

The Energy of Stillness

by Kondañña (Barry Kapke)

To speak of the energy of stillness seems like an oxymoron. Stillness is most usually taken to imply an absence – stillness doesn't *have* energy, but is a lack of energy. “Be still” means “stop being active.” I'd like to suggest that stillness is not merely the diminution of activity but is a positive experiential quality with its own vitality and aliveness.

Relatively speaking, most of us reside in a *yang* landscape of excess and activity. We work hard and play hard. We become restless when not constantly engaged in some activity – or multitasking any number of simultaneous activities. We seek diversion – distraction from solitude and quietude. Our minds – and our mouths – are busy. The cities we live in have their own vibrant ‘buzz.’ Life is ‘hot’ – driven by passions, desires, expectations. Consuming, doing, becoming – these define how we live. Even when we take a break from the hectic pace of our daily lives – whether going on vacation to another country where life is simpler, or just getting out of the city – still we look for entertainment and fun things to be done. Stress, as the saying goes, seems to hold us together.

We may protest, insisting that we are different, and, relatively speaking, this may even be true. My point is not to make a judgment of the person but to point to the frenetic environment that we take as normal. The consumer culture that we live in promotes this “more, bigger, faster, better” mentality. We are not encouraged to ‘be’ but rather to ‘become.’ We are not allowed to learn to be intimate with ourselves and, in fact, become quite uncomfortable when alone with ourselves. Meditation is quite instructive in this regard.

Monkey Mind

Our bodies cannot truly relax until our minds learn to relax – and the Western mind seems to never relax. I know computer programmers who report that they perform problem-solving permutations in their dreams. They wake up exhausted. Those new to meditation often say they simply can't sit still; their minds are racing and they have to get up and *do* something. In Asia, this is referred to as ‘monkey mind.’ When we take the time to observe the mind, we see it is like a monkey in a cage – darting here, jumping there, making a lot of noise.

See for yourself. Close your eyes and focus on one thing. The breath is always with you so it is a good meditation object. Your task is to simply sit and observe the rising and falling of the breath for five minutes. Inhaling, feel the expansion of the chest – exhaling, feel the lungs emptying out. Your eyes are closed; you're sitting still; there's nothing to distract you from this simple task of watching the rising and falling of the breath. After a breath or two, you may think “Ah, this is simple.” That's it – the mind is off and running. “What a stupid thing to be doing.” “I wonder what I'll have for dinner tonight.” “Oops, I forgot the breath. Ok, I can do it this time.” “In... out... In... I just can't believe what my boss said yesterday.” We've all been driven to irritation by the person who sits in front of the television switching channels on the remote so fast you know they can't possibly register what is on. It's like we have that person in our heads – channel-surfing.

When we're not observing our mind, we don't realize how fragmented our attention is. Meditation is useful in clearly showing us this. Then, with practice, we can begin to train the mind. Just as we learn any new skill, we learn to be mindful. This doesn't mean that thoughts stop. It is the nature of the mind to think thoughts, just as it is the nature of the nose to smell odors, and the ears to hear sounds. However, instead of *being* the monkey, we observe monkey nature and relax around that. With this mental relaxing, the incessant internal chatter also begins to calm down. There are still thoughts, still sounds, still sensations. The quiescent mind is not suddenly empty, but these arisings no longer captivate and overwhelm us. We can hold the space that contains all these experiences, fully attentive and conscious.

To be capable of entering the heart of stillness, mindfulness practice and meditation are invaluable foundations. If you found it difficult in the earlier exercise to stay with your breath without thoughts and sensations commandeering your attention, then it is very likely that you will find it even more difficult to be attentive to what is happening around you and with your client. That does not mean that there is something wrong with you. In the same way that awkwardness precedes moving with grace and certainty, monkey mind precedes a calm and focused mind. As with all things, it is a matter of practice.

Meditation, mudras¹, breathing, silence, focusing, perception, and visualization are tools that will aid in the deepening of your craft, and its efficacy.

Preparing for the Client

Having learned your craft as a massage therapist or bodyworker is not enough. Technique – even mastery of technique – is insufficient alone. Athletes, disciplined in the execution of their skill, prepare themselves mentally as well as physically before engaging in the athletic event. Using visualization, exercise, and ritual, they get ‘in the zone.’ Traditional healers and shamans undergo a period of purification and concentration – sometimes hours, sometimes days – before they are sufficiently ready to see their ‘patient.’ Many cultures believe any normal adult has the ability to enter a trance state and to be possessed by a ‘god’; the adult incapable of doing so is seen as seriously impaired. In the hyper-acuity of these non-ordinary events, something larger or deeper seems to take over. Much of our most profound work with clients is guided not by external assessment methods but by intuitive *knowing*. Extra-ordinary ability requires preparation and readiness.

All too often we do not allow ourselves time to step outside of ourselves that we may be an open vessel capable of receiving another human being. We are already ‘full’ when we step into the treatment room. There is usually another client scheduled shortly after the current one so there is no time to waste. “Let’s get to it.” If you are incapable of being present and attentive with your client, with a fresh and perceptive inner eye, then the work will be, at best, hit-or-miss.

It is essential to slow down, stop our own internal chatter and monkey mind, and settle into what I call the heart of stillness. Hugh Milne, osteopath and originator of Visionary Craniosacral Work², describes this process of preparation as ‘coning in.’ From this stillness emerges the spaciousness and the sensitivity to perceive what is really going on moment by moment and what is needed. “When the world dissolves,” said the Buddha, “everything becomes clear.”³

Stillness is a place of deep listening. It is also a place of profound patience. Milne offers the analogy of listening to birdsongs in the woods. You find your spot deep in the forest and then sit still, waiting. If your energy is active, moving through the forest rather than being in it, the birds will keep their distance and their alarm calls will be all you’ll hear. If you can stop, relax, and wait, the birds will accept your presence and share their true songs with you. “So it is with touch,” Milne says. “Knowledge aids visualization, understanding, and insight, but a healer also needs to know how to be as empty as possible, as quiet as can be, like one who waits for birds to sing.”⁴ The quieter you can be, the more will be revealed.

