

New Vision at Esalen

Fern Smith

At the beginning of last year, whilst on a month-long 'work/study' visit to Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, I was lucky enough to meet and work with Dr Sam Berne – a craniosacral therapist and optometrist who has some truly inspiring ideas about the way we see ourselves and the world. Being at Esalen for a whole month gave me the opportunity to work with a number of its visiting teachers; and being there at the same time as Dr Berne was one of those wonderful pieces of serendipity which happen at times when we are open and available to what is present in the field. I was at the beginning of a year-long sabbatical from my theatre work to pursue a Clore Leadership Fellowship in the Arts. One of my main reasons for doing the fellowship was to find ways to integrate my creative and therapeutic interests and practices. Having run a theatre company for over twenty years and qualifying as a craniosacral therapist four years ago, I am increasingly interested in finding ways to bring the two worlds of the arts and healing together.

I became interested in the concept of leadership, not because I was interested in leading others but because what was of greater interest to me was the idea of 'leading myself'. How could I even think about leading others if I was unable to do this? How could I even be an effective craniosacral therapist? My exploration of craniosacral therapy, initially as a client and then as a qualified professional running a small practice of my own, has all been part of this journey. I feel now that what leadership and craniosacral therapy have in common is that they are both about taking one's place in the world before we die; ultimately about being born, which I believe to be a continuing process rather than a one-off incident in one's life. Leadership and craniosacral therapy are also concerned with becoming aware of, not being limited by, and perhaps even resolving, inertial fulcra and patterns. Those who make the best leaders are those who are truly 'themselves' and are characterised by presence, integrity and charisma. Simply put, true leaders are embodied. Finally, neither craniosacral therapy nor leadership can operate in a vacuum – by definition, a relationship is vital for either process to function.

The Clore Leadership Fellowship has given me the opportunity to further my exploration and was the inspiration behind my month-long trip to Esalen. Established in the 1960's as the birthplace of the human potential movement in America, Esalen was originally associated with such radical thinkers as Abraham Maslow, Aldous Huxley and Fritz Perls. It is a place of true body-mind integration, having developed its own world-famous training in massage and bodywork many years ago and still employing a large team of therapists and healers, which includes craniosacral therapists.

Esalen has always been associated with the cutting edge of research and practice in the integration of creativity, bodywork and the art of living. Dr Sam Berne is one of those teachers who make Esalen still worth visiting after almost fifty years. His work, both as an optometrist and craniosacral therapist, not only has deep implications for the way we see and relate to the world as individuals, but it also has much to say about how the myopia of our global vision affects how we respond to one another, as well as how we interact with the planet itself.

As part of my craniosacral studies, I was continually exposed to images of, and attempted to orient to, the central nervous system. However, despite the best efforts of my wonderful teachers, I still had quite a segmented and mechanistic impression of the brain – the idea that the optic nerves are extensions of the brain and made up of brain tissue did not fully 'land' in my consciousness until I worked experientially with my own eyes and vision with Sam Berne at Esalen.



Dr Sam Berne

The eyes as a portal for balancing our physical and spiritual health

After his studies in optometry school, Dr Berne had an awakening in his late 20's when he had vision therapy which completely reversed his own short-sightedness. It was during this process that he realised that vision is a mind-body experience, whereas conventional eye care only focuses on physical symptoms and treats the eye as separate from the body. His own experience led him to develop his work in this field, later training as a craniosacral therapist to support his explorations.

He says that he allows his vision therapy to evolve 'to help people self-discover that vision is more than an eyeball process. Learning to use our eyes to put more attention on ourselves, and less on the object we are looking at, enables our vision to relax so we can see with an integrated brain and respond to life in a more balanced and harmonious way.'

In January 2010 I attended Dr Berne's vision therapy retreat at Esalen. The workshop allowed participants to:

- discover how movement, breath and sound can enhance brain integration, learning and vision
- balance the masculine-feminine dynamic through dialogue, using therapeutic lenses, prisms, and an eye patch
- experience light/colour therapy to improve peripheral vision and body energy patterns
- see their individual energy fields and chakras through electrophotonic imaging – a Russian camera and software system that measures the photon emissions from fingertips to reveal the body's energy fields. (*Editor's note: this is a development of Kirlian photography discovered by the professors Kirlian in Russia in 1939 and used extensively since.*) This electrophotonic capture (EPC) camera allowed participants to work with their chakra and body-energy field measurements.

The workshop gave me space to think about my own vision and how the lens through which I view the world (both literally and emotionally) affects all of my day-to-day interactions. As a young teenager I had been diagnosed as short-sighted and was given stronger and stronger prescriptions as my eyes got weaker and weaker. As Dr Berne says, just as with the allopathic medical model, traditional optometrists' wisdom finds a weakness (often initiated by trauma), fixes it in time, and then supports and nurtures that weakness (the trauma is trapped in the system). Predictably the system cannot then find ways to heal itself and the system (or the optometrist) finds it necessary to have (or prescribe) stronger and stronger 'supports' or lenses. In my case after over thirty years of supporting my weakness, my prescription at age 46 was minus 5.25 in the left eye and minus 5 in the right.

