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# Buddhism and Psychotherapy

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## Preface

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What follows is a lightly edited transcript of a talk/workshop with James Low. It arose from a meeting of people interested in, or practicing the teachings of buddhism, many of whom also had an interest in, or were working within the psychotherapeutic field.

## Excerpts

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*Saraha said in the winter water turns to ice and then in the summer the water from the pond evaporates and goes away. What is the real water? Sometimes our mind freezes like ice; we become very sharp, we become very definite; we can't move. Sometimes we are relaxed and flowing, like water, able to adapt into any shape that is around. Other times we get a bit spaced out. We are all of these three possibilities. It is important to become like ice, to take on a definite shape. It is important to become like steam, just to be very, very open and defuse. And it is important to flow. The problem is if we do them at the wrong time, if we are out of balance with the environment. So, it's about developing the freedom to move through the various possibilities of our existence in relation to the experiential field as it arises...*

*... Nothing lasts forever. When the spring is there, the flowers will come out; when autumn comes, the flowers die, then in winter we don't have flowers. When I began work as a therapist, I didn't know so much; everything was summer time. Now, I know a lot more, but it's winter time. That's life. So many of the things I could do, I now can't do. This is very important. It is about how we take our place in the world, according to the season. When winter comes and we shrink, we can learn a lot from that. If we are lucky, if we are healthy, our lives are advancing. However our patients' lives are shrinking, so when we know directly a lot about shrinking, on all levels, then we have a more nuanced conversation.*

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## Overview of some background ideas in psychotherapy

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One of the basic principles of psychoanalysis is that each case should be approached on its own terms. If the analyst is experienced then they have a kind of wisdom, the wisdom that will allow them to be more relaxed in *not knowing* what is happening. It is what the English poet, John Keats, described as **negative capability**. For a poet, that meant to be in the situation and not to know what is going on. To allow yourself to open, and open to things that are unclear to you, with the belief that from that darkness gradually a dawn will arise. That is one of the fruits of attending to the unconscious. And so, in that path of therapy, humility is an important support for wisdom.

### Being an expert. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy.

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There are other forms of psychotherapy that are very much concerned with being an expert, for example, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), which is very popular nowadays. As a model, it has now become very complicated, but the basis, established by Aaron Beck some thirty years ago, is that one can understand the basic principles about how symptoms come into existence.

For example, we can know what depression is. Depression is the product of the interaction of certain factors: of 'central beliefs' that generate patterns of thought, which regulate or don't regulate feelings, which then lead to particular kinds of behaviour. The belief brings with it a selective attention, so that when you look at your behaviour, you turn the interpretation of the behaviour into a way of supporting the belief. Thus, you have a circular movement.

The therapist can then become the expert and know what kind of beliefs will generate the experience of depression. This enables the therapist to say to the patient, *'Don't worry, I know what the problem is. This is how it is. Just do what I say and you will get better. The road to freedom lies through compliance.'*

Indeed, there is some evidence that this works, because human beings are very adaptable. All over the world, we find human beings doing many stupid things because it seems a good idea. So there are people in the Amazon rain forest chopping down the trees in order to grow soya beans, in order to feed the cattle that will be exported to America for MacDonal'd's. It seems that is a very useful thing to do and it all makes sense. The belief is, *'I want to make some money.'* The perception is, *'There is a big forest, with a few people running around inside it. I can shoot these people because I have a gun and they only have a bow and arrow. Then I can chop down their trees and plant my field. Then I make money. Then I'm happy.'* This kind of cycling is how we behave.

CBT is working with a similar kind of analysis. It is just helping people to move from what are called **maladaptive patterns** to **adaptive patterns**. Adaptive patterns are efficient patterns, which is to say they are efficient with the zeitgeist of the time.

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CBT starts with the assumption that we generate beliefs which may indeed have been efficient at some time. Generally, in that model you don't look at the past too much. You think the belief that you hold is now inharmonious, is dystonic, with your lived situation. If it can replace a belief that doesn't help you to function well, with a belief that will help you to function well, then you will function well. Then you will be happy. It is as if an electrician comes to the house and says, *'The reason your electric bulb keeps popping is because you have the wrong kind of fuse. You just put in a stronger fuse and then it will be better.'*

It is a very materialistic view, a very rational view. It posits that thinking is inherently more powerful than feeling. Therefore, in order to find freedom you have to strengthen your power to think, so that you can manage impulsivity and emotion in feelings in a better way.

Cognitive behavioural therapy is now much more popular and politically much more powerful than psychoanalysis. On one hand we can say this is due to the hard scientific evidence that CBT is really effective in treating many conditions, particularly depression, anxiety states, panic attacks and so on. This is the narrative of those who believe in CBT.

On the other hand, we could say there is something more to do with the zeitgeist. For example, in the Middle Ages in Britain and probably in Poland as well, water was very bad so most people drank beer. There were different levels of beer made from the different washes of the grain, so the last washing of the mash was called 'small beer' and was drunk by young children as well, since it was not very alcoholic. There are beautiful paintings where you can see peasants out in the field having lunch, and out will come somebody bringing a pot of wine, or some beer. The peasants would have their meat and bread and drink a little alcohol, then lie under a tree and have a sleep.

#### Efficiency and economics: health insurance companies as agents

With the start of the capitalist revolution, with industrialisation, you started to have factory systems, for example large weaving machines, which were one of the first things to be really mechanised. If you were a bit drunk, they were very dangerous. They were very dangerous anyway, many people were killed by them, but if you were drunk, it was much more dangerous. And the machines were expensive and every time you stopped running them, they took a time to start. So from the boss's point of view you want to keep them running as long as possible. People were working fourteen-hour shifts on weaving machines, in 1720 in England. And that was the time that the price of tea came down, so the workers were given tea and not alcohol. Tea helps efficient workers; the caffeine wakes them up and helps them work longer. It was not that the employers were enlightened and compassionate, worried about sclerosis of the liver in their workers.

In the same way in America in the 1970's and 1980's, the health bill for people wanting psychological treatment started to increase. Psychological treatments were becoming more popular and were moving out from the white upper-middle-classes to become more generally popular in the culture. This was also an impact of the Vietnam War, since many veterans required psychotherapy. However, to offer a psychoanalytic treatment at three times a week at least, maybe for two or three years, was very expensive on a health insurance policy.

Therefore, insurance companies became very interested in brief structured therapies. This led to funding of research, particularly the infant cognitive behavioural therapy, which is a brief problem-solving intervention. There was a gradual shift in the popularity of treatment options so that after some years, when people were referred because they had depression, they were advised, *'CBT is the best thing for you, and there is evidence to prove it.'* The insurance

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company that was paying for the treatment was very happy because it didn't cost very much money. The patient was also happy because he thought, *'I'm getting the best possible treatment.'*

This is another form of what Karl Marx calls **mystification**, or **false consciousness**, in which the ordinary worker in the factory can't understand why, although they produce things, the boss, who does not actually produce anything, makes so much more money than them. The worker's attention is directed towards his own production targets. He or she is not likely to read the annual report of the company. Not understanding the nature of capital accumulation, and not being a share-holder, they have no awareness of, and no entitlement to, the excess profit their work generates. So it remains a mystery why the bosses get richer. The worker produces objects for the market but does not own the means of production, and so is excluded from his share of the excess profit.

In the same way, when we go to the doctor and he prescribes some medicine for us, we often don't remember that a big international drug companies often have very aggressive politics. They make very punitive attacks on anyone who undermines them, and sell very aggressively to doctors, offering them all kinds of special benefits. We think, *'Oh, my doctor is giving me the best kind of medicine.'* This is the problem of faith and trust. Trust makes us feel warm and safe, *'Some big person is going to make my world nice. I trust my doctor.'* However, the doctor might also want to retire with a little bit of extra money in his pocket...

### Psychotherapy includes complex theoretical systems as well as simple task-based systems

In the general field of psychotherapy, you have systems of profound enquiry often leading to great confusion and complexity. You also have systems of simplicity; of obeying clear instructions, doing a lot of homework tasks, and clarifying your mind according to principles that are presented to you. We can unpack these in the many different schools of therapy and look at how meditation and can address some of these issues.

### Systems which are based on an ideology: a system of representation

The central question, however, is the relation between experience and representation. By representation I mean that an idea is set up, a concept is set up, and the concept is seen as expressing truth. One such is healthy **adaptive functioning**, which would be a goal of many kinds of brief-focussed psychotherapy. So, we might have a question, *'Do we ourselves have healthy functioning? Are we creatively adapted to our culture?'* What would that mean? We may have a certain critique of our culture, and we might even feel that part of our mental health is exactly that resistance to adapting to our culture.

So, with a system of representations, concepts are interacting with each other. The concept or the belief is seen as primary, or as the building block on which the whole edifice is built. Essentially, this is an ideological system. Moreover, ideological systems are based on an *idea* which one can believe in. The more you believe in it and use it in your life, the more shiny and precious it becomes. That is to say, we believe in something that has come to us from somewhere else.

For example, someone might believe that Jesus Christ has died for their sins and is their path to salvation. However, if they are living in Warsaw now, they won't have met Jesus Christ. Maybe they are very mystical and have had a direct vision, but that is very rare. Generally speaking, somebody has told them that there is this person called Jesus Christ, and that Jesus Christ did these things for them. You think, *'Hey, that sounds pretty good, I'll do that.'* By

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following that system there are all kinds of benefits; you have a sense of certainty in life, you have rituals, and you have a sense of community and so on. The belief then becomes the basis for generating certain kinds of experience.

In the same way, you can believe in the Buddha. You won't actually meet the Buddha; he has been dead for quite a long time, but you meet people who tell you about the Buddha and you think that sounds pretty cool. Then on the basis of that belief, you develop certain behaviours. Those behaviours generate experiences, and these experiences then convince you of the correctness of your belief.

Cognitive behavioural therapy works in a similar way for its practitioners. Most therapists, certainly in Britain who practice CBT have never had it for themselves, but they believe in it because it works for others. So they are like the catholic priest who has no faith for himself, but thinks, *'Anyway, these people believe in Jesus, so I am happy to introduce them to each other.'*

### Systems which are based on experience

On the other hand, and this is of course rather a crude polarisation, you have systems which begin with experience. In order to have the experience, a method of some kind will have to be used; but usually there will not be the explicit selling of a belief before then. When you develop a belief, the belief then provides an orientation for your mind. You will know what you want to see, and so you will start to see what you want to see. As human beings, we are very good at suspending disbelief. That is to say, that when we look at the television, or the theatre, we fall into what we see. We allow ourselves to take an illusion to be something real and having made that leap of faith, we do not examine it further. And so what we experience as a given.

Lacan, one of the great defenders of a pure Freudian view, said that the desire of the analysand is to be the object of desire of the analyst. Therefore, if the therapist/analyst shows their desire, the patient will want to fulfil that. For many years, I have run small retreats near Cologne in Germany, and in the afternoon in these retreats, we had small interviews where people could come for twenty minutes and talk with me about their meditation practice and so on. Because the retreat would start early in the morning and finish late at night, it was a very busy day for me and I had no gaps at all. This autumn when we were having the retreat, I was quite sick. I had a very bad cold. So, I decided not to do the interviews in the afternoon in order to have some rest. One of the people who comes very regularly to the retreats said, *'Oh, it is very nice that we don't have these interviews because I always used to wonder what I would talk to James about, what will I ask him about?'* So I think I'm doing something for them, and they think they are doing something for me! *[Laughter]* These things happen all the time.

When I was doing my psychoanalytic training, I saw one patient very regularly for many, many years. At the heart of the treatment were many different dreams that this patient had, very complicated detailed dreams. This person's life was very restricted in many ways. However, he had resolution to some issues; he became more relaxed and the analysis ended. I gave my report and got my little diploma. Then he phoned me a few years later at the hospital and came in because some other problems had arisen. I asked him about his dreams and he said, *'Oh, I don't dream any more. I was only dreaming for you. I didn't dream before the analysis, I didn't dream after the analysis.'* *[Laughter]* This is why we have to be very suspicious about helping people. As human beings, when we are shown a method, being so anxious inside and so adaptable, we are likely to fit in to that place in order to get a pat on the head, *'Good boy, good patient.'*

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OK, maybe now we will take a break here and get some fresh air. Then, when we come back, let's see if you have any questions or any particular ideas about how you would like to use the time, because there are many, many different things we can explore.

[Break]

## Questions

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So, what we've done so far is just a kind of overview of some of the background ideas in psychotherapy. We have this time available, I'm not sure what you would like, so maybe if you can tell me a little bit more what some of your desires are, I can see if we can meet them. Because we can look at the philosophy of therapy, we can look at the methods of therapy, we can look at buddhist philosophy we can look buddhist methods. I don't mind. I'm just here. I have a certain amount of time and I'm happy to talk about all or any of these things. So what is your desire?

**Question:** I am interested in the connection between CBT and buddhism because I have been in CBT therapy for a number of years and I have also been practicing in a Bon group and I have a feeling that, these two are somehow similar.

