The role of the Brahmavihāra

in

psychotherapeutic practice

The following is an essay written early in 2006 for an MA-course in Buddhist Psychotherapy. It addresses some questions on the relevance and the relationship of a key aspect of Buddhist understanding and practice (namely the Four Brahmavihàra) to the psychotherapeutic setting and, in particular, to their role in Core Process Psychotherapy.

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ekamantaṃ nisinno kho asibandhakaputto gāmaṇi bhagavantaṃ etadavoca || nanu bhante | bhagavā sabbapāṇabhūtahitānukampī viharatīti || evaṃ gāmaṇi | tathāgato sabbapāṇabhūtahitānukampī viharatīti ||
(S iv 314)

Sitting down to one side the headman Asibandhakaputto addressed the Blessed One thus: »Does the Blessed One abide in compassion and care for the welfare of all sentient beings? – »Ideed, headman, it is so. The Tathāgata abides in compassion and care for the welfare of all sentient beings.«
(Saṁyutta Nikāya S 42, 7)

Introduction

Core Process Psychotherapy is a contemplative Psychotherapy and refers explicitly to a Buddhist understanding of health and mind-development (*bhàvanà*). The following essay is an attempt to understand the concept of the four Brahmavihàra, their place and function in Buddhist mind-training and to address the questions of how they inform and relate to Core Process Psychotherapy.

In **part one** the first segment of the topic will be contextualised. The teaching of the Four Brahmavihàra in their Indian background will be looked at in some detail and aspects of the Buddhist teaching on mind-cultivation relevant to Core Process Psychotherapy will be drawn from.

In **part two** I will be looking briefly at the Western concepts of *presence*, *embodiment*, *holding environment*, *relational field* and *Source-Being-Self*.

Part three is dedicated to a brief exploration of the perspectives when we correlate the Brahmavihàra and the depth of Buddhist wisdom teachings with CPP-notions and some relevant concepts that grew out of 130 years of psychological history and research.

Part i – The Teaching of the Brahmavihàra in Buddhist context

The Buddha's Teaching on the Four Brahmavihàra is wide in scope and great in depth. While the territory of their direct experience (kcn, 2005) is universal, timeless and entirely transcultural, the actual concept of the *brahmavihàra* probably has its origins somewhere in pre-Buddhist India.[1] In the Buddhist Teaching the Brahmavihàra take a role of central importance; references to the whole group of Four and to each of them individually can be found from the oldest strata of Buddhist texts (e.g. the Suttanipàta)[2] up to the works of the later commentarial tradition[3] in all the great sections of the Pali Canon and indeed all forms of later Buddhist literature.[4]

The Brahmavihàra, (literally ›Divine/Sublime Abidings‹) or, as they are more often called in the Pali texts, the four *appamaññà* (lit. ›limitless ones‹) are translated as the ›Four Immeasurables‹ or the ›Four Boundless States‹. They are *mettà* – usually translated as loving kindness, *karunà* – compassion, *mudita* – empathetic joy and *upekkhà* – equanimity.

Literally ›at the heart‹ of human experience, they are qualities of mind referred to in the early Pali texts where they are understood to take place in – and in turn affect – a continuum of experience called ›*citta*‹. The Pali term *citta* is rendered in English both as

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[1]) The Brahmavihàra are enumerated in Jaina literature in the *Tattvàrthàdhigamasùtra* (7.6) and in Patañjalì's *Yoga Sùtra-s*, (i, 33 *samàdhi-pàda)*. In both texts they are found as a group (maitrì, karunà, mudità, upeksà) without explicitly being referred to as ›*brahmavihàra*‹. While the dating of the Yoga Sùtras is problematic (learned opinion suggests a range from the 2nd century B.C. to the 4th century A.D.) it seems undecided whether these texts show Buddhist influences.

[2]) E.g. Snip 73 (Khaggavisàna-sutta); M i 36 / MN 7 (Vatthùpama-sutta); M ii 74 (Maghadeva-sutta); can be considered as *locus classicus*; D i 251 / D 13 (Tevijja-sutta), many more

[3]) Pts ii 136 (Maggangavàro); Vism chap. ix, (Brahmavihàraniddeso/ Description of the Divine Abidings)

[4]) For a late example see e.g. Machik Labdrön: An Explanation of the Four Limitless Attitudes (Machik Namshe)

