

# **Cultivating the Boundless Heart -**

## **The Four Immeasurables and their application in the therapeutic context**

By Subhana Barzaghi

Who among us does not want to have more happiness, love, kindness, joy, peace and equanimity? The greatest of these qualities is said to be peace and equanimity, because the only time we can be truly happy is when our heart is open and peaceful. When we have an open heart, we're able to heal and transform our life from the inside out and to give deep meaning to our life. Buddhists cultivate the way of the open heart by practising four things: love, compassion, altruistic joy, and equanimity.

These qualities are called the Four Divine Abodes. In the Pali language they are known as the *Brahma Viharas*, and in the Mahayana tradition as the Four Immeasurables. The qualities of the heart are considered immeasurable because they can't be quantified; there is no end to their cultivation; and if you practise them, they will grow, expand and embrace your life and the world. These four qualities of the heart are said to be the most beautiful, powerful and sublime states we can experience. When we are consistent and dedicated in practising them, they can become our natural abiding place—our true home. Also, all four qualities are a natural expression of an awakened heart-mind.

In order to both give and receive love in its fullest measure, we need to slow down and create more space in our life. The great traditions of meditation, prayer and contemplation are ways for helping ourselves listen deeply and restore the lost connection to our heart.

In his *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, the second-century Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna outlined the benefits of practising the four immeasurables. Living beings who apply the immeasurable mind of love find that in their heart, they extinguish anger and hostility; in practising compassion, they extinguish all sorrows and anxieties; in practising joy, they extinguish sadness and joylessness; and in practising equanimity, they extinguish aversion and attachment.

A peaceful heart gives birth to love.

When love meets suffering it turns to compassion.

When love meets happiness it turns to joy.

(Kornfield, 2009: 387)

## **The boundless heart of love**

In the *Metta Sutta*, the Buddha writes about loving kindness as follows:

So with a boundless heart  
should one cherish all living beings,  
radiating kindness over the entire world:  
spreading upward to the skies,

and downward to the depths;  
outward and unbounded;  
freed from hatred and ill-will,  
whether standing, seated or lying down.  
Free of drowsiness,  
one should sustain this recollection.  
This is said to be the sublime abiding.

The first immeasurable quality of the boundless heart is love. The Pali word for 'loving kindness' is *metta*, which has two root meanings. One of the meanings is 'gentle', as in the gentle rain that moistens the earth and nourishes all beings. The other root meaning of *metta* is 'friend'. The Buddha extolled the virtues of spiritual friendship, whereby a good, wise, spiritual friend, a *kalyana-mitra*, is a person who is consistent through times of difficulty and hardship and who will support you when you're lonely, sick or depressed. He or she provides you with refuge when you're afraid, rejoices in your successes and achievements, and challenges you when you stray and deviate into harmful behaviour. The healing power and art of *metta* lies in being a good friend to ourselves as well as to other people.

In our Western culture, we unfortunately find it difficult to speak about love, which has become very commercialised, romanticised and erotised. Sadly, the meaning of the word 'love' has been blurred with the meaning of the words 'desire' and 'appetite', and advertisers have exploited the concept of love to the hilt in order to sell all types of product. We tend to use the

word in a very generalised way; for example, we'll say, 'I love strawberries and ice-cream', or 'I love my partner, my house, my car and my country', without distinguishing the love from desire and 'sticky' attachment.

In continuing to define each of the four immeasurables, the Buddha described the 'near enemy' of each and the 'far enemy' of each.

The near enemy to *metta* is something that masquerades as love and is similar to it, but isn't the divine abiding that the Buddha was referring to. Sensual desire and clinging attachment are the near enemies of love, and they can very easily become confusing and enmeshed. In order to bring clarity to the whole process, definition and experience of love, we first need to differentiate love – *metta* – from sensual desire. *Metta* means love and veneration for all life and knows no bounds; it's unconditional, positive regard and kindness.

Easier to recognise, the 'far enemy' is the opposite of love: hatred and ill-will. In *Kodhanna Sutta* 60 of the *Anguttara Nikaya Sattaka Nipata*, the Buddha enumerated several reasons for us to let go of anger:

Anger makes us suffer; it sears the heart physically and emotionally.

