

Embodying Passion through Expression:
Awakening Courage to Voice What is Most Awkward and Uncomfortable

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Dedication

This paper is dedicated to all those who endeavor to speak from their heart, listen with presence, and embody their passion beyond the limits of hope and fear.

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Abstract

Authentic communication, characterized by congruence between what is felt and what is said, is an integral aspect of personal power, intimacy, creativity and physical/mental/spiritual wellbeing. The author proposes that the essential aspect of authentic communication is awakening the courage to speak what is most uncomfortable in relationship with others. The first section of the paper establishes the author's experiential connection to this topic. The second section utilizes the lens of the *Chakra* system (Indian yoga) to discuss the energetic significance of the throat and voice as it relates to the mind and body. The third section explores the inhibitory states of *guilt* and *shame* which challenge a person's ability to express their internal experience. The fourth section summarizes scientific studies that support the health benefits of confession and truth-telling. The fifth section draws on key principles for skillfully communicating charged inner-experience. The conclusion utilizes the Vajrayana Buddhist notion of "*crazy wisdom*" to illustrate that courageous communication truly arises in the absence of "hope and fear", requiring a person to cut through conceptual reference points and speak directly from felt experience. The author asserts that speaking in this way creates the foundation for a creative, harmonious, fulfilling life.

Key Words: authenticity, communication, chakra, guilt, shame, "crazy wisdom"

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Nothing is quite so freeing and enlarging as a liberated voice.

(Rodenberg, 1992, p. 17)

The voice is the bridge between heart and mind. It can be the vehicle for authentic expression, creativity, and freedom; used unskillfully, it can deepen confusion, unhappiness, and habitual patterns. In the process of opening and maturing into our uniqueness and brilliance as individuals, an integral part of this journey is learning how to express ourselves authentically and courageously. To do this, we need to discover the capacity within ourselves to speak *to* and *through* what makes us most uncomfortable in our various relationships with others.

When we speak from the truth our experience our ability to embody our unique gifts, talents and skill-sets exponentially increases. As we learn how to speak clearly to and from the living energy in our body, our authentic voice emerges—connecting the warmth of our heart, the vision of our mind and the presence of our spirit. Aligned with the flow of life-energy, our voice becomes an instrument of our well-being—empowering us to face and move through fear-based contractions and inhibition, prompting us to live a life less ordinary—one more courageous, creative and fulfilling.

The directive of this paper is to explore and attempt to understand the transformation of “speech energy” into authentic presence. I am curious how we can transform our speech from habitual and inauthentic modes of expression—which distort contact with our lived experience—into a more direct presence-centered way of speaking, enabling us to communicate our embodied thoughts, sensations and emotions.

As an integrative endeavor, I will start by relating my personal connection to the

topic; personal stories and anecdotes appear in several sections. From there, the theoretical aspect begins by exploring how open, honest communication lays the foundation for intimacy and meaningful relationships with others. The next section focuses on investigating the latent energy of the voice via the lens of the Yogic Indian *Chakra System*, specifically focusing the Throat Chakra, *Visuddha*. Having established this framework, I investigate the intrapsychic demons of guilt and shame, which inhibit our ability to speak to the full range of our internal experience.

Exposing some of the potent mind-states people face in choosing to speak honestly to their experience, I go on to summarize significant scientific research that affirms the physical health benefits of self-disclosure and difficult truth-telling. From there the next section centers on powerful principles for skillful engagement in uncomfortable conversations. The last section of this paper utilizes Vajrayana Buddhist understandings of “crazy wisdom” (Trungpa, 1981) to address how one may summon the courage to speak important truths vulnerably and courageously. Truly fearless communication is the result of surrendering conceptual hopes and fears, instead speaking directly from the space of their heart and the energy of their embodied experience.

The conclusion asserts that the more one practices verbally contacting uncomfortable states of mind and names the unspoken “elephants” embedded in relationship, the less one’s inhibitions, hopes and fears have the power to control one’s behavior. Working with inhibition in this way, a person’s unique visions and passions begin to align and clarify. This allows the undivided energy of wakefulness to collect, coalesce, and creatively manifest through the open channel of one’s body-heart-mind-stream.

A Personal Note

On a personal level, I am greatly invested in this topic because learning the willingness to take part in “hard conversations” with others has been one of the most powerful, liberating engagements of my lifetime. I grew up the son of an Insight (Vipassana) meditation teacher in a house where meditation, Buddhist Dharma teachings, and the study of consciousness were daily topics of conversation. I started formally practicing sitting meditation when I was thirteen—when the shit was hitting the fan in middle school. Since then I have practiced on several month-long silent retreats, studied Buddhism in India, was briefly ordained as a monk, along with other meditative endeavours. While I learned a lot from these experiences, something quite significant was missing from my spiritual education.