›mind‹ and as ›heart‹[5] and represents the process we intuit as the experiential centre of our being. The nature of the *citta* is described in the Pali-Suttas as inherently ›luminous‹ and pure (*pabhassaram*). Rather than being an immutable nucleus at the core of our existence, the *citta* is dynamic, resonant and highly changeable – indeed, it is ›hard to find a simile for the speed at which it can change‹. The *citta* may be ›malleable‹, ›lofty‹ and ›expansive‹ – or it can be ›neglected‹ and ›obscured with adventitious defilements‹ (A i 7); occasionally, it may even turn into the proverbial ›monkey-mind‹ (*kapicittam;* J 435,6). If ›untroubled‹ and ›tamed‹, it is capable of recognizing ›its own good, the good of others and the common good‹. Most importantly, if understood ›as it truly is‹ (*yathàbhùtam*) it can be developed through cultivation and completely liberated (A i 10).
The Brahmavihàra, the ›Brahma-like abodes‹ are sublime expressions of the *citta* in differing tones of universal empathy. On one level these Brahmavihàra are paradigms of a free mind and Buddhist ideals of how to live in the relational world; they are ›the standard Dhamma practice for the human realm – the realm of being affected by people, events, things ourselves, our own moods, our own limitations and disappointments‹ (Sucitto, 2003)

All four of them refer to a quality of intrinsic non-separateness (kcn, 2005) in human experience and to a set of *inherent* and *boundless* qualities of being, fundamental to all our understanding of health, wellbeing and happiness. On the one hand, being *inherent*, they form the basis of our capacity to relationship and are indispensable to any emotional, personal, social and spiritual development. In this respect it can be said that they are at the core of our nature and constitute our humanity proper. On the other hand, being *boundless*, they are the natural expression of a mind unfettered and not clinging to any self; they manifest the activity of an enlightened heart entirely free from all affective and cognitive impurities and represent the culmination of the Buddhist path.

All of the four Brahmavihàra apply in the human, the relational world. They are essentially forms of love and a profound willingness to see, welcome, accept and resonate with others. The name ›Abiding of Brahma‹ or › Brahma-like abiding‹ comes from the Vedic deity *Brahma*, whom the Buddhists have adopted and given a celestial (albeit impermanent) place in their cosmology. A leading exponent of the Early Buddhist Teaching states:

> *In contrast to many other conceptions of deities, East and West, who by their own devotees are said to show anger, wrath, jealousy and "righteous indignation," Brahma is free from hate; and one who assiduously develops these four sublime states, by conduct and meditation, is said to become an equal of Brahma (brahmasamo). (…) They are called abodes (vihàra) because they should become the mind's constant dwelling-places where we feel "at home".* (Nyanaponika, 1993)

When these qualities of empathetic connection in one's mind and heart have been developed to maturity, they have become truly immeasurable and are referred to as ›boundless deliverance of the heart‹ (*appamànà cetovimutti*) (M iii 145; and S iv 296)[6] The latter text goes on to state that the qualities which are said to ›measure‹ or ›limit‹ the heart are desire (*ràga*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha),* in particular a most suffering-

[5]) In this essay I shall use the terms ›heart‹ and ›mind‹ synonymously to render the double meaning of *citta.*
[6] Anuruddha Sutta (M 127) and S 41, 7 (Godatto-sutta)

inducing type of delusion that insists on the existence of a permanent and separate entity called ›myself‹. To the degree that our deliverance of heart has become unshakeable (*akuppa*), we are effectively delivered from our mistaken notion of a separate selfhood and all the anguish that goes with it.

One of the stock passages in the early texts runs as follows:

> *"Here, monks, a disciple dwells pervading one direction with his heart filled with loving kindness, likewise the second, the third, and the fourth direction; so above, below and around; he dwells pervading the entire world everywhere and equally with his heart filled with loving kindness, abundant, grown great, measureless, free from enmity and free from distress.*
>
> *Here monks a disciple dwells pervading one direction with his heart filled with compassion* [….]
>
> *Here monks a disciple dwells pervading one direction with his heart filled with empathetic joy* [….]
>
> *Here monks a disciple dwells pervading one direction with his heart filled with equanimity* […]*."* [7]

The empathetic nature of all four of the Brahmavihàra is such that they enable us to access the aspect of non-separateness in our experience of the world and the other. This means that whenever we allow ourselves to rest in one of these Four Immeasureables, we are operating in a mode of mind and heart that is radically opposed to our habitual experience of self versus-world-and-other.[8]

A study of the various textual references in the early Buddhist Teaching and practices found in the living contemplative tradition indicate three distinct levels of understanding the Brahmavihàra:

(i) As ***inherent and universal qualities*** of the human heart. As such they may be completely developed or only in dormant form, they may be partially occluded by other aspects of consciousness, incompletely manifest through lack of cultivation, or entirely blossomed, radiating and pervasive. In any case, their inherent nature makes them intrinsically accessible to all human beings. As fundamental capacities of the human mind they form the basis of health and wellbeing, all our social and relational interaction and they are the prerequisite of any development of mind and spirit. The Brahmavihàra at that level are indispensable *gifts*, beyond loss or cultivation.

