INNER WORK
Integrating counselling and psychotherapy with mindfulness practice as the pursuit of enlightenment

Avraham Cohen is a psychotherapist in private practice and a counselling supervisor. His contributions to the field were recognized with a BCACC President’s Award in 2008. Currently, he is an adjunct faculty member at Adler University; formerly, he was the associate director of a full-time master in counselling program at another institution. Heesoon Bai, an educational philosopher and psychotherapist, is a professor at Simon Fraser University.

They have both published widely in academic journals and books as authors and co-authors. Their article, “Suffering Loves and Needs Company: Buddhist and Daoist Perspectives on the Counsellor as Companion,” was given the Professional Article of the Year Award by the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association.

Not only do they write together, but they also jointly deliver workshops, public talks, and consulting to organizations — and they are a married couple, committed to sharing their extensive research and knowledge with their community.

Tell us about your Holistic Model of Self-Care Practice. Why are counsellors becoming so interested in this approach?

Avraham} Counsellors are in the position of witnessing profound sufferings in their clients that are interconnected with the systemic forces operative in contemporary life conditions. Of course, our clients come to us with the hope and expectations of their symptomatic problems being fixed and eliminated. Our approach to counselling is, however, to look and see beyond the symptoms.

Self-care practice is one aspect of a multi-dimensional and holistic approach to human growth and development from wound healing to expression of optimal human potential. It is most often when we experience a sense of “failure” in our personal and/or professional identities and relational fields that we begin to reflect seriously on who we really are and what truly matters, who we have become within the context of multiple zones of pressure, including imposed and unnatural “ideals” of successful human life that we are implicitly enacting, and what we are doing to ourselves to achieve these ideals, or alternatively, to defy and reject them.

Our model of holistic development offers, to both counsellors and their...
clients, this larger framework that looks at the formation of the self within the mainstream societal context, and it shows how to reconnect with the original bright shiny self and facilitate its development, which has potential to create pressure-relieving, and at the same time, alternative conditions of mind-body-heart-soul-energetics that can foster and facilitate self-transformation. Our intent with the Holistic Model of Self-Care is to support the person to attune the self to its primordial or natural tendency to be whole and integrative within the individual uniqueness of personhood and context.

**HEESOON** } Mainstream psychotherapy today is by and large focused on fixing problems. Symptoms, especially at the behavioural level, that individuals are having are often the focus, rather than taking a more comprehensive and existential perspective: critically examining individuals and their problems in terms of the human existential predicament and suffering and the ultimate failure of mainstream programming — programming that purports to make us “happy and successful” and that, on the contrary, creates and exacerbates wounds within us and within our children from the beginning.

The alternative we offer is about moving towards the authentic, integrated, and whole for individuals, couples, groups, organizations, and that which is other than the human.

**Your Holistic Model of Self-Care seems very contemporary but also suggests some ancient perspectives. Which teachings have influenced your approach?**

**HEESOON** } You are right in pointing out the contemporary-ancient fusion aspect of our model. Both Avraham and I were hugely influenced by the modern existentialist roots and contemporary exemplars of holistic psychotherapy (e.g., R.D. Laing, Fritz Perls, Erich Fromm, C.G. Jung, Alfred Adler, Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Irvin Yalom, Arnold Mindell, Amy Mindell, Kirk Schneider, and Mark Epstein, to name a few) who identified the malaise of modern individuals as stemming from division of the whole into separate entities and parts that are unconsciously set up against each other (e.g., aspects of inner self vs. other aspects of inner self, humans vs. non-humans, individual self vs. others, groups vs. groups), and ensuing fragmentations and marginalization of certain aspects of self, such as the somatic, the affective, the ontological-spiritual. The supposedly rational-logical aspect has been privileged and then is turned into an instrument of domination, control, and exploitation for creating an ideal of successful human self and life.

Such is precisely what we observe around us everywhere, from the corporate culture to the school culture. Hence, Avraham and I have been in a lengthy process of discovering a way to recover the whole self and its ecological continuity with the world. Holism is the guiding philosophy we adopted, and it is mostly the pre-modern, even ancient, philosophies that stood out for us as inspirations. In particular, we have developed an approach that integrates mindfulness and a process approach to psychotherapy.

**AVRAHAM** } For us, Buddhism and Daoism have become central inspirations and resources for enhanced practice methods. My interest in Asian philosophy and practice goes back many decades to my youth when I was in a state of deep despair and dissatisfaction. I began looking beyond my privileged, middle-class, Jewish family background. I suppose I was part of the cultural movement that turned many Jewish intellectuals and seekers towards Buddhism and Asian philosophies. Even so, I have resisted any efforts to “name” me as any kind of “ist.”

One of my particular interests was in Japanese martial arts. I was introduced to Aikido in the 80s, and five years ago, took up a serious study-practice of Ki-Aikido. Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of Aikido, said that Aikido was the only martial art based on love. The practice involves finding the precise, in-the-moment way of joining with attackers and taking them to a place of safety and possible insight. This is very central to our approach to psychological inner and relational work, namely, aligning with our clients — and even the apparently life-negating egoic dimensions — and forming alliance(s) that facilitate connection to their authentic nature.

**Why is your Holistic Model of Self-Care Practice so valuable and suitable for people now?**

**AVRAHAM** } Basically, our model is about the development of the whole person, whole relationships (including with the other-than-human beings), and whole communities. Self-care is seen as part of an integrated holistic way of being. It is perhaps better seen as an obvious outcome of each person’s search for wholeness, peace,
and a meaningful and contributing life. Particularly, all aspects of personal growth involve a reflective mindful practice and a process-orientation that have roots in world wisdom traditions.