Despite my engagement in meditation practice, for the vast majority of my life I have been afraid to engage in conflict with others, afraid to embody states of anger and rage. Although my Buddhist upbringing had its value, I implicitly learned these mind-states to be unacceptable. Due to this conditioning, I often felt ashamed and unlovable for being angry. Projecting this outwards, I bought into the belief that if I openly expressed anger and upset with friends, family and lovers they would inevitably disown me. Until a little more than a year ago I mostly bypassed feelings of anger by using the Insight Meditation method of noting and labelling my aversion: “Angry” ... “Upset”... “Pissed off”. I believed that these methods were helping me to cultivate equanimity, calm and insight into the “empty” nature of phenomena. While this may have been true in other situations, with regards to anger I now see how it was a strategy to avoid feeling the overwhelmingly intense energy in my body.

Over the past year and three months, however, I have been on an altogether different journey. December, 2010 I sat a month-long Dathun (Tibetan Buddhist Retreat) with Dr. Reggie Ray. Over the course of the retreat I fell in love with my quirky, sexy, sharp, sweet MI (Meditation Instructor) Hollie¹. We began engaging in a hot/cold, on and off affair that finally, truly ended fifteen months later.

Spending this time with Hollie (six years older than I) has left an irreversible mark on my life. Directly put, Hollie challenged me to communicate openly and honestly on a level I had never previously dreamed possible. Both of us being Scorpios, our cosmic agreement has been that no matter how painful the circumstance, it is nearly impossible for us to withhold the truth of our experience from each other. If we withhold, the other person can sense it right away. In other words, “the jig is up.”

From the perspective of my ego, this relationship, much of the time, has been something of a nightmare. Looking back on the months, it has been one challenging episode after another (along with timelessly sweet moments of connection), revealing more mental stains and defilements than I wish to admit. But on a fundamental level I have changed.

Through this relationship, I learned how to cry in the presence of another. I learned how to look someone in the eyes, say “I love you”, and mean it from the bottom of my heart. And, most terrifyingly, on several occasions I surrendered to the experience of feeling and communicating the explosive energy of living rage in my body—icy and inflamed.

I mention this not because I am advocating explosive catharsis on a frequent basis. I do not advocate this. I mention this as an acknowledgment of the healing that has taken place within

¹ I recieved consent to use her actual name.

me. Finding the courage to embody this level of authenticity, I have reclaimed estranged, forbidden parts of myself. I am more willing to engage what is fierce inside me as well as what is tender. I am more willing to leap into the unknown and speak from my heart, not knowing how the other person will respond.

In this way, I have seen for myself how the discipline of verbal transparency is inevitably a mixture of painful and rewarding experience. Regardless of “feeling tone”, the practice of authentic speech, acknowledging the energy arising in relationship awakens and enhances our sense of aliveness. This makes the journey worthwhile.

Authenticity is the Ground of Intimacy

It took me a long time to realize why learning to share awkward, difficult conversations is such an important aspect of living for me. Doing research on this topic, I have come to realize that authenticity matters because it is the ground and the root of intimacy. As mentioned above, I define the experience of intimacy as mindful contact with the energy that arises between two people in relationship together.

While this paper is explicitly focused on the benefit and power of learning to speak truth from the heart, the subtext implicitly focuses on *how we choose to be in relationship*—with ourselves, with others, and with the world at large. In this sense, questions that have guided my inquiry include: *Intrapersonal realm* : How much of my experience am I willing to be in contact with? To what degree am I willing to be with intensity, uncomfortable emotions, and unattractive parts of myself? *Interpersonal Realm*: To what degree am I willing to acknowledge and contact the space between us? Am I willing to speak to “the elephant in the room” (Love? Attraction? Disgust? Boredom?). *Transpersonal realm*: Do I try out new things or only stick to what I know?

Do I follow my joy and creativity or find ways of distracting myself? Do I embody and express my love for life?

As human beings, we all have an innate desire to be happy. Whether or not we actively express it, part of that happiness depends on meeting an underlying need to experience some flavor of love, connection and intimacy with others (not necessarily romantic or sexual). This is corroborated by noted humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow who cited meeting the need for love and belongingness as critical for healthy human development. He ranked love and connection third on his “Hierarchy of Needs” right after physiological needs of food, air water, and needs for safety and security (*Hierarchy of needs*, n.d.). Looking through the lens of neuroscience, Siegel (1999) asserts it is essential for infants and young children to experience intimate attunement with their primary caregivers to ensure that they develop the capacity to regulate uncomfortable emotions in a healthy manner and internalize a “secure base” from which to explore the world (pp. 67-70). The bottom line is this: young or old, all people humanly desire to love and be loved, see and be seen.

However, there is a paradox here. Although we want to experience true intimacy, whether with friend, lover, stranger, or self, it is often the thing we fear most as human beings. On a deep level of our psyche, we know that if we open up and allow ourselves to be vulnerable, it will reveal the faults and insecurities we spend so much time and energy trying to hide. In other words, we are afraid that the person we are behind the masks and layers is not actually worthy of another’s attention and love, let alone our own. In spite of this, we *do* want intimacy. And in order for that to happen we need to embark on the journey of individuation—we need to gain awareness of *who* and *what* and *how* we are outside our many labels and roles.