(ii) As ***states of mind***. While not strictly emotions, they are the affective resonance and natural expression of the empathetic and available heart untainted by desire, (*lobha*), aversion (*dosa*) and grasping of self-view (*sakkàya-ditthi* and *attavàdùpàdàna)*. As one of the great purifying practices in the human realm, the Brahmavihàra at this level are *virtues* and can be aspired to, accessed, affirmed, developed and nurtured as altruistic manifestations of the heart.

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[7] Tevijja Sutta (D 13) and Mahà-Sudassana Sutta (D 17) - (e.g. D i 251 and D ii 186; trnsl. by Rhys Davids, 1899)

[8] The Pali text call this *sabbadhi sabbattatàya sabbàvantam lokam* – ›the entire world everywhere and equally‹ (D 13)

An example of this may be the Buddha, explaining to Rahula, his 18 year old son, the benefits of meditating on the four Brahmavihàra[9]:

> »Rahula, develop the meditation of loving kindness (*mettà*); if you develop the meditation of loving kindness, all malevolence will be overcome. Rahula, develop the meditation of compassion (*karunà*); if you develop the meditation of compassion, all aggressiveness will be overcome. Rahula, develop the meditation of joy (*mudità*); if you develop the meditation of joy, all discontentment (*arati*) will be overcome. Rahula, develop the meditation of equanimity (*upekkhà*); if you develop the meditation of equanimity, all reluctance will be overcome.«

(iii) As *objects of mind-cultivation*[10]. Infused with the intention of the practitioner to bring about collectedness of mind (*samàdhi*) and to purify the mind of obstructive emotional responses, they can be accessed by the practitioner consciously and used as methods to soften, gladden and strengthen the mind, to let it become expansive and stable in a deep state of deep unification (*jhàna*). At this level the Brahmavihàra can be understood as *systematic methods*. Initially, based on a preliminary partial purification of mind, they act as *objects of meditation*, leading to a deepening of mindfulness and calm. Later, when the mind has become absorbed, saturated and expansive, the fruit of such methodical application is a profound transformation of the *citta*, in that the mind becomes inoculated against the respective ›enemies‹ of each of the Brahmavihàra.

Metta loving kindness (lit. ›friendship‹, ›friendliness‹)

Mettà is the quality of unconditional benevolence, a genuine wish and care for the well-being of the other, a gesture of acceptance, deep welcoming and opening. Exemplifying the aspect of nourishing that *mettà* implies, the image used in the commentarial scriptures is that of a mother nursing a newborn baby. As the heart grows in its capacity of *mettà,* we begin to feel a fondness for ourselves and the other, and incline to expand our heart and to include everyone in its comforting and unselfish warmth.

The simplest level of practising *mettà* can be found in the contemplation and the wish expressed in the daily recitation of Buddhists practitioners:

> »May all beings abide in well-being, in freedom from hostility, in freedom from ill-will, in freedom from anxiety, and may they maintain well-being in themselves.«[11]

With a practice of strengthening *mettà* in our lives we find ourselves living with greater gentleness, ease and thoroughness. A sense of deep benevolence and lightness accompanies the process of thought, speech and general movements of the body. We feel less burdened and free from ill-will towards ourselves and the other.

There are many advantages from practicing *mettà* that are referred to in the scriptures and can easily verified by personal practice; the primary ones are freedom from the damaging and afflictive states associated with aversion, anger, ill-will and selfishness. A direct benefit of practicing *mettà* is a happiness associated with expanding the mind in

[9]) Mahàrahulovàda Sutta, M 62 / M i 424 / trnsl. by Bhikkhu Bodhi

[10] It is interesting to note, that the Pali Commentaries show a definite shift in understanding the Brahmavihàra primarily as *meditation objects* – at the expense of the two other levels of understanding.