**James:** OK, we can look at that.

**Question:** I am interested in the question of how to deal with the problems that arise through questioning beliefs and dogmas. The 'glue' that you mentioned at the beginning is becoming more and more realised and so the actual functioning becomes more difficult instead of becoming easier.

**Question:** When we come back from a retreat how do we integrate in society again, without becoming immersed in it?

**Question:** By studying and searching one gets a lot of experiences and encounters a number of different methods, and this whole knowledge begins to fill one to bursting point. Then the desire arises to somehow share it with the society around us, but they are not necessarily very receptive. Would you offer some kind of advice how to do this?

**Question:** During the break when we were talking you said that each school of psychotherapy has its own paradigm, sees the world in its own terms. How do we deal with this variety of schools? Should one try to synthesise, or try to create something of one's own, or move from this school to another? What would you say?

**Question:** Is it advisable to try to use buddhist techniques or methods while helping people who are not necessarily connected to buddhist ideas?

**James:** Well maybe this is enough questions for now because these all come together in some kind of way. I will take some more questions later.

## Buddhist overview

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Approach the world with openness: don't use knowledge as a weapon

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In the Buddhist tradition it is said that the Buddha taught eighty-four-thousand different dharmas, or ways, because there are many, many, different kinds of people. Maybe this is one of the goals that we could set ourselves as therapists (and as people); to develop enough skill so that we create ourselves in a new fresh way with each situation we meet. Myself, for example, if I was to come up with a fixed syllabus to teach everywhere I go, I could have some lecture notes and just read these out. It might be a little bit boring for everyone, but it's also easier. Actually, when I come into a place, I like to look around the building, look at the people a bit, and then something will come to that particular situation.

Because from the buddhist point of view, we should approach the world with a sense of openness to what is there, not using knowledge as a defence or a weapon, but having it to hand; having it available so that it can be utilised according to the situation.

So the organising principle here is composed of several elements: one is an **empathic attunement**, an opening to **the felt resonance of the other's embodied experience**. On the basis of this, one can start to get an understanding of the person's present capacity and the limitations, or conditionings, or sabotages with which they restrict themselves. Then of course, what we try to offer the person, whether it is towards a friend, towards students, or towards patients, is an experience that is different. We do that on various levels. We can do it through how we exist in ourselves and the key element of that is not to be defended against the other; not to see the other as the enemy, while also accepting that other people can be dangerous. This is not about being naïve. Working in a hospital, I see people who are very disturbed, very unhappy and often very angry, very aggressive, very political in their mind, and very determined to get what they want. So a question can be, *'Well, how can I be open, without being defended, yet still be protected?'*

In the buddhist tradition according to Tibet, there are many different levels, corresponding to our own capacity. In each level the techniques or methods that we might apply, stand in relationship to us, in terms of our embodiment of a particular understanding.

#### Protection when we see the world as a dangerous place: hinayana

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So on the first level; we encounter the world as a dangerous place. It's as if the world is one electrical wire; we are another electrical wire, and if these two wires come together – 'Sshhh'. You get the spark, the current starts and all sorts of things come into play. Now in the environment that we live in there are many triggers which upset us, or make us happy. We may experience ourselves as a kind of puppet just reacting to whatever is around in the world. In order to protect oneself and gain a degree of calm, one should disconnect the wires, avoid stimulating circumstances, and try to attend to the hooks in your own mind which go out to connect into the world.

Part of this, through mindfulness practice, is to recognise that moment-by-moment different sort of experiences are arising for us. So, we have mindfulness of the body, whereby we attend to the fluctuation of sensation, and the change of concepts that arise in relation to these sensations. We observe how once a concept starts to sit on a sensation, the concept will hook in other concepts and we start to build up a picture. You can see that with small children. You may need to go out to the shops but they don't want to go with you. And we say, *'Well, we have to go because we need to buy some food for tonight.'* and they reply, *'Well, I don't want to go, I want to stay here.'* We then say, *'You are too small to stay here on your own. You will have to come with me.'* Then you can see a lot of trouble is coming, so the quick way is to just use the magic word, 'chocolate'! Once the concept of chocolate is introduced, the child's resistance is gone. It suddenly falls away and suddenly they are very keen to go to the shops.



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## We bind our concepts into a story which psychotherapy puts into question

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It is more difficult for us as adults because we bind our concepts together much more quickly and in a more intense way. It can be more difficult to interrupt a friend who is getting a bit collapsed, since they are more able to seal themselves in their state. However, we can very easily recognise that sensations in our body are impermanent, that they arise and pass all the time. However, once a concept is applied to it, because concepts are both momentary, and yet somehow abstractions, the abstraction seems to exist longer in time than its actual momentary manifestation. Again, you can see this with small children – they fall over and they are crying and then their mother says, *'Oh, come here.'* and they kiss it better and then the little child is running off again. But if that kiss didn't happen then the child would start to weave a story around it, *'I'm really hurt, this is horrible.'* They would make more and more noise and become ever more disturbed because their concept of pain, and the actuality of pain are turning around. At a certain point, the child probably is not feeling very much pain but is convinced that they are feeling a lot of pain. They have created a fantasy pain.

So what we see there is how impermanent momentary experiences can be woven into a story which seems to exist through time. It then organises future sensation as a proof of the story that has been developed.

So a lot of the work that we would do in psychotherapy would be about putting into question the content of experience. We might have a sort of phenomenological interest, and ask *'Can you describe precisely what is happening for you now?'* Alternatively we might be interested developmentally, *'Can you remember the first time you have had this kind of experience?'* This kind of questioning can be very helpful, however it can be tricky taking the person's attention towards what has happened for them in a way which increases their perspective and clarity, without winding them back into the feeling tone of the experience.

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## Empathic attunement

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For example, one of the things about empathic attunement is that it can make us feel understood. This applies to friends, to patients, and of course to our own mind – because there is not very much difference, as long as we are in a dualistic world, between our relationship with our mind and our relationship with others. If somebody tells you about an event, maybe a painful event, you can respond, *'Oh, that sounds very painful. How did that happen? How do you feel?'* The quality of your gaze, the tone of your voice, the way your body moves as a gesture towards the person can be supporting their sense of the importance of what has happened to them, of the reality of it. So the patient, while feeling understood, is actually being immersed in the experience more. The empathic attunement is serving to validate it for them.

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## Psychotherapy: you get free by going through it

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Now in western psychotherapy there was an idea that it is only by being able to fully encounter your experience that you go through the experience and come out the other side with more spaciousness in relation to it. The idea is that you become freed *from it* by going *through it*. However, buddhism would have a very different view.

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## Buddhism: you get free by being less attached

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Very often if somebody goes to see a Tibetan *lama* and says, *'Oh, I am having this problem.'* and they start to tell it in some detail, the lama would say, *'Oh these things happen, why are you*

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telling me all this stuff? You know this is samsara – life is shit – what do you expect.’ That is very important because from their point of view, they would see empathic attunement as feeding attachment. That is to say, if you want to free yourself from something, the first thing you have to do is become less fascinated by it; realise the most interesting thing about you is *not* your pathology. That was the view taken up by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg in developing solution-focused therapy.

**Question:** I want to get this clear: the way I see it now after what you have said about empathy, be it with your friend or your patient, is it seems that empathy is a negative aspect. It sounds as if it imprisons the other person within their experience.

**James:** Potentially, yes. The point of view of buddhism is that all experience is impermanent; we live in this constant flow of things arising and passing away. We can't hold onto a moment; it inevitably moves into the past. So life is a bit like a dream. We have these experiences which *are* there, and yet they are fundamentally ungraspable. We live in states of anxious preoccupation since the root of our suffering is our tendency to try to grasp and to hang onto things that have already gone.

Sometimes our anxiety is about the past, something that happened to us which we cannot let go of. We feel that this event which was perhaps was terrible, but certainly has gone – is continuing to determine who we are. Sometimes our anxiety is about the future; we might be pre-occupied with something that has not yet happened. Some people are preoccupied with their own death; some people are preoccupied with worrying about their children.

#### Mindfulness meditation relaxes our tendency to grasp

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So from the point of view of mindfulness what one is concerned with is to try to relax the kind of tendrils. Like an octopus which has these little limbs that go out with little suckers on them, so we cling onto our experience. We are just trying to pull these back and wrap them around ourselves.

The method is very simple and very difficult. It is very simple because there is nothing much to do and very difficult because there is nothing much to do. Mindfulness is a radical reframe. It says, *'All that is fascinating in your life is now not interesting. We are going to take something which is completely uninteresting and we are going to make it the most interesting thing in the world.'* But having it as an interesting thing doesn't mean developing thoughts about it; it just means paying attention to it. So we are going to replace the idea, *'I want an interesting life, so I am going to make sure something is always happening.'* to, *'I want a calm life, so therefore I am going to avoid everything that is interesting.'* That is very radical. So, we could try some of this practice just now. It is very simple to do.

We just sit in a comfortable way. The traditional instruction is to settle your skeleton so that your bone structure is carrying your weight to diminish the amount of pain that arises in the body. This is not because we want to protect it from pain but because pain will be more interesting than what you are going to be looking at. We do the practice with the head tilted slightly forward; the tongue is turned around so that the tip of it is touching the hard palette just behind the upper teeth. We take a simple focus of attention. This can either be the flow of the breath as it goes in and out of your nostrils, or a visual object. Then you just make a clear decision, *'This is my object of attention, I am going to keep my attention on this and therefore everything else which can occur is now in the category of distraction. No matter how interesting or important any of the ideas or sensations might be in another context, in this context they are only distractions, and so as soon as I recognise that I am being caught up in them I will just let them go*

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and gently bring my attention back to the chosen focus.' OK so we can try this for about ten minutes or so.

[Mindfulness meditation practice]

### Being fully present (Buddhism) cf. Transference and counter-transference (Freud)

From the point of view of the Buddha's teaching, the only thing that is reliable is our presence in the moment as it occurs – all the rest is just a realm of ideas and concepts. I can tell you about my childhood, I can tell you about events in my childhood, and as I am telling you, I will be smiling because they are very happy for me. I can tell you about events that were very sad and shameful, then I will look very pulled in on myself, and the blood will go out of my face. With these experiences, it is like a theatre, because the actual events have gone. I cannot go back to a beautiful sunny beach when I am five years of age running with my little legs going round and round. I can go to it in my mind, but I can't go to that place. So, the memory feels real but it's fundamentally and structurally an illusion.

It is because of our preoccupation with thoughts about the future and thoughts about the past that we have very little mental presence; very little ability to be fully embodied, here and now, in this moment, with the people whom we are with. The notion that Freud developed of transference and counter-transference exactly speaks to this. Namely, that we encounter the world through the projections and fantasies we put onto it, so that we very rarely encounter the world and ourselves in a naked fresh way. We are wrapped up in our assumptions and preoccupations.

Now in some ways all the different systems of psychotherapy are also speaking to this issue. In cognitive behavioural therapy, they would talk about how a *schema* develops, and on the basis of that, you see the schema rather than seeing yourself. You don't see the situation. Gestalt therapy would talk of the interruptions to contact, the ways in which habits and patterns, built up in the past, stop us being here in contact with another person. All the therapies have interesting things to say about this, but the big difference between a buddhist view and these therapy views is the radical investigation into the momentary nature of the self. So it's not just that, 'Well, if I stop being so focused on the past and the future I will be more present here and I will then have a more concrete sense of myself.' but by being fully present, the very assumptions out of which I create my ordinary sense of self will start to dissolve away. And so it would become possible to awaken from the dream of a permanent, fixed self.

Freud said, that one of the purposes of therapy was to help people work and to love, and that part of the method of this is to transform neurotic suffering into ordinary unhappiness. Again, on one level, all therapies do this.

From the buddhist point of view, what *therapies* would do is transform a nightmare into a dream – however you are still asleep.

### Buddhist mindfulness radically questions the basis of our existence

The function of the Buddha dharma is to help people awaken. The world as experienced as awake is very different from the world experienced asleep. When we practice mindfulness as a technique for helping patients in psychotherapy, we are using it to give them a sort of relief, or holiday, from the encapsulation in habitual negative thoughts. However the buddhist practice of mindfulness, is designed to radically question the assumptions we have about the very basis of our own existence. In this way, the attachment to the sense of self as something substantial

and reliable through time, will be dropped. One will then awaken to the lived experience of oneself as an open presence of awareness, encountering the world, the lived environment, and oneself, in the movement of their constant dance.

One is not starting from *inside* oneself, *moving out* towards the world, but one is aware of oneself as part of the world – and that who ‘I am’ is also ‘you’. This is the very nature of our existence. So, if you smile, I will smile. I don’t have to decide to smile; it’s the energetic connection between us that brings the smile rising through. This is a very, very, different view from the brain as some kind of hyper-computer with data coming in, processed, and leading to a response going out in endless feedback loops. Because, here, it’s saying that subject and object are part of the same field of experience, and that one finds ‘oneself’ through one’s participation in a world which one cannot escape from. We have nowhere else to go – we are in this world. Even if we go and live on a desert island on our own, our thoughts will be the thoughts we developed with our mum learning language, going to school... You can’t take the world out of you.