Developmental theorist Robert Kegan (1994) proposes a very compelling model of this process of individuation. Before we can mature into autonomous, deeply free-thinking individuals we pass through a developmental stage Kegan refers to as “third-order consciousness” (p. 115) or “socialized mind” (Kegan, 1994). This means that such a person sources his sense of identity from his primary relationships as well as affiliation with cultural groups (Kegan, 1994). On a fundamental level, this person’s identity is dependent on others. He does not actually know who he is beyond concepts shared in relationship and held in affiliated social groups. Taking this into account it is difficult or impossible for a person operating on this level to speak to the full range of his experience—especially with regard to conflict; conflict is perceived as a potential assault on identity because identity is sourced from the group itself (Kegan, 1994, p. 258). As a result, a person operating in “third-order consciousness” will go out of his way to avoid contacting and expressing charged internal experiences that may give rise to schism. This makes genuine intimacy impossible.

In contrast, “fourth-order consciousness” also referred to as “self-authorship” is the next level in Kegan’s developmental paradigm (Kegan, 1994). This stage is described as an awareness in which one primarily sources his sense of identity from values and moral/ethical standards—beyond cultural groups and primary relationships. At this stage, integrity with one’s values and beliefs trumps fear of conflict or being alone. In this way, one’s sense of self becomes more clear and defined. Kegan makes the point that this transformation occurs because one has had pivotal encounters with difference and conflict. Referring to his model, Susan Burgraff explains that incidents such as “leaving the family religion”, encountering new cultures

abroad, divorce or major break-ups are all potential situations in which a deep questioning of reality may incite the kind re-organization of one's identity (personal communication, 2010).

The important thing to note in working with this model is that the capacity for tolerance of difference is what makes intimacy truly possible. A person at the level of self-authorship has much less of a need for others to validate and affirm his or her sense of identity. Thus, a self-authoring person can actually relate to and enjoy differences in perspective. This richness and tolerance of multiple perspectives is what allows authentic communication to take place.

Theory of the Chakra System

One of the most potent and fascinating lenses for framing conversation about the power of authentic expression is the Indian Yogic theory (Hindu and Buddhist) of the chakras—seven distinct centers of awareness-energy.

According to Yoga theory, the chakras are understood to be vortexes or “wheels” (literal translation) of etheric energy that spin counter-clockwise, which exert non-physical control over the physical body (Maxwell, 2009, para 3) and interface with the surrounding environment. The Hindu tradition makes earliest mention of these sacred energy centers in the *Yoga Upanishads* (600 B.C), later in the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* (200 B.C) as well as the *Sat-Cakra-Nirupana* a foundational text of Kundalini Yoga (*History of the chakra system*, 2008, para 4). The chakras appear in Buddhist literature during the Indian Tantric period (9th-11th century) in texts of “Highest Yoga Tantra” such as the *Six Yogas of Naropa* (Yeshe, 1998).

In discussing the scientific basis for the chakras, neurobiologist Maxwell (2009) confirms the power of yoga practice (based on the chakra system) to benefit and modify physiological systems. However, he is skeptical of the notion that science has observationally explained non-

physical energy interacting independent of physical matter. He reasons “if chakras were truly independent of physical structures, why would there be any correspondence with physical locations?” (para 6). Judith (2008) asserts “Through modern physiology we can see that these seven chakras correspond exactly to the seven main nerve ganglia which emanate from the spinal column” (*History of the chakras*, para 7). While it is outside the scope of this paper to unravel the question of how the non-physical and physical interact, the point is that there is indeed a relationship between matter and energy. According to the teachings of Yoga and Ayurvedic medicine: *Prana*, vital life-force, is what animates the chakras and meridians (channels) of the subtle body (*Ayurveda: The science of life*, 2006). When the chakras and meridians are open and clear, energy flows naturally, maintaining the basis for health and well-being. Conversely, when the chakras are blocked, the flow of life-force becomes inhibited—pathology and disease thus arise (*Ayurveda: The science of life*, 2006).

Visuddha Chakra: Understanding the Energy of the Throat

According to Vedic Scriptures, Visuddha, the Throat Chakra, is visually depicted as a sixteen petal light-blue lotus that emanates from the spine at the level of the throat. The consciousness of this energy center has many themes, but is primarily associated with communication, creative expression, purification and willpower (Myss, 1996).

The Vedas also describe the elemental nature of Visuddha as that of *Akasha* which means space or voidness (Johari, 2000, p. 125). Voidness in this context does not connote something cold or nihilistic. A more appropriate image would be that of an open, empty vessel waiting to be filled. In describing this further, Johari (2000) writes that the sound of Visuddha is “the pure essence of sound” (p. 125) which is humming silence. It is the silence that reverberates through

us moments after hearing a breath-taking musical composition or reciting a sacred mantra (Johari, 2000, 126). This quality of silence is not merely the absence of sound; it is the resonance of pregnant potentiality that abides before and after creation.

Considering Visuddha's anatomical placement between the Heart-Chakra, *Anahata*, and the Third-Eye Chakra, *Ajna*, this notion of "elemental voidness" makes a lot of sense. *Ajna*, the third-eye, is the energy center in which visions are received. Thoughts and images come to us seemingly out of nowhere. The nature of thoughts is to vanish back into ether unless the information received evokes some kind of experience or feeling in the heart. It is the heart's response that breathes life into our visions and ideas. When there is resonance between heart and mind, when the circuits are connected in this way, Visuddha chakra springs to life; we feel naturally compelled to speak or act—to bring the energy we feel inside into an external form of expression. When this energy center is healthy and aligned, as is often seen in little children, creativity and expression burst forth naturally from this open space.