[11] M i 288 Sàleyyaka-Sutta; Pts ii 130 (Mettàkathà)

loving kindness and in turn, one obtains deep states of collectedness and quiet more easily (*sukhino cittam samàdhiyati*)[12]. An interesting passage (A v 341) mentions specific (and maybe not so obvious) results from having practiced and deepened loving kindness:

> »Monks, eleven advantages are to be expected from the deliverance of heart by familiarizing oneself with thoughts of loving-kindness, by the cultivation of loving-kindness, by constantly increasing these thoughts, by regarding loving-kindness as a vehicle of expression, and also as something to be treasured, by living in conformity with these thoughts, by putting these ideas into practice, and by establishing them. What are the eleven?
> (i) He sleeps in comfort. (ii) He awakes in comfort. (iii) He has no evil dreams. (iv) He is dear to human beings. (v) He is dear to non-human beings. (vi) Devas protect him. (vii) Fire, poison, and sword cannot touch him. (viii) His mind can concentrate quickly. (ix) His countenance is serene. (x) He dies without being confused in mind. (xi) If he fails to attain arahantship here and now, he will be reborn in the Brahma-world.«

Karuna (compassion)

Side by side with wisdom, *karunà* is a cardinal virtue in Buddhist Teaching. The early scriptures often use the older term *anukampà (lit.›trembling along with‹)*– an expression maybe even more strongly evocative of the spirit of empathetic connection that is at the heart of *karunà*.[13] In the experience of compassion, our hearts turn from the preoccupation with our own joys and sorrows to the suffering of other sentient beings. We are touched, feel their pain as our own pain, learn to bear it with them without protecting ourselves through distancing or removing awareness. We experience a deep wish to protect and to alleviate the suffering of the other, feel opened and in profound resonance. Despite our apparent physical autonomy: we are not separate and it is through our capacity to feel their pain and sorrow that we experience our most immediate and unconditional connection with all other beings. Besides the aspect of empathetic resonance, *karunà* also has an active side and is in some texts described as the ›inability to bear the suffering of others‹ coupled with the deep wish: »Through my body, possessions, and virtuous action of the past, present, and future, may the sufferings of beings be instantly removed!« [14] – The commentarial image is one a loving mother whose intention, words and deeds always tend to release the distress of her sick child.

The contemplation and wish that expresses the aspect of *karunà* in the chanting of Buddhist practitioners is:

> »May all beings be free from all suffering«

The early and later texts unanimously see in the practice of *karunà* the direct antidote to anger, annoyance and the notion of an alienated and isolated self. (D iii 248)[15]

Mudita (joy, empathetic joy)

[12] M i 38 Vatthùpama-Sutta (M7)

[13] Incidentally, when the Buddha initially questioned the value of teaching after his enlightenment experience he was appealed to by Brahma Sahampati, and it is said, that out of *ankumapà,* compassion, he began teaching the Dhamma against his initial inclinations.

[14] Longchenpa (1308-1364)

[15] Sangìti Sutta, (D 31)

As *karunà* connects us to the suffering and sorrow of others, *muditä* is the quality of heart by which we resonate with their joy, success and elation. It is associated with our capacity to appreciate and share in goodness. This can be our own goodness – *muditä* understood as *joy*; or it can be the goodness, success and good fortune that others experience – *muditä* understood as *empathetic joy*[16].
Implicit in *muditä* is our genuine capacity to acknowledge, admire and take part: in the worth, quality, well-being, achievement, sheer vitality of ourselves and others. There is a clear note of rejoicing in *muditä.*[17]

The cultivation of *muditä* has as its major benefit the removal of all discontent and dipleasure (*arati)*. In its aspect of empathetic joy it is the opposite of envy and jealousy. The image used in the scriptures is one of a mother's joy over the success and youthfulness of her child.

In Buddhist tradition the brief reflective contemplation on *muditä* is chanted as follows:

»May all beings not be parted from the good fortune they have attained.«

Upekkha (equanimity, serenity)[18]
Equanimity is a quality of profound balance and a even-mindedness. It is spacious, impartial, unshakeable. *Upekkhà* is rooted in a deep understanding of *kamma* – that our actions bear results, that these in turn affect us and, in effect, that we create our own future experiences. It helps us to be reconciled with the way things are as they are right now and allows us to look more deeply into the nature of experience without coming from attraction, aversion or blindness. Equanimity applies to whatever we experience of ourselves, of other beings and of the world around us.

Like the other three Brahmavihàra, it is resonant: there is a deep empathetic connection to all beings it touches – this (maybe not as obviously as ought to be) includes ourselves. *Upekkhà* is not the indifference it occasionally is portrayed as.[19] The equanimity manifests itself in depth of understanding, non-reactiveness, spaciousness and clarity of attitude.

