

# here we are now

## intro

Welcome, we are here now – at the last offering in this season of padkos that we’ve called “being... here... now...”. In some ways it always felt like a slightly risky theme to highlight and sustain. We know that a focus on the care and wellbeing of individual people, including ourselves, can be seen as indulgent and individualistic, at the expense of political activism and revolutionary social change. But this separation of the personal from the social is not a division or distinction we believe to be true. In fact, the abstraction of the one from the other is probably at the bottom of some of the most disastrous and damaging impacts of much Left politics.

We’ve talked consistently about the relentless co-option and monetisation of self-care, and its many forms that strip mindfulness from an ethical base so that it’s just about getting people to accept and acquiesce to the situation – and we’re clear that our current situation is not acceptable and is *causing* much (though not all) of our distress and unwellness. We are not crazy to react negatively to the situation we’re in! We should also be aware that there is also growing evidence that ‘wellness’ has become an increasingly well-traveled entry point into rightwing conspiracy-thinking – and that this has accelerated during the global COVID pandemic. This ‘conspirituality’ is described by Eva Wiseman as

“the sticky intersection of two worlds: the world of yoga and juice cleanses with that of New Age thinking and online theories about secret groups, covertly controlling the universe. ... While the overlap of left-wing, magazine-friendly wellness and far-right conspiracy theories might initially sound surprising, the similarities in cultures, in ways of thinking – the questioning of authority, of alternative medicines, the distrust of institutions– are clear”<sup>1</sup>.

By contrast with both these deviations, throughout this series we’ve returned again and again to the idea that the integration of inner- and outer- awareness and engagement is not just compatible with, but deeply productive for, holistic well being and life. Jenny Odell (author of ***How to Do Nothing: Resisting The Attention Economy***, 2019) talks<sup>2</sup> about self care ‘in the sense before it was commodified; like actual care of the self in almost an activist sense in order to ultimately accomplish something later; self care that prepares ourselves for action’. She quotes black north american poet, feminist and activist, [Audre Lorde](#) saying: "caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (in “A Burst of Light”, 1988).

The fact that spaces and resources for wellbeing and self-care are unfairly distributed, only encourages our ongoing commitment to change those conditions. The fact that key drivers of modernity, of capitalism, of patriarchy, of industry, of ‘progress’, of ‘development’, of ‘efficiency’, of profit, of money, of consumerism, are also key drivers of so much of our collective and individual un-wellness and dis-ease, only strengthens our resolve to break the logic of those patterns.

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1 Eva Wiseman, 17 October 2021. "The dark side of wellness: the overlap between spiritual thinking and far-right conspiracies", <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/oct/17/eva-wiseman-conspirituality-the-dark-side-of-wellness-how-it-all-got-so-toxic>

2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=izjIP9qtmBU> . In that talk, Odell goes on to suggest, in a way that resonates with our earlier padkos on art and play, that we should “take a protective stance toward ourselves and each other, that we protect our spaces and our time for non-instrumental and non-commercial activity and thought; for maintenance, for care, and for conviviality; and that we fiercely protect our human animality against all technologies and rhetorics that actively ignore and disdain the body, the bodies of others, and the body of the land that we physically inhabit”.

### **A note about *buen vivir* or *sumak kawsay***<sup>3</sup>

Often through this series we've talked about an 'abundant life' being a worthwhile way to think about what it might be that we're striving to attain. There's a useful overlap with the Latin American notions of *buen vivir* or *sumak kawsay*. *Buen vivir* is often translated as 'good living' or 'living well' and was used by a number of social movements advancing the struggles of indigenous peoples, and including their natural world. It focuses on living sustainably as part of a community that includes both human beings and nature<sup>4</sup>. "Originally created as a political and cultural proposal, Ecuadorian and Bolivian governments later adopted it. The term refers to the implementation of a socialism that moves away from Western socialist theory and instead embraces the ancestral, communitarian knowledge and lifestyle of Quechua people. ... In the original Quechua phrase, *sumak* refers to the ideal and beautiful fulfillment of the planet, and *kawsay* means 'life,' a life with dignity, plenitude, balance, and harmony" ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sumak\\_kawsay](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sumak_kawsay)). *Sumak kawsay* is a paradigm based on five pillars:

- There is no life without knowledge or wisdom (Tucu Yachay)
- We all come from Mother Earth (Pacha Mama)
- Life is healthy (*hambi kawsay*)
- Life is collective (*sumak kamaña*)
- We all have an aspiration or a dream (*Hatun Muskuy*).