Anger inhibits our capacity to flourish materially or spiritually.

Anger disturbs our peace of mind and happiness.

Anger easily disrupts friendship and creates distance.

Anger erodes away one's joyful, happy nature.

Releasing and transformation of anger are reiterated in a beautiful, timeless verse in the *Dharmapada*:

## **Hatred never ceases by hatred**

...but by love alone is healed.

This is an ancient and eternal law.

Cultivation of the loving heart has three dimensions to it: learning to love and care for other people, learning to receive love and love oneself, and learning to embody unconditional love in its fullest measure. If the wise teachings don't 'go down below the neck' and engage the heart, they're of little value.

## **The art of loving oneself**

Some people find it very challenging to learn to love themselves and to receive and take in nourishment from other people. To receive is to reach into all the aspects of ourselves that don't feel deserving and worthy of love and tenderness. In learning to love and accept ourselves fully, we can become confronted with how much we long for love but we don't quite trust it when it's offered to us. We can be reminded of the times at which, when we opened the door of our heart, equal amounts of much pain and hurt flowed through the same door so that the next time, we recoiled from the offering of love.

The Buddha once said to King Prasenajit that although the mind will travel in a thousand directions, it will find no one else more beloved and deserving of love than oneself. To open your heart to receive what's given, to trust and let the love flow, to not fear being wounded as a result of loving, to not cling too tightly, to not fear love's inevitable ebbs and flows, and to hold open the door of your heart to life's fierce grace is to engage with love on a deep level. In order to receive love, we must get out of our own 'small' way, let go of all the thoughts of non-deserving, drop our fears, and let our heart soften and melt through the radiance.

I undertook my first Zen retreat in 1978, with Robert Aitken Roshi, at the Convent of the Sacred Heart, in Burradoo, NSW. I entered the *sesshin* in a terrible state of angst and vulnerability, but was determined to explore and understand the deeper truths of Buddhism. After hearing Aitken Roshi's teachings, I felt an overwhelming sense of trust that 'here is a wise teacher who can help me'. In our private interviews, Aitken Roshi was a man of few words, but the words were poignant and potent. After a few days, I realised I was finding it difficult to look Aitken Roshi in the eye. He had a penetrating gaze, and I felt he could see right through me and that he'd see all my faults, so I avoided his gaze. I began to wonder why I couldn't look him in the eye, and came to realise I was feeling ashamed of myself, unworthy, and remorseful for having caused pain to my former partner. I realised I wasn't loving and accepting myself. I was capable of loving other people generously, but I'd never thought about loving myself, fully and completely. I sat with this

intention to love and forgive myself unconditionally. I found that this softening of my heart towards myself was helpful in opening myself up. The experience of self-love and self-acceptance was the forerunner of a much deeper and more profound experience of awakening. Directed towards oneself, then, the power of *metta* becomes a radiant light that burns away all our inadequacy, resistance, anger and fear. With *metta*, we uncover the possibility of truly respecting and valuing ourselves as an equal part of this universe of flowers, ants, stones and clouds.

May I be free from suffering and ill-will.

May I be filled with loving kindness.

May I be peaceful and happy.

## **The art of loving other people**

We're relational beings, constantly in relationship with other people, whether the person is a friend, a loved one, a family member, a work colleague, a stranger, the local bus driver, or the café barista. *Metta* is loving kindness we extend beyond the preferential kind of love we reserve for our loved ones so we are able to cultivate open-heartedness in relation to all beings, including strangers, and even our enemies.

However, if you do have an intimate relationship, you'll find it can be a powerful vehicle for practising *metta*. An intimate relationship can be a great gift not because it always entails happiness, pleasure and delight but because if we view 'relationship' as a place of practice, it becomes a brilliant mirror

that reflects our state of being to us. Equally with our formal sitting practice of sublime silence, interpersonal relationships are helpful for enabling ourselves to see where we're stuck. In the 'relationship' mirror, the painful valleys and the peaks of exhilaration are equally and instantly revealed. There's nothing like intimacy for revealing to ourselves where we're holding back, contracting and avoiding love's steady gaze, which we hijack by maintaining our fears, insecurity, irritability, unrealistic expectations, projections, arguments, excessive neediness, defensiveness and refusal to forgive.