In Buddhist literature, *upekkhà* is often compared with the attitude of a mother who lets go of controlling her children as they grow up – continuing to support them and wish them well but recognizing that their choices are theirs to make, good or bad.

The benefits of practicing *upekkhà* are – as usual in all Brahmavihàra – the diminishing and ultimately the disappearance of their respective opposites:
The direct opposites (›far enemies‹) of *upekkhà* are greed, aversion and anxiety; the ›near enemy‹ is not-caring or indifference. The suttas often refer to equanimity in regards to sense-experiences and in the Anguttura Nikàya we find advice on how *upekkhà* helps us to deal with annoying people. (A iii 186)

[16] The Pali commentarial texts almost exclusively favour the interpretation of mudità as empathetic joy.
[17] *Muditä* is derived from the pp. of *modati* – ›to be glad at, to rejoice‹. In German it is often translated as ›Mitfreude‹ and thus the direct antonym of the infamous ›Schadenfreude‹.
[18] The word comes from the compound verb for ›looking across something‹.
[19] Including (often well-meaning) equations with e.g. Stoic notions of imperturbability (*ataraxia*).

The way we may reflect on *upekkhà*[20] is the contemplation on *kammà,* ethical conditionality and responsibility:

> »All beings, when they act upon intention, are the owners of their action and inherit its results. Their future is born from such action, companion to such action, and its results will be their home. All actions with intention, be they skilful or harmful, of such acts they will be the heirs.«

Part ii – Western Concepts

Besides being influenced by different Buddhist sources, Core Process Psychotherapy makes use of seminal concepts originating from Western research and clinical experience. They stem from psychotherapy, philosophy and the ongoing broad reframing of Buddhist thought in the West.

»Therapeutic presence is about contact, or presence in relationship.« (Sills, no date, p.24) The therapeutic setting in CPP is mostly the client-practitioner-dyad and this relationship is obviously personal and individual – but it is also much more than just that. The profound implications of non-separateness and the plain experiential fact that the relational space between client and therapist ›is full of other people‹ (Sills, pcn) leads the Founders of CPP to speak of therapy as ›joint practice‹.

The concepts of ›Being‹ and ›Presence‹ are deeply interrelated. Being, as the centre of sentience and awareness in the midst of self-constellations, is where our most fundamental sense of continuity and coherency arises (Sills, kcn). The essential felt-nature of such Being is what is called *presence* in CPP or what in the Buddhist Tradition is understood by *sati* (›mindfulness‹) – a fluid capacity to attend to and contact any situation with the fullness of ones heart-mind. For this quality of presence to be truly embodied it needs what CPP calls ›resourced availability‹, i.e. that the practitioner has the capacity and empathetic willingness to be affected by what is emerging in the relational space of joint-practice. Awareness is embodied when we can be fully present for the totality of our own experience, that of the other, and whatever else may be in the field – even beyond what we may completely know at that moment.

The level of Being is where we are fundamentally connected to other beings, where we are never truly out of relationship, where meaning and awareness arise and coalesce. Being is innate and spontaneous, naturally seeks relationship to know itself and the world it inhabits; »it essentially seeks other beings to know its own being«. (Sills, kcn) In its wish to relate to what it knows to be interconnected with, it also has a developmental aspect that needs to be distinguished from the self that constellates around it. »If self is the wheel that spins in response to relational life, then Being is the hub of that wheel.« (Sills, kcn)

Being in turn rests in and arises from Source. ›Source‹ is the concept for an experience of deep alignment with the numinous ground that holds and permeates all potential manifestation. Buddhist Tradition has referred to this as the unconditioned emptiness that underpins the tapestry of all phenomena, an unspeakable suchness (*tathatà*[21]) that can not described conceptually. One of its aspects is what CPP calls ›Innate Health‹,

[20] A v 88
[21] S ii 26 (Paccaya-sutta)

›Brilliant Sanity‹[22] and refers to as the ›Core State‹ with its nature of luminous awareness at the ground of our experience. Source, as the spiritual ground of all our experience, can never entirely be lost, but, as Sills (kcn, 2005) states, can be ›obscured‹: »… the greatest wounding we encounter is the obscuration of Source and the subsequent disconnection or dislocation of Being«.