It is a very common experience if people do long meditation retreats on their own, that they start to feel haunted by memories of the past and other people’s voices in their heads. Though they try to control this, wanting to control the content of their mind, it is an impossible task. We are interactive beings. How I am here is how I am with you; how I am talking is dependent on you. I will not be talking like this in Warsaw airport. We find ourselves being ‘ourselves’ in the different situations that we are in. We are called into being by the other. The more we relax our anxious neurotic sense of self, the more we can become many different ‘selves’, for the many different ‘others’ that we meet.

A final thing before we break for lunch...

### [One size fits all: metaphor of the Procrustean bed](#)

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If we have an idea that one-size fits all, one method, the one really good method, the one true method will help everyone – I would suggest that we are inevitably entering a totalitarian system. Because the ‘reasonable’ patients, the ‘good-hearted’ patients, will of course get benefits from this correct method, but there are always some enemies of the revolution! *[Laughter]* Those who resist the miraculous power of the one true method *[Laughter]* we need to send for electric shock treatment because they are resistant cases! This is the discourse one has to be careful of.

The Buddha said that the teacher must be very able to do everything. The student need only know one thing, and that’s enough: that they don’t know anything. Simply stay with that, ‘*You don’t know anything, the teacher will give you everything you need.*’ It should be the same with a therapist. This is the traditional idea of noblesse oblige: there is an obligation on those who have something advanced.

The Greeks have this story of a man, a lonely sad sort of giant, called Procrustes. He didn’t like people very much but he wanted to be friendly. He lived in a long valley, and when people were travelling through this valley at night- time he would say, ‘*Oh come and sleep, I can offer you a bed.*’ When they lay on the bed to sleep, if they were too long, he would cut off their feet, and if they were too short, he would stretch them out. This was because he believed that, ‘*My bed is a very good bed and you should fit my bed.*’ So the over-privileging of any kind of model is dangerous and carries within it an implicit violence.

*[Lunch break]*

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## Self-development (western) cf. self-recognition (buddhist)

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What does self-development mean for you, as therapists? In terms of any of the work you have already done, how would you understand how you sabotage, or limit the possibility of that development?

Almost all the various systems of psychotherapy have been developed from roots in Western Europe or in America, and in general are part of the project of modernism. Modernism as a Western European tradition is based on the belief that the future will be better than the past: that we can learn from the mistakes that people have made in the past and use that in order to progress.

A tradition like Buddhism however, is fundamentally conservative. It suggests that at a certain point in time some beings awoke and recognised something that was different from what had been seen before. That view, or that insight, or understanding, opens a revelation of a different understanding of the nature of the world. It reveals something that we would not see, according to our ordinary basis of perception and cognition. Therefore, an important thing is to maintain the continuity of the tradition, and with that, to be very careful about the introduction of new ideas into it.

We can see this with *hatha* yoga, which has been practiced in India for a very long time, not as a very public, health care practice, but as a series of exercises used by yogis as a way of supporting their meditation. Traditionally in India, it was seen as a transmission from the early founders, but now yoga has come to the West and has become a very big business. In America, there are hundreds of yoga magazines, yoga videos and so on. New kinds of props and pulleys and special mats are being invented all the time. One great yogi from Bengal has invented *sauna yoga* [*Laughter*] and has actually tried to copyright the *yoga asanas* that he teaches. He argues that, '*They are mine. I stole them from the tradition, but I am an Indian, so I'm allowed to do that. However, if any of my western students steal it from me, I will take them to court.*' We can see how cross-cultural meetings are often problematic.

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## Differences between a modernistic view and a traditional view

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It is important for us to recognise the difference between a modernistic view (self-development) as opposed to traditional view, which is about awakening, or self-recognition, or self-realisation. Buddhism and hinduism are very similar in this way, but I will use primarily examples from buddhism. The buddhist view is that each person has been inseparable from their ordinary daily sense of self, their true nature or Buddha nature, from the very beginning... in all their past lives... at this very moment... and in their all future lives... The path, or the work of meditation, is to relax the attachment to our habitual or usual sense of self, so we can awaken to our true nature.

So, how we are in our ordinary lives is not wrong or false, but it *is* very busy. The very busyness that we put into our self-maintenance and our self-development becomes a screen to our true nature. So that when we feel lost and empty, when we feel that something is missing in us, our tendency to go out into the world and try to get more things to add on to ourselves, to fill the empty part, becomes part of the problem itself. What one has to do then, is to look into this sense of emptiness, which reveals itself as a kind of dissatisfaction and hunger, and try to observe it in the moment that it operates. Try to see whether it is something to be relied on or not.

The title of many Tibetan books on buddhism will include something like, *'The refinery of pure gold.'* When people find raw gold ore in nature, it often is not very shiny. It doesn't look like gold; one has to purify it by removing what is not necessary. So one has to be able to discriminate between what has real value and what doesn't have value... but a lot of the time we don't know.

### Our feelings and our relation to the world

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For example, someone who is addicted to alcohol will have a feeling, *'I need a drink'*, and that feeling will *feel* absolutely true. When that feeling arises in the body, there is no doubt that the thing that is required is to open the bottle. Someone looking from the outside can see, *'Listen, my friend, your killing yourself.'* Nevertheless, this person will say, *'Shut up, go away, you don't understand, this is medicine for me. If I don't have this I feel sick.'* It is the same for people who take any of these powerfully addictive substances.

Similarly people develop a feeling about their relation to the world. Someone might feel a bit anxious about going out of the house and think, *'Outside on the street anything could happen, here in my house I know all the things that can happen – I feel safe here.'* Then, maybe, they arrange for their family or friends to bring them food and so on, and gradually they develop a full agoraphobia in which it becomes impossible for them to go through the door. If you were to take them by the hand and try to pull them through the door, their body would shake, their breathing would become very rapid and they would almost be passing out. Again, the person on the outside is saying, *'Sweetheart, your life is becoming very small. Look outside, the autumn is here, the leaves are a beautiful colour, we can walk in the park and have fun.'* But the person says, *'Shut up, you don't understand, it is not like that for me.'* So they are trusting what *feels* real for them; but for the person looking from the outside, what they feel is an illusion.

This is very similar to the Buddha's teaching. The Buddha says we are addicted to our thoughts, to our ideas, to our familiar assumptions and sense of identity. These things feel completely real, normal, and necessary, but from the point of view of the Buddha, they are like a poison. However, if you try to separate people from the objects of their ordinary attachment they become very agitated. They think some real violence is being done to them.

Many people feel frustrated as they get older in life because they can't do the things they did when they were young. Opportunities are getting smaller and smaller. They feel their lives are not fulfilled; they are angry to have to leave life. It is as if, if they had more experiences, they would somehow be completed. But when we look back in our lives, how many experiences have we had? These experiences have come and gone – and we are still here.

The experience goes away and then we think, *'I need to have another.'* But each time it comes, it goes; so we need another one and another one, and another one. There is no end to experience. The thirst for experience is like drinking salt water – the taste of the water will wet your lips and give you some relief but the salt in the water will make your thirst worst.

So this is a fundamental difference between many of the systems of self-development in the western and the eastern understanding. If we try to develop ourselves by adding things onto ourselves, the fact is that many of these experiences will just pass away. You might join a psychotherapy group for example, and through that, you learn something about how you are with other people. However, a therapy group is an artificial situation and when you go back to work, the people at work don't behave as in a therapy group. They are just being themselves, so all the triggers that press your buttons are still there.

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## Buddhism: the mind is unchanging but its contents are changing

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In buddhism they would make a discrimination between the mind and the contents of the mind. The idea is that the mind itself – our basic capacity to be aware, to be present – is unchanging, however the content of our mind, our experiences keeps flowing and changing. So, you can't capture experience. You can be moved, you can be touched by experience, you can weep, you can laugh. We can be very intense [*James clicks his fingers*] but it's gone. It's always just moving through.

Everything has its time. The things that are good to do when you are ten, become silly when you are twenty. In London on the banks of the River Thames, there is a big concrete area where young men use their skateboards. You can see men of thirty-five years of age still running up and down on a noisy skateboard. To my eyes, this seems a little bit sad. I can imagine if you are fifteen it can be very exciting to be on a skateboard, but at thirty-five, maybe there is a little bit more to life. However, for the people who are in skateboarding, for whom it is their world, it is enriched with all sorts of emotional connotations: it represents freedom, youth, physical strength and skill and so on.

This might help us to understand one of the central ideas in buddhism about attachment. Attachment is our capacity to invest things with meaning. We can invest all sorts of things with meaning. Some people have a small garden and spend many hours there; some people keep racing pigeons; some people gamble on racehorses and know everything about the quality of the soil, the health of the horse, who the parents and grandparents were. Some people will be members of the communist party and will remember all the particular debates and infighting and the intellectual quarrels. All of these things are interesting for the people who like them, but seem completely crazy for people who don't like them. In that way, we can see how when we put our heart into something it tends to close the world down a bit. The blinkers go on and we cut a little circle around the object of our fixation. Then sometimes, we later look back and think, *'What was that all about? Why did I do that for so long?'* You might stay in a relationship that is terrible, where you have lots of difficulties and troubles. You try and you try, and then you eventually think, *'Oh! I'm out of here.'* Then you look back and think, *'What was that? Five years? Ten years? What for? Why was I so stupid?'*

Part of this is, again, that we should be a little bit suspicious of ourselves. When the person who smokes reaches for another cigarette... Why? *'Why do I need this cigarette?'* *'Well I smoke because I smoke – shut up – go out!'*

But if we are curious, if we ask ourselves, then the stupidity of what we do is revealed to ourselves. So much of what we would call 'self-development' is not so much that we have to add things on to ourselves; it is that we have to spend less time doing nonsense.

There are many kinds of nonsense – some people over-eat too much; some people sleep too much; some people have a very crazy sex life; some people drink too much; some people work too much. We can starve ourselves, we can cut ourselves, we can pull out our hair; people do many, many things when they get agitated and upset.

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## Anxiety and its triggers

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A lot of this is developed by states of anxiety; anxiety in the body, where we can't soothe ourselves, we can't relax. We come into an anxious agitation where our breathing gets blocked because the diaphragm is locking and we are breathing from the upper chest. The healthy balancing of the sympathetic and the parasympathetic nervous system is disrupted,

and then suddenly our body is pumping adrenaline, which is telling the brain there is a crisis. We go into this hyper-arousal state. This leads us into the classic responses of 'fight' or 'flight' where our energy is mobilized either towards acting directly on the environment to change things, or in mobilizing our energy to leave. We also have the 'freeze' response where we just freeze in the situation. We can't move; our mind may be racing but our body doesn't move. There's also 'flop', when we just collapse! You can see that with a mouse when it's caught by a cat. It 'flops' in the cat's mouth, then the stupid cat is taken in. It puts the mouse down and the mouse gets up and runs away. *[Laughter]*

OK, so I would invite you then, just to think for yourselves a little bit about the trigger situations that get you into anxious arousal. What is your normal response to that? What ways do you have of trying to shift your state when you become disturbed? Then share some of that with the person next to you. It's not so much thinking about the things that you might do, or you know how to do but never do – it's more thinking about what do you actually find yourself doing. OK, so take a little time to reflect on that then discuss it with a neighbour.

Are there any things you would like to talk about from that?

**Question:** How can I be sure whether my way of relaxing tension is of the fixative type or whether it is still healthy enough – because there is a very thin line?

**James:** I think that in general the patterns that become problematic are the ones that have a kind of spin in the tail. So instead of finding yourself aroused about something and using the method to come down, it is rather a circular motion like a perpetual-motion machine. So for example, if you get very drunk and the next day you feel pretty tired and a bit out of it. If you are a drinker, you have more impulse to drink again, so it just spirals round and round. But of course if we have two substances and we bring them together, *[James claps hands]* we can feel the energy which that creates; if we rub our hands together we can feel the heat. Similarly, when we experience ourselves as solid and substantial, and from this separated feeling come into contact with the world, we generally feel friction. There is some charge built up, just as you get static electricity with a plastic comb, but if the plastic comb were not put in a place where you get the discharge, you wouldn't know that the charge was in it. For example, I don't know what it is like in Warsaw, but in London if you go into the underground at rush hour and you just look at people's faces, you would think everybody's about to go mad because they are all running for the train and they are very, very stressed. But when I'm running home from the hospital to see some private patients, I also am very mad! *[Laughter]* So everybody looks normal to me then because we are all mad trying to get on the train. *[Laughter]* So being charged up is just 'normal'. In London it's completely normal to walk down the street and not make eye contact with anyone. People even bang into you because they don't look where they are going. It becomes normal to be anxiously preoccupied, to be dissociated from the body. So as you get the gradual group adaption to a new notion of what is 'normal', you don't feel weird anymore, you just think, 'Oh, this is life nowadays.'