Johannes M. Waldmüller (2014)<sup>5</sup> discusses many of the complex and nuanced features of *Buen Vivir* and *Sumak Kawsay*. He says that the various terms used to express *Buen Vivir* point to what is actually a plurality of platforms of 'Latin American' alternatives to "mainstream utilitarian development approaches". There is no simply clearcut definition - and in a sense that's an important point. It "intentionally leaves space for re-interpretation, re-appropriation or, as it is frequently called, 'enactment' and 'reconstruction'". Quoting Walsh (2010) Waldmüller says that it's "a system of knowledge and living based on the communion of humans and nature and on the spatial-temporal-harmonious totality of existence. That is, on the necessary interrelation of beings, knowledges, logics, and rationalities of thought, action, existence, and living. This notion is part and parcel of the cosmivision, cosmology, or philosophy of the indigenous peoples of Abya Yala."

We should note it is a set of ideas and practices that are really diverse now, and that now includes also including a form of state-led development in some Latin American countries – for instance, it is included in the constitutions of both Bolivia and Ecuador. But it is also - especially *Sumak Kawsay* - a form of living and thinking, with important spiritual and cosmological dimensions, based on a practice "of all-connected consciousness, being in constant exchange and reflection with the social and natural environment. ... *Sumak Kawsay* is regarded as explicitly entailing no aspirations to governance, to rule, to domination, to hierarchies, to competition. Instead it is the quintessential expression of a number of ontological values, such as connectedness, commonality, and balancing between eternal energies and poles, existent in every living being (which is everything). ... Thus being is always an active and passive act of sacred interconnectedness. Everything is alive and sacred. ... The goal of *Buen Vivir* is not to 'overcome' 'ill living' [*Mal Vivir/Llaki Kawsay*], since there is no aspiration to 'live better' – but rather to balance both always existent sides in a refined way. The key to do so, is practicing consciousness, i.e. listening, responding and correlating with mind, heart and body. In opposition to Western concepts of exclusivity, competition, subjectification, etc., *Buen Vivir* puts emphasis on key values such as solidarity, generosity, reciprocity and complementarity. These stem from a primordial understanding of oneness, connectedness and animacy, i.e. plants, animals, water, stones, humans, soil, mountains, etc. are regarded as living beings".

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3 Our gratitude to Anne Harley for pointing us to the terms and their use in Latin American struggles and thought – and also for a number of great resource articles on the topic.

4 See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialism\\_of\\_the\\_21st\\_century#Buen\\_vivir](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialism_of_the_21st_century#Buen_vivir)

5 "Buen Vivir, Sumak Kawsay, 'Good Living': An Introduction And Overview". Note that the full article is really worth reading – we can only present a few of the important points he makes here.

## what were we thinking?

When we began discussing this mini-season, we imagined quite a different process from what it became. Despite the constraints of COVID restrictions, we initially thought we'd be working with groups of people experienced and knowledgeable in different healing and therapeutic practices to make the process happen. And we envisaged that each theme would be accompanied by a practical and social event bringing some of those people together with others from our padkos community. In the coming period we may well return to some of these ideas and facilitate sessions of gardening or mindful yoga; music- or other art-making, and the like. But the real obstacle to that way forward turned out not to be COVID lockdown restrictions – well, not directly anyway. The therapists and healers we spoke and met with, all supported the ideas but they were too stretched by increased demands on their time and capacity, or too exhausted to the point of feeling overwhelmed, to contribute what they would have liked to. For a while we wondered about dropping the whole idea. On the other hand though, these obstacles directly affirmed the need for, and the relevance of, what we were proposing to deal with. So we pressed ahead – and of course we're indebted to a number of people (including from amongst our friendly therapists and healers) who have nonetheless contributed their thinking, resources, perspectives and support through the season.

## what have we done?

And so, on Mental Health Action Day late in May, and at a global time of deep trauma as the COVID pandemic rolled on, we kicked off this series of padkos servings focused on “being and being well [and] oriented to nurture and nourishment; to offering kindness and care; to encouraging resilience, compassion and perhaps hope. ... If padkos is ‘food for the journey’, what does that mean here and now?; what nourishes and sustains us individually and together in this current moment? ... Valuing abundant life, and expanding the practices that do so, marks a complete rupture with the logic of death, with the logics of money and profit, of competition and individualism, of exploitation and domination that otherwise rule our society. And breaking with the logic of death by doing according to the logic of life instead, is how we change the world ... here ... now...”.

