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Enhancing Therapeutic Success-- Some Observations from Mr. Kawakami: Yogi, Teacher, Mentor and Healer¹

Erik Peper, Katherine H. Gibney, and Vietta Wilson



Mr. Kawakami exhaled as he pushed the unsterilized skewer slowly through his tongue. He the skewer during his exhalation and paused during inhalation. Sitting calmly, with the skewers in his tongue and throat, he showed no signs of discomfort; rather, he radiated peace. Removal of the skewers left neither open wound nor bleeding. Inspection of the entry points on the following day found no inflammation.

Mr. Kawakami is a 62-year-old male Japanese yogi with 37 years of experience practicing various forms of yoga. He is founder and chief executive director of his own school of yoga and the Institute for Research of Subconscious Psychology in Fukuoka and Tokyo, Japan. In 1983, the Indian Yoga Culture Federation bestowed upon him the title of Yoga Samrat after he demonstrated that he had reached the highest level of proficiency in his discipline.

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During the last seven years, we have collaboratively completed psychophysiological assessments and client healings at San Francisco State University, during professional meetings, and in his ashrams in Japan. In this collaboration, he challenged our beliefs and encouraged us to explore our self-healing potential, frequently reminding us that the limits of experience and possibilities are often constrained by the limits of our beliefs. When a person is not limited by beliefs, more opportunities are possible. Mr. Kawakami demonstrated his mastery of self-regulatory slow breathing by maintaining a breathing rate of two breaths per minute for 20 minutes while sustaining normal oxygen saturation without significantly increasing end-tidal carbon dioxide (Peper et al., 2002). In a recent study exploring the electroencephalographic activity associated with tongue piercing, he demonstrated the ability to control pain and bleeding (Peper, Kawakami, Sata, & Wilson, in press).

Although we have no information on how he avoided bleeding or getting an infection from piercing his tongue and throat with unsterilized skewers, we used Mr. Kawakami as a model of what is humanly possible; we extracted themes that underlie successful clinical therapy and, through observing healings, the processes involved in awakening the healing potential in all. The purpose of this article is to offer some insight that could be developed so that we can enhance the yogi within each of us and with others.

Part 1: Themes that Optimize Healing within a Therapeutic Setting

The following themes are extracted from research that studied how one achieves success in therapeutic clinical settings (Arkowitz, 2002; Baskin & Enright, 2004; Burke, Arkowitz & Menchola, 2003); McCullough, Thoresen, & Pargament 2001; Wampold et al., 1997). Each therapeutic theme is followed, in italics, with suggestions as to what we also have found effective in educational settings to enhance success and increase healing.

- Positive expectation by the therapist. *The natural enthusiasm of the instructor who expects improvement is contagious for enhancing success.*
- “Warm” personality. *In our experience, individuals also prefer an instructor who not only has “warmth” but also models energy and health.*
- Positive regard toward the client. *The instructor can see the potential of growth within the person and enjoy working with him or her.*
- Development of an alliance or working relationship. *We find students respond better if the instructor can actually do the skills he or she is teaching or who has a reputation of having been able to do them and the students believe they will receive expert instruction.*
- Teaching clients to forgive themselves for not being perfect. *This not a one-time statement of “You are okay,” but a consistent reminder by the instructor, at appropriate times, that the perfect person has yet to be born. We have found that some clients feel as if they are failures if they have to seek advice or help from another or if they cannot perform to a specific level or maintain optimum health. This seems to be most true of high functioning, high performance people.*
- Helping clients to resolve their resistance to change, which is usually characterized by the following:
 - Some people really don’t want to be there or to change. *Address this issue and find a guilt-free way to help them advance beyond their present state.*
 - Some clients have frozen attitudes and don’t believe change is possible for them. *Explore their inner beliefs and experiences; create possible options for change.*
 - Some clients do not have the skills to change. *Make sure you provide step-by-step instructions on how to develop a particular skill.*

- Some clients are “stuck.” *The most successful way we have helped these people is to do the task **with them**. For example, coaching an athlete works because the coach personally invests in the athlete and spends a significant amount of time with him or her. The coach’s success is partially determined by the success of the athlete and the coach holds the individual personally accountable for his or her practice and performance.*

These therapeutic and educational processes facilitate rapport, enhance outcome, and underlie the teaching and healing approaches of Mr. Kawakami. Additionally, he includes concepts that augment self-mastery and control.