The spiritual dimension of an intimate relationship is a 'wider container' – a stronger, deeper foundation for working through the changes and difficulties that inevitably arise. By engaging in a spiritual practice, we allow our heart to become broader, cultivate a greater capacity to heal our own pain, clear up misunderstandings and grievances, and come to forgive each other and ultimately let go.

Of course, when we open the door of love and things go askew, we can experience 'broken-heartedness'. A dear friend of mine, Lindy Lee, reminded me that our Zen teacher John Tarrant Roshi said, 'The Tao breaks our hearts so that we may know our own depths.' Lindy commented, 'I have always treasured that, especially when things are not easy.'

On the deepest level, an intimate relationship is a wide-open,

challenging and joy-inducing gateway to our true self, or our nature of selflessness. Engaging in a union of love is also an act of stepping beyond our small self in order to truly meet the other person and surrender to him or her, and to meet the vast and fathomless mystery in our heart. In the deepest sense, engaging in relationship can be a pathway for polishing the radiant heart and having the opportunity to recognise and honour our 'personal beloved' as being a spark of the boundless heart, or, as the Sufis refer to it, the 'universal great beloved'. The personal love is then like a window that opens out into a greater, interconnected embrace in which we're one with all beings.

Rainer M. Rilke said, 'For one human being to love another human being: that is perhaps the most difficult task that has been entrusted to us, the ultimate task, the final test and proof, the work for which all other work is merely preparation.' (Rilke, 1984, Letter 7).

## **Embodying unconditional love**

Who can tell what miracles  
love has in store for us  
if only we can find the courage  
to become one with it?

(Allama Iqbal)

In order to cultivate the boundless heart to its fullest measure, we need to combine it with wisdom; that is, see into the deeper truths of who we are. Wisdom and love are simply two sides of the same coin. A teacher from India, Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, a Vedanta, verbalised the essence of an awakened heart-mind: 'Wisdom teaches me I am nothing. Love teaches me I am everything. Between these two poles, my life flows.'

(Frydman, 1973)

Love teaches me I am everything. Experiencing this opening you can joyfully feel interconnectedness with the stones; the clouds; the flowers; and all creatures, great and small. Awakening is often referred to as true intimacy. In the light of true intimacy, I *am* my partner; I *am* the gum blossoms, the light and the shadow. This is the timeless place we can't use words to describe; it's a way of life through which we embrace the fullness of the world and celebrate in the mind of oneness that has no bounds.

This natural radiance was here before time began; it's only our desires, our anger and our defilements that cause obscuring of its warmth and light. In order to act 'with heart' in the world, we have to reach out and touch the immense diversity of the human condition. The open heart is the way of inclusion. As Walt Whitman once said, 'I contain multitudes.' I *contain* this; I *am* this.

When we have wisdom, we learn we are nothing, and this realisation is the dimension of selflessness in our being. Our essential nature is that we're

free from dualistic divisions, and it transcends caste, race, gender, colour, age, self and 'other'; it's vast, fathomless and ageless. The highest level of love is born of this non-dual awareness through which we recognise the seamless totality that has no division.

When you're practising *metta*, you're directly seeing and experiencing your own natural radiance of heart and mind.

## **Application for therapists**

For psychotherapists, the implications of the practice of *metta* are first that we hold ourselves dear, and equally that we hold the space of loving presence for our clients. Carl Rogers, an influential American psychologist and the founding father of the humanistic, or client-centred, approach to psychology, emphasised holding an attitude of 'unconditional positive regard' for our clients.

Even when I'm working with clients who present with a challenging, defensive or abrasive personality, I think that if I can appreciate and value even one aspect of their character, or even one strength, I'll be able to work with them. It might be the case that they've never received kindness, support or positive regard during their life. The crucible for transformation and healing for a host of problems – low self-esteem, unworthiness, a feeling of inadequacy, rejection, abandonment, and shame – is the therapist's loving presence. In the 'container' of the therapeutic alliance, the client who

encounters the therapist's loving presence can begin to internalise this unconditional positive regard. Drop by drop, the client can learn to 'take in the good', as Dr Rick Hanson clearly outlines in his step-by-step approach. By internalising the loving presence, clients can improve their self-esteem; learn to cultivate kindness and acceptance when gazing towards themselves; and value, appreciate, respect and honour their capabilities and inner strength. According to Dr Hanson, the benefits of 'taking in the good' are that we promote optimism, have a more positive mood, are more open, are more resilient, feel we matter, and are better able to heal old wounds through which we felt we weren't loved. By being in a state of loving presence, the therapist creates a container of radical acceptance.