In June, padkos zoned in on mental health and wellbeing specifically. To connect this with our previous and ongoing work, we referred to CLP's *In, Against, and Beyond Corona* (published in 2020). There the point was strongly made that we confront “not only intensified rates of suffering and death, but greatly heightened levels of psycho-social anxiety and trauma. ... Some people came into this period of crisis already more predisposed to psychological stress and need special concern and support. Now, many more are also stressed by factors directly associated with the virus and its preventative measures—for instance, livelihood and income scarcity and uncertainty; or interpersonal tensions from being confined together with others in small spaces for long periods; or isolation and disconnection from healthy social interactions that are being disrupted by rules to achieve distancing; or pervasive and generalised underlying sense of loss, grief, trauma and mourning in the awareness of suffering and death caused by the pandemic. All these point to the light and the shadow of our fundamental connectedness across humanity and the world. Some of it will progressively lift as the pandemic recedes and the restrictions can be increasingly relaxed. But some will remain. And some of our awareness, and the caring and nurturing that should flow from it, should certainly remain with us as we move ‘beyond’”.

In the next serving, we got out in the garden, so to speak, “appreciating, and connecting with, the much larger web of natural life that we're part of;... the width and depth of our connectedness with all forms of life in nature, and of the deeply restorative and transformative possibilities it might offer. ...”. We wanted to “re-affirm ways of being in the world that embrace the symbiosis between human and other forms of natural life. So whether it’s taking a mindful walk through a public park, or tending a herb plant or vegetable seedlings on a window-sill, whether you’re taking care of a garden, or noticing the push of green shoots and weeds against urban sterility, or just surrendering to the green peace of a nature reserve, the possibility of connecting to nature can be made real – even though in our country, as elsewhere, access to ‘green space’, as well as the quality of green space most easily available, is unfairly rigged along class and race contours”. Again we referenced our pamphlet ***In, Against, and Beyond Corona*** : “Far too many people live in overly-crowded urban settlements with distressingly too little space for connections with nature – plants, birds, insects, and the like (gardens, allotments, vegetable gardens, common green spaces, wild spaces and so on). The separation of humans from our connectedness with the rest of nature is very damaging to our whole human being.” (And we also recalled that “Not only is the *activity* of gardening good for our mental health, but it is also strikingly clear that so is eating good food and maintaining a healthy gut micro-biome. There is growing evidence that the ‘gut-brain’ axis is crucial in the relationship between our mind and the biome of bacteria in our gut. So nutritional deficiencies impact on our general but also our *mental* health - and the health of the microbiome in our gut impacts out immune system”.)

Then in August, we turned to creative work and what it offers for healing and wholeness. We noted that the “use and effectiveness of creative work and the arts is well established in the practices of mental health and therapy... Creative processes and activities can help us gain more insight into ourselves and also help bolster our capacities to handle life – from simply facing the challenges of ongoing daily life, to healing deeper layers of mental stress and trauma.” We recalled Kristin Ross’ work on the revolutionary Paris Commune and its demand for ‘communal luxury’ - “a demand for something like public beauty - the idea that everyone has the right to live and work in pleasing circumstances, the demand that art and beauty should not be reserved for the enjoyment of the elite, but that they be fully integrated into daily public life. This may seem a merely ‘decorative’ demand on the part of decorative artists and artisans, but it is a demand that in fact calls for nothing short of the total reinvention of what counts as wealth, what a society values. It is a call for the reinvention of wealth beyond exchange-value”. In that edition of padkos we also briefly shared the experiences of two renowned pianists, Christopher Duigan and Rosey Chan, who discovered new and surprisingly-therapeutic ways to connect with audiences after their touring schedules were stopped by COVID.

