
Awakening in Buddhism and Psychotherapy

*A talk for Psychotherapists at Noûs, Scuola di Specializzazione in Psicoterapia
Cognitivo-Costruttivista, Milan*

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9th November 2012*

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Excerpts

...Thoughts, feelings and sensations have no energy of their own. They are like balloons. They arrive inflated with the unpredictable creativity of the winds of the open infinite hospitality of the ground of being. These arisings are already on the point of deflation, the point of vanishing, when we become conscious of them. If we don't blow more air into these balloons they won't float and fly, but generally when a thought comes we breathe our life-force into it, inflating it with our sense of its meaning, value and function...

...You cannot make solid ground in this world; it is a flow that never ends, there is no full stop. Life is just comma, after comma, after comma. Experience is movement. If you try to stop the river of experience you will only get trouble. If you want something stable and reliable you have to get to know your own awareness...

*...I remember when I was a teenager saying something to my mother about how she was with my father. She said, "James, what happens between your father and me is something you can never know because I am not married to your father, I am married to my husband. You call my husband 'father' but for me he's my husband and he is married to his wife. I am his wife but you call me 'mother.' These stories don't meet, so you will never know." **That was very helpful to me...***

Contents

Some basic premises of psychotherapy	2
Balancing dynamic movement with stability	5
Three basic principles for psychotherapy	7
General buddhist view	8
Three markers of conditioned existence	11
Bowlby and Buddhism on attachment	12
Mindfulness practice	13
Karma	16
Play and meditation	17

When we meet another person we already have agendas. These agendas are determined by the particular structure of our own ego, by our own history and also by our professional training and all the many things we have learned in our life.

The more we develop a professional view and a professional understanding the more there is a danger that we start each encounter by looking for something. Instead of being open we are looking for patterns and structures, and when we identify these patterns and structures we feel competent: *'I know how you are and I know I am capable. I can make sense of the human condition.'* This is the particular narcissistic gain of being a therapist and it can seem quite tempting. Yet it is unhelpful because we are filling the space of possibilities with our projections and thereby incorporating the other into the fantasy of our own existence.

So, can we become more available for the other as other given all our history, our tendencies, our likes and dislikes? Is it possible to think of being truly open to the other, of giving a heartfelt welcome which is not already flavoured or coloured in some way by our conscious and unconscious biases? This is one of the hopes of meditation. There would be little to gain by attempting to become open by emptying the mind of all thoughts and feelings. Rather it is by recognising our own condition, the familiar ways in which we situate ourselves, that we can start to be more spacious in relation to our own limitations. In this way we integrate the limit or the finite within the unlimited or infinite, thereby dissolving the seeming opposition between them.

Some basic premises of psychotherapy

Let's start by looking at some of the assumptions which are imbedded inside the general orientation of psychotherapy. Firstly there's a sense that our lives get tied in knots, that we become limited by particular swirls, particular repeated turns around fixed beliefs, fixed attitudes and fixed behaviours. Different schools describe this in different languages, thus from Freud we have the notion of the unconscious, operating on the basis of primary process thinking – a timeless zone in which great currents of energy, of libido, move according to their own dynamic which is not directly related to our conscious self. Within that interpretive frame, the task is to help the patient become more aware of the impact of the unconscious on their conscious life.

There are two key aspects to the unconscious in Freudian terms. The first is that the unconscious has a life of its own; it's not something that is going to go away and it will continue to impact on our lives. The second is that it operates as a kind of store in which we can hide or preserve aspects of ourselves which we cannot bear to be conscious of. This hiding is effected by repression where first of all we put something out of our mind and then we put out of our mind the fact that we have put that thing out of our mind. Thus the repressed material has a double knot sealing it and so it is as if it is not impacting us. But of course the reason we have repressed the material is because it is too powerful or too problematic for us to manage from our ego identity and so these repressed factors – the factors that we wish to avoid – have, for us, a particular density to them. Like a very dense planet they seem to exert a gravitational pull which distorts our conscious being in the world with others. The function of a Freudian analysis is to help the patient become more conscious of what has been repressed and to try to work through and find a way of accommodating that which was previously too difficult to bare. It is also a way of awakening to the fact that we human beings are very strange. We are not rational. We are very very weird. This implies that we should not trust ourselves.