In the therapeutic relationship based on loving presence, therapists are subject to ethics and boundaries in order to guard themselves from 'falling in love with their client', from over-attaching and clinging, and from erring towards the near enemy of *metta*, which is romanticisation or sexualisation of this love and falling under the spell and power of Eros.

## **The quivering heart of compassion**

The second of the four immeasurables is compassion, and the Pali word is *karuna*, which means 'experiencing a trembling or quivering of the heart in response to another being's pain'. Compassion arises in us when our heart is open to our own suffering and the suffering of everyone else in the world.

During the Vietnam War, Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh wrote *Interbeing*:

*Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhists*, aimed at those who were responding to hatred, intolerance, fanaticism, and political and religious ideologies. He forged the precepts out of the crucible of the terrible experience of the war. The fourth precept in the order of interbeing is

Do not avoid suffering or close your eyes before suffering. Do not lose awareness of the existence of suffering in the life of the world.

Find ways to be with those who are suffering, including personal contact, visits, images and sounds. By such means, awaken yourself and others to the reality of suffering in the world.

(Hanh, 1987: 34)

A relationship clearly exists between our suffering and compassion's healing power for alleviating that suffering. The mystic Sufi poet Rumi wrote, 'Do not turn away. Keep your gaze on the bandaged place. That is where the light enters you.'

The 'far enemy' of compassion is easy to recognise, because it is compassion's opposite: cruelty. Compassion has two 'near enemies'. The first is to be overwhelmed by pain and sorrow about someone else's burden. 'If we feel that our hearts will break, that we will be overwhelmed, that we cannot bear what is going on, we will find it difficult to open to the pain – yet that is the basis of compassion.' (Salzberg: 104) Compassion's second 'near enemy' is self-pity, through which we have a smidgen of self-indulgence in relation to our own difficulties and we lack motivation for transforming the suffering.

## **The therapeutic application of compassion**

I was really touched by a long-term practitioner's and client's cultivation of compassion and forgiveness. Liz had suffered enormously, over many years, from living with a cruel and sadistic father. She'd spent many years in therapy, working through her past and healing herself from it. While she was cultivating compassion, during her meditation, she decided to befriend her internalised negative mental images of her father. She came to see him as a soldier 'just surviving' in the trenches, in agony about everything and cursing the world. Her heart softened, she felt the wellspring of compassion for him, and she melted in tears. She'd helped herself change and transform her reactions to her father, and her relationship with him.

His Holiness the Dali Lama hosted an international Buddhist teachers' meeting in Delhi. The story goes that he was puzzled and curious about the discussion among the senior Western dharma teachers during which they were addressing the fact that many people suffer from low self-esteem. He enquired of the teachers as to whether they themselves had suffered from low self-esteem, and without hesitation, all of them, one by one, nodded. His Holiness then consulted with his mentors, because the Tibetan language doesn't have a specific word for 'low self-esteem'. He then turned to the teachers and said that low self-esteem is due to lack of compassion for oneself.

According to the conclusions from research undertaken by Leary et al.

(2007), self-compassion has many benefits:

- The practitioners' well-being is enhanced with reference to a number of factors on the well-being scale.
- Stress is lowered due to reduction of the stress hormone cortisol.
- Self-criticism is reduced.
- Self-soothing, self-encouragement and other aspects of emotional resilience are increased.
- Practitioners are better able to heal the lack of caring they received from their parent/s or significant carer/s during childhood.

According to Paul Gilbert, who teaches Compassionate Mind Training,

The practice of compassion helps us to understand how our threat and self-protection system is working and how to develop a kinder and more soothing approach to our minds. We shift from blaming and criticising ourselves or self-dislike to being curious about how our minds work; understanding and taking responsibility to try as best we can to feel more in control and at peace with ourselves.

