

# Post Workshop Reflections by Anthony Fidler

## Weathering Storms: Mindfulness based Approaches for Emotional Pain, Trauma and Psychosis

### Introduction

On 16<sup>th</sup> November 2018, Dr. Tamara Russell and I hosted a workshop at Jamyang Buddhist Centre in London, aimed at exploring how Mindfulness, Trauma Release Work, Connection and Mindful Touch based practices may play a role in helping people experiencing extreme states of emotional pain, trauma and confusion including what we currently consider psychosis.

The basis for the work was my personal experience of managing and navigating extreme states over the past seventeen years using similar practices. Tamara's role was to bring a little bit of 'professional' practice around the edges of my enthusiasm for the work and to host the event.

We opened the workshop to people covering the whole range of the mental health field. Our intended number was fourteen including Tamara and myself, but two people didn't make it to the day itself, finding themselves in unexpected crisis and drawn into the psychiatric system.

Of the twelve present, eight people had personal experience of extreme states from bi-polar and PTSD to acute psychosis (whatever these terms mean). One person experienced an extreme state in the weeks prior to the event but was able to attend. One of the twelve, stayed with us for just the first half hour before feeling the need to leave.

The professionals present represented a range of roles from psychiatric nurses and counselling psychologists working in frontline psychiatric work to private psychotherapists along with a junior doctor moving into psychiatric work. Some had personal experience themselves and were included in the comments on experiencers above.

As important as the practices, was the non-medicalised, non-hierarchical, non-judgemental safe space which we did our best to establish and maintain through the day while playing our joint roles of facilitators as well as participants.

### Response to Group Feedback

Overall, the response from the group participants was warm and appreciative of the journey we shared together through the day, with an expressed desire for more opportunity to explore the practices together.

In terms of learning for the future, I've discussed the issue of one member leaving at the beginning in the report below and will explore ways to create a safer entry into group resonance in future workshops.

I decided to run a satellite session with her privately a few days later and after an hour discussing our experiences together, I shared the compassionate touch practice with her for a further hour which was well received. The feedback was as positive as I can imagine, thank you.

The workshop also highlighted that we are all different in our needs and capacities and so some space is required around practices to allow people to find their own way, with form or without.

Tamara provided the possibility of following alternative side-activities in the time and I like this very much, though our little room perhaps didn't make it easy to step out of the group for a while and do your own thing. But I would encourage this.

I accept, I blew the timing on breaks. They were all carefully planned in the schedule and intention, but I lost the rhythm in the stress of responding to a member leaving. This was un-necessary. Also, the talking session was over-long after lunch. I found managing the timing between shared discussion (which was great) and getting the content I felt needed to be said across, challenging. In the future I would prefer the 'professional day' and the 'pure experience' day (still with response feedback) to be separate if possible.

One member of the group was extremely unhappy with the day, and I was sad to read this. I would have preferred to have had the opportunity to discuss this on the day and perhaps it could have been resolved. One of the criticisms was that we were exploring practices and ideas relevant to 'me': white, middle class, well-educated, well-travelled and nothing was offered relevant to the wider population. It was missed perhaps that very 'well-travelled' means, well-used to being with people from very different backgrounds. There was also opinion that the day felt unformed and 'amateur' perhaps, early research / experimental stage... Pretty critical.

It would have been interesting to respond to this on the day itself. For me, it misses the basic nature of what we were doing on the day. The practices I offered are working at the level of basic human needs: to strengthen our relation to the ground, our power centre, with the space around us and with other human beings. To bring us to a sense of safety in which we can face our inner difficulty ourselves, with the support of others as appropriate, but primarily led by the individual.

Whether the person is black or white, teenage or aged, educated or less, middle class or whatever, does not change these basic needs and ways to work with them. Adjustments are always appropriate for diverse groups though. With teenagers I would play more, dance more, maybe use music.