To be able to really be ‘in the forest’ with our clients, it is very useful to make a practice of setting aside time for yourself before a client arrives. Give yourself an hour, just for you, in which you are not *doing* anything. Just allow yourself to settle in and find your heart of stillness. You might walk in the garden or sit silently in meditation, but try not to do anything with your hands or engage your mind in mental activity. Just wait. Be attentive. Breathe. Be still. Be.

As with meditation, regular practice at a regular time is helpful in bringing consistency to your cultivation of stillness. Milne further suggests working with the breath to aid your ‘coning-in.’ Allow your attention to focus on the breath, registering the inspiration, noting the expiration. Stay with this observation of the breath for awhile, allowing the monkey brain to settle down. As the mind becomes more concentrated, bring attention to the respiratory still-point at the end of each exhalation. Notice the point where the exhalation completes its release and there is a pause, an interstice, before the next inhalation begins. Surrender into that empty spaciousness. Rest there. Time shifts. Don’t rush to the next breath. When the in-

breath resumes, feel your expansiveness. “When your coning-in has had time to take effect and you have touched your own inner silence, you are quiet enough to listen to another being,” says Milne. “Then it is time to get up and invite your first client in.”⁵

Still Points

Stillness is important in preparing to work with your clients, but stillness also is an integral aspect of the work itself. The body is a symphony of vibrations and rhythms. It is essential to listen to, and work with, the body’s natural rhythms. It is just as essential to work with, and respect, the body’s silences.

When we think of music, we naturally have sound in mind. We have appreciation for the tonal effect of these vibrations. Some sounds are music to our ears; some are cacophony. We tend to overlook the intervals of silence that surround these sounds. However, it is silence - the space between notes or sounds – inasmuch as the texture and tonality of sounds, that makes individual sounds discrete and discernable. Without the intervals of silence, otherwise pleasing sounds become a dense and impenetrable ‘wall of noise.’ Similarly, tactile stimulation to the body must be varied or it becomes just tactile ‘noise.’ If you’ve ever received a massage where the practitioner kept doing the same stroke over and over, you know what I mean.

A *still point*, in craniosacral work, is an interval of rest in the craniosacral pulse or wave. It may typically last anywhere from a few seconds to minutes, allowing the cranial wave formation to reorganize. According to Milne, “Still points are to the cranial wave as sighs are to the breath – automatic releases that let off steam.”⁶

I use the term ‘still point’ more broadly to refer to pauses or breaks, natural or induced, in any of the body’s rhythms. There is a feeling of completion, of convergent integration, in that still repose. It is literally ‘the pause that refreshes.’ In arriving at a still point, I allow myself to stop as well and just to rest in that heart of stillness with my client. Quite often, the client will take a deep breath and there is a feeling of deepening.

All too often, we may feel we are being paid to be *doing* something and so we keep adding stimulation to stimulation, stroke following stroke, as if we were painting the body with our attention. There is only so much information the bodymind can assimilate before it turns off. The ‘less is more’ approach is ultimately of greatest benefit to the client because it allows the bodymind to remain present, interested, and able to digest what it has received without going into sensory or informational overwhelm. As a practitioner, it is part of listening to the body to be able to discern when there is a ‘drawing together’, a still point, and to honor that stillness, to support it, rather than glossing over it and rushing on to the next thing. Often the client will comment after the session that there was a remarkable deepening or releasing in those moments when you intuited to stop, holding their sacred space, allowing them the opportunity to feel and to digest those feelings.

Stillness is an opportunity. It is not an emptiness. It is not merely a cessation of activity. It is the spaciousness that breaks from the identification with sense stimulation and allows a deeper feeling to occur, an understanding that is not a mental process. “Ah, so this is how it is.”

I use stillness quite regularly as a guide. When I make my first contact with the client’s body, often I’ll walk around the body lying there, just being attentive, listening for an invitation, a place in the body’s field that is receptive and still. I go there. That is where I’ll make my first physical contact. Commonly, there will be a sigh. I enter the body’s field with the client’s exhalation, following that softening and opening. I move out with their inhalation. I listen to the ‘music’ of the body, its rhythms and its still points, and I try to work with these individual rhythms.

There is so much more than muscle and bone, breath, cranial wave, qi flow, emotion, to be felt. The spirit sings and if we hear the song we can sing along. There is great joy in being heard. There is incredible relief in being supported and acknowledged, rather than being judged and ‘done to.’ Slow down. Listen. Be.

NOTES

¹ *Mudras* are specific gestures of the hands that facilitate energy flow in ways not unlike yoga *asanas* (postures). See: Gertrud Hirschi, *Mudras: Yoga in your Hands* (York Beach ME: Samuel Weiser, 2000).

² For more information about Visionary Craniosacral Work, contact The Milne Institute, Box 2716, Monterey CA 93942. Website: www.milneinstitute.com E-mail: milneinst@aol.com

³ *Dhammapada: The Sayings of the Buddha*. Translated by Thomas Byrom. (Boston: Shambhala, 1993).

⁴ Hugh Milne. *The Heart of Listening: A Visionary Approach to Craniosacral Work*. (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1995), 132.

⁵ Milne, 88.

⁶ Milne, 205.

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