Part 2: Themes that Are Part of the Yogic Potential

The following concepts equally need to be nurtured and integrated in order to enhance growth and healing.

- **The limitations of experience are the limitations of thoughts and beliefs.** Mr. Kawakami transcends familial and cultural conditioning. With an open mind, he inquires about the goal or task at hand—taking a Zen-like attitude of *Beginner’s Mind* (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). His innate response is, “Let’s explore and see.” He does not limit himself with thoughts of impossibility; he responds by saying, “I do not know and I will just train and see if it is achievable.” He has a willingness to explore and challenge himself and his beliefs; he is willing to be tested and studied to see if what he believes can be scientifically explored and authenticated. For Mr. Kawakami, there is no failure, unless you fail to explore. In this process, the impossible often becomes possible. It is in the experience that we learn that other options exist. In the therapeutic setting, this sometimes can be induced through an “Aha” experience (Wilson, Peper, & Gibney, 2004a; Wilson, Peper, & Gibney, 2004b).
- **Implement action based on intuition.** Health involves listening to one’s intuition and acting upon it, regardless if others disagree. For example, Mr. Kawakami’s hair is shoulder-length and curly, contrary to Japanese custom. Even though his haircut is different, it is less of a statement of “I want to be different” than it is “This is me,” a true expression of his inner self.

A more profound example of his listening to himself was noted in how he acts on his feelings. In a recent collaborative study of tongue piercing while recording his electroencephalograph (brain waves), he agreed that someone else would hold his tongue while he pierced it (Peper et al., unpublished). In this way, there would be fewer movement artifacts in the physiological recording. Yet, as he started to pierce, he stopped and said he could not do it because he could not relax his tongue when it was held by another person. He then held his tongue with his left hand while inserting the skewer with his right. Even though this seemed insignificant, it represents a major theme of health—listening to and acting on feelings. He did not acquiesce to social pressures. He was willing to try the experiment with someone holding his tongue—another confirmation of his honest willingness to explore—yet he confidently stopped the research session because it wasn’t working for him. Many others would have continued and possibly injured themselves as they yielded to the social pressure of scientific inquiry.

- **Be open to experience and other perspectives.** Mr. Kawakami appears to live his life with passion and excitement and is not constrained by dogma; he thinks and acts independently of parental and social constraints. He incorporates whatever appears helpful and will facilitate the teaching and healing approach. The absence of rigidity and increased flexibility is part of his healing style. One of the healing approaches he uses is to help resolve reincarnation

patterns that may affect present behavior. In this process, he also includes automatic writing, gentle touch, energetic and sound healing, imagery, memory, and role playing. Clients experience not only an energetic healing but a total and powerful sensory experience: somatic, kinesthetic, auditory and cognitive. The healing process often includes the component that induces an “Aha” felt experience that can form the basis for change and growth, as is illustrated in the following description of a healing session.

A 30-year-old depressed woman who had the experience of not being wanted by her family (because she was a girl instead of a boy) was the client. Using role playing, Mr. Kawakami facilitated her age-regression to her birth. She role-played herself as a tiny baby, curling up and being held by Mr. Kawakami and his colleague, Ms. Sata. They acted as loving parents and created a new, positive memory of birth. To anchor this experience, they handed the client a baby bottle filled with warm milk. Curled into a fetal position and lovingly held and spoken to by Mr. Kawakami and Ms. Sata, the woman sucked the milk out of the bottle—just as an infant would. She sucked from the bottle as if she had not eaten for days, although only an hour before she had eaten a full lunch. During and following this session, the client radiated peace and felt very quiet. As she reported later, “This experience felt right and was wonderful and helpful.” She felt nurtured and wanted for the first time in her life.

The kinesthetic intervention described above created an experiential rewriting of the past—a process in which individuals find more self-acceptance, for which they have unconsciously ached for many, many years. This tableau showed that healing is more than a simple formula; it is an intuitive and creative process adapted uniquely for each individual. Most likely, this healing experience is but the first step to “a reset of the past.” The rewriting of the past and the experienced acceptance often stops the ruminating voices of the injured inner child, which can harm our lives dramatically (Bradshaw, 1992) and can lead to a feeling of calmness and peace. Sometimes this new experience becomes the turning point where a person feels strong enough to deal with his or her own past, including painful experiences of parental non-acceptance.