At a Red Cross Centre in Luxembourg, I planned rapping music to use with troubled teenagers while sharing spontaneous movement together, but as things turned out we had more refugee adults present and I felt silence was more appropriate. A woman in that session, of African origin, had been caught up in sex-trafficking in Greece. We shared the same practices, but in a fuller way than at the Weathering Storms session, including on that occasion, lying upside down in spontaneous 'happy baby', and allowing sound release to express. We then shared the touch work. She was paired with a Pakistani male refugee and I chose to do a 'three-some' with them which was necessary and went well. She felt safe to set her own boundaries on how she worked that day. The centre supervisor was able to check with her afterwards and she liked the session very much.

Recently at Dragon Café, we had every London ethnic mix present and age while we went through the practices together including the touch work.

I also worked privately with a withdrawn 13-year-old and his mother and he exhibited much more open body language after the session. And just through talking, I once related well with an older teenager with a violence pattern – it isn't about touch, it's about non-judgemental communication, authenticity and heart connection.

Finally, I've worked with the touch practice 1-1 with multiple women who have been abused, and in some cases also had massive mental health backgrounds and they have opened up and felt safe with me. One woman had had an experience of feeling extreme discomfort with any male touch, even

with her son for many years, but after one session was hugging me, her son and I believe opening more with other men.

So, thank you for the opportunity to respond to this. I agree I want to do more 'research' en-masse now to see real life changes in people from these basic human practices. To create a genuine 'stabilisation' path for individuals after 'psychosis', as an alternative to what is being offered people right now.

At the same time, I am quite confident that this work will make a real difference if given a chance. Medication is an issue as it numbs many people, but I can only do my best with this and hopefully later not everyone will have to be treated in this way.

The people most difficult to work with are not those traumatised and sensitive, hearing voices or whatever but those with a closed heart, as this makes resonance very difficult to achieve both in terms of facilitators connecting with them and with their capacity to connect on this level with others. But it is a journey which can be done with much patience and is absolutely worth the effort.

### Workshop Report

#### Intentions and Reality

What we originally intended for the event was a three-day format. This would have been ideal perhaps, but one starts with a vision and then allow it to touch reality and then you work with the imperfection of life with humility and heart doing your best. We offered our best on the day.

The original plan was a first day of gentle practice and exploration purely for people with personal experience of extreme states, so lots of time for exploring and seeing how people react to the practices without ambition or pressure to 'achieve' anything. This became a one-hour session at Dragon Café in London, given in October, which I found very interesting and have written about previously.

Then a second day, purely for professionals within the mental health service with time for some practices but more emphasis on discussing frameworks, safety, implementation etc. as well as my personal experiences. Tamara would have had an important role, linking the practices I was proposing, to established research and understanding.

And then the third day was to be a pure practice day for experiencers and professional together on a non-hierarchical basis.

What manifested was a fusion of the second and the third day, as one, so a compromise mixing a need for theoretical explanation and discussion, with practical experience and feedback time.

We were aware of this and of probably having far too much content for the challenges of the day, but still for me it worked as an extremely interesting research day and a basis for further, more refined work in the future.

#### Importance of Group Safety & The Value of Experiencers

For me, our first important learning came right at the beginning of the day. My first objective for us was to establish a safe group resonance.

Approaches differ between people and I had agreed with Tamara's professional rationale of running a classic group introduction i.e. sharing names, reflecting on and clarifying intentions for the day and a discussion on safety requirements for the group. She led the introduction.

After some guided meditation, we started with a few people sharing their intentions for the day. One of the attendees left for what we thought was a toilet break, but after an over-long period, I went out to check on her and found she had left the building without informing us.

We were able to reach her by phone later in the morning to check she was okay, and I arranged a private future meeting with her as a satellite session to continue the work. She was with us only briefly but offered an important contribution to the session.

I had previously run workshops for anxiety in Luxembourg and my format in those cases, was to assume that no one with inner discomfort could be required to participate in 'head' based activity or discussion or any activity which might trigger anxiety such as being required to speak out into a group, even if the purpose was to establish personal safety needs!

My response as members in the room will acknowledge was of real sadness that we had failed someone from the start, and what followed was heart based direct talk, cutting the whole process that we had slid into.

