



Shoma Morita and 'doing what needs to be done'

We first discovered the work of **Shoma Morita** (1874-1938) in the early 1980s, when we read the American anthropologist David Reynolds' book '*Playing ball on running water*'. Reynolds first discovered Morita's work in the late 1950s when he first visited Japan. Morita's work had never before been written about in English. Reynolds was to become the first translator of Morita's ideas for a Western audience.

Shoma Morita was a Japanese psychiatrist in the early part of the twentieth century. A contemporary of Freud, he was Chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at Jikei University School of Medicine. His attitude to therapy was influenced greatly by the psychological principles of Zen Buddhism. Originally, he worked only with people who were experiencing anxiety neurosis. In Japan this was called *shinkeishitsu*. Morita's followers have, however, extended the use of his approach to work with people with a wide range of problems, including people who are terminally ill with cancer. The key focus of Morita's work was not so much to 'get rid' of the problem, as to help people focus on living life fully. David Reynolds adapted Morita's work for a Western audience, calling his approach to therapy 'Constructive Living'.

Living with Thoughts and Feelings

In most Western cultures feelings drive much of our actions. In CBT, for example, the assumption is that how we think, influences how we feel, influences how we act (or behave). Morita took a very different view. All feelings are natural. When people win a prize or receive a compliment they may feel happy. When they lose a precious possession or discover the death of a friend, they may feel sad or 'heartbroken'.

Morita believed that there was no need to try to change or 'fix' thoughts and feelings. Instead, we should accept reality as it is (*arugamama*). If we feel angry or depressed, fearful or lonely, we accept these feelings - as gifts from reality - and focus our attention on living well, by taking the steps necessary to realise this. This way we can let thoughts and feelings come and go - like sunshine or storm - and continue doing what is important or necessary in life.

Morita and the Tidal Metaphor

Most Western forms of therapy assume that people need to change the way they think in order to change how they feel, so that eventually they will act differently. People talk about their 'need to develop confidence' so that they can 'speak in public' or 'make new friends'. This is unnecessary, and may worsen the person's situation - by encouraging the person to focus on thoughts and feelings rather than action.

Morita said that: *“Trying to control the emotional self willfully by manipulative attempts is like trying to choose a number on a thrown die or to push back the water of the Kamo River upstream. Certainly, they end up aggravating their agony and feeling unbearable pain because of their failure in manipulating the emotions.”*

As David Reynolds said: *Morita therapy is not really a psychotherapeutic method for getting rid of “symptoms”. It is more an educational method for outgrowing our self-imposed limitations. Through Moritist methods we learn to accept the naturalness of ourselves.”*

In the **Tidal Model** we encourage people to discover what they can *do* when faced with different problems in living. Reality cannot be controlled far less conquered. We learn to swim or build a boat! If it is raining we put up an umbrella or cover our heads

with a newspaper. Alternatively, we just get wet. However, if we need to go to the store, we go to the store!

Therein lies the paradox. This outlook on life is so simple that, for some people, it is very difficult to enact. Or, perhaps we have centuries of conditioning that leads us to believe that we *must* conquer our fears, or leave our past behind us. It is clear that many people devote a huge amount of time to trying to do these things (which involve playing with abstract concepts like 'fear' or 'the past') and, as a result, do not live. Perhaps the problem is that we *think* and *feel* too much, and do not *do* enough!

Arugamama and serious problems of living

In the West it has become popular to talk about 'evidence-based' interventions. These are, allegedly, ways of 'treating' or 'helping' people which 'work': i.e. achieve particular outcomes. It seems clear that although these 'interventions' might appear to be very helpful for some people, others are not helped by them. Indeed, most studies show that at least some people 'become worse'. Ultimately, we should be asking:

👁️ What *kind of help* does this *particular person* need *now* to do *what, exactly*?

When people are being fitted for a suit of clothes, they like to choose the material and have it fitted, closely, to their frame. If money was no object, most people would say that such 'bespoke tailoring' was far better than an 'off the peg' suit of clothes; especially one where they had no choice of colour or style.

Over the past 25 years we have used Morita's ideas in our work with a wide range of people, with all kinds of 'mental' or 'physical' problems: from those who were

'suicidal' or 'persecuted by voices', to those who 'took too much drink or drugs' or were limited by some 'disability' or 'handicap'. We always took the view that our challenge was **not** to relieve people of their problems - 'curing' them, or magically 'transforming' them. Instead, we assumed that these people already were the best people they could be (albeit with problems). Our challenge was to help them find the resources within themselves to do whatever they needed to do, to live a meaningful, productive and constructive life.

We believe that this is what happens around the world, day in and day out. We pass people in the street, or work alongside them, often oblivious to the problems in living they face, or the fears, worries, 'hang ups' and various other 'troubles', that lie behind their outward appearance. We assume that they are 'OK' because they are still keeping going. As the Scots writer Janice Galloway famously wrote: "The trick is to keep breathing". We should accept reality as it is (arugamama) and keep living regardless.

There are no solutions

We do not believe that our various problems in living need to be 'fixed' or 'solved'. rather, we need to master the trick of 'knowing our purpose': doing 'what needs to be done' as part of leading a full and meaningful life. People who have lost a leg or an arm, their sight or their hearing, do this. The next person you pass in the street may be a 'voice hearer', or 'clinically depressed'. How would you know if they do not tell you? If they are living life with a purpose, what would it matter anyway?