

## **Couple Love Psychotherapy and Tantra Meet.**

*By Ger Murphy*

This short piece attempts to begin an exploration of how the integration of a Psychotherapeutic and a Tantric framework may offer couples support in the challenging work of maintaining long term relationships. (In the context of this discussion I am referring to couples of either sex as I understand that in heterosexual as well as homosexual couples, gendered roles and identity occur.) My interest in this subject comes from my work as a psychotherapist where after an Integrative Psychotherapy training and an apprenticeship seeing couples and families I have seen couples for psychotherapeutic work for the past 25 years.

The challenges for couples attempting to maintain a vibrant relationship are great in the present climate. Divorce rates are rising, the use of pornography is growing, sexual dysfunction is increasing and the stresses of couple life mean that couples are under increasing pressure. To have a sustainable relationship is increasingly challenging. Couples are living longer, so relationships are now expected to last 50 years, where in 19th century life they were expected to last no more than 30 years. The complexity of relationship where couples are co-parenting, home-making and holding down demanding jobs requires more than the occasional meal out and flowers on Valentine's day and birthdays. Sustaining a vibrant couple relationship requires commitment as well as skillful practice and understanding.

I have found that couples come with many issues but that three themes reoccur regularly:

1. Couples place too much expectation on the other to fulfill them, this is exploited by the media, movies, etc. putting such weight on romantic love.
2. Couples find it difficult to see typical patterns of relating, in their own case, especially in a time of conflict.
3. Couples often do not have practices which nourish their intimate relating.

The outcome of these three issues is often that couples continue in unproductive discussion of old stories and hurts which exhaust them and lead nowhere.

I want to suggest that for couples to maintain a vibrant relationship they would be greatly assisted by

- a commitment to their own and their partners self-development
- a knowledge of couples dynamics
- a commitment to ongoing exploration of relationship through a practice such as tantra

Couples who are committed to their own development will be willing to reflect on how their life is unfolding, what energises them, and how their soul-purpose is unfolding. For a useful discussion on soul-purpose development see (Plotkin 2010).

Many couple difficulties arise from how disappointments in one's own life are projected onto the other. Many times we project such disappointments onto the other in the mistaken belief that the other should fulfill us and make us whole. Such a belief

often places an unfair burden onto the other. Couples often come together with the expectation that the other will complete them in an unrealistic way. The ancient Greek myth of coupling as the finding of the other so as to create a whole can lead to an unhealthy co-dependence and ultimately to a sense of disappointment when such a completion does not occur with the consequent blame and disappointment that such unmet expectation can generate.

Taking responsibility for one's own development can avert such a result and can allow both parties to flourish in a mutually supportive way. When both parties can look at how their life is bringing them closer to expressing their unique gifts so as to express what it is they are here to offer to the world, a mutually supportive atmosphere is more likely to be present,. This can allow each to support the other in their unfolding but without the other having to take responsibility for this unfolding. In this context each member of the couple would take responsibility for maintaining good supportive friendships, interests of their own, disciplines such as exercise, diet, meditation, and any other pursuits which support their individual unfolding and optimising their physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. See (Ken Wilber's, 2008, *Integral Practice* for one of the most inclusive maps of self development and self-care currently available.

Couples will do well to have some understanding of how couples can typically interact. Many times couples come to coupling with expectations derived from childhood of how to love, what a partner should be and how to relate to an intimate other. Unconscious expectations are formed early in life from watching parents interact, and hopes and fears arising out of this experience will colour the expectations each partner brings to the coupling. Where there was trauma in early life, individuals develop ways of managing such trauma in an attempt to minimise further hurt or pain. Such experiences often affect how couples can open or not to intimacy. Hurt and old pain is often stored in the body even when it not remembered consciously, and unless remembered and worked through this can affect the couple dynamic.

There are many patterns of dynamic which appear in couples attending for help with their relationship. One typical dynamic that occurs in couples is one where there emerges a "chaser and chased" dance, with one partner pushing for more closeness, which they unconsciously expect not to get and the other seeking distance in the hope of avoiding suffocation which they unconsciously expect to occur. Such a dance is often a painful and repetitive one in which couples can get stuck without knowing how to break it. (Dicks 1964) in his classic work *Marital Tensions* explores at depth how such unconscious expectations operate in couples and how couples can recreate the experiences of their parents while attempting to avoid them. Understanding what expectations are carried into couple life can greatly help couples. This understanding is then used to withdraw old projections from the other, and can offer great freedom for both to be present with less shadow of the past being present. In this way couples can come to fully own their own feelings for themselves, 'changing YOU ARE, to I FEEL'.

So often I find couples arriving for help frustrated in being unable to get their partner to change, and with a view that this change in the partner is all that would be required to bring about resolution of the difficulties. Couples can use better communication processes to help understand each other. I have found working with couples that developing clearer communication skills is vitally important. For example couples can be helped greatly by having formal speaking and listening periods in their week, where one speaks and the other listens- at depth. This can avoid the often heard occurrence of couples not really listening but 'reloading' ie getting a reply ready while the other is talking, resulting in each feeling unheard and frustrated.

