

## Crazy Zen & Heart Touch at Dragon Café: Post Workshop Reflections

On Monday 10th September, I ran a short workshop at the Dragon Café in Borough, London. I was invited to try out some of my Mindfulness based work there by Dr. Tamara Russell and the Centre's Program Manager.

I am exploring ways in which Mindfulness based frameworks and practices can create safe environments which are helpful for people experiencing extreme states and perhaps what we often call psychosis. The Dragon Café, part of the Mental Fight Club project is an alternative mental health meeting place with mindfulness and non-judgemental philosophy underpinning all its activities and structures and seemed an ideal place to begin this work.

My intention with this essay is to give the reader a feel for what a healthy 'mental health' space feels like, in terms of offering warmth and basic humanity. And then a sense of the stages of guiding a group safely into a deep internal state in which they can mindfully approach inner pain, ideally without anyone realising that anything 'special' is going on.

I'm just starting out here, so forgive me if what I write seems obvious, naïve or worse patronising. There is no intention of the latter.

I really had no idea what to expect on the day and was grateful for the fact that I entered the space with Tamara leading the way. She had taught there often herself and was familiar with the people, warmly hugging many as we went in and I felt like I entered on the wave of this warmth. I am sure this doesn't happen in formal psychiatric environments, but why not?

We entered the venue, a converted underground Church crypt and were met by what felt to me like a mass of people. The sounds of people chatting and going about their business was everywhere around us. It was a very busy, alive place, but had a good feeling about it. There was no sense of stress or power games in the interactions around me. I particularly like the quiet welcome from the older man taking registrations. He gave us some coloured clothing buttons as vouchers for a drink and cake if we wanted. It immediately struck me as a little quirky and I liked it. A first hint that this was a place with its own unique personality.

I was taken through the café area itself, a room full of simple tables and chairs with plenty of people sitting round talking. Everyone looked 'normal' to me and comfortable in themselves sitting there chatting. The individuals were of a wide ethnic and age mix and the genders felt balanced; a London population.

We made our way through the doors into the 'quiet' room: a low ceiling, windowless space with a kind of green lawn like mat area in the middle framed somehow with pillars, which I could see was going to function as a workshop area for us. There were more tables on one side with people sitting round chatting and another small area with a kind of office like feeling, computers and people going about their work. In the far corner there was a low partitioned area where people were receiving massages. The manager informed me that people would be coming and going through the door at times for them.

The prospect of facilitating a sensitive workshop with an unknown number of people, with unknown 'mental health' issues in a venue which was in my first impressions, 'a complete nightmare', could have left me with emotions hitting the ceiling, but as it was I was okay about it. I was supported well and although I wanted things to go well, I was simply there to be myself and do my best to play out my role for a while.

I recognised that despite all the activity going on in a small confined space, everyone was present and going about their own roles with patience and warmth. I was aware of the quiet helpers, moving things out of the way from the previous session and bringing in chairs or yoga mats. I felt relaxed to go and change in the toilets, at 1.57pm, knowing everything was being prepared as best it could for 2pm.

The centre manager was friendly and respectful with me, playing his part to ensure my work was successful, but at the same time I was aware I was just another cog doing my bit in this complex woven environment. Not more or less important than any of the people in the space around me.

We started on time, a group of about sixteen to twenty people having gathered, sitting on chairs around the little green area. Tamara opened with a few words and guided meditation inviting us to come into the moment and become clear of our intentions for the following hour together. It gave me a good chance to be still for a moment and prepare myself before we started.

I usually like to start any kind of workshop with some barefoot walking. My instruction was to simply walk around the space, no rules, how you like, looking round at the space with all its diverse objects and activity, in a way making friends with and accepting everything around us. I love this kind of simple practice with a group and it prepares well the ground for whatever will follow. We slowed down, allowing the outer world to be, while we checked out our inner terrain, the body feeling, emotions, thoughts and sense of being with others sharing an experience. Recognising the stability and support of the ground meeting us, as we place our feet. And finally, we added compassionate touch with our hands on to our own body, feeling where it needed to be held and supported.

