Judith Blackstone

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Judith Blackstone, PhD, developed the Realization Process, an integrated method of somatic psychotherapy, embodiment, relational healing, and spiritual awakening. She is a psychotherapist in private practice in New York City and offers classes, workshops and teacher trainings in the Realization Process, throughout the United States and Europe. She is the author of *The Empathic Ground, The Enlightenment Process, The Subtle Self, Living Intimately* (to be republished in Fall, 2011 as *The Intimate Life*) and the upcoming *Belonging Here*. She has been a student of Eastern contemplative traditions for thirty-five years. She is founder of Nonduality Institute in New York City.

Serge Prengel, LMHC is the editor the *Proactive Mindfulness* project.

The following is a transcript of the original audio. Please note that this conversation was meant to be a spontaneous exchange. For better or worse, the transcript retains the unedited quality of the conversation.

Serge Prengel: This is a conversation with Judith Blackstone. Hi, Judith

Judith Blackstone: Hi

S P: So Judith, your work is Realization Process, if you want to say a few words about it?

J B: Yes. The Realization Process is a method of somatic psychotherapy. It's also a method of relational attunement, which means being able to connect more deeply and more subtly with other people, while remaining within one's own body; while remaining connected to one's inner being.

S P: So I like very much that expression, you talk about the relational attunement and that sense of attunement to self, attunement to others, and the two being related.

J B: Yes. They're absolutely related, and the third aspect of Realization Process is spiritual attunement, and what I mean by that is the uncovering of a very subtle level of consciousness that is not often included in our understanding or our work. In fact, in the somatic therapy field, we talk a lot about energy. There's a dimension of ourselves, a level of attunement to ourselves, that's even more subtle than energy, and that's a level of consciousness or actual stillness that feels like – it feels like openness.

S P: So something that we don't normally always pay attention to in somatic therapies that's more subtle, and has a connection to the spiritual and to openness.

J B: That's right. Wherever we inhabit our own body – that means wherever we live within ourselves, we're open to the environment. So for example, if we inhabit our chest, then this present moment right now, we can experience taking place outside our body and inside our chest at the same time. So it means internal contact with the inside of our body is at the same time openness to the environment, and to other people.

S P: Yeah, yeah. So that sense of the experience of – from inside, as well as openness to the outside, so do you want to develop that a little more?

J B: Yes. So in the Realization Process, one aspect of it is a series of exercises, attunement exercises, for inhabiting the internal space of the body, and also for attuning to the natural qualities of being within the body. So that's just one aspect of the work, but it's kind of the basis of the work. And that means not just being aware of the body – it's not like a body scan – it's actually entering in and being present within the body as that space.

S P: Ok, so not a body scan, but actually entering and being present in that body space.

J B: Yeah, that's right.

S P: So what does it – what would it – I mean I understand that this is an experience and words are going to be really, really proximitive, but to some extent you know, what can give us a glimpse of that kind of experience?

J B: Well, as you're listening to this, you can take a moment to become aware of your hands. Just sit with that for a moment, feel what that's like, and you may be able to feel the warmth in your hands, or the rigidity or relaxation of your hands. And now, take a moment to enter into your hands, to feel that you actually are that internal space of your hands. So that's the shift that we're making little by little throughout the whole body.

S P: Yeah, yeah. So just that sense of bringing the consciousness to the hand, but not just the consciousness from the outside, but that sense of being inside the hand, being the hand itself.

J B: Exactly, exactly. So when we do that, several things happen, and they're all important for our growth. One is that the created boundary – the protective boundary that we've created from childhood between inner and outer experience – dissolves. But that is not a merging with the environment because we've gotten to it by inhabiting the body, there's not a merging but rather a oneness, a continuity between oneself and one's environment. So we feel open and transparent and we actually can little by little experience a transparency throughout everything around us, it's a matching – a oneness of consciousness, a very, very subtle consciousness. So that's one of the things that happens, and that's actually a spiritual experience that's talked about in a lot of the Eastern literature, sometimes called nonduality, sometimes called unity consciousness, but it also helps us connect with other people, because the internal space of our own body has a very interesting capacity. It has the capacity to actually resonate and connect with the internal space of other bodies. So from deep inside my chest, I can connect (and of course we all can) with the space inside another person's chest. And that means that we're connecting not from the surface of ourselves, but all the way through, person-to-person, the internal depth of ourselves.