As a species human beings have been able to live in most parts of the world, living in tiny islands in the pacific, living in high, high, places in the Himalayas, living on ice for many months of the year in the arctic. So clearly human beings have enormous creativity, enormous imagination, which allows us to adapt into situations and then to feel at home in them. You can see that with Australian aborigines or people in the Sahara desert or Eskimos... people make incredible adaptations to live in their environment. In the same way, we adapt to our own psychology. When people grow up in a family where maybe dad is alcoholic and maybe beating mum, they learn how to survive in that family. So we have this capacity to make our context, normal for ourselves; to forget the other possibilities and options. Again, this is why



from the point of view of buddhism, we would say, *'You should be a little bit suspicious.'* Because if we look back for a hundred years in cultural history people have done many, many, different things in order to develop themselves and feel healthy. Many of these things have involved a kind of intoxication with an idea: now I belong to the Boy Scouts, or to the Young Communist League, or whatever it will be in your time. You believe at the time that this is a path to truth and value but then afterwards you may ask, 'Oh, what was that all about?'

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### Being calm enough to stay present as we experience agitation

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Rather than focusing particularly on what is the method that I use to balance myself, we should try to look at what is the nature of imbalance. What is this lack of relaxation in myself? What is this agitation, this being ill at ease, which drives my energy out towards the world?

In order to do that we have to be calm enough to stay present with ourselves as we experience agitation. That is to say, the observing aspect of our nature has to be calm enough to stay present with the agitated part of ourselves without itself being agitated. This is not the same as being cut off, as being somehow dissociated whereby we are a bit numbed and deadened. Rather, it is about developing a quality of calm clarity, which is able to see or experience whatever is arising without either pushing it away and editing it, or becoming fused into it.

Like a fire, if you go too close to the fire you get burned; if you are too far away you don't get any warmth. You have to be close enough to your experience for it to reveal itself without you being burned, without being conditioned and affected by it. For example, maybe sometimes, we wake up in the morning and we are just a bit sad not really knowing why. We just think, 'Oh.' Then you can just lie in bed and just be sad – not 'be sad' in the sense of falling into it, totally identified with it, but *be with* the sadness, really feel it, don't block it and hold it away, but just think, 'Oh' and that way you understand *'Oh, this is what sadness is – it won't kill me, it's not poisonous, it's just one of the funny colours of life.'*

For example, when we went to the farmer's restaurant across the road, we had this very nice taste that you don't get in England, sour cabbage with sweet carrot in a salad. That's very wonderful, to have so many unusual tastes and to put them all together on a plate. If somebody asks me, *'Oh, do you want something sour?'* I would say, 'No.' However, when this sour is put next to something else, it reveals something about itself; and my mouth takes on a particular shape in the experiencing of it. So in the same way, if somebody says, *'Oh, do you want to be sad? I can make you sad if you like'* – actually a little bit of sadness is quite interesting. It is the same if you get a bad cold and you feel different. In English we would say, *'Oh, I don't feel myself today.'* So, I am now somebody whom I don't recognise. I'm not who I should, but I am who I am. That is very helpful, since I can also be sick. This means, that the 'normal house' that I am living in is not secure; the doors can fall off, the windows can fall in, the wind of life can blow through.

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### Relaxing with anxiety – opening to a multitude of selves

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If we refer back to what we were discussing before... a state of anxiety or confusion, a state in which, 'I don't know who I am.' a state that, 'I want to get out of because I don't like it, I don't want to be the person who is experiencing this.' or, 'I don't like myself when I am like this.' If we can just relax and be present with that state, we will find that it is there for a while and then it is gone. What had felt like an absolute limit to myself, *'I am not me when I'm like this.'* becomes the key to an opening when we see, *'I am many different things; I am many different people.'*

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From that point of view, self-development wouldn't be about building a 'better self', a 'stronger self', but more about relaxing into the recognition that we are a multitude of selves, yet somehow there is a continuity of something through all these different variations. *'What is it that continues? Can we grasp it? Can we define it?'* That is one of the central questions of buddhist meditation.

And the function of meditation and in some kinds of psychotherapy is to try to strengthen the capacity to be present with what is there without controlling it, and through that gain a strength which is not a strength *against* something – not a kind of ego strength to dominate and control or push away – but a resilience of spaciousness and welcome which can allow life to be experienced without being overwhelmed by it.

OK, so if we take break now, we can come back and maybe do some different kind of different meditation practice and also look at therapy theory.

[Break]

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### What is the purpose of this constant observation?

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**Question:** Talking about the suspiciousness or constant questioning, this constant analysing, observing one's actions. Where does it lead to – what is the goal?

**James:** The goal is not to get taken in. What I was trying to describe was situations in which we think something is the case and then we find out that it's not the case. From a buddhist point of view, no object can be the answer to the question of my existence. So for example, if I feel hungry I can eat a cake and then I feel full. If I feel sad and I eat a cake, I can feel full and relief from the sadness, but the sadness will come back – and then I will be fat and sad.

[Laughter]

**Question:** But then we can start to question whether, *'Am I hungry enough to eat now or maybe I should eat later?'*

**James:** But it is a very interesting question isn't it? How can we know what to take as a simple thing and what we should be more suspicious of? Part of it is: if I live in my body then I can start to trust my hunger. If when I'm eating I'm observing what I'm eating and I'm not distracted somewhere else. I'm chewing the food and tasting it, then I will feel my stomach getting full and I will know when to stop. But if I'm eating for some other purpose, as in eating for an emotional reason, or eating in a state of distraction, or caught up in a kind of obsessional oral gratification because I like the taste, then I will eat beyond the limit of my body. I am having to cut off from my body and I am just eating for my mouth. Afterwards my body won't feel good. Being relaxed, being present in the body is a very good basis for existence.

What we should be suspicious about is when we are investing objects in our life with a long-term significance. So for example, my work is psychotherapy – so I *'do'* psychotherapy. And it's quite simple, I sit in a room with people and I talk with them in various ways. And when the session is finished, it's gone, there is nothing much to think about. I do my work and then I go home. But I can also *be* a psychotherapist; so it shifts from being an activity that I *perform* to something which *I am*. In which case I am creating for myself a sense of 'who I am' composed out of impermanent factors, and which is changing according to the socio-political climate.

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## As soon as we ask the question, 'Who am I?' we have many answers waiting

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I don't know what it is like in Polish but in English we say things like: 'I am tired', 'I am hungry' and I can say, 'I am a man', 'I am British'. Being British lasts longer than being hungry and so it seems to be a stable identity. If I believe in re-birth then in *this life*, 'I am British.' Or I might say, 'I am British because I was born in Britain – if I was born somewhere else, I wouldn't be British.' The thing is that if I say, 'I am British.' it seems to be some definite thing.

And so maybe if in the English newspapers I read a report that Polish people think that Britain is a terrible place, I will feel very insulted because I will have identified with this whole country of Britain, and therefore anything that is said about Britain is said about me. Or if I think, 'I am a man' and I read some feminist criticism of the male personality, I might feel insulted. In that way we can be hooked into an identity which is essentially meaningless; because although of course I have a male body, being a man is a socially constructed identity which only arises for me under certain circumstances.

Now of course this is a particular understanding of a situation. But clearly for the condition of women, feminism has been very important; women were helped to develop a positive and clear sense that being a woman existed in the world as a social fact. So it's not something to be taken for granted; it's something which has a particular social and historical shape to it and there is a struggle to defend that identity and protect it to make sure that women get paid the same as men for the same job and so on. However, the kinds of conversations that are built into feminism are very conceptual, very ideological. They develop a mental category of a 'woman' or of a 'man' and then that stands in relation to historical experience and planning for the future.

All of these things are very important. But from a buddhist point of view or a real deep question point of view, if I start with the knowledge, 'I am a woman' or 'I am a man', I buy into a system of ideas and assumptions which leads me into many, many different kinds of activity. On the level of social justice these questions are very important and they can lead to the development of health and happiness for many people. But they can also simultaneously be a way of avoiding the question, 'Who am I?' Because as soon as we ask the question, 'Who am I?' we have many, many, answers just waiting – we can say, 'I am a man.' 'I am a woman.' 'I am young.' 'I am old.' 'I am British.' 'I am Polish..' 'I am this, I am that' – and our whole life is just recycling these answers – which are a way of avoiding and really staying with the question, 'Who am I?' 'What is existence?'

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## Relative and absolute truth

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So in buddhism they have a notion of relative or conventional truth, and an absolute truth. And on the sense of relative truth we have our gender identity, our age, our financial situation and so on, and these are defining characteristics of our ordinary sense of identity. But they are also contextual – some people who are born into rich families become poor, some people who are born into poor families become rich, some people who are healthy when they are young become sick when they are old, some people who are sick when they are young become healthy when they get older, some people who are born as men in their male body will have an operation to have their genitals removed and dress as women and say, 'I am a woman.' So in that sense being suspicious means really to see that many of our identities are moments or gestures, they're functions of generating meanings shared with others, but they arise in a context of shared understanding and shared activity and they are not a permanent secure identity.

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So without denying the fact that, I was born in Scotland and I am male, I also can be aware I'm saying, *'I was born in Scotland and I am male.'* And then, the question can arise, *'Who is the one who is describing themselves as born in Scotland and male?'* That is to say, is that voice made in Scotland? So the mind, which is aware – has a content – but is it defined by its content? And I think that is a really important thing. Because, when I say, *'I'm hungry'* if I'm really hungry, it feels on a *very deep* level, you could almost say on an *infinite* level, *'I am hungry.'* With small children you see this very clearly – a child of three when it's hungry it is just completely hungry – they become very crazy – and yet after they have some food their mood is changed.

### Infinite potential yet moment-by-moment arisings

So we have two things running together: one is the infinite potential that we have, which is our capacity to be happy, to be sad, to be hungry, to be full, to be many, many, things – to be everything in some way. And at the same time we have the fact that moment-by-moment we are always just something – we are sleeping or we are walking, we are talking or we are sitting – we are always something – one thing after another. In the course of a day we are hundreds of different things, and yet, we have at the same time, simultaneously, an infinite freedom because we are not fully that which we are.

And I would suggest that sometimes when we feel a bit empty or a bit unfulfilled in life it's because somehow we want to be just one thing – 'If only I could just be fully this – forever – then I would know who I am.' then all the questions could drop and we would know definitely, 'I am this!' But that can never happen. Because our potentiality to be so many things is not something we can grasp because it's a potential – it's not yet manifest. So the one definite thing about us – that we are an infinite potentiality – we can't sit in, we can't rest on, because it's not there. And all the things that we are moment-by-moment – we can't rest on them either because they keep changing.

So if there is nothing that we can rest on this could be a real problem – if we are really heavy. So this is then the central question – Am I heavy? What is this solidity of my existence, this burden that I have to drag around from place to place, trying to cheer myself up, to sit up straight? This is a central question in psychotherapy and in buddhism.

### What is this self that can be developed and improved?

If there is something wrong with me, if I'm a bit broken and I need to be mended or improved, then there's work that I can do. On a relative level you might sit with a bad posture and then you could do some yoga or Alexander Technique or something like that and get your spine a little bit more arranged. Since your weight is hanging on the skeleton it is probably going to be better for you again – fewer headaches and so on. That would improve your spine and your posture – but would it improve *you*? You might feel better but would *you* be better? So what is this self that can be developed and improved?

In the West, we work primarily with our narrative self. We work with the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves; how we exist as a set of representations, of ideas, of memories, hopes and fears, and what we construct from these as ingredients. But from a buddhist and also from a hindu point of view we are more interested in what are these attachments, or veils, that get in the way of us just relaxing and being ourselves – being close to the very ground of our own existence.

### Our thoughts and feelings cover us, like our clothes

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One way of thinking of this – it's not the only way, but one way – would be to think that our thoughts and feelings, the stories we have about ourselves, are like our clothes. In the daytime when we walk about, generally in our culture, people see us with our clothes on – so we see people in their clothes, we don't see them separate from their clothes. If you see colleagues at work you see them wearing many different clothes in the course of a year, and it's as if these clothes manifest who they are because we might think, *'Oh, they are that kind of person because they wear that kind of clothes.'* But when the clothes are removed they are somebody different – their body shows a whole different set of contours and shapes and so on.

From this point of view, self-development is not so much about getting better quality of clothes to wear or even to find clothes which would manifest or represent our true nature, but rather, to experience the nakedness of our existence so that it remains with us as a felt presence, so that we don't lose the felt sense of the deep and open continuity of our being whatever kind of clothes the world forces us to wear.

We are not in charge of our wardrobes. If we are human beings connected with other human beings, accidents in other people's lives will change our clothes. You can be happy in the morning and then you get a phone call that someone's died or there has been a car crash, or some awful thing, and your psychological clothes have changed. You find yourself crying or upset or angry – you are wearing different clothes – you are identified with this other aspect of your existence.