This above example does not offer a recipe for treating people who do not experience loving acceptance by their parents. It just offers a specific single-case description that resulted in a remarkable outcome. The approach may be totally different with other people, and it should! The challenge for a good therapist or healer is to find the individual key for relief and health, since all people are different.

- **Joy and play aid the therapeutic and educational process.** Mr. Kawakami demonstrates living life with joy. He expresses joy not only in his use of language and humor, but also in his use of activity. He dances with total freedom, and even sings karaoke. He appreciates when others are achieving their own personal moments of play and joy. His small gifts of friendship are often playful. Make your own sessions more fun for *you* . . . fun is contagious. People have the option to participate either because they have to, or because they enjoy it. Add novelty, surprises, or challenges to your sessions, and sometimes, something silly.
- **Mastery of skills requires disciplined training.** Mr. Kawakami’s many skills may appear to be magical, but on closer inspection, they are the result of discipline and practice. In his many years as a body-builder—he became Mr. Japan in 1972—he learned a core principle of success: Personal achievement is based upon commitment to high quality and quantity of training. In this process he shaped his attitude and developed discipline. He equally demonstrated this discipline, training, and skill mastery in becoming a yogi. In the

collaborative research on slower breathing, he took time to train himself to be able to do it. He did not approach the task with a young man's false bravado, a bravery for which one often gets injured, but rather he approached with an open mind and desire to attain mastery.

- **Compassion can be expressed in varied ways.** Mr. Kawakami reflects a desire to further the Buddha nature in each of us. Often he does this with humor, sometimes with specific healing skills, but most importantly with an energetic radiance that evokes the healing potential in clients. He works with a variety of individuals who have been injured spiritually, physically, and mentally. His compassion has no language, His non-verbal healing skills were demonstrated when he worked with an 18-year-old, severely developmentally disabled but peaceful girl who had not spoken since the age of two. She had been recently traumatized by a serious automobile accident, in which her mother was also seriously injured and later was unable to be with her. Doctors predicted that the girl would die. Nevertheless, she recovered, but her emotional state was volatile, with fits of anger. Her parents said that she was afraid of strangers, yet when she entered the room, she walked straight to Mr. Kawakami and sat next to him without prompting. After a non-verbal healing session, she returned to her pre-accident state, a change for which the parents continue to express their gratitude.
- **Group confirmation aids healing.** Mr. Kawakami encourages reinforcement of achievement that occurs in his clients through sharing it with others. By having his clients reflect verbally on their experiences, typically in front of a group, hope is augmented and shared.

Summary

Looking at the commonalities between factors that are associated with therapeutic success and those associated with the personal and healing skill of Mr. Kawakami, we suggest that the reader explore the following:

- There may be more to the human being than thoughts and flesh. We are each a center of consciousness that is affected by our past and by others, thus we need to be aware of our internal states. Be open to a spiritual perspective, changes, and new experiences in your life.
- Look to exploration with an open heart and mind, rather than reaffirming limitations. Say, "Yes, I will explore it" instead of, "This is not possible."
- Learning is an ongoing process. Remember: we can learn at all ages, but have to be aware that learning does not follow a constant increasing curve. There may be many different steps and long-lasting plateaus. Even when we think we are not learning anything, we may be in the time-consuming period in which our experiences and knowledge become integrated as we cross the plateau to the next step.

- Listen to yourself. Act upon your intuition and feelings. Regardless of what the group says or wants to do, check in with yourself and ask, “Do I want to do this? Is it healthy to do?” Give yourself the chance to make choices and observe what happens.
- Contribute to the well-being of others: be generous of spirit and actions.
- Develop mastery over yourself, a process through which self-esteem and confidence are nurtured. Be aware that things are possible even when you are experiencing failure; now may not be the appropriate time or there may be something wrong with the conditions. Stay open to experience (e.g., remember how often a child falls until he or she finally is able to walk--it is a process of trial and error).
- Be joyful and have fun in life. See the good in yourself and others.
- Remember that great talents do not just fall into your lap; they become great performances through hard work. If you have enough excitement, work will become fun!

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