S P: Yeah. So what you're describing is a transparency that comes from removing the usual boundaries we have and that this is not about disappearing, but having in a way a more solid sense of self, but that allows that connection.

J B: That's exactly right. That's exactly right, and the third thing that happens when we inhabit our body in this kind of full and subtle and present way is that we can recognize and also more easily

release even very subtle holding patterns within the body: ways that we've organized ourselves from early childhood, in relation to our environment, and particularly as the result of what we might call developmental trauma, relational trauma. So the Realization Process also contains a number of ways of working with these holding patterns in the body. One way is a kind of diagnostic of actually feeling that we're in our own body, and feeling that the space that pervades our own body also pervades an image of one of our parents. And feeling how we constrict just in the moment – of course we're just going to unveil one or two holding patterns in that way – how we particularly constrict ourselves in relation to our parents. And then we can really feel exactly how we've twisted away from life, exactly how we've closed ourselves off.

S P: So that these – that disappearance of boundaries is a disappearance also of these old patterns that have been keeping us in a habitual mode, and also cutting us from present reality.

J B: Yes, very gradually. I mean, the first thing it does is actually reveal the holding patterns a little more clearly. Some holding patterns that are not so deeply ingrained may fall away just with inhabiting the body, but many will not. And we can really reach this transparency long before we've let go of all our holding patterns, that's really an ideal, but we get to feel exactly how we've twisted away, and then once we feel that in various parts of our body, what we do in the Realization Process is to actually inhabit the holding pattern, to try to penetrate into it from this very subtle level of ourselves. And in such a way that the holding pattern actually moves further towards the constriction. Right, because each of these frozen parts of ourselves are actually frozen movements, they all have movement in them. They're all frozen movement.

S P: So is – am I to see if I'm following you correctly – is in a way what we did before is we did that experience of feeling the hand from inside, so is this similar, about feeling the holding pattern from inside?

J B: Yes, it is. So for example, if we inhabit our chest, we'll find – all of us, really – that we can't inhabit our chest completely, there will be little areas where we're holding. We almost all have some tension around our sternum, some places that we've shut down our heart, protectively. And as we then inhabit those, or contact them -- there's something I'm leaving out here just because of our time constraint, but we also work with a very subtle channel that runs through the vertical core of the body, the very innermost core of ourselves. When we contact that holding pattern from this core of ourselves, we can penetrate into it in a very subtle way so that it goes towards the constriction and at that point, we can often feel just what that constriction is trying to do. For example, I worked recently with a young man who was having a number of problems, and one of them was in digestion. But his psychological issues were issues of disempowerment, of not being able to manifest his life in the way that he wanted to. And when he actually – of course first we do the inhabiting the body and the subtle core of the body and all of that – but when he was able to actually feel the constriction in his gut, and penetrate into it, it actually twisted. We often protect ourselves on a bias like that: we twist rather than just pulling in. He could actually feel how he had twisted, and when he did that, he right away remembered himself as a little boy at the dinner table, the tremendous anxiety in the atmosphere (his parents were just both very anxious people), the taste of the food that was so unpalatable for him, and so he could feel that he was twisting away from digesting the atmosphere of anxiety and the food. And then once he did that, I had him just let go of the accentuation of the twist. So of course it's not going to just let go just like that, but since he has allowed it to move even more fully into the constriction, then letting go of that intensification creates a kind of lubrication of the protective pattern, of the protective movement… trajectory,

right? It lubricates it, so that it can move in and out, and it also becomes a conscious – little by little – a conscious movement.