If we collapse into that experience with no sense of this naked openness of our being, we will have lost ourselves – so we will go from immersed experience to immersed experience to immersed experience, without any of that relaxed spaciousness. If we can have a sense that our deepest identity or our true nature is not contingent, is not dependent on circumstances – although how we respond in the world *is* dependent on circumstance – then we are freer to just participate in life. If I know that whatever state I'm in is not a full definition or a conditioning of who I am, then I can be sad when I'm sad, happy when I'm happy, I can be jealous when I'm jealous, and I can be proud when I'm proud. Why tell yourself, *'Oh, don't be so stupid you shouldn't be jealous!'* Why not? It is a very interesting taste –like sour cabbage! *[Laughter]* You might not want to eat it every day but sometimes it refreshes the palette.

So then instead of trying to correct yourself and worry about how you are, and worry about how other people see you, you can accept, *'How I am is changing and so I can let these changes flow through me with this relaxed open spaciousness.'*

### Meditation practice

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OK, if you like we could do a little meditation to try to get some flavour of this. Sit in a comfortable way, with your eyes open or closed. Generally, we practice this with our eyes open, not staring at objects as a basis for thinking about them, but simply sustaining our simple presence in the room. Then we just relax into the out breath. This is because when the breath is going out, our thoughts become quieter. So we just relax into this out breath, releasing the tension of the body and then just sit present with whatever is occurring.

Our minds are very used to identifying with what arises, with thoughts and feelings and so on. When you find that happening, just relax again into the next out-breath. You will find that whatever you were caught up in, just goes by. Do not blame yourself if you get distracted, don't beat yourself up – just relax into the out-breath and then stay present with whatever is there. If you feel you have to move around, just move your body, don't sit in pain. It is very important not to punish yourself. OK, so we will do this for about ten minutes.

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[Practice]

Perhaps you can see how many, many things come – many, many ‘you’s’ arise – many identities come and go, come and go. And yet, there is a continuity going through all of them. And so going back to the issue of being a bit questioning or sceptical, it’s just trying to tilt the quality of our attention, of our awareness, so that rather than collapsing into an identification with what is arising, without pushing it away, we just rest with it.

Is buddhism more than a very radical and efficient form of therapy?

**Question:** Is buddhism something more than just a very radical and efficient form of therapy?

**James:** Well, the Buddha is also described as the ‘great doctor’, so in buddhism there is the image of the Buddha as a healer. Therapy is a kind of healing but of course, the power of the healer depends on the skills of the healer, as well as on the tools they have at their disposal, be they surgical or medicinal. So a hundred years ago there would have been many good doctors in Poland – good hearted, kind, hard working people – and they would have had many patients die because they didn’t have antibiotics. In relation to all the tools of buddhism, the tools of psychotherapy are like someone in the middle ages in Europe. Buddhism has many, many, strong tools and powerful methods; modern psychotherapy has not so much.

Also buddhism has a very powerful intention which is to free all sentient beings from suffering, forever. Psychotherapy can be simply a profession. ‘*May I have a good pension plan when I retire.*’, with a completely different aspiration. I would say that buddhism is much more rich, deep, and powerful than any known system of psychotherapy and its whole intention is much greater.

Essentially, you could say that buddhist meditation is an ongoing self-psychotherapy. Even analytic psychotherapists who have had their own therapy for many years, will, when they finish their therapy, see more and more patients because they have arrived somewhere. They have arrived at a level of competence. But buddhism is more like a journey that never arrives anywhere. Lamas and meditation teachers and so on, are always doing their own practice all the time. They are practicing on themselves; they are not practicing on other people. Nowadays there are many self-proclaimed gurus, people who claim to have become self-realised masters. From what I have noticed, they are intensely self-referential. The person is preoccupied with their own experience and they want to teach other people to be as absorbed in their self as the teacher is in his self. Buddhism, because it carries these two wings of wisdom and compassion, creates a pulsation in which in order to help other people I have to help myself first, and in order to help myself I have to help other people. Attention is balanced, out and in simultaneously.

OK, maybe we should end here for today.

[End of days teachings]

Self-development: a buddhist understanding

One of the ways we can proceed today is that I can explain some of the principles of a buddhist notion of self-development, and look at that in relation to aspects of psychotherapy. The key thing from this approach is that it is not something abstract and theoretical, but

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something which is directly linked to our own existence; and that our task is to observe how we limit our own potential, which manifests through our body, our voice, and our mind.

### Our body

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When we are not at home in our body, when our posture is bad, when our breathing is bad, when we don't support ourselves with exercise and food, then the energetic quality of our existence is hidden from us. If we take the body to be a thing, something to be moved about, improved, or added onto, it becomes more difficult to recognise that our body is always energetic. Moment-by-moment our body is revealed to us through sensation and through perceptions – we see our body as it moves, we feel our body from the inside as it moves, and each of these revelations is dynamic moment-by-moment. So clearly if we don't like our body, if we hate our body, we take up a position of judgment where we feel that our body should be other than it is. Then we feel disappointed which makes it difficult to relax *into* and *experience* our body as its luminous display, which is displayed moment-by-moment.

### Our voice

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It is the same with our voice. If we worry about what we are going to say, if we worry about what people are going to think about what we are going to say, we can become very self-conscious. We may then see our speech as something intentional; as something that exposes us to the judgement of others. Then it is very easy by thinking too much, to lose the moment to speak. However, our existence is moving in time, and so part of it is to trust our spontaneity, the freedom of our movement in time.

If you play tennis or badminton and the ball is coming towards you quite quickly, you don't really have much time to think about it. What you have to do is to be free to respond to move towards the ball. Of course, if you have built up a range of skills then you will be able to hit the ball in a better way. But if you have many skills as a tennis player then when the ball is coming towards you, you think, '*Now which skill shall I employ, front-hand, back-hand?*' Clearly this wouldn't work either because the ball has already gone by. Nevertheless, we often apply this when we speak. We try to plan too much; we prepare what we are going to say.

This is a sign of anxiety. And when we are anxious it means we don't trust, we don't relax into the moment and see how the full acceptance of the words of another, looking at their face, feeling the impact of their being on ourselves, will draw forth from us a full response to them. I think much of what we can call 'self-development' is really letting go of the impediments of over-anxiety, over-preparation, trusting that our natural being in the world will provide us with what is required.

### Our mind

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It is the same with our mind. If we can relax, particularly through the practice of meditation, we are open to accept that many things come in our mind, so that when we say, '*my mind*', it is more like saying, '*my country*' than like saying, '*my house*'. Because, if you say, '*This is my house.*' or, '*This is my flat.*' or '*This is my room.*' then if it is very untidy, people might ask, '*Hey! What are you doing?*' You would feel that you have some responsibility to make it better, tidier, or clearer.

However, if you say, '*This is my Poland.*' nobody is going to hold you responsible. If Poland is your country, it's your country, but you are not in charge. You are not responsible. In the same way we can say, '*This is my mind.*' but in this mind many things happen. In Warsaw there

will be very good people, very holy people, but there will also be thieves and robbers and bad people. In our mind all sorts of thoughts come... friendly thoughts, selfish thoughts, sometimes cruel and exploitative thoughts.

From a buddhist point of view, the importance is not so much in the content of the thought but in the nature of the thought. That is to say, what is a thought? We have thoughts; we are used to having thoughts. We usually see our thoughts as part of us, and yet perhaps we haven't really looked to think, *'What is a thought?'* When a thought arises in our mind, we tend to take it as something having an existence in itself. So, you might have a lazy thought. You might think, *'Oh, I don't want to go to work today, maybe I should phone in and say I'm sick.'* Then you think, *'Oh no, if I do that then my colleagues will have more work, so I should go in.'* And then you might think, *'Oh, it's wrong for me to have this kind of thought, if I didn't have this kind of thought I would be a better kind of person.'* So all of the thoughts that follow the first thought are taking the thought as something very real, but the thought has just come and it's already gone – 'I don't want to go to work.' – and it gone.

So, where does it come from? Well, it comes from, *'Maybe I was up too late last night.'* or, *'I don't like my boss.'* or, *'I have some project to work on today that I don't like.'* So we can experience our thought as part of a conversation with other thoughts – but what is making the thought? We might think, *'Well, if it's **my** thought, if it's in **my** mind, then **I** must be responsible.'* If something is stolen and the police come, and they look in your bag, and the stolen item is in your bag, they will say, *'It is in **your** bag. **You** are the bad person.'* So if the bad thought is in **my** mind, **I** must be the bad person that put it there.

This is why meditation is very important because when meditate, we realise that many different kinds of thoughts are coming in our mind. If there are thoughts coming in our mind that we don't want to be there, that upset us when they arrive there, then who is putting them there? Maybe someone else is hidden inside us? This would be like Freud's notion of the unconscious where you have the front factory, the ego-thought factory, and then behind that you have the unconscious-thought factory. The unconscious-thought factory is always trying to slip some thoughts under the table. In some religious systems they would say, *'Well maybe it's sometimes the devil that puts bad thoughts into you.'*

So a lot of this kind of analysis, which is the analysis of psychotherapy, starts with the assumption that the thought is real and that it's something that you can have a relationship with. You can improve or you can surrender. If somebody is very impulsive, they will just have given way to a powerful thought.

### Our mind is different from our ego

What meditation can help us to realise is that all thoughts, whether they are good thoughts or bad thoughts, have their source in our mind, but that our 'mind' is different from our 'ego', or our ordinary sense of self. As a kind of paradox, if we want to develop ourselves, instead of making an effort to control ourselves, we have to relax and observe ourselves so that we see what exactly is the nature of our existence. Of course, when we are tense and anxious, it seems more important to mobilise ourselves towards activity. We feel something **must** be done, and that we would be betraying ourselves by just sitting and observing.

In England sometimes at football matches they have a 'scare'. There was a famous one in 1985, when a fire broke out in Bradford stadium. People thought, *'Fire! Fire! Fire!'* and they started to run. If there is a fire you have to **do** something! Because of this group anxiety, many people were crushed to death and people were pushed into the fire. So even in a crisis situation what



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is important is to stay calm; to look and then think, 'What is the proper way to get out?' and if everybody goes in a calm way, more people are likely to stay alive.

From a buddhist point of view this is exactly the same for our own existence. We have learnt many, many, assumptions about how the world is, and many ways of responding which have become second nature to us, they come 'naturally' to us. In a crisis we tend to mobilise these but actually they are not very helpful. So our task is how to become more calm, more spacious, and to be able, even as the temperature rises around us – the emotional temperature, the fearful temperature – just to just to see and then to respond. This doesn't mean a lot of intellectual processing. It's not about thought, in terms of making sense of something, but it's about being fully present.

For example, if you are doing group dance improvisation, you don't plan in advance exactly what you're going to do. But out of gestures, out of movements, the group starts to have some sense of something developing. That depends on being able to be open, through all the senses, to see and experience what other people's bodies are doing, and then allow your own body to come in and respond to that. Of course, if you have some moves that you like to do, you're likely to sabotage your interaction with the other person. If you like twirling round and round, and they don't want to twirl, then you're going to lose them. Dancing with another person means allowing the dance to emerge from between both of you, as part of both of you. This means both parties have to be able to bracket off, or put aside their assumptions, their habits, and be fresh and available into what is emerging; replacing knowledge, control and prediction, with awareness, presence and a freedom to respond into the situation.

One of the things we can do today is to look at how meditation practice can help us to develop this freedom, so that we are more at ease in ourselves and in the world.

### Using mindfulness practice in therapy

**Question:** My question is how to apply mindfulness while working with a client. I'd like to have a glimpse of this buddhist view of working with a client, because in neurosis and depression it seems it would be something useful.

**James:** OK, so I can take this question in relation to the practice of meditation. Generally speaking we experience our lives as moving through time. 'Who we are' is the development of all the experiences we have had. So if I have a habit, I can see that the habit is coming from the past. In therapy it would be very normal to ask the patient about their childhood and see the kind of family situation within which these habits are likely to have developed. So on one level, what is happening for me now is coming from the past.

I'm talking in English because in the past I have learnt English. I'm not talking in Polish because in the past I never learnt Polish. I can't just pull Polish out of the air. Clearly the knowledge that we have, the skills that we have, are developed in time. Psychotherapy is looking at these causal sequences and through interpretation, or through description, or through experiential exercises, is trying to provide new learning so that there will be more options and therefore different possibilities of choice.

However, a buddhist view of this is rather different. Of course it accepts this movement through time, but it puts into question the idea, 'I do this now because I did it before.' As we were discussing before, many thoughts come into our mind, some of which seem to be very directly *our* thoughts. I might think, 'Oh, tomorrow is Monday. What do I have to do on Monday

*morning?* Then I call to mind the various things I have to do, whereby I appear to be the agent or the one who is thinking these thoughts. At other times, just some thought comes to mind. Suddenly, we find ourselves thinking about something. It just came into our head; the thought seems to have a life of its own.