We thus have a triad of the notions Source, Being and Self that speaks of the essentially spiritual nature of our relational journey. All three can be taken as an axis of Source-Being-Self. Sills states: »When Being maintains its connection to its spiritual roots, and Self is organised around that interconnection, then a sense of continuity of being will infuse the self-system and a cohesive and integrated sense of Self will be present. If Being comes through the developing self-system as a stable presence, then the *second*[23] important axis, the Being-to-Being axis of interconnection, will be intuited. (…) This Being-to-Being axis is a crucial ingredient in all therapeutic work. In CPP the whole of this relational process is called the generation of a *relational field.*« (Sills, 2005, p.3)

The notion of ›relational field‹ goes back to the English analytic tradition. Frank Lake, who drew on Winnicott's work, describes »that the prenate experiences the womb as a unique relational field« (Sills, 2005, p.1) – The term has sparked considerable controversy in the analytic schools, since it seems to defy easy definitions from within that field of thought. – In CPP the term theoretically goes back to the interpretation of Lake's paradigm by Franklyn Sills (Sills, 2005, p.2) where it describes the early womb environment as ›empathetic relational field‹ in which the prenate and his basic needs are being held. The maternal ›womb of spirit‹ (Lake's term) is the first relational field that the new being encounters. Winnicott (1965) speaks of a ›holding environment‹ or a ›good enough holding environment‹ respectively, within which the infant ideally has its basic needs more or less met. Such relational needs typically are safety, emotional warmth, acknowledgement, acceptance, recognition, nourishment, sustenance, attunement, resonance, responsiveness (Sills, 2005, p.2).

In CPP the term ›relational field‹ has pragmatically come to refer to the experiential reality of the inter-subjective co-creation of what's happening between therapist and client. The relational field reverberates with the conscious and unconscious material therapist and client generate together and the field holds both universal and conditional forces (Sills, [no date], p.24)[24]. From a Buddhist understanding, the notion of relational field points to the fundamental truth of our non-separateness and interdependence. Bringing a clear and precise awareness to this unified field and all its subliminally conveyed information is the key to finding back into the experience of non-separateness (kpn, 2005) for the therapist. Both suffering and Innate Health of client and practitioner co-arise in the therapeutic setting and the engendered relational field. The therapist's first task is to orient towards Brilliant Sanity as the Core State and to help establishing the relational field by holding all of what the client brings in his or her awareness and an expanded perceptual field. Sills continues: »Our most important clinical skill is the ability to perceive this Sanity, and its expressions, in another person. While we must initially make an effort to be present, this state is natural and the key

[22] Chögyam Trungpa's term
[23] Italics: my emphasis
[24] This understanding of inter-subjective co-creation goes beyond the analytic notions of transference and countertransference.

to its attainment is to simply notice what is in the way of it. Conditioned thoughts, preconceptions, imagination, opinions, judgments and beliefs are not projected onto the client's process as the therapist's mind settles into the present within a responsive listening field.« (Sills, [no date], p.24)

One of the knottier but crucial terms in CPP is the notion of »embodiment«. It was coined by the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty in the 1940s. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945)[25] – M.-P. continued in his writings Husserl's approach of a ›phenomenological reduction‹ and pursued in the latter's radical departure from Cartesian thinking, i.e. that mental terms (*res cogitans*) and physical terms (*res extensa*) are strictly separated from each other. Although M.-P.'s language was to remain phenomenological until his end, he early on came to his famous conclusion, »that the greatest teaching of the phenolmenological reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction«. [26] M.-P. then went on and established as one of his key insights *embodiment* – that our body has to be understood *both* as an ›outer‹, living and empirical structure *and* at the same time as an ›inner‹, biological and phenomenological structure. (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1992, p. 10) These aspects of our experience are not opposites but rather poles in between which we continue to move in a circular fashion. ›Embodiment‹ in M.-P.'s understanding thus has the double sense of (a) the body as a empirical and living organism and (b) the body as a context or milieu for cognitive activity. In an evocative image, M.-P. states that »Ones body is in the world as the heart is in the organism.« (Merleau-Ponty, 1966, p. 238)

In their joint work on the biological roots of knowledge, the neuro- and cognitive scientist Varela and his neurobiologist teacher Maturana (Maturana & Varela, 1987) took up the notion of embodiment where M.-P. had left off. Varelas later critique of the big project of ›returning to the things themselves‹ (Husserl) is essentially that it remains theoretical, i.e. that it lacks a *pragmatic* dimension. Neither Husserl nor Merleau-Ponty (or Heidegger) in their respective approaches have managed to bridge the gap between science and practical experience. Even though the two latter emphasised the ›embodied‹ aspect of human experience, they remained confined within the essentially theoretical mainstream of western philosophical thinking. (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1992, p.38) – Varela then adds to the notion of embodiment the *practical* dimension. He does so by resorting to Buddhist methods of awareness training and attuning to subtle body and energetic processes. These methods foster the capacity to remain mentally present in a resonant and embodied way during everyday activities. Specific methods are geared to enable awareness to disentangle itself from a preoccupation with conceptual and abstract functions and return back into the immediacy of the experience of being present-in-this-body (ibid., p. 40).