S P: Yeah. So really that as this person was able to feel that movement, there was also at the same time the recollection of where it originated, and the possibility of completing it.

J B: That's right. Completing it and then feeling the movement, the possibility of releasing it. So the whole movement into that constriction is also a movement out of it.

S P: So really what you call the holding pattern, the constriction, is really literally a sense of uncompleted, arrested movement.

J B: Arrested movement, that's right. Frozen – frozen movements of protection, and also of compensation: compensatory attitudes and so forth. So there's often layers, right? There's a held… perhaps a held smile, and once that's let go there's a holding of a sad expression… layers and layers. And then, in the example I just described, because the belly actually has within it a natural quality of power, that's just simply the quality that our body makes in that area of ourselves, once he started to untwist like that – to untwist that holding pattern, not only did his digestion get better, but he could attune more fully to that quality of power in his belly, which gave him more sense of effectiveness in the world.

S P: So it was really holding him in life as well.

J B: That's right.

S P: So in this process, what is your experience as the therapist, as the client is progressively inhabiting?

J B: Yes, that's a wonderful question. As the client is inhabiting his or her body, there's more natural resonance from the internal space of my – of course, there's also kind of transmission, but first let me say, there's more connection. So as that person is able to be in their belly, and if I'm in my belly, then I will feel that belly-to-belly internal connection to that person. There is such a thing as transmission, so that we help each other open just by our presence. So wherever that person opens or inhabits himself, which is exactly the same, right – inhabiting and openness – wherever that happens in that person, if I'm a little bit closed in myself, it will help open me. Or at least, make me more aware of the holding patterns. Now when we attune to this space pervading ourself and our client in the therapy session, we're also able to track both our own internal experience, and to whatever extent we can, the internal experience of our client at the same time. Because this space evenly pervades our own self and our environment, this very subtle consciousness or transparency, we actually have a sense of ourselves and the other person simultaneously, without having to go back and forth.

S P: So that's a felt sense of yourself and other.

J B: That's right, at the same time, yeah. Which becomes really important for very sensitive people, who tend to run other people's pain through their own body, and read other people by feeling it within their own body. Once we actually have uncovered this very subtle aspect of ourselves, we

don't have to do that. We can read the other person over there in their body, and at the same time read our responses to that person.

S P: So that's interesting in light of what you were saying earlier about the disappearance of boundary and that… so do you want to talk a little more about in a way how that corresponds to the experience of the self?

J B: Yeah. So my work differs from a lot of the Asian teachings in that because we're attuning to this openness by inhabiting the body, we do – just as you said, just as you recognized – we have more and more vivid and deep and cohesive, coherent experience of our own self as an individual. We can feel our love, we can feel our understanding, we can feel our power, we can feel that we take up space internally. So there's a kind of palpable sense of existence (of our own existence) ongoing, even as we shift in relation to different circumstances. But there's this ground of being that doesn't shift, that's an ongoing sense of existing.

S P: So I'm struck by the phrases you use, of the "grounded", the "taking space", the "palpable"… so really a sense of a very strongly embodied sense of self.

J B: That's right.

S P: And that place is where, as a therapist, you have the possibility of resonating with the client without being swallowed or…

J B: …or intrusive, that's right. Because energetically, we can enter into another person, or we can let that person even zap us of our energy. But in this level of openness, of transparency, that doesn't happen. We feel our self and the other person, without that intrusion. Now the actual energetic exchange happens more fluidly, person-to-person, also. As we know ourselves as this more subtle level, then the energy level moves more fluidly and more deeply.

S P: So it that possible to give a sense of it in terms of what happens in a session?