It's the difference between these two thoughts, or two kinds of thinking, which is very interesting. Buddhism would suggest that even a thought, *'Oh, tomorrow morning I have to go to the office.'* is also just a thought coming into mind.

When we do mindfulness practice, we make an intention, *'I am going to focus my mind on my breath or on some external object.'* I, me, myself, the one who is in charge of my life, *I* am going to decide what I am going to do. *I* am going to focus my attention on *my* breath. That's what I'm going to do and nobody here is going to interfere with me! Therefore I will be able to do it for ten minutes, or one hour, or a whole day. *I* can do it because *I* am in charge. But then, when we start to do the practice we find that even if nobody in the room is causing any trouble, I am not doing the practice. I am going somewhere else. So if *I* am in charge of *me*, how come I am not doing what I'm telling myself to do? The rational fantasy that we have about our existence is not the whole truth.

So maybe we could do some more mindfulness practice just now, and use it as a kind of laboratory, a kind of space for enquiry, so that we can just observe how our mind *actually* is rather than trying to prove the fantasies we have about how our mind works. I would suggest that unless we can actually observe how we function, all we have are dreams and ideas. By observing how our existence actually is in itself, independent of the stories we have about it, we start to be in touch with things as they actually are.

OK, so we want to sit in a comfortable way, just relaxing the shoulders and trying to feel the weight of our body hanging on the skeleton. You don't want to be holding it with muscular tension. As yesterday, choose a simple object for observation, either the experience of the breath coming in and out of the nostrils, or maybe some simple point on the floor in front of you. Then make a simple intention, *'I will maintain focused attention on this object.'* and then we start just continuing to keep our attention upon the object. Whenever we find that our attention has wandered off, just very gently bring your attention back to the object. Try to avoid judging yourself, or blaming yourself for being distracted. Don't be curious about why you were thinking about this other thing. Just very gently bring your attention back to the task.

*[Mindfulness practice for ten minutes]*

Can you now, from that experience, describe to a neighbour your experience of what a thought is?

## Question

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**Question:** If there's this almost total anarchy in our lives, in our thinking lives, how do we manage our lives?

**James:** Wonderful question. *[Laughter]* Maybe there *is* a kind of clarity which is present in the midst of the confusion and chaos, and this clarity is not created by thoughts and is not dependent on thoughts.

For example, when I was young in Scotland, I used to go out on the hills a lot. With a friend we would race each other, running down the hill very, very, fast. On the hill were many rocks and streams, and you had to jump and leap and bounce, and you'd fall and you'd get up. What we would find is that you can't think about it at all; you just throw yourself down the hill. Whenever we got frightened – as soon as we thought, '*What am I doing?*' so becoming apart from the situation – we had a problem and we fell down. But if you open to the situation and you're just part of it, then you don't have any accident. When I speak with people who are surfers, they say exactly the same thing. You just become part of the wave; you are not fighting the wave nor trying to control the wave, but you find yourself at one with the flow of experience.

When we accept that we are in our life – when we accept our life – our life is performing itself. We are part of our existence, very simple things. It just comes to mind; we think '*Oh, I have to do that. Oh, I have to do this.*' The world is made of rhythms. There's the rhythm of day and night, the rhythms of the seasons, the rhythms of our blood and of our breath. There are also more artificial rhythms – the rhythms of when shops are open or closed, the rhythms of when the bus comes. By being in touch with these rhythms, somehow we pattern our way through life.

We could say that all forms of mental illness are problems of rhythm. From mild depression anxious preoccupations, right to extreme states of psychosis – each of these manifests as an interruption to being part of the rhythm of the world. For example, somebody who has an obsessive-compulsive disorder finds themselves 'turning on' their own rhythm, but it's a rhythm that cuts themselves off from the rhythm of other people. So, you lock the door and you walk up the stairs. Then you walk down the stairs and you check the door and you go up the stairs again. Then you go back down the stairs, you re-check the door... People can do this for half an hour, for one hour or more. It is very difficult then, to be in the rhythm of life.

### Mindfulness meditation gives us a capacity to focus our attention

When we do the meditation practice, we become aware of all these strange thoughts, these kind of chaotic thoughts. We can become more disturbed by them, thinking, '*Oh my God, it is out of control!*' That is, I think a very accurate conclusion. Our mind *is* out of control. But you don't have to worry, because, control is an illusion. We are not in control of our lives. We are living our lives participating in the world with others. We might even say that a healthy life is an interrupted life. Our life is not a straight line. It's not like a train, but it *is* a movement. We are more like seaweed swirling and twirling in the waves as they tumble on the shore. If you look at seaweed in the sea, it's not mad, it's not out of control; it's completely rhythmic, so beautifully articulated with the pulsation of the wave.

What *restricts* us from being in this harmonic pulsation with the world is our own rigidity, feelings like '*I couldn't do that.*' '*I can't dance, or if I try to dance people will look at me and then they will see I can't dance and I will feel very bad.*' '*I can't paint.*' '*I can't sing.*' '*I can't tell jokes.*' '*I can't eat in public in case people see my throat moving up and down.*' People develop all sorts of anxieties and phobias about the world. And in the end it doesn't really matter. We are not called upon to dance ballet like Diaghilev. All we have to do is participate. The music goes on and you move from one foot to another, that's enough. If you start to sing and you sound like a frog, that's enough. [Laughter] If other people are more sweet at singing, then the honey of their voice can cover yours. [Laughter] Part of our problem is that we feel, '*I am alone, I am just me, myself, and other people are going to see me as an object.*'

When we do the mindfulness meditation and we experience directly all this movement, all this creative potential in ourselves, we see that we have so many different flavours – so many different aspects to ourselves. Some of our thoughts are so boring, other thoughts are very interesting and we think, *'How amazing!'* So in this way we reveal ourselves to ourselves. Each of these things that arises is something we can inhabit for a moment. It is OK to be boring; it is OK to be interesting. If you're interesting all the time, that's a bit of a burden for other people; it's the same if you are boring all the time. But we are not constant. We are always changing. It is this rich potential that we have, which allows us to be close to many different kinds of people. For most people, even if they have quite a restricted range of functioning, when they are talking to small children they will become different. Their body will be different, the tone of their voice will be different, the look on their face will be different, the softness of their eyes will be different.

One of the functions then, of the mindfulness meditation is to give us some capacity to focus our attention when we need to.

### Mindfulness meditation lets us relax and reveal ourselves to ourselves

Another is to let us see that aspects of ourselves come into existence, when we attend to them. The root of the word *'therapy'* is a Greek word which means *'attendant'*, somebody who is there not as the healer, not as the boss, but somebody who waits with, even a little behind, the patient. In some ways we are attendant on our own existence. When we relax, we reveal ourselves to ourselves.

If you're relaxed and hanging out with your friends and you're just chatting, you don't know what you are going to say before you say it – you just find yourself saying something. The words that come out of your mouth go into your own ear and you are quite surprised. That is to say that, *'our self'*, is not something *inside* us but, *'our self'*, is like the surface of the water. If you go to the sea and you see the sunlight shining on the water with the waves, it's always changing – always changing. This is *'our self'*; it's a luminous dimension of revelation. The nature of this revelation, because it is occurring with other people, is out of control. It's not something to control, but by participation in it, by being present in it, it becomes ripe and full and rich in compassion and wisdom. I think this is a real fruit of meditation. The boundary between self and other becomes lessened, and we realise that our existence is created with other people. Other people are not the enemy, they are not people to be controlled or coerced or made to do what we want to do, but we are all moving together in this dynamic field.

From this point of view we can see not only how damaging it is, but also how sad it is that many people, especially people who come into mental health services, spend so much time in judgment and evaluation, in feeling bad, in feeling guilty, in blaming themselves. When we blame ourselves we create a very concrete, a very condensed sense of who we are. With that belief, *'This is who I am.'* or vantage point, instead of the world being an open field where everything is possible, it's as if the world becomes folded into hills and valleys, and our belief situates us at the bottom of a valley from where we don't see very much.

When the patient says, *'I am stupid, I never do anything right.'* and other people respond, *'No, you do this really well.'* then they say, *'Oh, you're just patronising me – you are only saying this because you want to cheer me up, but I know and you know that I do it badly!'* *'No, no, you really do it well.'* *'No, no, I know better than you!'* We can see that psychopathology is the resistance to being interrupted. We seal ourselves into a belief about who we are, how we are and what we can do. We resist other people's ideas giving us some fresh air, tilting our head around so that we can see something new.

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## Question: Where do thoughts get their energy from?

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**Question:** A thought is energy, so I wonder if mindfulness is enough. Maybe a little a bit of judgement is necessary to assess the kind of energy of my thought because I don't want my thoughts to hurt other people.

**James:** OK, so that raises an interesting question. Where do the thoughts get their energy from? Say if you start to feel angry towards someone, and you feel very hurt and you want to hurt them in return. The thought has an energy in it which comes from the reaction between that thought and other thoughts. Just as when we rub our hands together, we have friction; so when conflicted thoughts rub together then some heat arises. I think we have two main choices. One is to sort of micro-manage each situation as it arises, trying to work out how we should behave in each instance. That's very difficult, because it means we have to keep an eye on ourselves all the time. However, from a buddhist point of view it is more helpful – of course we have to be attentive in the moment – to develop a *general intention*.

That intention has two aspects. The first is an understanding of the inseparability, or the non-duality of self and other. Usually, we get more angry with people we know than with strangers. So if you live with someone, and they annoy you, then you get angry with them, and they get upset. Unless you are very brave and can throw them out of the window, and go along to the supermarket, go to the shelf where they have a stack of good partners, and just choose another good partner and take him home, then you are stuck with that person.

[Laughter] The more you show your anger the more upset your partner becomes, but they are still living in your house! So if my intention is to have a peaceful life, if my intention is to maintain an ease of flow of communication in the experiential field, then my comment to the other has to be based on my felt sense of the capacity of the other person. Clearly, I have to cook what I am going to do in a way that the other person will eat and it's not just vomited back over me.

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## Therapy approach: affect regulation

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We could see here two possibilities of what psychologist call 'affect regulation'. We can control our affect, our emotion, by having an internal discourse in which we see, recognise, our arousal patterns and use various strategies to diminish the intensity of our feeling. However a problem is that while I'm doing it, I'm not in contact with the other person. It may also make me more angry with the other person, because not only do I feel, *'You are an asshole, you've made me feel upset.'* but now *'I have to control myself because you can't deal with my emotions. It's always up to me!'* So this kind of self-control is not really very useful.

The better way is to stay close with the face of the other person. With the encounter of the radical otherness of the other person we realise that there is a gap between us. Although there is no real difference between self and other, we are participating in the same integrated field of experience, but that doesn't mean we can then say, *'Oh well, we are all the same, therefore how I feel is how you are likely to feel.'* Each person is the centre of the universe – each person is a luminous node in this integrated texture of co-emergence.

So on the bases of this, various things arise. The first is: our connection is inalienable. Even if I kill you, I cannot destroy the connection that exists between us. Therefore to attack you brings no benefit to me. My goal is to stay in connection, because it's always an illusion to imagine that I can break connection. This is the problem of self-preoccupation, whether it's through anxiety, or depression, or psychosis. We may imagine that, *'I am just alone just getting on with my own life.'* but this is always a lie, since we are always living our lives with others.

When an emotion arises, its function is often to cut me off from the other. Often it is because when someone does something to us, we process their action in terms of our belief system about how people should behave. We then think, *'You shouldn't treat me like that.'* Now that may well be true, but if I want to help the other person to not treat me like that, is being angry with them the best method? Very often people behave in a crude way because they are not mindful. If we respond by being immersed in our emotion, is that likely to increase their capacity for mindfulness? Probably not. So you go into a cycle of retaliation, but each time you do that, you build up a more intense picture that the other person is not good, or is cruel, or unkind, or doesn't love you, or whatever the story. And then what? You win, but you win in a desert, in desolation. Then you find someone new and start all over again.

When you are young you do that with hope; as you get older you do it because you are sad.

### Buddhist approach: examine the basis of the emotion

From a buddhist point of view, much more important is to attend to one's own state. And rather than trying to control the emotion as it arises, keep observing what is the ground or the basis out of which the emotion is emerging. That is to say, what is the status of a thought? What is the status of an emotion?

A thought arises, *'I hate you!'* That brings with it a whole feeling tone, yet it is very unreliable. It's there for a few seconds, and it will go, if you don't build on to it. The feeling, *'I hate you!'* illuminates the pain of the moment where the other person has done something to you. It doesn't necessarily tell us anything real about who this other person is *all* of the time, or what we feel about them *most* of the time. It tells us something about the reactivity of our own situation and how we have the tendency to turn a moment of pain into a story of the horribleness of the other. The pain when the other hurts me is turned into a judgment that the other person has done something bad. This is then essentialised into a general conclusion, *'I hate this person, they are not nice.'* But only the first level is really true: *'If you hurt me, I will feel upset for a while.'* Probably a short while, because as we find from our mindfulness meditation, our mind is so full of other stuff, we forget about it.