The penultimate serving focused on mindfulness and meditation. It’s a vast area that we could only begin to explore together in that brief mailing - but experience, and a growing body of data, make clear it’s deeply beneficial for mental, spiritual, and holistic wellbeing. In our exploration together we saw that mindfulness practice unites body, mind, and spirit in the here and now, and can relieve our minds, bringing peace, calm, and clarity. In the traditions we’re focused on here in padkos, this is not done by escaping the realities of this world or the suffering and injustice in it, but being present to them, and by connecting mindfulness with radically-critical engagement in the world. We quoted the globally-renowned Zen-Buddhist, Thich Nhat Hanh, saying: “Meditation’s purpose is to be aware of what is going on in ourselves and in the world. What is going on in the world can be seen within ourselves and vice versa. Once we see this clearly, we cannot refuse to take a position and act”.

## what's in the goodie bag? your attachments this time

In addition to the “edited version of components of wellbeing” mentioned below, we’re also sharing some short extracts from an extraordinary article from the *New Left Review*. It’s based on an interview with Guilherme Boulos, a Brazilian militant with the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto, that articulates a deep connection between psychological wellbeing and radical social transformation. See: [extracts from] “Guilherme Boulos: Struggles of the Roofless - Interview by Mario Sergio Conti”<sup>6</sup>.

Finally, there’s Kristin Neff’s 2021 piece: “Four Ways Self-Compassion Can Help You Fight for Social Justice”. Here Kristin Neff says that “[b]y aiming compassion inward as well as outward, we can better confront the pain of injustice without being overwhelmed, and find the strength and energy to fight for what’s right. ... Self-compassion has three core components—kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness—and the fierce and tender aspect of each has an important role to play in the social justice movement”.

## some thoughts & pointers back to praxis

Neff’s piece is good, but pause for a moment and reflect on the ‘fighting’ language of the title. It flags something we want to emphasize about praxis as we bring this padkos season to a close. The healing work of taking care of the individual should be reflected in the way we think and do the simultaneous work of transforming the world. If modes of thinking and doing that (still) characterise a lot of ‘activism’ cause harm, we should not think about wellness as a patching-up operation to simply repair and return fighters to the fray. We need to refuse activism that is, itself, damaging. It is very clear that that kind of damage is not only to the individual activist but it infects - and is reflected in - the activism itself, ultimately doing more harm in the world too. Sometimes it’s our own pre-existing damage (and we all carry more or less damage) that really drives what we think of as ‘activism’ - folding layers of trauma upon trauma and damage, and then seeing it as an exemplary mode of activism. It’s not. It’s toxic, and invariably, we become the thing we hate. So we continually think self-critically about our praxis and try to align it with the good and the true; we look for alignment and for congruency with all we know about being mindful and well, here and now, and of being present *in* the here and now.

It’s connected with a radical kind of politics of dignity; a kind of peaceable politics and of doing less harm; it’s connected with a certain type and set of ethics and ecology. But it also is about starting to build a praxis of inter-connection and holism and life for all – especially in our current era dominated by western, capitalist, thought and practice (or ways of seeing and doing) that fractures the world into disabling and harmful shards and abstractions from each other and disciplinary and conceptual divides.

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6 We’re so grateful to Richard Pithouse at [New Frame](#) for pointing us to this piece.

### ***A note about being present with no-thing:***

In 2010, we wrote a piece called “Finding Our Voice in the World” where we talked about CLP’s praxis and of

#### **“Having faith in nothing**

What then *is* the work we do in those spaces? As one person put it in a reflection session: ‘We are not the messiahs but what could be CLP’s role?’. For CLP, it’s mainly to be present and to journey with the people and support their struggles. But sometimes it is difficult to know what it really means to ‘support’ when we meet with people and groups who you would think expect more. In a material sense, I/we come with nothing, I/we have nothing. In a way, our political approach in CLP sharpens the question because we do not go in to places of poverty offering a solution and resources that we deliver as a product or a programme.

It was important to reflect carefully on this ‘nothingness’ that we bring as CLP. Even those raising this question mentioned some of the immaterial things we do bring – love, care, energy and ultimately perhaps, a simple commitment to being with the people.

But more than that, we are *there* and we bring ‘nothing’ because we deeply believe that nothing other than the struggles of the people themselves create the possibility for really changing the world – changing it away from what it is, and towards what it should and could be. We have seen and learned enough to know by now that anything else, any promise that some outside power or project will free the people, or will develop the people, or will fundamentally change the world, is a lie. And we know that the effect of that lie is to continuously make the people avoid the terrible but liberatory truth that change, rebellion, transformation is in their hands. In short, we have a theory of change in the world, and we continue to build our confidence in this”

### **post-script: what should we check up on?**

Through the course of this padkos series we’ve looked at some aspects of an integrated and holistic notion of being well. You might feel you want to check in on the different parts of your own life and assess how that’s going – but what aspects of life would you need to take into consideration? We thought it might be helpful to share and summarise a couple of lists from some of the resource people we’ve drawn from over the season.