In this sense, another aspect of Visuddha is that of choice or volition—the ability to initiate action. Speaking to this, Caroline Myss (1996) refers to Visuddha—the throat—as the "willpower chakra". Writing from a Christian spiritual perspective she asserts:

The symbolic challenge of the willpower chakra is to progress through the maturation of will: from the tribal perception that everyone and everything around you has authority over you; through the perception that you alone have authority over you; to the final perception, that true authority comes from aligning yourself to God's will. (p. 219)

Framed in this way, it is apparent that this open space between the heart and the mind holds the key to an incredible amount of power. Power, in this sense, is the experience of choice; a

willingness to act primarily based on what we feel inside, rather than acting based on the messages we hear from others.

Being the nature of space, able to accommodate all kinds of experience, Visuddha is also imbued with the quality of being able to heal and purify negative energy. When someone says or does something that does not sit well with us, or when we ourselves do something regrettable, our heart contracts, our mind storms with neurotic thoughts. The energy of our internal kingdom being in a state of disharmony, our natural inclination is to correct this flow. Our impulse is to release this contracted energy in some form of expression or communication with the other.

Telling someone sincerely how we feel (Anahata) as we remember the events that took place (Ajna), if the other person is open to receiving us, we feel better. In this way, stuck energy, aerated by space, dissolves back into the void. Of course, this is when Visuddha is open. When it is not open, this can cause major inner turmoil. A main reason for this is that there is a lack of good communication between mind and heart. Myss (2000) writes:

If mind and heart are not communicating clearly with each other; one will dominate the other. When our minds are in the lead, we suffer emotionally because... we seek to control all situations and relationships and maintain authority over our emotions. When our hearts are in the lead we maintain the illusion that all is well [avoiding unpleasant blind-spots]. Whether mind is in the lead or the heart, will is motivated by fear and the future goal of control, not by a sense of internal security. (pp. 229-30)

Disharmony within a chakra is often talked about in terms of an “excess” or “deficiency” in the flow of Prana, which may give rise to an energy blockage. Symptoms of deficiency in the Visuddha chakra include: “fear of speaking, small/weak voice and difficulty putting feelings into

words” (Judith, 1998, p. 286). Symptoms of excess Visuddha include: “Loud excessive talking, excessive verbal defensiveness, inability to listen to others, gossiping and frequent interruption” (Judith, 1998, p. 286). Judith (1998) also notes that the functioning of Visuddha is impaired or damaged by “lies, verbal abuse, excessive criticism (blocks creativity), secrets... authoritarian parents... alcoholic/chemical dependent family [which implicitly teaches] don’t talk, don’t trust, don’t feel” (p. 286). In all of these scenarios, even in cases and symptoms and “excess” there is a common denominator: some form of inhibition is suppressing one’s capacity to speak one’s mind freely.

Shame and Guilt: Obstacles to Authenticity

A shamed individual may be too paralyzed to act. If she can, she will usually withdraw from others physically and emotionally. A shamed person also suffers a spiritual crisis in which, she feels less than human and cut off from others as well as her Higher Power. (Potter-Effron & Potter-Effron, 1989, p. 17)

The following are a two potent memories from my past that expose my shamed, inhibited relationship to anger as a boy and teen. Frame one:

I am eight years old, in 2nd grade. On this particular day I am teased by two of the coolest kids in my class, Nick Dansker and Zack Gong, for wearing wide steel-rim glasses and being an awkward, geeky kid.

Knowing my place on the 2nd grade food chain, I remained silent. But this is not the only reason I am quiet. I have learned that in my family we are “pacifists” which means that we don’t fight back; we don’t act on our anger. I feel hot-lava squirting through my belly and chest. Instead of connecting with this energy I “check out.” I divert my attention to the cerebral plane, smugly contemplating how unevolved and immature my tormentors are.

After school, I come home and find my dad in the backyard, reclining in his chair under

the cool shade of the purple wisteria. Before I can manage “hi” hot tears of rage and despair are streaking down my face. My dad is well respected in our the local Buddhist community for being wise, so I ask him how I can get Nick and Zack to stop bothering me. He smiles and replies, “One of the best ways to meet an insult is to say, ‘thank you.’ If you say thank you it stops the conversation in its tracks.”

This is not the answer I am looking for. I am greatly embarrassed by this response and suddenly hate the fact that we are pacifists. I wish I had a dad who would encourage me to fight back, and I suddenly I want to punch him because he’s not that dad².

Frame Two: I am fourteen years old—a stoner in my freshman year at Berkeley High. Our crew—six boys, five girls—are crammed into my friend Andy’s upstairs bedroom (the local opium den). Bong smoke bathes the room, “E-40 and the Click” (Cali Rap) pumps from the speakers. Inspired by the music, I launch into a monologue about how I have a half-black older brother named Tony who produces hip-hop in L.A and who personally knew Tupac and Notorious BIG.

