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No Way Is Way: The Power of Artistry in Psychotherapy

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Learning Objectives:

After studying this article, the reader should be able to:

1. Learn about Bruce Lee's philosophy of Jeet Kun Do and how it relates to the practice of psychotherapy.
2. Understand that the practice of psychotherapy is as much an art as a science.

3. Understand that an art form is dependent on the self-expression, maturity and personal development of the artist.

4. Learn about how viewpoints from renowned leaders in psychology, counseling, spirituality, and Buddhist psychology relate to the art of psychotherapy.

Key Words: Psychotherapy, artistry, flexibility, personal potential, self-cultivation

Abstract

Bruce Lee (1940-1973) is deemed the greatest martial artist of all time. His legacy as a warrior, an instructor, a family man and a philosopher has culminated in a deep respect for his craft and its underlying artistry. Lee was an avid student of psychotherapy theory throughout his career, and aspects of both psychology and broader human nature permeate the rich philosophy of his craft. Lee's fundamental message underlying the art of Jeet Kun Do logically extends to the practice of psychotherapy. This article outlines Lee's philosophy of tapping into one's potentiality in order to develop one's own Way, rather than restricting personal and professional growth by conforming to one set indoctrinated style or another. Lee ultimately concluded that 'No Way Is Way', a principle which guided him to evolve into a world-renowned athlete and teacher. Through the interpretation of personal excerpts from Lee's own words, the art of psychotherapy will be illuminated. Lee's philosophy of developing a self-cultivated artistry will be linked to principles expounded upon by well-known writers in counseling, psychotherapy, spirituality, and Buddhist psychology.

Bruce Lee (1940-1973) had extraordinary skills in martial arts, as well as the art of living and teaching the wisdom of life to others. An avid student of various schools of martial arts, Eastern philosophy and Western psychotherapy, Lee developed an integrated and unparalleled approach toward helping others become successful in their professional and personal endeavors. Lee sums up this approach using the phrase 'No Way Is Way,' meaning that no art, including the art of living, can be confined into one set routine, pattern or indoctrinated style. A concentration simply on technique restricts the potential of an individual to actualize his or her potentiality. Lee explains that success can be attained by "being formless like water . . . if water enters a tea cup it is the tea cup, if water enters a bowl it is the bowl." This wisdom can be extended to the practice of psychotherapy. It is important for therapists to honestly know themselves, to deeply know their clients and to be open and flexible during the therapeutic encounter.

In the field of psychotherapy, professionals must be adaptable and change with change. If a therapist can keep his or her mind permeable and free from both inner and outer hindrances, he or she can fully know the subjectivity of the client, including the client's biopsychosocial needs at that moment. In the recently released sole documentary of Bruce Lee's art, the 'Golden Dragon' explains his philosophy of human nature and interpersonal success. This article highlights wisdom discussed in Bruce Lee: The Celebrated Life of the Golden Dragon (Lee, 2000) and links the fundamentals of martial arts with the practice of spirituality, counseling, Buddhist psychology and, ultimately, the art of psychotherapy.

“After four years of training in gung fu, I began to understand and feel the principle of gentleness . . .of minimizing the expenditure of one’s energy. All this must be done in calmness and without striving.”

Here Lee comments on one of the most fundamental aspects of psychotherapy: showing compassion, positive regard, and respect for one’s clients. Most importantly, a therapist must not only feel but also be these qualities in order to embody them. If one is these qualities, one’s energy becomes free to extend compassion, psychological mindedness and interpersonal connectedness to the client. It creates a therapeutic atmosphere which fosters personal growth for both the client and therapist. As the Buddhist scholar Thich Nhat Hanh (1996) explains, all human beings are interconnected in both body and spirit. What one person does has a ripple effect which influences many other events and people. We must show compassion for others that we are in contact with (in this instance our clients). We must attempt to tap into and use our ‘Buddha-nature’ (our core, loving, healing, positive qualities) in the service of others after correctly perceiving the source of their suffering.

In order to fully maximize efforts in this way, a therapist should remain ‘calm without striving.’ With calmness, a therapist can maintain centered awareness while becoming attuned to the client’s subjective state. In Buddhism, “the idea is that you do not put something in front of you and run after it, because everything is already there, in yourself” (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1991). Therefore, psychotherapy should be accomplished without the expectancy of or quest for a cure, a perfect intervention or the accolades of a gracious client.

“To bring the mind into sharp focus and to make it alert so that it can immediately intuit truth . . . the mind must be emancipated from old habits, prejudices, restrictive thought process, and even ordinary thought itself” (p. 78).

Lee further defines the path toward success as one of self-cultivating a disciplined focus on the subject of one’s endeavor. In psychotherapy, the subject is the client and the therapist must enter a state of heightened alertness in order to access the client’s world. Heinz Kohut (1984) astutely defines empathy as ‘vicarious understanding,’ a necessary skill for therapists to develop on their path toward helping clients communicate effectively with themselves and others. In order to optimally respond to the therapeutic meaning a client has shared with the therapist, and on a more core level with himself/herself, the therapist must be open to multiple simultaneous messages from the client (Bacal, 1998).