J B: Sessions differ, of course. Sometimes I start with talking; of course if someone has a lot to say, we'll start there. Sometimes I start with the actual exercises of the Realization Process, there's two main exercises: there's inhabiting the body and attuning to the pervasive space and that can take like half an hour, there's the core breath, where we find this very subtle channel that runs through the vertical core of the body and we breathe there so that we can live there; so that we get this very deep inner contact with ourselves. So sometimes I'll start with either one or both of those exercises. Sometimes I'll go right to working with the holding patterns, especially if the person has already done those exercises with me, or maybe they take my class on Monday nights that I teach, and so they're familiar with the exercises, and then we can go right to the holding patterns. Releasing those holding patterns gives you more and more of this pervasive space, so people who are interested in spiritual attunement are interested in freeing their body on this very deep and subtle level. But many people come to me who are not interested in the spiritual aspect of the work, and they still work with releasing these holding patterns because they do – they free up our ability to love, our sense of our own… actual feel of our own power, and so forth.

S P: Yeah. So part of it then is that either each session or at least in some sessions there is the exercise itself, so their building as a resource the practice of that kind of experience.

J B: Yes, that's right. And that's exactly what it is, it's resource, it's contact with our own being. So that then they can go into the little pockets of pain and childhood and they still have their whole internal presence as a resource.

S P: And you said that some people are interested in the spiritual aspect and some people are not necessarily coming for that, so how would you maybe talk about the presence of the spiritual in their therapy?

J B: Spiritual means something very specific to me in this context, and it means the unveiling of this very subtle consciousness that pervades oneself and everything around oneself. And so that's the type of spirituality that I work with, and that's a wonderful feeling.. It's been valued in the Eastern teachings of course for thousands of years, and yet it's so extremely subtle, it's just really a kind of transparency.

S P: Yeah, so you talk about subtle, you talk about unveiling, so really a sense of, "it's out there, but it's so easy to overlook" and that… so a sense of that very, very subtle work that needs to be to get there. You're almost there and kind of…

J B: That's right. You know, there are many teachers out there now saying that since this space is always there, apparently actually the ground of our nature, all we have to do is relax into it. And that's not quite the case, in my opinion. If we just simply let go into this space, we tend to let go from the surface of ourselves. And to really get to this transparency, we need to let go from deep within. This space pervades both our own being and everything around us, and it is self-arising, I mean these are exercises I teach, they're not the experience itself, but they enable the experience. And then that space – that pervasive space arises spontaneously, so to speak, after having done all of this practice.

S P: Yeah. And that experience is the experience of that larger consciousness.

J B: That's right, that's right.

S P: So again, understanding that it is an experience and something that's very hard to reduce to words, is there a way that you can give a little bit of a hint of what it might be like?

J B: It feels like you're made of empty space, even though you're completely in touch with yourself, so it's very interesting. And it's not that hard to experience, it's neither as easy as some people make out and it's also not very hard to do at all, especially those of us in this field, where we come into the field with a lot of sensitivity to begin with. But that's how it feels, and it can be experienced both as complete emptiness as if you were an empty vessel, so that everything is just happening vividly in that space, as if there were nothing – no effort on your part. It can also be experienced as presence, or as radiance. So these are two ways of experiencing exactly the same ground of being.

S P: So in a way the apparent contradiction in terms points to the limitation of words, and "emptiness" is not an emptiness because that's a very acute experience in that sense.

J B: Exactly, yes.

S P: So just there, you are in a way using this experience, this ability to touch upon these experiences as a resource, as a means to helping people deal with problems, but also fostering and encouraging people to live more in that area.

J B: Yes, they happen together, and on this level I think on any – in any embodiment kind of therapy, any somatic therapy, there's really no difference between the psychological and spiritual. Even if people aren't interested in the spiritual, they are getting to that very subtle and unified level of themselves as they heal these psychological barriers within themselves.

S P: That feels like a very, very profound, simple definition of in a way seeing what we can talk about as the unity of these aspects in theory, but that you're going to find them in practice as well. That people – that's how people experience the process.

J B: That's right.

S P: So does it feel like a good place to end this brief conversation, or is there something that you would want to add to it?

J B: No, that's fine, I think you helped me say pretty much everything I was hoping to say

S P: Thanks, Judith.

J B: Yes, thank you.

This conversation was transcribed by Anna Kreiter.

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