I am very grateful to Tamara for playing her role in this, which she did with her natural warmth and good heart and I would say it was helpful that I went along with the 'professional approach' on this occasion as I feel the 'mistake' was one of the most important highlights of the day.

What came out in my view, was that a fundamental problem with mental health care in the World right now, is that it is almost exclusively set up and run by people who have not had personal experience of the difficulties that 'service users' face.

This is not a comment on lack of compassion or good intention but on the implicit problem of the 'divide' between those who give 'care' and those who receive. A teacher of mine once said that, as a professional clinical psychologist he had counselled people with panic attacks for over twenty-years but until he experienced his own dissociation and associated panic attacks, he had no idea what they felt like and now has enormous respect for his past clients.

How can people who have not experienced what it feels like to be unsafe in your body and mind, possibly for the entire life from birth onwards, really understand people who have this life situation?

My first conclusion from this 'research' is rather dramatic, that there needs to be deep experiential / peer-based influence on every stage of the mental health system. There needs to be a new balance of power and influence between those with professional training and those with 'life experience' training relevant to the needs of the client group. In my view, both have something to offer and are essential, as do less 'qualified' people with a warm heart and some training in emotional care.

In terms of this workshop, what I would have preferred would have been to have clarified a few points on 'safety' prior to the formation of the group via email or skype and then go straight into relaxing the body and mind when the group met in person.

We did our best in this case. I did speak with the member who left myself on Skype before the workshop and we got on well together, creating the foundation of a relationship that should have helped her with entering the group, but I also felt the beginning was too unsafe.

We weren't ready as a group for too much sharing. Even to have to sit still and listen to a speaker or do a guided meditation, while in a non-heart-resonant circle puts too much pressure on sensitive people. She herself said it was her fault, that she was 'too ill', but I don't accept this. We didn't offer a sensitive enough space for her and I'm sure this could have been achieved.

I shared my own experience from the past, that the 'emotional shadow' of people and groups often seemed to invade me. I dealt with it somehow with my mindfulness and other practices, but it is not easy. This may not be 'accepted' science, but I believe it is true for some sensitive individuals. If the group becomes heart-resonant then there is no difficulty for the sensitive individual and it becomes a beautiful support for them.

Nb. On this point, we also reflected on the need for therapists to work on their own shadow material else they share it with their patients.

The work of American psychiatrist and writer M. Scott Peck may be relevant here on Community formation.

### Moving on with Walking into Mindfulness

My response to the opening issue was to take us out of the auto-pilot workshop plan and go straight into practice.

We started with free-style walking, shaking the arms, stretching, playing, looking round the room making friends with it and with those sharing our experience.

We also did a little bit of connection / affirmation practice walking up to each other, making a little eye contact where possible and expressing, while touching our heart or making a gassho (heart-based gesture), that we recognise the person is there with us and that we are grateful for their presence. We affirmed that they are not just an object in virtual reality but a felt part of our life. In doing so, we were also affirmed, and it feels good.

This needs to be done authentically, with sensitivity. For me it laid the foundation for a group resonance to start to form between us, along with a feeling of safety, possibly greater than that which individuals experience while on their own.

### Slowing Down, Concentration Walking, Approaching Difficulty

We shifted then to slowing down, walking with more and more focus, our attention resting deeply in our feet and on our relationship to the ground.

You need a bit of calming preparation before doing this, as the individuals inner feeling increases with the concentration practice. They do need to be able to 'be' with the inner sensations which will no doubt be a mixture of pleasant and unpleasant.

I guided at this point, encouraging people that it was okay to be with any discomfort. For me this is an easier way of approaching difficulty while having something to do, rather than just sitting with it straight off.

### Form and Free Style Qi Gong

Our next practice was Qi Gong based to further increase 'life feeling'.

My goal was to open the flow of vitality and aliveness in the body, which naturally frees the individual from emotional patterns of stagnation, usually without them noticing. You just feel better.

You also shift deeply into a non-thinking state or 'being' mode, to use mindfulness language and at the same time deepen the inner listening, strengthening the relationship between the body and mind.

I consider the disconnection between the thinking-mind and the body-mind, to play a large part in what we consider 'mental illness', hence the focus on developing this.

