

The gift of hospitality

Psychotherapist and Zen Buddhist monk **Manu Bazzano** explores the concept of hospitality and its significance to both Buddhism and the therapeutic relationship

There are several threads linking counselling and psychotherapy to Buddhist practice. One of them is the aspiration to offer genuine hospitality. What is hospitality? And why is it crucial to both counselling and *Buddhist practice*?

A Buddhist practitioner is inspired by the *Dharma* (the body of teachings given by the Buddha); by embarking on the path, he/she aspires to become a *bodhisattva*, a word which literally means 'awakened being'. In its long history from early iconography to the present day, the figure of the bodhisattva has gradually shed the otherworldly garment of Buddhist archetype in order to assume the features of an ordinary human being. Accordingly, if it once described someone akin to a saint or a person to whom a special revelation had been granted, the term can now be read existentially, ie someone who has developed an aspiration to be useful to others. A bodhisattva has realised the unsatisfactory nature of life and has acknowledged the inherent suffering of the human condition: rather than chasing after enlightenment, special knowledge or the ability to perform wonders, he or she aspires to act with wisdom and compassion for the benefit of all beings. Rather than a Platonic archetype *outside* everyday reality, he or she is an ordinary person like you and me, living and breathing in the phenomenal world. Rather than the carrier of special messages from

some higher dimension, the awakened being cultivates spaciousness in his heart/mind so as to make room for the presence of another human being.

There are some similarities here with Christianity, particularly with the unswerving way it is expressed by Søren Kierkegaard. Inspired as well as haunted by the biblical figure of Abraham, in his book *Fear and Trembling*¹ he comes up with a mesmerising creation, a figure he calls *the knight of faith*, someone who paradoxically renounces *and* embraces the world². Kierkegaard's spirituality was grounded in everyday matters yet harboured a tremendous faith, which could be appreciated, I believe, as a *fundamental trust without an object*. Some counsellors would perhaps define this faith as trust in the *actualising tendency*³: this notion, now under attack in a landscape which places great emphasis on neo-Darwinism and evolutionary psychology, is nevertheless valuable in renewing a pledge in favour of the ineffable nature of life in general and human life in particular.

As a consequence of this pledge, a counsellor might strive to host both the 'positive' as well as the 'negative' aspects of a client, bracketing the desire to see positive change taking place in its more obvious manifestations. Upholding a more neutral yet benevolent attitude towards different *Gestalts* may in turn help the client be a better host/container of his/her own emotions

and feelings, including those which are troublesome, painful and disruptive. Rogers had of course a phrase for this: *unconditional positive regard*⁴, a notion which has been variously understood and often misconstrued.

An act of generosity

A bodhisattva is committed to the practice of the six *paramitas*, or 'perfections' – the first of these being the practice of generosity. By this very willingness to open up to others, he/she is granted admission to the legendary palace of truth. As it turns





out, the most direct way of accessing it is not by esoteric practices and special yogic tricks, but through an act of relinquishment, an act of *generosity*: instead of an exotic search for mystical revelation, the Buddha invites us to make *adequate room for the other*. By leaning out of one's imaginary self-bound existence, one discovers spaciousness.

A counsellor too makes room for the client, and in this way makes available the remarkable gift of therapy. In his masterpiece *Minima Moralia*⁴, Theodor Adorno argued

that we moderns have forgotten how to give presents: we are no longer able to give something for nothing, let alone the gift of one's heart and mind, the gift of what Carl Rogers liked to call *presence*³. That a genuine gift has become such a rare thing gives even more significance to the practice of counselling. Years of training, placement work, self-care and professional development can then be seen as all geared towards honing and refining this subtle capability: to genuinely provide space in one's heart and mind in order to

receive another. Perhaps what we are trying to cultivate as counsellors is *negative capability*, to use the felicitous term employed by the great English poet John Keats in a letter of 1817. Keats defined negative capability as the talent for 'being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'⁵. He saw it as an intuitive, insightful way of relating to the world which respects its ineffable, unfathomable nature, rather than desiring to capture it and 'understand' it.

Right-brain and left-brain responses

Our individual response to the presence of another human being certainly awakes similar perplexities, to which we might respond in a variety of ways. One way would of course be a 'left-brain' response: cognitive, geared towards encouraging the client to implement positive changes and a certain degree of control over his/her life. Another way, if I were to try a translation of Keats' powerful poetic insight into the language of science, would be a right-brain response. We know that, broadly speaking, the right-brain rules over empathy and inter-subjectivity, emphasises the journey over the arrival, asserts the primacy of perception, resists a reduction of lived experience to mere utility⁶. We now recognise that interdisciplinary developmental research (as evidenced by pioneering neuro-psychoanalyst Allan Schore)⁷ suggests that 'the evolutionary mechanism of creation of a right-brain to right-brain attachment bond of social-emotional communication and the maturation of affects, represent the key events in infancy more than the emergence of complex cognitions'⁷. One significant upshot is that effective therapy needs to be right-brain to right-brain communication⁷, something which might call for a redress of the balance after three decades of dominance of cognitive approaches and neuro-behaviourism⁸.