From a buddhist point of view what we would be concerned with is how our own mind takes a momentary event and starts to weave a story around it and turns that into a final conclusion, *'I know who you are. You are like that.'* On the basis of that, you decide, *'Oh, I really don't want to see you again.'* Off you go to a party, you open the door and there is that person and you say, *'I'm not going in there!'* In English this is called 'cutting off your nose to spite your face'. The really horrible thing is that if you go to the party, and you see this person whom you hate and they are having fun with people, talking and laughing, you think, *'These fools, don't they realise how horrible this person is!'* But of course, the other people like them because they are not *all* bad *all* the time. We ourselves have created the story which we now want to maintain through time: *'Because you hurt me last year, I won't speak to you this year.'*

It is not necessarily that we have to regulate our affect. If you get angry with someone and shout at them, when you give it space it will just clear away. If both people are a bit present they will see that emotions are always fluctuating. The real danger is our tendency to concretise a situation, to come to a fixed conclusion. For example, my father fought in the last war against the Japanese, and after the war, he wouldn't allow anything made in Japan in the house. He'd say, *'I know the Japanese.'* There are many, many, different kinds of Japanese, and some of them were very unpleasant during the war, but when we draw a general conclusion, we cut our *own* eyes out.

When the focus is on awareness, we live in a world that is fresh. This means that if we don't look clearly we won't get the information we need to respond. It's quicker and easier to substitute an assumption for awareness. My father didn't need to think, *'Is this a good Japanese person or a bad Japanese person?'* He knew in advance, *'I don't like the Japanese, they are very terrible people.'* Prejudice – a **pre-judice**, a judgment made in advance of the situation, is very powerful and very simplified – but it's very blind.

In buddhism, the root of all our troubles is seen as ignorance, which is described as a state of blindness, of not seeing, of not being present in the moment, relying instead on fantasies and beliefs. Rather than starting with the assumption, *'I shouldn't be angry.'* or even the feeling, *'I don't like it when I am angry.'* the encouragement would be to try to examine: what is anger when you feel it? This is of course difficult to do.

### Do meditation practice when feeling calm, so that you develop your capacity

That's why we do meditation practice when we feel calm, so that we can gradually develop our capacity to maintain a focused attention, even in states of turbulence.

The actual experience of anger is very complex, with many different aspects. What we call *'anger'* is dynamic and unstable and lacks the reliability and simplicity implied by the word *'anger'*. It is in some ways similar to pain. In Britain, chronic pain clinics use a lot of meditation techniques now, particularly for pain relief. Clearly, the person is suffering terrible pain. When you ask them to describe the pain, they say things like, *'It's awful, it's unbearable. It's always there, grinding away at me.'* Because it is so horrible, the person wants to get away from it, but they can't get away from it because it is part of their embodied experience. Often they are very exhausted because they are trying to pull themselves out of their own experience.

The treatment is to help the person calm themselves, first of all by doing diaphragm breathing and then by attending to a neutral object externally. In order to be able to examine the nature of pain – to turn their attention towards what they are trying to avoid and to give a very precise, detailed and moment-by-moment description of the pain – the patient has to be able to remain calm, and not fall into an emotional reaction.

Their language then starts to shift, so instead of saying, *'My pain is terrible, it's awful.'* they start to be able to say, *'Oh, the pain is cutting, the pain is burning, it's stabbing, it's throbbing.'* using different words.

So by having a method of looking at the pain, the pain reveals itself as something they didn't imagine. Instead of being a constant thing, a terrible persecution that has locked onto their life, the pain reveals itself as a movement which is always changing, and something that they can be interested in. They then find that the very quality of interest and close attention starts to impact the way in which the pain manifests, so that by attending to it, it loses its intensity. By looking at it, it's transformed.

This would be the heart of a meditative approach to any kind of mental problem; to develop an interested attention in the actual details of the manifestation of the condition. This is very different, say, from keeping a diary of negative thoughts, or a diary of triggers for angry impulses. When you keep that kind of diary you're already starting with the level of a product. There is an angry impulse, *'How many times a week did you feel the angry impulse?'* So we're taking it for granted that there *is* such a thing as an 'angry impulse', and each time it comes it's pretty much the same.

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Rather, we want to really look at the process of the manifestation, *'What is this?'* before we get to the level of the name.

Question: Awareness enriches everything. It's like monosodium glutamate.

**Question:** I can't really accept this idea with respect to positive thoughts. When we experience something very positive and therefore good feelings towards somebody, should we even in such a situation distance ourselves from our thoughts?

**James:** Well, that is a very interesting question. It may well be that if you're happy when good things happen, then you are going to be sad when bad things happen. Because for both to occur you have to have a kind of immersion, or intoxication in the experience *'This is real, it's happening to me.'* and then being either happy or sad.

In the buddhist tradition one of the qualities they say is helpful to develop is equanimity; not to be too too happy when good things happen, and not to be too too sad when bad things happen. From a buddhist point of view, this light and airy happiness is a kind of madness. Actually good things and bad things are happening all the time. Maybe you have a good day and then you look at the news on the television and you see some terrible thing – hundreds of thousands of people killed. If you want to have a fun life you just dissociate, you say, *'Oh, never mind, they are muslims, somebody else.'* But if we want to be fully integrated as people then we will be impacted by everything we encounter.

In order to be part of the world, to be present with whatever goes on without being overwhelmed by these huge waves of emotion, we need to have a kind of dynamic centre of gravity, in which of course we say, *'Oh yes, good things are coming, then bad things are coming.'* It's not to resist any impact, not to try to live as a monk or a nun – living a life of renunciation. Nor is it to leap into an intoxication with whatever is coming, but to keep centred in the continuity of our awareness, with whatever is arising. Many entertainments are mindless, and to be caught in these is to lose awareness; they are a kind of self-abandonment. Whereas through the practice of meditation I think we can realise and experience that awareness enriches everything. It's like monosodium glutamate.

### A meditation you can share with patients

So we can do a slightly different kind of meditation now to bring us more towards this kind of experience. And this is a kind of meditation that you can also share with patients.

It involves starting the same way as before. So, we focus our attention on something stable, an object in front of us, or the breath. Then when we have a bit of stability of this focus, we just bring the focus to the top of our head. So we just sit relaxed with our attention focused on the top of our head, and then gradually take the attention down through the body scanning whatever is going on.

We may find that there are various sensations in the body. So for example, you may encounter some pain in your shoulder. What we want to try to do is just be present with that sensation, not describing it as 'pain' but trying to find the *simplest* word that would describe what is there. So it could be 'hot', 'cold', 'stabbing', 'scratching', 'tickling'. So keeping the attention on just the first presentation of what is there, rather than the conclusion we might come to about it.



Just keep our attention sweeping slowly down right through the body, down to our feet and then back up again. We just do this very slow scanning through several times. Again, if you find yourself getting caught up in thoughts, in concepts, in stories, when you recognise that, just gently bring your attention back into scanning down through the body.

*[Meditation practice]*

Of course if you are interested you can practice this for much longer on your own.

## Questions

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**Question:** It was difficult to focus my attention on a point and do the scanning at the same time. I had to name the different parts of the body to focus on them.

**James:** That's OK. Gradually I think you get more used to just letting the attention move through the body, back and forth. Most of us are not very used to being present with our body. When we are healthy, our body is almost invisible to us, but then when we become sick it becomes a problem. Through this kind of practice, we can come to experience our body as something very living, dynamic, and moving, not a thing at all, but a pulsation of energy.

## Question about children

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**Question:** How can we present this to children regarding the appearance and disappearance of emotions, the impermanence of their thoughts.

**James:** Well, I think children are very close to this because children are used to allowing their imagination to work into the world. My little plane can take off. *[James picks up his watch from the table and pretends to fly it around making the sound of an aeroplane]* Children do this automatically. So an idea or a fantasy can be projected onto an object which will then hold that and become that, and then it will go away, 'Oh it's boring, I don't want to play with it any more.' Adults of course then say, 'Oh be careful with that, that's my watch, don't do that. If you want to play with something use one of your toys.' And so the child learns that some objects carry a permanent investment of value and that they are only allowed to play with things that have no value for adults. One of the things we as adults need to learn to do, is not just how to invest, but how to *divest*, to take the energy back and know that whatever is precious to us, is precious because of our heart connection. The value lies in the quality of the heart to give value.

I think children have a lot of sense of the continuity. If you have a child of say three and you have food time, then often the child will start eating. Maybe the first third of the food they will eat fairly quickly, but then it starts to get very, very, slow. The idea that you have to take all of yourself, your intelligence, your imagination, and just focus on eating, seems crazy to a child. They want to tell a story or play with something or throw it around, and so you have to enter into play with the child to help them finish eating the food. I think a lot of that is how do you help the child to bring its imagination into something, rather than deflect off. Also at that age they are learning this wonderful word 'No.' 'No, I don't want to!' So then you have to try to turn 'No' into 'Yes'. This is wonderful, because the child is the master of the imagination, and the adult is the master of the practical. In English we say, 'Fair exchange is no robbery.' so the adult will teach the child to become more efficient and the child will teach the adult to be more creative and playful, otherwise the food will not be eaten.

Of course children can become very upset when something they had put a lot of emotion into is lost; they lose a toy for example, or they have a little pet and it dies. I think one can just support them by pointing and giving a kind of commentary on what is going on, *'Now we are going to do this.'* *'Now we are going to do that.'* *'That is finished now, what are we going to do?'* *'Now what will we do?'* is open, there are many possibilities. We decide on one thing, then we do it. Then we stop doing it, and the world opens again. So, the world is open, closed; open, closed.

I was putting shoes on a little three year old boy recently and he was saying that he didn't want his toes to be locked away, and he kept wiggling them about saying, *'Look, they want to run about!'* So we had to have many games before the little foot would go into the shoe. *[Laughter]* Also for us as adults that is why children are so precious to us, because they interrupt our sense of solidity, of the 'proper' way of doing things. They can show us the illusion of the constructs that we have made. Sometimes you have to get to the shops on time before they close, but putting on shoes is something amazing, because when you put your shoes on you lose your feet. You look down and you don't see your toes anymore. When you stomp around in your shoes, you don't feel your feet in the same way. Something really has happened, you have transformed your whole experiential world. The child's capacity to resist being moulded into the assumptions of the adult, to resist the process of socialisation can be very helpful for adults.

I think that part of the task of education is to help children to conform without losing this natural line of creativity, so that the intelligence and the imagination can take on the shapes of the world without being crushed by it. That is why getting children to describe what happens in their bodies is very, very, interesting. For example, you can look at your hand and you see what it is. You can make it do all sorts of things and then you can ask, even a small child, *'Now close your eyes, and take your attention inside your hand and what does it feel like from the inside?'* Then they find that it is all tingly and all sorts of things are going on.

Then you can see how you have many bodies; you have a body of concepts, you have a body which has to be controlled, a body to sit still, a body you have to listen to for certain messages – when to do 'pee-pee', when to do 'poo-poo', *'Are you finished or not? – is there any more?'* *'I don't know.'* It's amazing. *[Laughter]*

OK, so maybe we should take a break for lunch for an hour.

*[Lunch break]*

So maybe see if you have any questions about the things we have done, or other things connected with therapy or spiritual traditions.

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### [Question about psychodrama and Bert Hellinger](#)

**Question:** My question is about the Bert Hellinger constellations. How would you link it to what you have been talking about?

**James:** This is referring to a system of psychodrama, which is a way of unpacking one person's story by having other people in a group take on the identity of characters from that person's story. One of the very interesting things that happens in this practice is, for example say I'm describing a situation with my grandmother and my aunt and my parents, if somebody becomes my grandmother, within a few sentences usually they start to speak in a way which is containing some of the qualities of the grandmother. They are not just repeating a script

because they don't know enough about the situation to do that, but somehow they find that what is created in the air almost, is the mood of the family. People can then speak in a way which is appropriate to that dynamic.

This speaks to something similar to what Freud talks about in terms of repetition compulsion and also transference, in which the tendencies that we have from our childhood become repeated through us towards other people; but also that they (the other person) are inducted into responding in the way we expect. That would indicate that as we go through life we seek in an unconscious way to replicate, to recreate, the matrix in which we developed as a person in this life. This is a very powerful idea – and also a very powerful experience. When we see that actually as we go into a new situation, although on our conscious level we may feel, *'I am looking for a new experience, I want to have some new change, some new development in my life.'* in very subtle ways we are re-creating the old pattern.

One way of thinking about this is that we carry inside us the echoes, or the voices of the people from the past who have been significant to us. These voices are maintained in 'healthy working order' by the internal dialogues we have going on in our mind; also through our dreams, but also through the impersonal choices we make, like the kind of films we might see, the kind of novels we might read. We are often seeking to encounter characters who remind us of the importance of the positions we have already taken on.