On this occasion, there were multiple stages to the practice, starting off with form-based work and moving into formless flow. I do it in slightly different ways each time I share it.

For different classes, one could use more form (but in a soft way), or more free style. Different individuals or groups may respond better to either.

I chose freestyle on this occasion and received useful feedback from someone unable to follow it. What I should have done was offer an alternative form-based pattern for him to stay with.

I've often done this with groups, by starting with 'Wave hands like Clouds', a Tai Chi form, and then leading them into freestyle, while allowing individuals to stay with the preceding practice if they wished. It didn't happen on this occasion, so a mistake, but a useful learning point for us all.

Form based work may be more accessible for some individuals and possibly feel safer and allow greater feeling, if they are able to relax into it. It is rather like following a string through a labyrinth, the form can provide something to guide and hold you while you let go to it.

But for myself, if I am pressured into a form-based movement and not allowed space to adapt it with my natural feeling, then it can bring up strong inner frustration, which denies me any hope of relaxation. I will feel far worse for the session. I need time to settle into new forms.

Tai Chi may be the best middle ground between form and spontaneous movement, but it takes time to learn. Simple Qi Gong like Ba Duan Jin, done sensitively in a free-ish way, would be my form-based suggestion. Tamara has her own systems of simple Tai Chi based movement and they may be a good solution for some people.

#### Body Scan and Qi Yoga: Relaxation & Integration

Having aroused our 'energy flow' with the Qi Gong, we dropped to the ground to allow the body to integrate, relax and open.

What followed was a kind of body scan, but I emphasized the relationship with the ground again and combined the awareness practice with compassionate self-touch. We explored the breath moving our muscles in our stomachs, chest, throat with our hands as well as with our awareness. There was a sense of touching ourselves with simple care and compassion.

Again, what I wanted was to strengthen the connection between the mind and the needs of the body. We were learning to approach the body's need and meet it with our compassionate hands and our attention. One benefit from doing the Qi Gong beforehand is that the hands become effective for self-healing.

This is my direct approach towards exploring compassion and self-compassion, rather than through imagination as done in some other systems.

We also curled up and shifted the body shape spontaneously, which I felt to do on this occasion. I've not done this before, but it was what my own body needed. I feel this is an important lesson for others creating classes, that the alive way is what it is all about. At the same time, just lying still and moving the attention is also great, and something I often share with students.

Our next practice was to transition towards standing via a series of simple 'yoga' like positions and in each, I encouraged the relationship with the ground. Again, this is a way to open the body with deep

relaxation. I make use of inner meditative awareness and the resonance that builds up with the ground to support this.

Finally, once we had reached a standing state, we took a few gentle steps, really feeling our relationship to the ground.

### Regenerative, Trauma Release Movement

I could have finished here but decided to give a taster of the next stage of dropping into a spontaneous movement state, or regenerative / trauma release movement.

I have many techniques to support this kind of work but felt nervous to offer them in this environment on this occasion. We need plenty of time to go deeper and come back comfortably, especially when individuals have extreme emotional pressure inside.

The process may often look 'untidy' and we all need to feel safe and not judged to allow this level of expression to come through us. When it is done well, there can be amazing therapeutic changes for people. It has been an important part of my healing journey. I gave it a name, 'Crazy Zen'.

On this occasion what I did was to make use of a natural entry which is perhaps better anyway. We simply shook our hands and bodies a bit, then dropped into being childlike, stamping, moving round, making a few sounds. As my own body transitions into a spontaneous state governed by the body mind, the resonance naturally passes through the room, supporting other bodies into the same state. It's just like someone yawning, it is contagious. I have no idea what happened for other people during the session but have confidence in this work.

Even though it was brief, this experience of the body consciousness activating in this way, strengthens the relationship between the thinking mind and the body and may free someone from mental and psychosomatic illnesses, or at least set them off in the right direction.

### Afternoon Session

Unfortunately, I felt the need to offer too many words for a while after lunch. They felt important to share at the time about my own experiences of the value of mindfulness, my understanding of psychosis and of practices to help. As Tamara said, a summary of my 'book'. Too much talk and better kept as a separate session away from the deep experiential practices. Apologies to all. I was obviously aware of body language in the room but went ahead anyway...