(Gilbert, 2010: 30)

Compassion has the power to transform suffering. As therapists helping our clients to respond to the painful feelings of their inner life, when we accompany compassion with mindfulness, we can encourage and guide the clients to cultivate a response based on self-compassion. When we're compassionate towards ourselves, we look directly at the bandaged place and observe how the painful emotions manifest and arise in the body, and allow

ourselves to stay steady with the unpleasant feelings and sensations and to not act out because of the pain or deny, avoid or suppress it. When we have a steady response to our emotional pain, based on compassion, we find it begins to diminish because we're not fuelling it by introducing resistance, endless 'back stories', drama, trauma reactions or habitual conditioning. In cultivating self-attention based on compassion, we cradle and soothe our suffering and become tender towards our humanity in all its vulnerability.

### **Self-compassion**

When we cultivate compassion for other people, we mustn't leave ourselves out of the equation. In the case of teachers, psychotherapists, doctors, social workers and professionals working in the health and welfare field, it's especially important that we have compassion for ourselves in equal measure. If we overly extend ourselves by setting up the unrealistic expectation that we'll be endlessly compassionate and maintain high ideals without ever self-renewing, we will become exhausted and burnt out and suffer serious 'compassion fatigue' symptoms. Cultivating compassion for oneself is the best preventative treatment and antidote for compassion fatigue.

### **The appreciative, joyful heart**

The third immeasurable quality of mind is altruistic joy, the Pali word for which is *mudita*. The Pali word can't be directly translated into an English word, but it means 'empathic joy', 'altruistic joy' or 'appreciative joy'. When we're calm and peaceful, joy naturally arises in us, from the ground of our being. We can certainly cultivate a feeling of joy as a response to our own

success and happiness, but we can also cultivate 'sympathetic' joy, through which we rejoice in other people's achievements and successes and wish them well. We find it easy to feel joy and happiness for our loved ones, whereas in order to experience 'appreciative' joy, we have to extend the feeling even to people we might dislike.

*Mudita* means 'to be pleased', 'to have a sense of gladness of heart'. The Buddha called *mudita* 'the mind deliverance of gladness', because when we cultivate this force of happiness, we challenge our deep assumptions about aloneness, loss and unhappiness. In practising *mudita*, we cut through and defeat many of our negative emotions.

We have a number of ways through which we suppress our joy. A client of mine said that her mother often told her, 'Don't be *too* happy: something terrible will happen to you!' Of course, then, whenever she experienced joy, she also experienced anxiety.

The Buddha referred to the 'near enemy' of joy as being 'dizzy excitement' and to the 'far enemy' as being jealousy and envy. When we practise *mudita*, we also challenge the roots of our Western capitalist culture and market economy, which are mostly based on being highly competitive in order to succeed. Left unchecked, this competitiveness becomes a breeding ground for the unwholesome emotions of jealousy and envy, which cause considerable disturbance. 'Why did he, not I, get that promotion?' We

cultivate altruistic joy for whatever other people achieve, whether they're friend or foe.

In cultivating joy, I've started a wonderful, whole new practice for myself. I call it the kiss of life and joy, whereby I vow to kiss one thing every day. On Tuesday this week, I kissed the velvety blue irises in the vase at work, and on Wednesday, two gorgeous ducks landed on the balcony and preened their feathers. I threw them kisses from afar. On Thursday, the scribbly gum in the Wallamutta reserve caught my gaze, and in hugging that beautiful giant of a tree, I felt as if I was kissing a beautiful, solid, living abstract painting. This morning, Friday, I kissed my morning cup of tea – an enduring favourite. The other day, I embraced life's fierce grace by blowing a kiss to 'the cloud of unknowing'. I just try to notice what lands in my field of awareness and evokes pleasure, delight and joy in me. Cultivating joy is a lot of fun – and we don't have to limit ourselves to one kiss per day!

Some years ago, a close friend of mine had a birthday while on a retreat during which she'd decided to accept all experiences with gratitude, as her birthday gift. It was wonderful to witness her joy. Ever since then, whenever I've remembered her joy, I've spent the day feeling gratitude towards and for life's incredible experiences.

