing traffic, and other details at the scene. We could also notice the fear that arises in the body; the catch in the throat, the tightening in the chest. We could also notice the thoughts that are running through our minds; imagining someone who might be hurt or killed, the thoughts of our children and beloved ones we always want to protect. All kinds of experiences might arise, and we could recognize them without distortion.

Compassion is the desire to alleviate suffering and the ability to recognize our connection with others. When we are truly

present with others, we might even feel their pain. Compassion is the willingness to do so. I have always found this the most intriguing quality of brilliant sanity. It suggests that we do not have to learn compassion; we are compassionate. We need only to learn how to stop avoiding our compassionate, tender hearts. Returning once more to the car accident, our compassion might manifest as stopping and offering help if there is no one already taking care of people who might be hurt. Paradoxically, it might also show up as our turning away. We turn away because we feel connected; we feel pain when we see others in pain. That, too, is evidence of our tender hearts.

These three qualities of brilliant sanity; spaciousness, clarity, and compassion; are inherent in the client, in the therapist, in everyone, and thus I have learned that these are the most important qualities that I, as a psychotherapist, need to have the ability to connect with someone by being completely present.

Therapeutic application

In Contemplative Psychotherapy, a counselor's goal is to help the clients connect with or re-connect with their brilliant sanity. A counselor's job in a therapeutic alliance is to recognize the brilliant sanity that the clients are already showing and help them recognize it. A counselor can build a client's resilience based on their strength, which is a brilliant sanity in nature. Beyond that, counsellors can also work to identify and manage the obstacles to experiencing brilliant sanity, our own, and that of the clients.

Thich Nath Hanh said the present moment is the only time over which we have dominion. And he said, the most important person then is always the person you are with right now, the one who is right in front of you, for who knows if you will have dealings with any other person in the future, not even in the next moment. That is the miracle of mindfulness. Siegal (2010) supports the similar concept in the therapeutic session of being present, which involves the experience of openness to whatsoever arises in reality, being open to now, to whatever is. We come to acknowledge our own proclivities and, in that awareness, free ourselves to move from peak to plateau with ease and will.

What did the Buddha prescribe to treat our confusion? According to Dr. Wegela, the first three Noble Truths taught by the Buddha parallel the ancient Indian medical model of diagnosis, etiology, and prognosis. With the fourth Noble Truth, the last one, we come at last to the treatment, tells that the Fourth Noble Truth is The Truth of the Path. The idea of a "path" is that we cannot do it all at once. We need to find a way to proceed step by step toward discovering our awakened natures, our brilliant sanity, which we counselors do by strictly following the process of counseling in the therapeutic sessions.

Basic mindfulness posture and discipline in practice

Throughout the retreat, I have learned a few basic body postures practiced vigorously during the entire retreat, a kind of discipline to be maintained, especially during the formal retreat. This is beyond the therapeutic practice and nothing to do with the clients in the counselling session. Still, it is a fundamental discipline for serious practitioners that needs to be adhered to. However, I have tried these positions in the psycho-educational

classes with the students in high schools for the purpose of calm abiding and to enhance the mental wellbeing of the students in general, but not solely as part of the therapeutic practice.

1. Noble Upright Seated Position: Legs crossed half lotus with hands gently on the lap with the forefinger touching the thumb.
2. Noble Upright Seated Position: palms rested gently on knees with a sense of balance and softness in the hands. (Double earth witnessing mudra)
3. Noble Upright Standing Position: hands raised palms facing you at a comfortable height and angle with minimal effort and tension.
4. Noble Upright Position seated in a chair: knees bend vertically, feet facing straight and resting flat on the floor in front position.
5. Noble Silence: a discipline maintained throughout the retreat, no exchange of speech, but entirely being silent with awareness, openness (spaciousness), clarity, and compassion)
6. Walking Meditation: walk with noble silence, slow steps noticing every movement of the steps by being fully aware, open, and watching our own breath as we move around.
7. Aimless Wandering: move aimlessly and connect with the nature of our own mind with the serenity of the nature around and appreciating the beauty (the calmness) of both outer and the inner world. Accepting nature and letting it be there in a way as it is in its own rhythm.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I found the root to mindfulness practice is being brilliant sanity in contemplative psychotherapy. The training and the practice of mindfulness helped me let go of any ideal notions of how I work as a therapist should proceed and perceive the session as fostering mindfulness so that I am better able to be present with my clients; to recognize their sanity as well as their pathology, to be open to exchange and also let go, and better able to acknowledge our own obstacles and the blind spots which makes possible our essential interconnectedness. The principles and the practices of mindfulness/awareness and compassion help the contemplative psychotherapist cultivate his/her own brilliant sanity and that of their clients. Knowing the fundamentals of who we really are and recognizing our own mind's nature through openness is like the sky where all the things occur, such as the weather. Just as the sky is not disturbed by the weather, our mind is not affected by the clouds, hailstorms, pleasant and unpleasant emotions that come and go. The mind itself is spacious, empty. This quality is not graspable; we cannot hang on to it or even touch it. Yet, what I understood from the wisdom of brilliant sanity is recognizing my own experience of being in the state of awareness/awakened. From the Buddhist perspective, an understanding of emptiness as a space with nothing in it is incomplete. Emptiness is more than just a vacuum, more than the absence of experience. It is also a quality of awareness or wakefulness. Joining experience with awareness is clarity, the perception of things as they are without distorting that perception in any way. It sounds quite simple, but it is quite difficult. We generally filter our experience through our expectations, thoughts, preconceptions, and so on, which happen in the present moment. When the obstacles to spaciousness and clarity are dissolved, the impulse towards

compassionate action arises naturally. Weggela (1994) states that when we hear a child's cry, our first instinct is to help. It is only in the flicker of the next moment that we can quickly come up with reasons why we should not interfere and why we should hold back. If we look closely at our experience, that first reaction is a compassionate impulse, before confusion arises, an inherent warmth and tender-heartedness (pp. 28-29).

The Buddha's teaching on becoming more present in our lives is to take a gradual path, just like a string of a guitar, "not too tight, not too loose"; the middle path. I have always seen this wisdom as truly kind teaching and recommend my clients take these noble paths when their minds are overwhelmed by negative emotions. Instead of expecting ourselves quickly to be more present, just because we have heard about it, we treat ourselves with gentleness and friendliness like a feather touching the bubbles of water softly by taking an unhurried approach; befriending our emotion, rather than seeing it as a problem to be avoided. The path that the Buddha described is to bring mindfulness to all aspects of our lives. We can bring mindfulness to whatever we are doing or experiencing in the present moment. Instead of creating suffering by trying to avoid our direct experience, we pay attention by being brilliant sanity.

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