### Voice Work

We shifted gear back into practices with some voice work, based on Japanese Kotodama practices, Suu, Uu, Ah, Oh, Eh, EE.

For me this is an amazing practice which has helped me enormously over the years to extract myself from messy emotional states.

While we focus our attention on making the sounds together, there is a clearing of emotional charge from the throat and torso and an empowerment of the 'hara' or power centre in the body, which leaves us feeling clearer and less anxious. Fully present.

I was interested in the comment from one participant that it felt a bit hypnotic. I can see this in the sense that we are tuning ourselves, resting our attention fully one by one on the different sound patterns that we create together as a group. But at the same time, we are coming into total presence, so this is exactly the opposite of hypnosis to me.

We are entering a very alert, but calm and empowered 'empty mind' state, useful for potential 'Samurai' or people dealing with extreme states. I think participants may agree that afterwards there is no fear! In my experience, there is total mindfulness of each moment throughout the session and afterwards it is easy to enter deep meditation.

I feel this is a useful practice for working with mental health clients, as it also has the benefit of bonding the group together. I usually do this earlier in the sessions before too much spontaneous work, so we feel safe and our minds are quieter and less in need to hold on to control.

I think it is also useful for those working as therapists, as is everything we did on this occasion. A good way to clean our energy field and 'care for the carer'.

### Meditation

We followed the sound work with a brief sitting meditation session. For me the role of facilitator guidance is to support the student in their practice, not to distract them from experiencing their inner discomfort. This may be a fine line.

My understanding with research on mindfulness for psychosis to date is that it concludes that sessions should be short and filled with appropriate language guiding the experience. This makes sense. I agree sessions should be short: 5 minutes, 10 minutes etc. and people may need tailored support in their approach of inner difficulty.

I'm not keen on the general mindfulness approach of flooding the beginner with an almost continuous stream of talk. The 'empty space' is where the magic is, and for me, you need to support the student by entering into comfortable meditation oneself as a facilitator and sharing that through the resonance that has built up with them.

If individuals have extreme difficulty, you can also make use of a buddy system where there is physical touch on the shoulders perhaps while they sit or simply holding their hand or possibly a hand on the stomach while they lie down.

On this occasion, I made use of awareness of the stability of the ground first, and then shifted to awareness and feeling under the hands of the breath in the stomach area.

I encouraged this rather than nose breathing as it encourages embodiment and relaxation for people who have anxiety. Nose awareness is for people who can relax more easily in my experience. Getting this wrong, got me into my second 'psychosis'.

One can still make a mistake of 'making' abdominal breathing happen, rather than having it happen naturally. This got me into my fourth 'psychosis'. Hence my emphasis on focusing on the ground and allowing the resonance to empower a breathing change into a natural rhythm before focusing on the breath. Perhaps for most people it doesn't matter, but for me it does and the consequence of getting it wrong is to become less grounded.

I gave us a taster of open throat breathing, in which we breathed in, opened our mouth wide, possibly with the head back or not, and then let the air pour out naturally with the attention falling with the breath down into the abdomen. We rested there and then allowed the breath to come in by itself, how the body wanted. And then if there were subsequent desires felt for a bit of a stretch or yawn or movement then this was for us to allow if we wished, before settling back into our still 'meditation' on the natural breath. This process could be repeated as desired to help the body to relax more deeply.

Nb. Mindfulness of breathing with a tense, feeling avoiding, shallow breath is not relaxing and for me does not serve the purpose intended by the practice. Mindfulness can work by focusing on the ground and the stillness and sensation of the body, but if you can get the natural breath 'working' it is much easier.

We also imagined a warm smiling face. This is my attempt to soften the experience, to feel less alone in it, and bring in more self-compassion.

Finally, with the foundations of ground, centre, natural breathing and gentle self-compassion well established, we opened to the body sensations, emotions, thoughts, inner voices and whatever other 'guests' were entering our houses of awareness. There was plenty of silence, but it wasn't for too long.