When we're mindfully connected to our heart, we transform the ordinary activities of our daily life into the sacred. Look into your life and see how you

can increase your 'seed bank' of joy. How can you make this seed bank your natural abiding place?

Joy is non-attachment for one who is content.

Joy is for one who has practised Dharma and sees clearly.

Joy is non-affliction in this world.

Joy is the overcoming of sensual desires.

The abolition of the conceit 'I am': that is truly the supreme joy.

(Udana, 4.1)

Practitioners in the 'positive psychology' movement have made quantum leaps due to advances in neuroscience, involving mapping of the latest technologies in relation to how the mind affects the brain, and vice versa, in relation to how changes in the brain's neural activity affect mental activity. Dr Rick Hanson, an eminent psychologist, neuroscientist and author of the acclaimed books *Buddha's Brain* and *Hardwiring for Happiness*, outlines a clear, science-based rationale for 'taking in the good'. He provides practical steps based on his research into how to cultivate inner strengths and enhance positive states and integrate them in new neural pathways in the brain so they become more natural traits.

Think not lightly of good, saying,

"It will not come to me."

Drop by drop is the water pot filled.

Likewise, the wise one,

gathering it little by little,

fills oneself with good.

(Dhammapada, 9.122)

## **An equanimous, peaceful heart**

All four of the immeasurables are interrelated, and the deepest stream of compassion, joy and love is founded on equanimity and peace. On the deepest level, equanimity arises in us when we realise the truth of who we are at the core of our being, which is an unshakable freedom and peace. In order to act with heart in the world, we have to cultivate these divine qualities of love, compassion, joy and equanimity, and learn to embody them, apply them and express them in our daily life.

The fourth immeasurable quality of the boundless heart is equanimity, or *upekkha* in Pali, which means 'non-attachment', 'composure', 'non-discrimination', 'deep peace' and 'deep acceptance of the way things are'. The 'near enemy' of equanimity is cool indifference, but true equanimity is neither cold nor indifferent. The 'far enemy' of equanimity is agitation and expression of condemning, judgemental opinions.

To see the world and other people through the lens of equanimity is to shed divisive prejudices and discriminatory attitudes. Can you imagine a mind that's free of condemning, judgemental opinions of oneself and other people? When we cultivate an equanimous mind, we don't see the world in terms of 'good or evil', 'profound or profane' or 'us or them', or subscribe to the dualistic world view of 'subject and object'; rather, we see the vast,

fathomless, essential nature that contains all beings. When we practise true equanimity, we transcend any limited view of caste, race, gender, colour, age, time, self and 'other'; rather, we recognise the seamless totality, which has no division.

Stephanie Dowrick, the writer and inter-faith minister, beautifully holds us to our highest potential: 'Imagine the world we would live in if we dared to see all of life as sacred - unconditionally.' (Dowrick, 2010) Seeing the sacred in this world is the product of an equanimous mind.

Out beyond ideas of wrong doing and right doing,  
there is a field. I'll meet you there.

(Rumi)

A beautiful poem in the classic Zen text *The Gateless Barrier* encapsulates this quality of equanimity:

Moon and clouds are the same.  
Mountains and valleys are different.  
Is this one? Is this two?  
All are blessed; all are blessed.

(Aitken, 213)

## **Equanimity in the therapeutic context**

Significant benefits flow to both the therapist and the client from applying mindfulness and equanimity. If therapists can sit with a spacious, open,

equanimous mind, they can hold 'self' and 'other' with radical acceptance and thereby invite the client to be curious about his or her unfolding experience, to soften and to heal. Metaphorically, the therapist creates a general attitude of an open, spacious, welcoming container for the therapeutic work to unfold in. Rather than adhere to a prescriptive, formula-driven therapeutic agenda, both the therapist and the client accept whatever emerges in their present-moment experience.