The need for couples to have a practice of making love in an intentional and ritualised way is well worth emphasising where couples decide to commit to continuing a sexual relationship beyond child bearing. Coupling is challenging and to intentionally make love, rather than just having sex can sweeten relationships and is a great resource in stressful times. Tantra, which is an ancient Eastern ideology and practice, offers ways for couples to explore sexuality in a sacred and ritualised way which unites the pleasure of the body with the transcendent urge to become one with Spirit. For an excellent introduction to Tantra see (Margot Anand 2013)

Couples can benefit from the practices of Tantra without persuing the loftier spiritual doorways available until/if they wish to do so. Tantra shows us how useful it can be to develop an intentional practice of love making, and the many practices which can help this. For example I suggest that it can be of great benefit to couples to set aside an appointed time each week to meet each other in an intimate way. This would be when both are rested and free of distraction such as alcohol and other substances, time pressure or other concerns. I have found that when couples commit to such an appointed practice it has the feeling of a 'date', and can be felt as useful for partners to feel chosen again, which they may not have for some time. It is, of course not necessary for couples to have penetrative sex on such occasions, simply offering each other massage, looking at each other, and pleasuring each other in any consensual way can be deeply resourcing for the couple.

Many further aspects of tantra offer valuable resources to couples. For example it has interested me how reintroducing looking into couple dynamics can be rewarding. Many men like to look, many women like to be looked at. Many men tell me they want to look at their woman but are afraid to ask, and rather go to the internet for pornography. The work of (David Deida 2007) is useful here. Deida offers his view that in any relationship there needs to be a magnitised attraction, where masculine and feminine attract each other. Masculinity he defines as presence-consciousness and femininity is seen as energy. The feminine opens like a flower when adored, and the masculine task is to be in service to the feminine in this opening so that both parties can be fully themselves. Also it is remarkable how difficult it can be for couples to simply spend some minutes looking into each others eyes, how the shells of disappointment can cloud the heart and the eyes after years of relating, and yet how nourishing real looking can be for couples. Related to this is the regularly heard comment from men and women of their differences- women stating that they need to feel a heart connection before love-making and men finding heart connection through

love making. This can be a fruitless stand-off and needs practices which honour the needs of both parties as can be found in tantra.

A further practice from Tantra which I believe to be rewarding for couples is one where the couple alternates the role of decision-maker for one appointment. In this one partner is allowed to choose how they would like to be honoured and served by the other, always remembering that the other may choose to decline if this feels important.

These practices can greatly enrich a couple's life together, but it must be remembered that these practices can also bring couples to meet areas of vulnerability, pain or shame which then need to be worked through and healed. Where this can be done successfully a deeper relationship of intimacy, trust and satisfaction can grow.

The vulnerability encountered by partners can include the surfacing of buried memory and body sensation which relates to distant past events from the life of either partner, often relating to trauma stored in the body which can be reactivated by intimate contact. While it can be challenging to meet such experience, the loving presence of a partner can assist one in meeting and allowing such body experience to be permitted and released. Of particular value here are what Margot Anand calls the "Three Keys" – Breath- Sound –Movement, which when used as tools together allow strong experience to pass through the body in a healing way. Using these tools allow us to tolerate strong excitation more fully in the body without overwhelm or cutting out. In this way the intimate encounter can be a deeply healing one also. Of course there will be times when couples reach what feels like the limits of their expertise and will call on the help of a psychotherapist to support them in their journey or to offer one to one work with a partner exploring particularly challenging material.

In this way love-making can become a sacrament, a holy happening in which sensual and sexual pleasure can be united with a sense of the sacred, a sense of wonder and a gratitude for all life. Such a reuniting of the sexual and the sacred is, I believe strongly needed in the Irish Psyche, which has been ravaged by the effects of the pathological split between sexuality and spirituality, which have been graphically seen in recent decades.

Furthermore this integration of masculine and feminine, has great value to contribute to our current environmental and planetary crisis in contributing our love-making as a gift to ourselves, our couple our community, and our world.

A true resting in love has a powerful contribution to make -on all levels of existence, and can, I believe contribute to the reframing of our place on the Earth which is currently unfolding.

In summary I suggest that an integration of the perspectives from Psychotherapy and Tantra can be of great benefit to enriching the lives of couples who wish to deepen their relationship. Such enrichment is valuable in a time when relationships are under pressure. I suggest that where psychotherapy can help understand patterns of personality and character development, and with this the dynamics of couple life, Tantra can offer couples the tools to challenge these patterns and develop a more deeply satisfying intimate life together.

With the tools from Psychotherapy and Tantra, couples can have an improved possibility of meeting each other without the baggages of memory and

dissappointment on the one hand or the burdens of expectation on the other. This can make possible a profound meeting of two beings which nourish the souls of both and resource them to meet the challenges of modern living with a kindness and cherishing which is most worthwhile for themselves and their world.

While this discussion of the topic is a cursory one and both couple dynamics from a psychotherapeutic perspective and the arts of Tantra may be addressed more extensively elsewhere, I believe that the integration of the two dialogues has particular value, and clinical relevance and I would like to see a discussion of this integration .

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