My best friend, Miles Makdisi, has heard this story one too many times. Sitting back on the black couch across from me, his face flushes red, eyes piercing me with scorn. Cutting me off, he shouts: “SHUT-UP! ... SHUT-UP! Your brother doesn’t know anyone! You think that makes you cool, but it doesn’t.” I feel betrayed like never before. My nervous system is going 95 MPH. If I had listened to my primal instincts I would have leapt onto the couch, dive-tackled Miles and

² Recently I discussed this event with my father. Although he had no specific recollection he was clear that the way I received the message was not how he would have meant to convey it. He told me that he absolutely advocates assertive speech and behavior when it is clear that dignity and respect are on the line, and that he was very sorry I had heard otherwise. This was a very healing conversation.

attempted to punch his face in. But I didn't. I'm too afraid of being on my own—too afraid of losing a best friend.

In retrospect, as an adult, I now see how I needed to express my anger and I did not know how. Internally, I felt shame in response to my inability to express myself and fear that my family would disapprove of me if I was vocal with my anger. Growing up continually reminded that “war is not the answer” I did not learn how to navigate the grey-zones of maintaining dignity and self-respect; I was not given a skill set or an emotional literacy for feeling, processing and expressing anger. Not knowing how to respond, the silence I chose was painfully saturated in shame and confusion.

Reflecting on these and other experiences has inspired me to explore the research and theories of shame and guilt, which get in the way of our ability to speak naturally to our experience. In exploring this content I will give definition to the prominent characteristics of each state, noting the similarities and differences between them.

What is shame? What is guilt? How are they different? What effects do they have on an individual's capacity for expression? Prominent theorists Ronald and Patricia Potter-Efron (1989) define the emotion of shame in the following way: “Shame is a painful belief in our basic defectiveness as a human being” (p. 2). In contrast, Bierbraer (1992) writes that guilt is “the experience of self-criticism resulting from a comparison of one's actions with internalized standards” (p. 184).

Shame and guilt are closely related emotions that share many similar traits. They are both considered to be universal human feelings which means they are experienced across all known cultures (Potter-Efron & Potter-Efron, 1989, p. 3). Shame and guilt (along with pride and

embarrassment) also fall under the category of “secondary emotions.” This refers to the fact that guilt and shame are not experienced directly from birth; they are learned through social interaction with caregivers, etc, beginning at around two and three years of age (Sangmoon, Thibodeau & Jorgensen, 2011, p. 69). The fact that they are considered to be “self-conscious” states means that they are inherently imbued with a sense of judgment; they arise in reaction to other feeling states and behaviors (p. 69). While “primary emotions” (anger, joy, fear, etc.) are believed to have evolved “to address... threats and opportunities related to physical survival and reproduction... self-conscious emotions are assumed to address problems and opportunities related to ‘social survival’” (p. 69). This means they serve a function in terms “negotiating problems of cooperation, group living, and maintenance of social relationships” (p. 69).

Understood in this context, the “value” of “self-conscious” emotions is that they serve to reinforce a sense of cohesion within a group by creating distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. Being the product of socialization and acculturation it is vital to note that there is no one source of shame that applies to everybody (Potter-Effron & Potter-Effron, 1989, p. 2).

Describing the similarities between guilt and shame, it is important to note that modern social science makes many clear distinctions between these emotions. According to Sangmoon, Thibodeau & Jorgensen (2011) Here are some of the important differences between them:

- 1) Shame is “globalized” state in which every aspect of self is under attack. In guilt, criticism is behavior specific. (H.B. Lewis, 1971: Tangney & Dearing, 2002)
- 2) Shame causes one’s attention to fixate inwardly. With guilt, the locus of attention is turned outward towards the relationship. (Leith & Baumeister, 1998: Tangney, 1991)
- 3) Shame typically manifests as feelings of being “small”, inferior and helpless and powerless. Guilt typically manifests as feeling of tension, regret, remorse and “other-oriented concern.” (Wicker, et, 1983, Lindsey-Hartz, 1994: Tangney & Dearing, 2002)

- 4) The “action” of shame causes a person to withdraw, isolate and avoid contact. The “action” of guilt is to approach, confess, apologize and amend. (Frijida, et, al, 1989) (p. 71)

Contemplating these contrasts we see that although these states often go hand-in-hand, they have different effects and implications on the psyche. Shame targets the whole self and is typically a more stable state than guilt. Because guilt is behavior-specific it is an easier state to remedy (Potter-Effron & Potter-Effron, 1989).

Regardless of their differences, both of these states may equally be experienced as highly unpleasant. Evolutionarily speaking, the thoughts and physical sensations that arise out of guilt and shame are designed to be painful so that they motivate us to change our behavior in order to conform to the social/cultural/familial standards we have internalized.