## **The benefits for therapists**

It's important that the therapist create a safe holding space and be able to tolerate the strong emotions that frequently arise in the therapy setting. "The therapist learns to be a larger 'vessel' that can hold an immense amount of emotional content while at the same time maintaining equanimity." (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009, p. 26). In maintaining this holding space, the therapist is better able to manage classic therapeutic countertransference and use it to understand what's happening in the therapeutic relationship. For example, in order to ground myself and prevent myself from unskillfully reacting to my client, I notice myself frequently shifting and sitting back in the equanimous witness space of my mind – being conscious of my own tensions, bodily sensations, thoughts and feelings – when my client is expressing a more dramatic state of emotional disturbance. Throughout the session, I attempt to apply a two-way observational mirror, by intentionally tracking my own internal experience, moment by moment, and equally tracking my client's

experience in a non-judgmental, open, compassionate, caring way. Shapiro and Carlson reported (p. 27), 'Through the ability to attend to and regulate their own emotional reactions, therapists can be more present and accepting of clients across a range of emotionally charged therapy situations, and hence more likely to maintain a strong and supportive therapeutic relationship.'

## **The benefits for the client**

A considerable amount of research has been conducted in order to investigate how mindfulness training can be helpful for clients in regulating their emotions more effectively. Specific effective interventions for treatment of anxiety and depression are found in Jon Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness-based stress-reduction program, which he developed while dealing with stress and chronic pain; in Marsha M. Linehan's (1993b) dialectical behaviour therapy, which she developed during treatment of 'borderline' clients; and in the mindfulness-based cognitive therapy developed by Segal et al. (2002).

Supported by the therapist, the client can learn mindfulness and equanimity and can become ever more steady and at ease when witnessing the rising and passing of pleasant and unpleasant feelings, sensations and thoughts. We cultivate equanimity when we calmly and steadily direct our attention towards observing our whole mind and body process, with its shifting states of pleasure and pain. Sitting in a steady, equanimous space, we can enjoy the pleasant and pleasurable without continuing to grasp and crave, and can tolerate the unpleasant and difficult without continuing to submit to our conditioning or a state of mind marked by reactivity,

defensiveness or contraction. We learn to be with the full range of emotional and psychological states from a place of steadiness and calmness, and in effect, we enhance our inner strength and resilience.

In her heartfelt book about radical acceptance, Tara Brach (2003: 41) stated, 'We are seeing the familiar fears, the judging and planning thoughts, as part of the flow of life. Accepting them in this way actually enables us to recognise that experience is impersonal and frees us from the trap of identifying ourselves as a deficient and limited self.'

Applying a combination of being mindful and engaging the 'compassionate witness' aspect of the mind, we can assist our clients to more effectively regulate their disturbing emotions such as anger, anxiety, fear, depression and grief. If we're destabilised or splitting off our thoughts and feelings, we don't have the information we need in order to heal and live our life. We can guide our clients to cultivate this centred, mindful, 'witnessing' quality whereby we enable them to hold in mind the memories, thoughts and impulses that in the past might have been overwhelming for them or led them to impulsivity. We're able to apply discernment, wisdom and clarity in order to look into what's arising for the client, to see what's required, to understand what's happened in the past and to see what's happening in his or her present-day experience so we can give a considered and wise response. Our clients then make their decisions based on clarity and can use the information in order to live their life more fully. In applying mindfulness and equanimity,

we can return to a place of stability and clarity in the midst of painful memories, loss of significant relationships, the upheavals of family life, and the stress that arises in us from having an overly demanding work life.

During evidenced-based research conducted by Grepmaier, Mitterlehner, Loew, Bachler et al. (2007), the researchers investigated therapists who had or hadn't received Zen meditation training, as well as the impact on the therapists' clients who had a range of mood and anxiety disorders. The clients who'd been assigned to a therapist who had been trained in Zen meditation reported a greater sense of well-being and more self-awareness and understanding of their character and difficulties, and the possibilities for developing some solutions. 'Their symptoms improved more over time across a wide range of standard outcomes, including fewer symptoms of anxiety, depression, hostility, somatisation, and obsessions and compulsions.' (Shapiro, p. 28) Although more research has yet to be conducted, this type of research and these types of finding lead us to a greater understanding that a mindful, equanimous, compassionate therapist who can cultivate and abide in the four immeasurables has an influence on both the therapeutic relationship, the therapists own state of well-being and the client's outcomes.

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