Recognising and make resonance with the ground and feeling and listening to our body, especially our centre or abdominal area seems essential for good mental health to me. This is important for everyone but is especially so if a person has had a life of inner difficulty, possibly in an extreme way.

We need to find our sense of safety as an individual within a group in the space we are in, before we are ready to proceed, and I felt the 'walking into mindfulness' practice achieved this well. I noticed myself that the environment no longer felt challenging to me. In fact, the whole experience felt completely natural and comfortable as if I completely belonged there.

What came out next was a little bit of qi gong. 'Awakening the Qi' in Tai Chi, although I like to do it in an informal way. It came out with some spontaneous adaptations for the group of people around me. I am interested in the authenticity of someone's movement, so that whatever comes out is their body's desired expression, that moment, not something rigid done to meet what is perceived as my expectation or even their own.

I believe this philosophy of naturalness, of non-forcing will be key to any work of this nature in the 'mental health' field where people have their own unique inner pressures and needs. I guess my way is to trust people with their own self-responsibility, to take care of themselves and handle their own needs as best they can, and I try and give instructions to empower this in people.

If someone wants to lie on a beanbag and just watch, then lie on that beanbag. When the desire comes to join in, then join in. In other places with more space, we have freedom to drop to the ground and lie there and if I see someone doing this, I may make them the momentary leader, and take the whole group down with them, recognising their wisdom. This kind of sensitive aliveness may be more important than the specific methods or techniques being applied in a class.

Mindfulness and Qi Gong are a natural fit together. In fact, in Chinese culture they see meditation as an aspect of Qi Gong and don't appear to recognise two different concepts.

As soon as you focus on your feet planted on the ground and allow your hands to rise slowly, there is a sense of turning up the volume on your inner sensory field. You naturally meet more of 'yourself' that moment, both the pleasant parts of your experience and the unpleasant. You can't go around wanting just the 'good' bits and so the instruction is to explore being with all the sensations that come up. It is in these little moments of 'being' with what is, that we develop our tolerances for more extreme experiences.

For some people, this may be a less threatening way to approach their inner world rather than through the direct sitting with oneself approach. Perhaps Mindfulness teachers are offering the companionship of their voice as a tool to soothe the person while they approach their difficulty, but for me, I am interested in the possibility of helping people approach their inner experience while we share mindful activities together as a group. Perhaps after this everyone will be ready for a little bit of direct sitting, even without much guidance. Any gentle form-based activities offer this possibility, especially Tai Chi but also yoga or dance perhaps, maybe even other practices like swimming.

Our little session moved on to a gentle spontaneous qi gong, moving in freestyle spirals. I lead us into it with a little bit of 'Wave Hands Like Clouds', a Tai Chi movement, starting with one hand, then the other and then breaking out of the pattern into the creative flow. I felt it was a success for the group. Success meaning that no one noticed anything special happening. They just transitioned naturally into the state of allowing the movements to come out of them without needing to think who was guiding it all. My experience is that this is an amazing way into 'Being' mode, shutting down the thinking mind. I didn't have a chance to get feedback from everyone, but it felt good in the space.

I know from experience that even people with advanced Parkinson's can move smoothly in this way, so that no one can tell them apart from others. I believe it is because the movement is being guided non-cognitively from the body. It is extremely relaxing and liberating.

Again, I feel this is a useful practice for working with people with extreme states. We connected deeply with our bodies, feeling how they wanted to move. It creates a beautiful pathway into what I call embodied mindfulness.

We shifted gear at this point and moved down to the ground sharing yoga mats. Immediately there was a need to adjust and adapt for people who needed to stay in chairs or others who could only sit with their legs open or in different positions, but it was fine. We shared a little bit of sitting practice together just for a few moments, accepting the support of the ground and then physically connecting through touch with the movement of our breath finally moving on to some more qi gong practices to strengthen the 'hara' or power centre.

I was recently directed towards a book by Elyn Saks, which appears to emphasize the weakness of her 'centre', as a person. She identifies herself as an experiencer of paranoid schizophrenia. I don't identify myself with anything but can completely relate to this myself and would add a feeling of having no emotional skin, no protective barrier between oneself and the emotional field going on around you.