In the passage above, Lee highlights the need for us to make an attempt at directly “intuiting truth” by helping the client tap into the truth that lies within himself or herself. This statement speaks to the fact that clients are active creators of their lives rather than passive recipients of external stimuli. One of a therapist’s major functions is to help a client intuit his or her own truth. In this regard, a therapist must be deeply attuned to a client’s inner experiences.

In *The Art of the Psychotherapist*, James Bugental (1987) articulately explains that subjectivity embodies a client's thoughts, perceptions, feelings, actions, fantasies and intentions. Since humans are subjective beings and life problems are ultimately uniquely subjective experiences, it is imperative that therapists deeply, continuously and consciously observe the subjective states of their clients. It is equally important that therapists use their own subjectivity in the service of their clients. Psychotherapy from this perspective can be termed a "meeting of minds," or an "intersubjective encounter."

In order to fully empathize with and understand another individual's subjective experiences, a therapist's own mind must therefore be clear. A clear mind is one in which distracting and experientially restricting thoughts are limited. In the profession of psychotherapy, these limitations can come in the form of countertransference reactions, fatigue, misperceptions, noise or any other stimuli that detracts from the therapist's ability to intuit and communicate the client's subjective messages.

True observation begins when devoid of set patterns, and freedom of expression occurs when one is beyond systems (p. 84).

Lee explains that, in order to have a genuine encounter with a person, one must let go of rigid beliefs, personal values and pre-determined therapeutic agendas. Similar to a martial artist whose success depends upon maneuvering his or her body according to what is called for during a particular situation, the therapist must be flexible enough to express himself or herself as a human being who has been trained in the malleable art of communication. Recent research has shown that specific psychological techniques add little benefit to the therapeutic encounter; approximately 15 percent of client improvement is accounted for by identifiable treatment interventions (Ahn & Wampold, 2001; Hubble, Duncan & Miller; 1999). These findings support the philosophy that genuine awareness is generated internally rather than being imposed by an 'expert' from outside one's Self. Viktor Frankl (1992) comments about the fact that, as we search for meaning, purpose and vitality in life, we must ultimately look within and listen to the voice within our Self. We must learn about who we are, what we need, and how we limit ourselves from attaining our most sought-after goals.

The Dalai Lama (2000) explains that, in general, all people want happiness and do not want suffering. Happiness is an innate state of clarity that can be reclaimed with mental discipline after gaining an understanding of the sources of our suffering. In *The Art of Happiness*, the Dalai Lama (1998) reflects upon the notion that Western psychotherapy at times seems very concentrated on finding external solutions to self-created suffering which can be remedied with focused reflection, compassion, deepened connections with others and a shift in perspective. Therapists can aid clients in this process by collaborating with them to facilitating their true observations and understanding. For a therapist who truly observes and listens to his or her clients "the object of your study is no longer separated from your mind. Your mind is very much in it. You are not an observer, you are a participant" (Thich Naht Hanh, 1996, p. 51). In regard to professional development, Lee (2000) notes that "the final aim is toward self liberation. Mechanical

efficiency or manipulatory skill is never as important as inner awareness. A true fighter [therapist] listens to circumstances, while a classical man only recites [them]” (p. 95)

Drilling on routines and set patterns will eventually make a person good according to the routines and set patterns, but only self-awareness and self-expression can lead to the truth (p. 90). My concerns are for those who are conditioned and solidified by a partialized structure, with only routine efficiency, rather than freedom of individual expression (p. 91).

Sharing his insight from experiences with many styles of martial arts, Lee defines his philosophy of “No Way Is Way” by contrasting it with indoctrinated models and rote techniques. As opposed to psychotherapy training programs that teach students how to perform selected interventions based on standardized models and simplistic knowledge (Kottler & Hazler, 1997), Lee seeks to “restore the pupil to his primordial state so that he can freely express his own potential. The training consists of minimum of form in the natural development of tools towards the formless” (p. 99).

In the field of psychotherapy, many experts magnify and market their own approaches to healing. As a result, many of these approaches have become highly technical and cumbersome. In this regard, contemporary therapists are challenged to remain artists working with other human beings to reduce their suffering rather than becoming mechanics performing interventions on objectified clients. As Lee highlights, any one structure or style (that is, theory of psychotherapy) is incomplete, largely due to the fact that it is one person’s interpretation of a complex and ever-changing process. In the end, therapists must find their own way (Kottler, 2002) by knowing themselves, their personality and what fits for them.