Core Process Psychotherapy, in the context of a therapeutic setting, is doing precisely that. – A range of practical skills are taken up by therapists to foster embodiment in the relational realm. These, in brief, comprise a variety of ›inner‹ practices: e.g. awareness training, contemplative mental-disciplines of stilling and centring the mind; conscious calibrating or framing of intentionality, orienting to Source states and specific cognitive

[25] M.-P.'s term in French is ›incorporation‹. – It is strange how little western philosophy has attended to the phenomenon of the body. Amidst much talk of mind and nature, their actual or apparent unity or disparity relatively little has been said about the body. This is even more surprising when we consider that the body is the literal personification of an ›interface‹ between mind and nature.

[26] «le plus grand enseignement de la réduction est l'impossibilité de la réduction complète » (Phénoménologie de la Perception. Avant-Propos, p. viii).

and felt-sense aspects of the therapist's personal field, the client's arising processes and the inter-subjective relational field with its personal and transpersonal qualities. Subtle body- and energetic present-time-awareness[27] play a crucial role, whereby a set of specific skills are engaged: amongst them resourcing, fulcruming, establishing midline, generating field awareness and expanding it into a wide perceptual field – all of which engender an empathetic and resonant listening space for the client.

Part III – Exploration

While Buddhism is concerned with suffering (*dukkha* – lit. ›that which is hard to bear‹) at a broad and universal level, Core Process Psychotherapy (CPP) is particular in addressing human suffering at a more immediate, relational level. – CPP as a contemplative and psycho-spiritual form of psychotherapy is the outcome of research and personal practice, the insight and committed application of a small but growing number of practitioners in different fields who share the wish to bring together the depth of Buddhist understanding with the insights that have grown out of some 150 years of inquiry and experience in psychology and psychotherapy.

Why is such a synthesis needed? – Western Psychology, although as a science relatively young, has produced an amazing range of conceptual insights, models and clinical approaches to understand and address the troubles that beset the human mind. The outcome so far is rich and diverse, though the strategies practised remain on the whole strongly problem-focused and aim to short for a human heart, that essentially longs for happiness and reconnection with genuine well-being – rather than just successful ›samsàra-management‹. There is a longing in human beings for more than a cure of immediate symptoms coming from a suffering that is – beyond all mental, emotional and relational concerns – the expression of what CPP calls ›the obscuration of Source‹ and the sense of disconnection that goes with it. Something like a ›unified field theory‹ for the heart-mind and its path to happiness has yet to emerge in Western psychological understanding. – On the other hand we have traditional Buddhist sources and practices that appear to give little weight to what we would call the *developmental* aspect of both health and suffering (kpn 2001). This has considerable consequences and can mean that for some of the dynamic in our suffering, we may find little within traditional Buddhist Teaching to help us understand the developmental angle on our predicament. Several people have commented on this in the last years; Welwood (2002) coined the term ›spiritual bypassing‹ and as one of the founders of CPP has recently pointed out: »Part of suffering is developmental. It's not addressed in the archetypal and it's not addressed in the spiritual dimension. It is in the human, the *personal* and *relational* dimension that it is both experienced and addressed.« (Sills, 2002)[28] – CPP has developed a range of pragmatic tools and teachings to do exactly this.

The Four Brahmavihàra, both as concepts and as actual experiences, have a tremendous bearing on the work of the practitioner of Core Process Psychotherapy. – Pragmatically, to take up their cultivation is the way to connect with our deepest wellbeing. When we allow ourselves to be touched by them, we sense our Innate Health and Brilliant Sanity and rest in a ›numinous and illimitable ground state of pristine awareness‹. (kcn, 2005) These numinous qualities of Source, Innate Health and Brilliant Sanity can be directly

[27]) The Tibetan subtle energetic exercises of Kum Nye play a role in the cultivation of embodiment.

[28] Sills, M. at a monastic conference at ABM, Hertfordshire, 2002

related to the Buddhist notions of Emptiness, Suchness and Bodhicitta. – While *mettà*, *karunà*, *mudità* and *upekkhà* are different from Emptiness and Bodhicitta, they can be thought of as *their felt-experience* and ultimately manifest our Source-nature (*tathatà*). The felt-experience of Source mediated via the Brahmavihàra results in a deep alignment with the Source-Being-Self-axis out of which genuine health, healing and well-being arise.