I continued with a little heart reflection or inner listening, exploring communication with our deeper selves. Sadly, we didn't have time to explore this further on this occasion as I see it as a useful way to bring psychotherapeutic work into the process, along with group discussion, integrative art work etc.

We were running out of time, so I missed discussing and getting feedback on the meditations which was a shame.

#### The Importance of Approaching Inner Difficulty

My instinct right from the beginning of my own difficulty, while still on anti-psychotic medication was that I needed to re-establish my meditation practice and get back to my inner centre to deal with the mess that I was in. The problem was that going inside seemed to leave me ungrounded, bringing too much energy to my head. In others this may mean re-activating a trauma.

My goal with this work has been to prepare an individual so that they can do this safely and start to face their inner world.

Some individuals may need to share vocally with the group or with a private therapist at the same time as following the 'transformational' workshops. Others may just need repeated attendance at the workshops to empower them to do the work themselves.

Over time as confidence increases, they may find individual practice more useful also. We are all different, but for myself, approaching my inner world in the first year was terrifying and it took me many years to be able to do this in a retreat environment.

With this work, I hope to smooth out and speed up the process for others.

#### HeartTouch Practice / Mindful Touch

With only a short time left, I demonstrated my simple version of Akinobu Kishi's Sei Ki. I am writing a separate essay on the therapeutic use of this for 'mental health' work but will say a little here relevant to the day.

In terms of group practices, I have found that even five minutes of simple practice with a partner produces profound deep relaxation for both people and a sense of genuine warmth and connection with oneself and wider humanity.

One late-teenage girl with anxiety, having had someone place their hand on her stomach for a while in meditative awareness gave feedback that she didn't feel alone anymore. Some primal need for human connection was met in the simple practice.

We started with our own meditation as before, coming to be with ourselves, and then added a little Qi Gong through the hands, breathing in and feeling through our hands to our shoulders and down to our navel or just below it.

We followed this by holding a Qi ball, expanding and contracting it with the breath before bringing the hands together with optional blowing air which calms emotions.

I then observed the back of my partner, giving total mindful attention to all that I noticed especially movement induced by the breath and other small movements. Once I touched on the shoulders, I added my feeling sense of the aliveness inside and of the movement of the body with the breath. All this non-judgemental attention worked to encourage a natural resonance to evolve between the two of us. A natural trust. We were not making it happen but allowing it to happen.

After this I briefly demonstrated touch in sitting, prone and supine positions, with my simple supported 'body scan' style.

In my experience this simple 'scan' practice with constant relaxed attention, works very well at bringing both people to a state of greater calm and good feeling. Where you touch depends on your feeling, but the scan pattern provides a starting place. If you feel to go elsewhere then follow this feeling, as the scan is no longer the 'alive way' for the person and will not be wanted. I am sure oxytocin flows through both people in this practice. I call this work HeartTouch.

The high-level practice, Sei Ki is about pure meditative attention and spontaneously following the feeling in the hands to touch, guided by the resonance. There are no patterns to follow, although the doer may make use of techniques spontaneously. It requires more personal development and confidence in handling spontaneous release from the other.

I was sad we didn't get a chance to try out the touch practice on this occasion.

I usually offer a very simple foundation level to begin with: Touching the shoulders from behind while the other sits, then holding the person's arm and hand while watching the stomach area with them lying down. In appropriate cases where trust is enough, we also touch the stomach area.

I have already done this with participants who both experienced high anxiety or psychosis and in each case the interaction between them afterwards was warm and human with both feeling deeply relaxed. Like magic...

### Summary

For me the workshop was a good beginning despite some of the difficulties of the day. I was very anxious beforehand despite having done masses of teaching in other environments and this felt like my 'all' for this time.

I sincerely hope there will be other occasions in the future for us to go deeper together and that if the society wants, this kind of work will start to find its way into more mainstream therapy for people experiencing extreme states.

I learnt a lot from it and hope others did also.

Thank you to those who joined me for this first 'research' day, and especially Tamara for supporting me through the day and through all the planning and setting up.

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