#### ***1. “Components of well being”***

“[The Greater Good](#)” project, based at University of California (Berkeley, USA) lists the following aspects of social and individual life that all contribute to our well being:

- Altruism
- Awe
- Bridging Differences
- Compassion
- Diversity
- Empathy
- Forgiveness
- Gratitude
- Happiness
- Mindfulness
- Purpose
- Social Connection.

(For a brief explanation about what they understand by each of these areas, please feel free to take a look at the attached “edited version of components of wellbeing”).

## 2. Nicole La Pera - *How to Create Mental Wellness*

'The holistic psychologist', [Nicole La Pera](#), 7 August 2021, in an instagram post that draws from her influential book, *How To Do The Work*, outlines some important areas to pay attention to and create mental wellness:

### 1. *Address nutrition / gut health*

The mind and gut are in constant communication with each other. Our microbiome (collection of bacteria lining our gut) impacts our mood, how we learn, & our memory. 95% of serotonin is made in the gut.

### 2. *Do bloodwork for underlying infections / inflammation / disease*

Many mental health 'disorders' are actually an underlying infection or inflammation in the body. Undiagnosed thyroid conditions can cause panic attacks. Vitamin / omega 3 fatty acid deficiency can cause anxiety, depression, bipolar symptoms, and racing thoughts.

### 3. *Prioritize sleep*

Sleep is key in mental wellness. It's when our bodies regenerate new cells, clean up old cells, and create new neural pathways in the mind. It also impacts our microbiome, which is key in mental health.

### 4. *Practice consciousness*

Learning how to be the witness of your thoughts, life experiences, emotional energy, and daily interactions, allows you to be present / respond in new ways / create new patterns.

### 5. *Practice boundaries*

Practice placing limits on how you spend your time, on what you consume, and who you spend your time around. Without boundaries we can become resentful, irritable and neglect ourselves in the process.

### 6. *Move*

Mind body movement practices like yoga, conscious walking, kickboxing, lifting, sprints etc. are key in mental wellness. Movement doesn't have to be long and stressful - 15 minutes will have benefits.

### 7. *Sunlight, nature and quiet to heal / repair the nervous system*

Our nervous system has not evolved to be chronically stressed / hyper-vigilant / distracted. Long-term nervous system dysregulation causes mental health issues, inability to be emotionally resilient, and 'mood swings'.

### 8. *Understand your childhood trauma and heal dysfunctional relationship patterns.*

Childhood trauma causes: low self worth, false beliefs ("I'm not good enough, something is wrong with me"), and causes us to create the same dysfunctional relationship patterns we witness as children. Becoming aware of these patterns and unlearning them is healing.

### 9. *Create, play, journal, write, authentically express yourself.*

Creativity and authentic self-expression heal us and allow us to learn who we truly are. Most of us have been stripped of these things since childhood [childhood??], so beginning might cause mental resistance / discomfort. Continue to show up and keep promises to yourself. This will restore your self trust and create self worth (La Pera, 2021)<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> In *Additional note to the post* she says that "The mental health system has branded 'disorders' as solely genetic diseases of the brain. This is not the truth of these disorders. The brain-disease model leaves people unaware that the mind + body are connected (most serotonin/neurotransmitters are actually produced in the gut.) It leaves the gut/nutritional deficiencies/inflammation out of the picture, which is really unfortunate because each of these play a key role in mood, how we interact, our memory, + the symptoms that come from them are often misdiagnosed as mental health disorders. Genetics are not fixed. The science of epigenetics shows us that genes are always interacting with the environment. Genes express (or do not express) based on the environment. This means we can be empowered. We can play a key, active role in creating an environment that allows us mind/body health. I believe the mental health treatment of the future will include blood tests, nutritional therapies, childhood trauma healing, + education around nervous system dysregulation (also misdiagnosed as disorders or overlooked in treatment) We are much more powerful, resilient, + able to heal than the story we have been told".