I think we notice this particularly in terms of relationships. You may choose a partner or friend and when you get into some difficulties, you think, *'Oh this is bad news, I'm not going to be with someone else like this again.'* Then you meet someone new who seems very different, but after a short period of time the same problems arise. Often people think, *'Oh, how could I be so stupid, how come I didn't see they were like that?'* but of course when we first meet the person, they are not like that.

What happens is that each of us has a range of possible identities, many, many, many... Some of these are to the 'front'. They are what we sort of show in our ordinary life and some of these are more in the 'back', as a kind of reserve identity. When we meet someone, our calling card, our front identities, may seem quite healthy and fresh, but then gradually out from the back creep these other aspects of ourselves. Then these aspects lock on from both sides, so you have an unconscious alliance. Sometimes this can be positive. There might be two people and all their friends think, *'God, they are completely unsuited. Why are they together?'* but somehow they survive because some kind of glue is created from these 'other voices' or aspects. More often it is in the other direction; people get back into the familiar difficult territory.

So Bert Hellinger brings to the general project of psychodrama a particular way of realigning each of the aspects, the voices, or the internal persona of the person. The family structure that we have internalised is usually marked by poor communication. Even in a family where there is a lot of talk, there are usually many things which are not said. By positioning the characters – by getting them to face in the direction with the distance that they feel is appropriate in terms of the other characters – you can then identify the ways in which there is a block to communication. By then asking these members of the group who stand in these positions to turn and face each other and to speak from the heart, a new kind of conversation opens up.

This means that gradually as the various groups get into more communication the whole system becomes more dynamic, more connected, and tensions can be resolved. People often relax physically. The strange thing that then happens, is that the person whose story it is, who is usually not in any of these characters that are being enacted, starts to feel different inside. It is as if by changing this pattern outside them, it becomes readjusted inside. Following that

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experience they often feel empowered to reconnect with members of their family and resolve issues which had kept them all very stuck.

So again, one of the very interesting things about this is that it suggests that our identity is pluralistic. Letting go of the sense that we should have one simple identity and that we can live as a kind of complexity of selves, a multitude of selves, is something quite radical. It is similar to the ideas that Carl Gustav Jung was writing about, with his shift in focus back to more pantheistic times, particularly the ancient Greek times. People would experience that, *'There are many different gods. We can have different connections with different gods; we can worship at different shrines. Different gods can support us in different aspects of our existence.'*

This is very similar to what you find in Tibetan buddhism, where there are many different gods, many different forms of Buddha. Some are peaceful, some are wrathful, some are very alive and dynamic, dancing, sexual; others are very constrained, calm, they don't show very much at all. People who enter into that buddhist path can learn many different practices which they can use according to their own internal condition and according to their own external situation. Rather than thinking, *'There is just one god, and I am just one single individual person. There is just one thing that I have to do.'* we explore that we are many different people; we have no central identity. Because again, identity is not something deep inside us. It's not some description that is held in the police files, or some precious recipe that is held in a Swiss bank vault. Rather, we are *'self-ing'* all the time. We are coming into existence according to circumstances. Because this is *actually* what happens to us, whether we like it or not, it helps if we can get some support in working out how to do it.

Western Europe has developed according to control systems. In some aspects of our traditional religion, we have an idea that not only should you not do bad things, but also you shouldn't have bad thoughts. *'It is a sin to allow bad thoughts to arise in your mind!'* How will you stop them? The danger with any ideological position is you can always extend your dogmatic view. You can make it more and more extreme. So you can say for example, *'Trouble is caused by witches. We know what witches look like; we can find ways to make witches show themselves. Witches, when you put them in the water they float, a good honest Christian woman would sink.'* This is the danger of ideology; you can develop any kind of fantasy you like because it is just 'Bla, bla.' It's only words, but the words are made real because of power.

So from the point of view of observing ourselves, observing our minds as they function, observing the nature of embodied existence, observing ourselves as we speak, we find I think, that we are immersed in a world process. We are connected with others, coming into existence according to the circumstances. And so someone like Burt Hellinger is very useful for showing how our freedom to respond – to actually connect with people as they are – becomes limited when we expect them to be in a particular way and when we do our best to bring them into the position that we expect them to be in.

[Saraha: Ice, water, steam](#)

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The 8<sup>th</sup> century Indian yogi **Saraha** gave a very simple explanation of this. He said in the winter water turns to ice and in the summer the water from the pond evaporates and goes away. What is the real water? Sometimes our mind freezes like ice; we become very sharp, we become very definite; we can't move. Sometimes we are relaxed and flowing, like water, able to adapt into any shape that is around. Other times we get a bit spaced out. We are all of these three possibilities. It is important to become like ice, to take on a definite shape. It is important to become like steam, just to be very, very open and defuse. And it is important to flow. The problem is if we do them at the wrong time, if we are dystonic, we are out of balance

with the environment. So it's about developing the freedom to move through the various possibilities of our existence *in relation to* the experiential field as it arises.

The traditional mental illnesses that we think of in psychotherapy are obviously ways in which we find ourselves at the wrong temperature at the wrong time. An actively psychotic patient is like a mixture of ice and steam; they are very concrete, they are very kind of fixed and definite with not much symbolic understanding of what's going on. At the same time they have an attention which is very defuse, spread out like steam; they can't sustain their attention into a situation and carry on a clear dialogue. You could carry on the same analysis for all the different neuroses. The phobic patient for example, freezes in relation to something which you have to flow with.

What buddhism would add to this though is that through meditation you can develop more capacity to keep dissolving situations so that you don't get trapped in frozenness. You can *show* 'frozen'; you can *show* a hard edge without becoming hard inside. You can be very spacious, without being spaced out; so that openness, clarity and responsiveness flow together. This arises not from re-arranging our internal structure as you would do in Burt Hellinger work, useful as that is, but by looking again and again, '*Who is the one who is having this experience?*' '*Since I can show many different identities, what is my real identity?*' '*With all of these identities that I show, is there one that is more real than the other?*' Is water more real than ice? Is steam less real than water? These are all just the modes of manifestation that we have; happy – sad. When we are happy we may enjoy that more than being sad. Other people may enjoy being with us more when we are happy than when we are sad, but are we more real when we are happy?

The question would be, '*Who is this one who becomes happy or who becomes sad?*' That is something which is examined and investigated a great deal in Tibetan buddhist meditation.

So maybe see if there are any other thoughts or questions that you have.

#### Question: Diagnostic labels. Martin Buber's I-Thou

**Question:** Western therapies often gives a name to a patient's condition, that's sort of fixing them in the condition and giving the impression that he knows better where the patient stands. Can you avoid this in your practice?

**James:** One of the saddest things I encounter in the hospital is when a patient asks, '*Have you read my notes? If you haven't read my notes you won't know who I am.*' But who is sitting here in front of me, whose face can I see? They might still say, '*Yes, but you don't know me!*' So the patient has come to think that being known *about* is more real than being directly met.

And of course one of the things that we all encounter as we grow up is this very strange fact that we are both a subject and an object. We are a subject for ourselves and an object for others; but we are also an object for ourselves and sometimes we are a subject for the other as well. Martin Buber had the notion of an *I-Thou* [Ich-Du] to describe a direct engagement which is fully alive on both sides, where both parties are fully alive to each other.

For most patients, in the course of their development they have been treated more as an object than a subject. They become used to this and they often, certainly the patients I see, have very few ordinary social contacts. They like to be seen by professionals. This is because the professional will know *about* them, which supports them as an object. They don't wish to know anything about the professional, which also retains the professional as a kind of object.

In cases like this, I try to find some little threads of subjectivity. I will usually have some strange paintings in my room, and often try to get some strange-looking plants or flowers – something a little bit unusual, something that can become a hook for some kind of curiosity. I often tell jokes and I might even get up and move around a lot. I thank them for sitting down and, because I am usually fatter than them, I might say, *‘You know, if I sit down and you sit down, I don’t lose any weight, so I am going to get up and move around and do some funny things for you. Even if it doesn’t help you I will have lost a few calories, so I will be happy. Do you mind me being happy?’* So immediately they think, *‘What is this?’* I am trying all the time to get some real kind of connection, to communicate that, *‘OK, I see that you have to hide inside your box. You don’t want to come out because you don’t know how to come out, but I’m not willing to be in a box with you.’* And so I will do many different things.

For example, I might tell them a story of their life, just like in a fairy tale. *‘Once upon a time, long, long ago, something very terrible happened. It was a great tragedy and the sun turned away and the moon turned away and there was only darkness and screaming.’* Like that, you can really intensify all the emotion so that the person’s story is revealed to them. I will do this without even knowing their story (if possible) because I believe if you relax, by looking at someone’s face you can free-associate everything about them. It is unlikely that they have won the pools and made a lot of money. The range of story lines is usually tragedy, or tragedy.

### [There is always life inside](#)

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So it is about refusing death. I refuse to believe that the patient is dead. I refuse to let them kill me, and I believe in everlasting life. I believe really in the impossibility of death. More I believe in ice, water and steam – that people get frozen, they get numb, they get locked – but you can warm them up. So it’s about always trying to increase the temperature in the room.

This has become more difficult in the current climate. I don’t know how it is in Poland, but in England therapists have become very anxious about being sued by patients. We have documents like the ***Patients’ Charter***, which guarantees that the patient should be treated with respect. However sometimes it’s very important to laugh at them; even though if you laugh at someone they might complain. There is always the question, *‘What will the therapist be willing to risk for this other person?’*

Safe therapy is often a betrayal of the patient, but then creative therapy can also go wrong. You can misjudge things. So I think one of the bases has to be to practice really paying attention to the body. To always have a sense of how the person is breathing, and to keep monitoring that. Changes in skin colour, changes in the quality of gaze and so on, because often the feedback we are getting is non-verbal.

What I think my practice from buddhism helps me to understand is that there is always life inside the person. I worked a long time ago in the art therapy department of a big old-fashioned mental hospital where people were kept for many, many, years. One of the patients I saw was an elective mute, somebody who had made a decision not to speak. In each hour-and-a-half session we had, he and I would take a bag of clay, fifty kilos of clay, and completely use it up making small figures. We would make so many of these figures that the whole room was filled with them. We did this for quite a long time. He never spoke, but as our work progressed, his eyes would come more alive and towards the end, he would always shake my hand, really looking in my face. He was more alive, more in his body and his not-speaking was more present as his own choice. Radical action is often called for, but requires a clear intention. Wisdom and compassion need to operate together, but it helps if you have some

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status too – I had to go to the Head of Department and justify all these clay figures all over the place! *[Laughter]*

### Sustaining creativity whilst working in institutions

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I think the key thing is that working in institutions can kill the therapist. The bureaucracy is often quite deadening. People who have taken positions of power have often lost touch with their creativity, and so find it threatening if somebody is trying out a new method. Also from the buddhist point of view, we have this idea of dependent co-origination, which means that anything which arises will only develop as much as the context permits.

For example, the hospital department that I'm connected with was very creative for about fifteen years. Then the always had money for everything but then he retired. His post was filled and the bureaucrats came in to ask, 'How are your projects funded?' And everybody said, 'Well, I don't know. The professor knew, but he has gone.' And so many of the projects we had were closed.

Sometimes I become sad about that, but it's also how things are – nothing lasts forever. When the spring is there the flowers will come out; when the autumn comes the flowers die, then in winter we don't have flowers. When we look in world history, we never see an eternal summer; the seasons are turning around. When I began in the department I didn't know so much. Everything was summer time. Now, I know a lot more, but it's winter time. That's life. So many of the things I could do, I now can't do. This is very important. Because the individual is not the agent. It's not about universal mastery, 'I will make this happen.'

It's about how we take our place in the world, according to the season. When winter comes and we shrink, we can learn a lot from that. If we are lucky, if we are healthy, our lives are advancing. However our patients' lives are shrinking, so when we know directly a lot about shrinking, on all levels, then we have a more nuanced conversation.

The image of the wounded healer can be very important. Being open to the wounds of life yet continuing to live in situations which are not as good as ones we *could* perhaps create elsewhere, helps us learn to live in a more nuanced way with the movement of life and death. It helps us to really stay alive to the movement between life and death.

### Final meditation practice

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So maybe we could do a little bit more practice and then see if there are any final questions before we come towards an end.

This practice is just to continue what we did at the end yesterday. So, sitting in a relaxed way, relax any tensions in our body, our voice and our mind into the out breath. Then just stay present with yourself, with that sense that we are many different things. Notice how we are, how we become, as we observe ourselves, 'good', 'bad', 'stupid', 'intelligent'. All sorts of things are manifesting. Without blocking or editing, just give a welcome to ourselves – to all the many aspects of ourselves. We can do this for about ten minutes.

*[Meditation practice]*

OK, so that brings us to the end of our little time together. I'd like to thank our translator very much and our organiser for the work of setting it up. And also I would like to thank all of you for participating in this, I think, somewhat strange event.

In England at this time of the year we have Christmas pantomimes. Often there will be a cow, with two actors inside. Sometimes the actors are moving in many different directions, so our 'cow' has had psychotherapy and buddhism inside!