Counselling as gift

It has been argued that therapy is a form of *potlatch*⁹. The term, loosely translated as 'gift', refers to the

primary economic system practised by indigenous people of the Pacific Northwest coast. Theirs was a *gift economy* rather than an economy based on profit. It was banned in the late 19th century at the urging of missionaries and government agents who considered it a 'worse than useless custom'¹⁰ – in their eyes a profligate, fruitless practice and even contrary to civilised values. It was widely practised, much later, during the heyday of May 1968, within the *Situationist International* network, a cultural and political movement which gave us art and architecture, inspired social insurgence as well as seminal philosophical works such as Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, where we read of the 'parodies of real dialogue and gift-giving'¹¹ of alienated existence, and conversely of how uncommon and precious authentic dialogue and gift-giving can be.

It is easy, from our supposedly more sophisticated, at times cynical, 'postmodern' perspective to see these modes of exchange as naive and earnest. The fact remains that a real gift is not only rare, but quite difficult to match; it even creates a subtle (and not so subtle) obligation. The gift of therapy is in a sense most unusual; perhaps the client's payment represents a way – our accepted way as modern Westerners – to respond to this extraordinary gift. Of course this gift is remarkable only if the counsellor has practised the ways of hospitality.

What do we mean when we say 'welcome'?

What makes a good host? First of all, the recognition that an autarchic existence is a delusion: no one is entirely self-sufficient; no one can exist in isolation. Secondly, hospitality is *active*, in so far as the attributes of concern and care do not dwell automatically within the domain of 'being', as some philosophers like Heidegger want us to believe. The most important point has to do with the fact that the host must first of all be a *guest*. My native Italian language has one and the same word to describe host and guest: *ospite* (incidentally, this does not mean that

Italians are necessarily better hosts, as the recent increase in xenophobic sentiments in Italy has made clear). When I say that the host must be first of all a guest, I mean that in receiving the guest, the host is himself received by his own dwelling hence fully understands his own condition of guest in his own dwelling.

What do we mean when we say 'welcome'? Is there perhaps an assumption that this dwelling, this house, this territory is *mine*, and that you, the guest, the other, the client, are welcome to enter it for a while? I am reminded of an ex-client who, in the process of moving house, leaving the town where he had lived and worked for many years, poignantly reflected on how the houses and lodgings that see us through births, marriages, children, separation and death, very often last much longer than we do. I thought of Rainer Maria Rilke, who, in his eighth Duino Elegy¹² asks: *who made us like this, that no matter what we do, we always look as someone who is about to leave?* – or something to that effect.

A cup of tea

There is another, more fundamental, point as to why hospitality is crucial to human interaction, and hence to counselling. I have studied and reflected on this point for several years and hope to bring out the results of these meditations in English as I have done in my native language¹³; here it might suffice to say that it is only through hospitality that individuality comes into being. Summoned by another, called to respond, the response creates me. Called to respond, I step into that shared domain that the neurologist and philosopher Kurt Goldstein¹⁴, forerunner of Gestalt psychology and a man inspired by Goethe, calls *the immediate*.

The Zen Buddhist tradition emphasises the beauty and simplicity of the tea ceremony. This does not need to be mannered or overly precious. Offering a cup of tea to the guest involves both guest and host. Both need to be present to the interaction. The offering, and the acceptance, is also *immediate*, and both step into a shared domain, the

in-between, a realm beyond the mere dialogical sphere, a place of coming-into-being, made possible by a suspension of judgment – not a technique or a strategy but the unadulterated modality of *encounter* – increasingly rare now that we have greater, better and smarter opportunities to be indifferent to one another as we hop from iPhones to iPads to Facebook and Twitter... ■

Manu Bazzano is a psychotherapist and trainer. He has practised meditation in various traditions since 1978, and in 2004 was ordained as a Zen Buddhist monk. His latest book, Phenomenology of Hospitality, will come out in spring 2012. www.manubazzano.com

References

- 1 Kierkegaard S. Fear and trembling. London: Penguin; 1985.
- 2 Gamsu M. Passion and detachment. Journal of the Society of Existential Analysis. 2010; 21(1)63-75.
- 3 Rogers CR. A way of being. New York: Houghton Mifflin; 1980.
- 4 Adorno T. Minima moralia: reflections from a damaged life. London: Verso; 2005.
- 5 Keats J. The letters of John Keats. London: Adamant Media; 2005.
- 6 McGilchrist I. The master and his emissary: the divided brain and the making of the modern world. New Haven, London: Yale University Press; 2009.
- 7 Schore A. The science of the art of psychotherapy. A one-day seminar. University of Cambridge, Faculty of Education. 8 October 2011.
- 8 Panksepp J. Affective neuroscience: the foundations of human and animal emotions. New York: Oxford University Press; 1998.
- 9 Zizek S. In defence of lost causes. London: Verso; 2008.
- 10 Sproat GM. In: Cole D, Chaikin I. An iron hand upon the people: the law against the potlatch on the northwest coast. Vancouver; 1990.
- 11 Debord G. The society of the spectacle. London: Rebel Press; 1983.
- 12 Rilke RM. Duino elegies. London: Chatto and Windus; 1975.
- 13 Bazzano M. Phenomenology of hospitality, manuscript. London: 2011. Originally published as Chi ama lo straniero: verso una fenomenologia dell'ospitalità, Milan: Ipoc Press; 2011.
- 14 Goldstein K. The organism. New York: Zone Books; 1995/1934.