In the double nature of the relational field – which beside the mentioned aspects at the level of Source also holds aspects at the level of Being – the Brahmavihàra play a crucial role in the Being-to-Being relationship between client and therapist. They embody at the level of Being what is called the ›Core State‹ in CPP (kcn, 2005), thus creating a safe holding environment and deepening the subtle holding field for the client.

The process of growth needs the Brahmavihàra. Only with welcoming acceptance and openness (*mettà*) can we get in touch with the difficult areas of our life. We need the joy and capacity to share goodness (*muditä*) where we meet it in ourselves. And while it is ultimately insight and wisdom that transform and liberate the heart, compassion (*karunà)* and equanimity (*upekkhà*) are needed to be with some of the things insight is getting us in touch with in ourselves. – The prerequisite for being with another in his or her suffering and strength is the willingness to relate compassionately and clearly to our own pain, to acknowledge our own worth and appreciate our own strength. While this is true for everyone, it is even more crucial for the practitioner of CPP, whose capacity to hold others in the Brahmavihàra presupposes that s/he can relate in such a way to his/her own suffering, strength and goodness.

Summary

The two elements (in the title of the current essay) of *›cultivating presence‹* and of *›embodying the relational field‹* seem at a closer look paradoxical – neither can ›presence‹ be directly cultivated, nor can the relational field be truly ›embodied‹. – Instead, as far as presence is concerned, the craft of the Core Process practitioner lies in engaging the Brahmavihàra both as practices and as expressions of genuine health in the relational world. It is the Brahmavihàra that can be *cultivated* and the inquiry into their nature – and the acknowledged nature of what may obstruct them – is bound to engender the wished for presence. Such cultivation takes different forms according to the level of our engagement with the *Four Boundless States*:

(a) the Brahmavihàra *as gifts* are inherent and selfrevealing universal qualites that can be acknowledged, oriented towards, accessed, rested in;
(b) the Brahmavihàra *as virtues* are states of mind that can be affirmed, strengthend and applied;
(c) the Brahmavihàra *as objects of mind cultivation* can be taken up and developped.

The key element in establishing an embodied presence between practitioner and client is the therapist's orientation to one of the empathetic states of the Brahmavihàra. His or her intentionality and skill in doing so generate a safe holding environment and deepen the relational field. Thus the paradoxical task of ›embodying‹ the relational field can be best adressed by freeing the intrinsic awareness of the *citta* from its habitual cog-

nitive hypnosis and gently expand it into the fields of bodily, energetic, affective and subtle processes. The CPP-notion of present-time-awareness is the key ingredient for an embodied presence. Being-here-now-with-what-is-arising-in-the-field-of-awareness: welcoming, compassionate, empathetic, non-directive and spacious. Initially, this process happens for the practitioner himself, then outward, beyond of what it knows of itself, to the other, beyond of what it knows of the other, and further on, beyond all notions of self and other.

Health occurs in softening self-constructs and aligning with the Big picture – Emptiness, Source, Bodhicitta – and it is mediated in relationship on a Being-to-Being level. Our capacity to attuned relationship to all aspects of ourselves and all aspects of the other is found in the basic empathetic and relational tones of the Four Brahmavihàra that enable us to rest in the equilibrium of self and other.

Abbreviations
kcn – Karuna class notes (handouts PQMA 2005)
kpn – Personal notes on Karuna work 2000-2005
pcn – Personal class notes PQMA 2005

Pali Sources
The Pali passages are referenced to the printed editions of the Pali Text Society, London. Roman numbers after the abbreviation indicate the volume, Arabic numbers the page (e.g. D ii 186 = Dìgha Nikàya, volume two, page 186). English translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

D	–	Dìgha Nikàya (Engl. transl. as *Long Discourses of the Buddha)*
M	–	Majjhima Nikàya (Engl. transl. as *Middle Length Sayings)*
S	–	Samyutta Nikàya (Engl. transl. as *Group of Discourses)*
A	–	Anguttara Nikàya (Engl. transl. as *Gradual Sayings)*
Snip	–	Suttanipàta (Engl. transl. as *Suttanipata)*
Pts	–	Patisambhida Magga (Engl. transl. *Path of Discrimination)*
Vism	–	Visuddhimagga (Engl. transl. as *Path of Purification*)

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