In terms of expression and communication it is important to note that these mind-states have a deeply crippling effect on our willingness to expose our authentic thoughts, desires and feelings. A strong example of this is the challenge of a gay man “coming out.” If a boy grows up with the inherited familial belief that “it is ‘wrong’ to be gay”, and develops into a man who is attracted other males, he will inevitably be confronted with some mixture of guilt (“I can’t act this way”) and shame (“I am a bad person”) as a result of his natural feelings. As such, until he allows himself to confront and embody these uncomfortable feelings, and critically question the underlying beliefs he has internalized, his guilt and shame will cause him a great deal of suffering. Moreover, until such a man is courageous enough to willingly be with the pain and discomfort of his conditioning in an embodied way, these emotions as well as the beliefs that underlie them will likely halt any natural expression or behavior he consciously connects with being gay (at least in the public realm).

This example clearly expresses the notion that guilt and shame are learned responses to specific social behavior and phenomena. We began learning social expectations and standards from our family, culture and society beginning around two to three years old. At these early ages we did not question the validity of the standards we internalized, we took them to be reality. Our experience of “reality” was evidenced and reinforced by the feelings of guilt and shame that arose when we deviated from those standards.

Perhaps the most important thing to understand about guilt and shame is that because they were learned (socially conditioned), they can also be unlearned.

Integral to the process of learning to speak courageously in spite of feeling guilt and shame is the practice of mindfulness. Mindfulness can be defined as the state of nonjudgmental, present moment awareness that is able hold and relate with arising mind-body phenomena from a frame of openness, curiosity, and acceptance (Hofmann, S., Sawyer, A., Witt, A., & Oh, D, 2009). Mindfulness is key for the process of opening to authentic expression because it allows a person to recognize his or her state of inhibition without having to react to it. For example, if a person is ashamed to sing, becoming mindful, that person could learn to hold this aspect of his or her experience in awareness and sing anyway. In terms of being with intense feelings such as guilt and shame the essential aspect of mindfulness practice is to cultivate the capacity to open to the uncomfortable associated bodily sensations without trying to change them.

Through mindfulness practice, demons of guilt, shame, fear, anxiety, rejection all can be recognized for what they are: thoughts, emotions and sensations. In the words of Chogyam Trunpka (1988), when held gently in the space of mindfulness-awareness: “every mind-state is workable” (p. 96).

Health Benefits of Speaking the Truth

As stated in the introduction, the power of speaking truthfully has far reaching implications, not only on our mental health but on our physical health as well. Related to this, prominent researchers and theorists have shown that speaking honestly may have an especially healing quality when a person chooses to open up and engage in dialogue about things that are most weighing on their conscience.

According to prominent researcher James Pennebaker (1990) the act of withholding feelings is physically stressful to the body:

Actively holding back or inhibiting our thoughts and feelings can be hard work. Over time the act of inhibition gradually undermines the body's defenses. Like other stressors, inhibition can affect immune function, the action of the heart and vascular systems, and even the biochemical workings of the brain and nervous systems... excessive holding back of thoughts, feelings and behaviors can place people at risk for both major and minor diseases. (p. 14)

In line with Yogic theory of the chakras, this makes sense. When the throat is blocked, so too is the flow of energy through the body. Sooner or later, if blockages are not dealt with, pathological symptoms may manifest as a sign that something is critically wrong. Contrasting this, many studies confirm the curative act of self-disclosure and confession.

One of the most compelling reports of the power of truth-telling was discovered in relation to confessions during polygraph lie-detector tests. Polygraphs measure a person's biological stress levels, incorporating factors such as heart-rate, respiration, and perspiration. These tests are used in legal cases when authorities have strong reason to believe a criminal

suspect is telling a lie. The suspect is wired to the machine while a skilled interrogator (polygraph operator) asks them relevant “hot questions” about what happened, simultaneously monitoring their stress levels. The idea behind this is that lies produce high levels of stress arousal. Answers that illicit a high level of response are thus viewed as suspect.

In observing and studying many polygraph sessions researcher Pennebaker stumbled on a potent insight: frequently when a suspect was forced into confession, the suspect’s response was surprisingly positive. Summarizing the results of Pennebaker’s research, Hendricks (1993) writes:

Two profoundly interesting things inevitably happened. The first is that the person’s physiology resolved itself: blood pressure comes down, sweat production drops, and muscles relax. The second, of great interest to the therapist, is that the person is often extraordinarily grateful to the polygraph operator. (p. 244)

In one such example, a bank vice-president who admitted to embezzling \$74,000 over a six month period “warmly shook the polygraphers hand and thanked him for all that he had done... the polygrapher [also] received a chatty Christmas card written by the former bank vice-president with the federal penitentiary as the return address” (Pennebaker, 1990, p. 16).

Articulated in this account is a clear message: When we dare to expose hard truths, regardless of the degree of pain and sacrifice, confession coupled with remorse has an innately healing effect. It is healing because it is an opportunity to resolve being at odds with oneself. In this way, telling the truth absolves a person from undue bodily stress.

The Skillful Means of Truth-Telling

A problem will persist until someone tells a fundamental truth about it. When truth is expressed, there is room for the problem to transform in a healing direction. (Hendricks, 1998, p. 240)

While the focus of this endeavor is truth-telling, there is more nuance and subtlety to this process than just blurting out all the thoughts and feelings that are arising. In order for such an interaction to be healing, the messages expressed must be conveyed skillfully, in a manner that can be heard. Drawing on the groundbreaking work of respected somatic therapists Gay and Kathlyn Hendricks, this section focuses on a few profound principles that serve to make charged communication effective and meaningful.