More importantly, therapists should maintain constant awareness of how to fulfill the unique needs of their clients. Arnold Lazarus (1996) notes that therapists should become ‘authentic chameleons’ by adopting flexible repertoires in practice. This allows the needs of the relationship to dictate which response is used during a therapeutic encounter. In *The Art of Integrative Counseling*, Corey (2001) describes the importance of changing fluidly with the situation so that many approaches are interwoven into a coherent whole. This recommendation is different from being ‘eclectic,’ which amounts to using different identified styles at different times during the treatment process. When therapeutic aspects of many approaches are used concurrently, the therapist can be free to expand or contract the use of therapeutic interventions according to needs of a particular client. Therefore, as the venerable Thai Buddhist monk Buddhadasa Bikkhu (1988) states, knowledge should be used simply as a means to an end; a raft that helps one reach another bank. But it should not be clung to instead of relying on one’s own inner wisdom. “Having reached the further shore and gone up on land, we should not be so foolish as to carry the raft along with us” (p. 12). Similarly, Thich Naht Hanh (1987) describes the risk of relying on learned knowledge as a block of ice that can obstruct the flow of water. Water must be free-flowing in order to penetrate and fill another structure.

Owing to his roots in Eastern philosophy, Lee (2000) states that “the knowledge and skills you have achieved are after all meant to be forgotten so you can float in emptiness. Learning is important but do not become its slave” (p. 114). Thus, the most effective method of achieving this aim is to ‘let go’ of one’s reliance on rigidly defined styles. “This is because of the fact that any structure, however intelligently designed, becomes a cage if the practitioner is obsessed with it” (Lee, 2000, p. 90).

Truth is a pathless road. It is total expression... only self-awareness and self-expression can lead to truth (p. 90).

The final aim of Jeet Kun do is toward personal liberation. It points the way to individual freedom and maturity. As he matures, he will realize that his sidekick is really not so much a tool to conquer his opponent, but a tool to explode through his own ego and follies (p. 95). More important yet is the person who is there expressing his own soul (p. 122).

Lee’s art is one of mind-body awareness, personal responsibility and self-cultivation. Through his years of experience and education, Lee concluded that truth and personal artistry comes from within. If one’s goal is the attainment of truth, then one cannot mindlessly follow someone else’s path. Theory is simply one indication of another individual’s personal truth. With a dedication to deeply knowing one’s self, personal expression can be developed. Later, self-expression can evolve into a natural rhythmic interchange between a therapist and a client. However, taking center stage is the significance of a therapist maturing into a centered, capable human being who can reach out to others with compassion and model wisdom in order to help them reduce their own suffering.

Finally, Lee explains that the ultimate power in any art form, including psychotherapy, comes from a place deep within our own psyche. If we can tap into this source, we will be free to spontaneously, effectively, and therapeutically respond to others. James Bugental (1987) spoke of this healing place as tapping into the core of our being. He believes that therapists are in a unique position to help clients delve into, speak to, learn about and cultivate themselves. This can be accomplished by guiding clients toward the intimacy level of communication. However, the therapist must be at that level as well, or else the intersubjective exchange will be warped and out of balance. This would be akin to asking a client to create a self-portrait in vivid, stark colors and then handing him or her a pallet of black and white paints.

Carl Rogers (1980) called this state and the resultant atmosphere that is created presence. He admittedly had difficulty defining this term, noting that it is something that a therapist must encounter by himself or herself after experience and personal maturity. In the Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu (Mitchell, 1988) advises you to empty your mind of all thoughts, let your heart be at peace, return to the common source and it will bring you serenity, or do not realize the source and you will stumble in confusion. Deepak Chopra (1994) explains that this source is within each of us. We are co-creators of our world and our work with clients is an expression of that miracle. He explains that we have an extensive nervous

system, a remarkable data bank of personal experiences, an intricate communication system with others and an innate capacity to hear things if we are only open to the experience. Chopra quotes Lao Tzu as saying “An integral being knows without going, sees without looking, and accomplishes without doing” (p. 53).

With full awareness, our art can flourish, and it can lead us on a path of self-fulfillment. Since life is an ever-going process, one should flow in this process and discover how to actualize and expand oneself. It is not a question of winning or losing but it is a question of being what is at that moment and being wholeheartedly involved with that particular moment and doing one’s best (p. 124).

Even though I, Bruce Lee, may die some day without fulfilling all of my ambitions, I feel no sorrow. What I’ve done, I’ve done with sincerity and to the best of my ability. You can’t expect much more from life (p. 176).

Lee ends the description about his unique art by commenting on the essential nature of our existence – a focus on pleasure and fulfillment in all of our endeavors. He notes that life is a process, not a product. Being intimately involved in the process of life can lead to professional success and personal satisfaction. The message is simple: develop your art form with sincerity, humility, flexibility and gratitude; hone it with discipline, commitment, objectivity, patient awareness, and an unending appreciation for the artist.

About the Author:

Robert C. Schwartz, Ph.D., DAPA, completed his M.Ed., Ed.S., and Ph.D. degrees in mental health counseling at the University of Florida. He is currently an Assistant Professor and Director of the Clinic for Child Study and Family Therapy in the Department of Counseling at the University of Akron. His research interests include the diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders, insight in schizophrenia and Buddhist philosophy.

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