During the course of the workshop Sam encouraged us to consider how our glasses or contact lenses were not only supporting us but

shaping us and our interactions. He invited us to remove our glasses and 'make friends with the blur'. I found this not only slowed me down but connected me to my body rather than my head, made me less critical of others (and myself) and also necessitated getting closer to people (in order to see them!) There was more of a possibility of accessing and strengthening peripheral vision but also an instinctual vision or intelligence. I found myself increasingly experimenting with 'glasses-off time', walking in the dark and the rain, honing my senses in other ways and simply allowing myself to be in this fuzzy place with less sharp, delineated edges – more in the unknown. This was easy at times, challenging at others, although of course I did not dispense with my glasses completely.

I see this personal research into vision as complementary to and supporting my continuing personal craniosacral therapy, conscious embodiment and birth process work. Being 'in the blur' feels like going into unknown (often felt as pre-birth) territory, leaving familiar conditioned responses and patterns behind. The irony that I was diligently working with my own craniosacral therapist as well as being a therapist myself – supporting clients to work holistically, whilst simultaneously swallowing hook, line and sinker the medical model in terms of my vision – was not lost on me. The idea that one can work with one's vision and enter into a dialogue with it in order to create new possibilities and support neural plasticity seemed, all of a sudden, to make complete sense. By working with my eyes I could work directly with fixed brain patterning. This is important work that I believe craniosacral therapists should be aware of.

In addition to the workshop, I and a number of others were lucky enough to have a free consultation with Sam. This gave me a real and direct felt experience of how our sight holds us in a particular, fixed relationship to the world. I was given a number of different lenses to experiment with which had dramatic effects on my body and body awareness – bringing me into my (absent) left side; decompressing my cervical spine; bringing me more to inhabit the front of my body rather than supporting my usual back of the heels, blocking, hesitant, guarded stance. He also asked how my sense of my emotional self changed with these different lenses, and each time the difference was a revelation. After this work I committed myself to experimenting with my vision, having more 'glasses-off time', putting my contact lenses in a drawer (I haven't worn them since last January) and opting for

Berne ...
had vision
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During the workshop ... [we found how] our glasses or contact lenses were not only supporting us but shaping us and our interactions

a softer prescription (now minus 4 for *both* eyes). Whilst at Esalen I met people who had been working with him over a number of years to slowly reduce their prescription strength, people whose chronic headaches disappeared as they began to experiment with weaker lenses and many who were finding new aspects of themselves awakening as they 'made friends with the blur'.

'When your vision is relaxed, you see with an integrated brain and respond to life in a balanced and harmonious way.'

Dr Sam Berne's website, 2010

How can we measure the results objectively?

As someone committed to working with people to create effective and long-lasting, emotional and physical healing in their own lives, Dr Sam Berne is also interested in finding effective, objective and persuasive means to show that such work has a direct and measurable positive effect on the body. Subjectively reporting a sense of well-being and improvement is insufficient evidence for many people in the medical and scientific community, as well as for some clients. In addition clients often feel empowered by a growing knowledge that they are capable of self-healing given the right relationship and non-intrusive intervention such as with CST. However, if we could prove objectively that CST is effective then perhaps we could see a future where, funds permitting, it is available on the National Health Service.

[Enter stage left the electrophotonic imaging camera ...]

In 2009 Dr Berne met Dr Konstantin Korotkov, a biophysicist from Russia who developed a camera that, together with computer software, can measure energy fields and chakras. The process is called electrophotonic imaging. Dr Korotkov's scientific instrument interfaces with science and medicine, because the results from the electrophotonic capture (EPC) camera are repeatable, reproducible, and quantifiable.

The way it works is that the subject places their fingertips one at a time into the special camera box. (The fingers are the termination points of the main meridians of the body.) The camera captures the emitted light