In order to discuss vital points of how to effectively speak the truth, it is important to give some definition as to what “truth” in this context means. In terms of communication, here is one definition: “The truth is what cannot be argued about...when it is revealed it resolves arguments both within ourselves and between ourselves and others.” (Hendricks & Hendricks, 1993, p. 241). In other words, if neither side can argue the validity of a statement it means that there is a fundamental level of agreement between both parties—the basis from which both sides may eventually see eye-to-eye.

Unfortunately, this level of truth is usually hard to come by. Meaning is subjective. Perspectives are relative. It is rare that people with different histories will share an experience and view it in exactly the same way. This point is especially noteworthy in situations of conflict, when emotions are strong and people are likely to blame and judge one another. As long as one person is trying to convince the other that their their version of reality is more correct, the communication is bound to fail and more than likely will be damaging to the relationship (Hendricks & Hendricks, 1993).

The wisdom embedded in the statement above is that while judgments, perspectives, and interpretations of events are arguable, feelings are not. If I tell you I that I am angry at you for eating the chocolate cake in the fridge, and I look angry, chances are you will not debate this. As such, telling you I am angry is a statement of truth; it is a statement upon which we can both agree. Moreover, it is characterized by clear congruence between what is felt and what is said.

To speak the truth in a way that leads in the direction of healing requires that at least one of the people involved dares to “drop below” the realm of concepts and discover the feelings underlying about the situation (Hendricks, 1998, pp. 101-2). Hendricks (1998) writes:

The biggest breakthroughs [in communication] often come just after communicating something that is unarguable that’s also a fresh discovery. A fresh discovery is something you’ve discovered in the past ten seconds... something that you didn’t know ten seconds before. When you speak brief, unarguable truths, particularly things that you’ve just discovered about yourself, you will open a field of miracles around you wherever you go. (pp. 101-2)

Perhaps the statement at the end of this passage sounds a bit lofty. On what grounds does the author believe that speaking pithy, unarguable truths will produce miracles in relationship?

In working with thousands of therapy clients Hendricks brings to light a powerful phenomenon he refers to as a “One-breath communications”: the things we really need to say in relationships are not complex—they can be said in one breath (Hendricks, 1998, p. 106). A few powerful statements that fall into this category include:

“I want to marry you.”

“I don’t love you anymore.”

“I’ve been having a sexual relationship with Sandy.”

“I’m angry, and I’ve been angry for a long time.”

“I’ve lost respect for you.” (Hendricks, 1998, p. 106)

Aside from being very bold, these statements are powerful because they are expressions of embodied truth. There is synchronization and alignment between body, heart and mind.

Speaking this level of truth is extremely difficult. We can spend hours or years skirting around this quality of honesty because it makes us very vulnerable. Whether the information is pleasant or unpleasant, this kind of communication opens us up and exposes us to others. This a very scary prospect for many because being so genuine creates the possibility of getting hurt. That being said, learning the capacity to speak directly commits us to reality and empowers a sense of wholeness. When we express these emotions clearly, we discover the underlying needs which may or may not be getting met in the current circumstances. This allows us the opportunity to re-orient our intentions or behavior in a way that is more nourishing for us (Rosenberg, 2003). By being clear within ourselves we save ourselves from wasting our precious life-energy arguing points of view, doing our best to avoid a future we would resent. Learning to listen inside to the needs and desires that are truly motivating, we focus our energy accordingly. This allows our creativity to flow.

Crazy Wisdom: Communicating Beyond Hope and Fear

From the point of view of Crazy Wisdom, enlightenment... doesn’t particularly have anything to do with being old and wise. It is more like being young and wise, because it has tremendous openness toward exploring the experiences that go on in our lives... Pain and pleasure are both worth exploring from the point of view of... crazy wisdom. It is the epitome of non-caring but at the same time caring so very much-being eager to learn and eager to explore. (Trungpa, 1991, p. 114)

There are times in life when we know we have something important to say—a one-breath communication is bubbling within us—but like a deer in the headlights we are simply paralyzed. The space between us and another person is either cold, hot or disconnected in such a way that there seems to be no suitable point of entry. We want to speak—want to contact the energy within us—but we feel stuck. We have no clue how to initiate this important conversation.

In this moment, our fear-based habitual way of reacting is very strong. It is strong because we know we have something to say and we foresee that our words will have a strong impact on the other person. Unfortunately, we cannot know exactly how they will respond, or to what degree they will respond. This is unsettling because we sense their reaction could have an affect on our state of being. The future ambiguously unclear, our biological instinct is to worry—to ruminate, anticipate and prepare ourselves for the worst possible scenarios (Goleman, 1994, p. 65).

From the Vajrayana perspective, our reactivity is an indication that we are caught in a web of “hope and fear”. According to the view of Buddhist Tantra, hope and fear are essentially two sides of the same coin (Trungpa, 1991). For example, if a man asks an attractive woman on a date, to the degree that he is invested in the hope that she will say yes, he also he is also invested in the fear that she will say no. This duality becomes more solid as he imagines a “good” or “bad” scenario of the future. One future he would try to magnetize, the other one he would try to avoid. This is a very natural response. *And*, it creates the conditions for suffering.