All persons are somewhere on the continuum of dealing with wounds to optimal being and multidimensional expression of self and talents. For us, no matter what a person brings to their inner-work sessions, it is very important to see the potential of that person and co-create conditions that will work towards the realization of that potential and its unending fine-tuning. From this perspective, there are no problems — only inner material with which to work.

HEESOON) Most often, we are not raised and educated to question societal programming and its content, such as norms of successful life. If I may name such norms today, I would use labels like neoliberalism, capitalism, consumerism, militarism, patriarchy, and so on. For most people, such questioning occurs after they have encountered small but persistent “failure” experiences again and again at home and at school, and later, at work, or when they encounter a major failure (in relationship, health, or finance), all of which re-opens core and pre-existing wounds, and insidiously erodes their primordial confidence. This inevitably brings the person to a crossroad that opens the possibility to question the meaning and purpose of their life, their relationships to others, and how their identity has been put together in adaptation to the constraints and challenges of the environment in which they grew up.

My observation is that today, existential crisis is not just what “those others” are experiencing, especially if they are told that they are “too sensitive” or “the thinking type” or “in their mid-life” (although “mid-life” seems to be occurring at earlier and earlier stages); it’s hitting us all, young and old, with increasing frequency, and it has us running to all manner and forms of distraction, avoidance, denial, addiction, and even violence. Faced with pandemics of “mental health” issues and problems today, we are compelled to go to the depth of it all and to discern the patterns that disconnect us from ourselves, from each other, and from living life fully.

In the history of thought, we talk about this existential crisis in terms of exigent opportunity for transforming human consciousness at the roots. The ancient Greeks worked with metanoia (conversion). Buddhists and other Asian traditions worked with bodhi (awakening or enlightenment) and emancipation or liberation (moksha and nirvana). So did other perennial wisdom traditions. Not surprisingly, the view from the ancient Greeks aligns with the perennial wisdom traditions. We have a particular interest in Daoism and Buddhism, and it is not hard to see how the central ideas are also embedded in most traditions.
What do you suggest to counsellors who want to learn more about your model, personally and professionally?

AVRAHAM } My short answer is inner work! Inner work is based in investigation of the inner world and discovery of all those places of disconnect, marginalization, underdevelopment, and rejections and hurts. The definition I have for inner work is “reflective practices conducted under the gaze of consciousness, which depends on a developed capacity to self-observe, to witness experience.”

Inner work opens the door to engaging with the layers of inner and isolated selves to which we have previously been denied access and applying relevant inner-work ways. In our work, we apply process-oriented ways to free up the self and its expressions. Moreover, inner work is performed with the goal of healing through addressing arrested development and re-integration of what was torn apart and wounded.

However, it would be a mistaken understanding that inner work is solitary work done in isolation. The inner world exists within a relational field. Attention to the inner world is a central aspect of being in the relational world. Involvement in the relational world will invariably show edges (fixed egoic structures) that are indicators of personal growth opportunities for loosening of fixed structures of being and re-initiating developmental processes that necessarily halted or were at least compromised at an early stage.

To give a concise summary of the inner-work methodology I developed: identify early history issues, patterns that developed, and the process of discovering that which is unconscious and the good intentions contained there; work with the imaginal, creative, and emerging potential. This process aims at re-integrating mind, body, emotions, and spirit and results in establishing the ground for an optimal being to emerge.

Did your work bring you together as a couple or did the work come from your union?

HEESOON } Psychotherapy is not something that the traditional Korean culture within which I grew up was familiar with. In fact, it was completely outside my family culture to entertain the thought of seeing a psychotherapist or doing psychotherapy.

All this changed as a result of my meeting Avraham and entering into an intimate relationship. Our own relationship became the very ground for personal transformation and a living “laboratory” in which we researched and created ideas and practices that, in turn, we could share with others, including our own family of my daughters and their partners.

Through it all, I came to see that psychotherapeutic knowledge and practice, integrated in a unique and creative way with contemplative practices, offers that which we believe should be core to any educational process, be it parenting or teaching in institutional settings. We see psychotherapy as an educational process. What humanistic-existential process-oriented psychotherapy offers is the very element that can re-humanize us in a world that suffers from dehumanizing practices everywhere.

AVRAHAM } I received my BA from UBC, and I went back to do my doctorate — a lot later in life and in the middle of a well-established professional career — in order to investigate the nature of reflective practice in the realm of human consciousness, self-making, and liberating the imprisoned human dimension in individuals and communities.

Heesoon received her doctorate from UBC, too, but by the time I met her, she was a professor at SFU. Over the four years of my doctoral studies, we would run into each other at various academic and social events, and we gradually discovered common interests, including education, philosophy, psychotherapy, relationship, and the pursuit of personal enlightenment.

I took Jung’s words seriously: “All marriages are psychological.” And I had always wanted to have a personal relationship that was committed to working together on the relationship and with a person with whom I could work on offerings to the community. Heesoon and I showed up synchronistically for each other, and we have been fortunate to be able to take very good advantage of our mutual encounter. We are grateful to be able to offer to others the fruits of our inner and relational work through our workshops, trainings, talks, and psychotherapy.

A major part of my own work is with therapists who wish to grow personally and professionally, and who wish to learn more about how to use and facilitate inner work.

Find more from Avraham and Heesoon on the BCACC Blog at www.bc-counsellors.org.

Many of Avraham’s writings can be found at http://summit.sfu.ca/collection/204. To reach him directly, email: cohen2therapy@gmail.com.

Heesoon is currently co-editing a volume on ecological virtues (University of Regina Press). Many of her academic publications can be downloaded at http://summit.sfu.ca/collection/204. To reach her directly, email: baitherapy@gmail.com.

REFERENCES