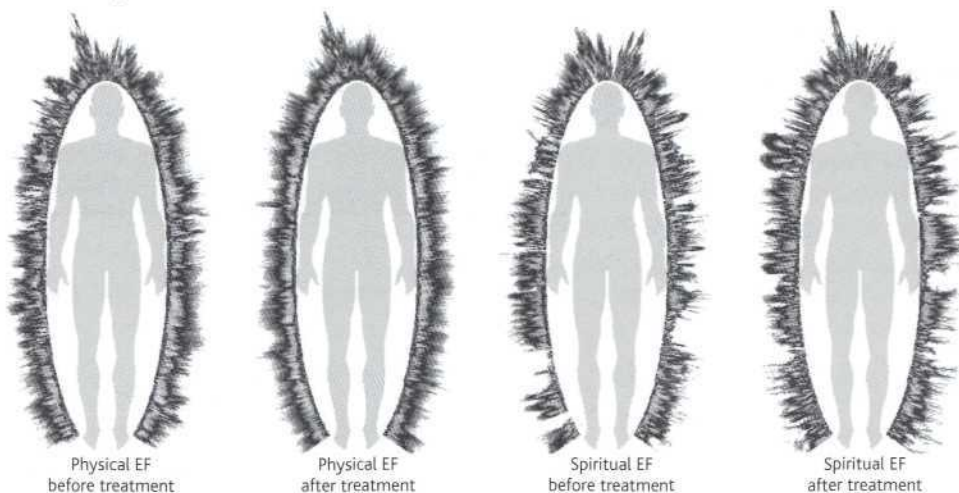
from each finger, and those images are analysed with a sophisticated mathematical tool known as fractal dimensionality. Data measurements of the person's chakra energy patterns and glands/organs energy patterns are collected and then displayed as fields in and around an image of the human figure.

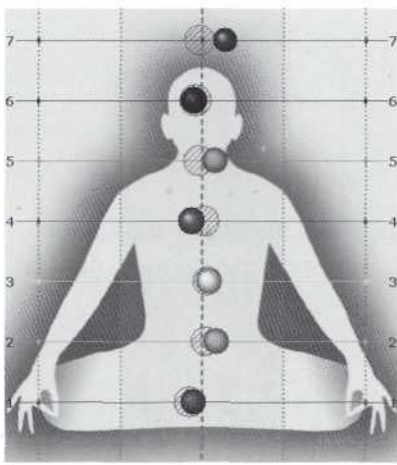
By measuring the energy fields, electrophotonic imaging can analyse in great detail chronic and systemic physical problems, as well as psychological and mental problems. Examination of the energy fields may allow patients to learn if some of their patterns hint at possible physical problems later.

Craniosacral therapy pilot study

In addition to the vision therapy retreat at Esalen, Dr Berne organised a small pilot study into the efficacy of craniosacral therapy, comparing the results of the EPC imaging before and after a CST session to see what measurable changes occurred.

Dr Berne and I worked with three clients. None of the clients had previously had CST and all reported feeling a deep sense of relaxation, alignment and integration after the hands-on treatment. The images and measurements taken by electrophotonic capture all showed significant improvements in the integrity of the energy fields and the balance of the chakra system – even after just one short CST session. Electrophotonic images for one of the clients, 'Adam', can be seen below. These show in detail the 'before' and 'after' imprint of Adam's energy field (EF) and chakra system. Note the change in size and alignment of the chakras and the more complete energetic imprint (with fewer spikes and indentations) after the session.



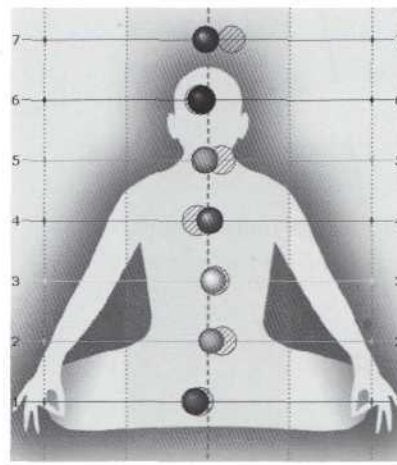


Chakras before treatment

As a craniosacral therapist I am convinced of the depth, subtlety, creativity and effectiveness of this work. However, I found it very affirming to see a 'before' and

'after' image and the read-out of the person whose system I have just been working with. The clients in this small study were all relatively sympathetic to this type of work – they would not be at Esalen otherwise – but actually seeing the improvement that they felt as a client, and that I palpated as a therapist, was extremely powerful. I had not come across this technology before but wondered whether, if it were more widely available, we could use it to make the efficacy of craniosacral therapy and related modalities more widely known and accepted.

In conclusion: I am drawing towards the final part of my fellowship and still working with my own vision, my own clients and my own therapist. It is still my goal to 'find my place in the world' and, as with all good journeys, there are many guides and inspiring people along the way. In more ways than one this does seem to be the ultimate 'vision quest'. I am reminded that we have the possibility of being born each day if we stay present with our own process. I believe that we lead others by leading ourselves and



Chakras after treatment

leadership is only the fulfilment of our own potential and ultimately a return to our original blueprint of emotional and physical health.

About Dr Sam Berne

Dr Sam Berne, OD, is certified in behavioral optometry and craniosacral therapy and is a Fellow in light therapy at The College of Syntonic Optometry. He has written three books and produced a DVD on holistic health, autism, and vision therapy. He is an adjunct faculty member at Santa Fe Community College, where he teaches courses on child development and learning, and at The Esalen Institute.

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