Where this took me, was to look for ways to strengthen the 'power centre' and the 'defensive qi' of myself. It is a work in progress for me, but there is progress and I have plenty of patience. In the workshop I quietly slipped in a little exercise to help with this: breathing into the hara. I had hoped to do a more powerful exercise using the voice but there was no time and it felt inappropriate in the space we were in.

In the martial arts of China and Japan, there are traditions to strengthen these aspects of human beings. I believe we can adapt and make use of these practices to help people deal with their inner and outer life difficulties. Equally though, any ways to empower people in a healthy way, will help them regain their independence and I believe relieve them of the intensity of challenging symptoms. We all know about this sense of inner core power; when it is depleted we feel nervous and unsettled inside.

Our final practice was touch and connection based. I paired up with Tamara to demonstrate. The beginning is to be with oneself, to approach the inner reality, even if for only a moment and then you are ready to open your eyes and start to observe the back of your partner, seeing in a non-judgemental way, especially focusing on small movements and the breath. This is a method for entering what can be called 'resonance' with another human being. A connection develops between us with a natural sense of trust and of being together. We continued with some simple touch on the shoulders allowing the bodies to breath together. Then with the person lying down, offered them support by resting their hand on our knee, while holding that hand and the person's shoulder.

This is not complicated work, but with a group of beginners unfamiliar with therapeutic or compassionate touch it was interesting to guide people through. It all seemed to happen easily enough. I appreciated Tamara's comments out loud to the group, as I naturally asked permission to place her hand on my knee. We are working crossing through personal boundaries and respect is key.

This kind of work is unfamiliar in our society and it seems almost taboo in the NHS and yet within minutes everyone was settled into it. The practice itself is not therapy, it is a simple ritual of being together in mindful and compassionate presence, but the therapeutic side-effects can be quietly enormous. One may not even realise at the time how things change inside in deep emotional ways, as inner needs are met, which are usually not, especially if one has a mental health background.

I found myself paired up with one of the group members for a short time, and appreciated Tamara moving round supporting everyone into the practice. Within no time, everything seemed to be happening completely naturally and as I took over the supervision role, there seemed no need to intervene. It was beautiful to watch.

There was little time left, but we finished with a group sharing and reflection. We were able to discuss the role of mindfulness in this work. It had effectively been a two-person mindfulness exercise with both people having different internal experiences but being connected in a way which everyone agreed was peaceful and soothing. You experience everything going on inside yourself, at the same time as directing your attention with your role of support if you are the giver, or of feeling supported if you are the receiver.

My idea is that the foundation of Mindfulness is for a person to enter a deep 'Being' mode Mind State as described by Professor Mark Williams and a deep emotional Soothing state, as described by Professor Paul Gilbert. The person also needs to be 'grounded' in their body, otherwise the practice may have negative consequences.

When someone has experienced trauma or extreme emotional distress and confusion as may happen in a 'psychosis' then this is more challenging to reach on one's own, but in this two-person mindfulness-based connection ritual, of which the above was just a little beginning, I believe there is a safe way, reducing the risk of re-trauma.

The hour-long class came to an end, and I appreciated the patience of the Tai Chi group following us as we tidied up quickly and were soon just another little piece of Dragon Café history.

I was able to chat privately with one participant who had had some challenging anxiety / panic feelings come up in response to a moment while giving touch, reminding me how powerful and primal this kind of work is. She had handled it well with her own inner resources, mindful of all the sensations inside, the thoughts and the urges to flee and I was able to mirror this back to her.

For me, this is part of the value of the work, that it can push buttons and bring up challenges which people can then grow through by meeting them from a relaxed empowered state. The goal for me or whoever is facilitating is to guide the session so that people can meet these challenges safely and at their own pace, with support around as necessary in the follow up. A simple hug or listening ear may be enough.

We had time outside to chat with some of the participants. Part of the intention of the workshop was to bring to people's attention an event we are organising in November exploring this work in more depth.

There are details on my website: [www.easternpeace.co.uk](http://www.easternpeace.co.uk)

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