The reason for this is that hope and fear both contain a fundamental substrate of aggression. Aggression in this sense means trying to control or alter the content of our experience—unwillingness or distrust towards allowing life to unfold naturally (Trungpa, 1991). Returning

to the original topic of voicing the “one-breath communication” hope and fear are in play, filling the mind with worry and the body with unrest. What does one do? How can one skillfully respond?

In my own life, I have come up with only one solution for this situation. There is a moment in life I affectionately have come to call “the moment of no return.” At this juncture in time, it is as though we are standing on the edge of a cliff. It is a moment where, in spite of fear, anxiety and perhaps paranoia, we decide to leap headfirst into an open, uncertain future with the other person. Implicitly, it is a decision that relinquishes comfort and security in order to discover what is real and authentic. One of the most memorable “moments of no return” happened to me when I first met Hollie on Winter Dathun.

From the moment we met, there was an undeniable warmth, curiosity and electricity in the space between us. *And*, she was my meditation instructor. I would interview with her every couple days about the unfolding experiences of my retreat. Two and a half weeks in, the only genuine thing I had left to report was how I felt about her. Contemplating this, I knew in the Theravadin Buddhist tradition I had grown up in, attempting to become intimate with the teacher in this way would not be considered “appropriate conduct”. However, this was the Vajrayana. As I had heard on numerous occasions, things were done differently in this tradition.

Frame three:

I wait patiently in the hallway, generic green notebook in hand. By “patiently” I mean constantly fidgeting against the awkward backrest of the stationed grey, metal chair. Hollie is running 15 minutes behind the interview schedule, which doesn’t serve to lessen my anxiety. Sitting there, Reggie’s morning words rattle through my head: “Surrender your territory...”

Surrender your territory... This is the path of warriorship.” After a short eternity Hollie appears in the doorway. Eyes twinkling, silently smiling, she beckons me in.

Sitting across from each other, we bow. Then silence. It’s not empty silence. I am at the edge of the cliff—heart pounding, butterflies in my stomach, as I glance down at the fearlessly inspired words I had written earlier that day. At the same time, despite my reservation, I am smiling inside. I know that what I am about to say is the truth—absolutely the truth of the way I feel. Aware of this resonance, I know I have nothing to hide.

(I can’t remember exactly how the words come out but I remember committing myself to speaking directly from my feeling) ... *our eyes connect and I say the words “I love you.” Her face is a mixture of “neutrally” holding space (as she is trained to do) and a deeply playful smile.*

Those 15 minutes had a large effect on my life. Beyond the fact that we got together soon after (I switched M.I.’s), an even bigger change was taking place inside of me. Essentially, my whole relationship to communication changed. Reflecting on this experience, a revelation dawned on me: “emotional vulnerability is a path of fearlessness.” When a person speaks the truth of their heart in an unmistakable way, they have no reason to hide. When you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to hide. It is liberation on the spot.

When we speak “to and from” our direct experience, rather than thoughts about our experience, communication becomes a truly meaningful act. It is meaningful not only because we are practicing honesty. We are also learning to listen within, becoming intimate with ourselves.

The more that we speak to and from the energy in our relationships, the more powerful we become. Power, in this sense is not something being “manufactured.” According to Chogyam Trungpa (1981) the energy we feel has no particular cause or basis. Rather it is “self-existing... universal and all pervasive... simply the rubbing together of the [false] duality of you and the phenomenal world, you and other (pp. 39-41).

In other words, the moment we stop investing our energy in futilely hoping to control our experience, we open to acceptance of things as they are. Synchronizing our internal experience with the outer environment, life-energy previously bound up in resistance can instead be used to deepen our harmony and connection with life. In this way, my paper can be summarized as follows:

When we are in social situation and we experience thoughts, emotions or sensations that relay the message: “It’s ‘not okay’ to speak *this*” (not to be confused with “not skillful”) we have reason to suspect our life-energy is being bound up in a “primitive belief about reality” (personal communication, Berliner, 2009). Unless it is *truly* unsafe or contextually inappropriate to voice what we feel inside, an introject is operating; such a thought keeps us from connecting with a greater range of emotion, energy and life experience.

Becoming mindful in this way, we are confronted with a sacred opportunity. The opportunity is to take the time to genuinely feel our feelings and express ourselves accordingly. As uncomfortable as this communication might make us feel, choosing to do so updates our relationship with reality.

At the most fundamental level, authentic expression is the act of “crazy wisdom.” It is “crazy” in the sense that we are choosing to ignore “the rules”, the cultural conventions, the trite

modes of expression we are habituated to. It is wisdom in the sense that we see that our thoughts and concepts have no inherent substance other than the meaning we imbue them with. As we come to understand this subtle truth we stop believing in the mind chatter. Such mind chatter distracts and deceives us from living in our most authentic presence.

The voice is powerful. It is the bridge that connects the heart with the mind. Empowered with the capacity to speak to the full range of our experience, we can call in the life that inspires us most.

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