§Yet we want to become psychotherapists. We want to get a piece of paper that says, *'You can trust me.'* There's a paradox to this in that you should only get your bit of paper that says, *'trust me'* when you know that you can't trust yourself, that you are basically untrustworthy. In order to affect this shift we have to install a question at the centre of our existence rather than an answer. Very often people come to see us because they are looking for an answer. Some of the time we help find answers of various kinds, but it is perhaps more important to help them live with a sense of not knowing. Uncertainty may be more useful, more ethical, more compassionate to oneself and to others than certainty. Now this is perhaps a rather strange idea.

It is helpful to see that our own ego is always tempted to move into the place of the dictator, the one with a clear agenda and the power to realise it. We like to feel competent, we like to know what is going on. Yet as

Carl Jung pointed out there are quasi-autonomous factors operating in us and around us. These constellations or complexes offer themselves to us and we get caught up in them without having made a conscious choice to do so. For example there is an archetypal presence which hovers around each mother. We can trace this back to Artemis, Demeter and beyond: the great earth mother, the source of our existence, the one on whom we can always rely. This symbol or archetypal presence evokes and sustains the fantasy that if only we can open ourselves to this fecund, rich, ever generous space we will be safe. And so we search for the presence of the great Mother in our own mother. That is to say we imagine that she is a golden key that will open the door to reveal the perfection of our existence. This is a key that is operating on the symbolic level. If only we can find a way of integrating ourselves with this symbolic domain then all the complexity of the pragmatic choice-making that we have to make on a daily basis can be resolved.

In this way there is the notion that somewhere other than in our ordinary selves, somewhere over the rainbow, there is the solution to our problems. These views indicate that in some way this other is more our self than we ourselves. That is to say my unconscious is the true depth of my being. Or in Jungian terms 'psyche' – which is the widest aspect of our psychological life, deeply influenced by a universal unconscious, a collective unconscious – is much more the centre of our life than our own normal ego sense of self.

Both of these foundational models of modern psychotherapy point to the decentring of our ordinary sense of self. They indicate that we need to deconstruct our fantasy that we can fully know ourselves, that we can define ourselves and that we exist as something knowable. So how can we integrate or bring together in collaboration the rational capacity to analyse situations and develop the clear knowledge that we need in order to hold our lives together and the disturbing fact that our rationality cannot introduce us to the widest expanse of our existence. The very tool that we use to make sense of our existence is being put into question by the process of trying to work out who we are. If you can't think about your life because some of it, perhaps its most important aspects, is hidden from rational thought, then how are you going to make any progress? Well, perhaps we need to access to hidden or dormant aspects of ourselves. How strange to have parts of ourselves that we don't know, when we are expected to be responsible agents.

Perhaps we have to use our rationality to decentre our rationality. This is like climbing a tree and sitting on a branch and then deciding to saw off part of the branch. However you're not quite sure where is the trunk so which part of the branch should you start sawing? If you saw off the side close to the trunk of the tree you're likely to fall. Hopefully some of you have experienced in your own therapy that you've been falling quite a lot. For it's that process of falling apart, of releasing the centripetal force that we usually operate with, which opens the way to new possibilities.

If we cease to align with our habitual beliefs about ourselves then what can we rely on? Different schools of psychotherapy point to different notions about how to 'improve' our existence. For example Cognitive Behavioural Therapy seeks to ground us in adaptive procedures. That is to say, we get into trouble because the ways in which we move towards the other and the ways in which we interpret what we receive from the world, are maladaptive. We're not in rhythm with the pulsations of the world and so we feel the world bumping into us, and when enter the social situations we find that we don't quite fit. As we rub against our situation this generates friction and heat that manifests as depression, anxiety, confusion and so on.

From this point of view, in order to make progress we have to stop listening to the music in our head and start to listen to the music of the world. We have to stop believing that we know what to do and to trust that the phenomenological field will provide us with what we need in order to formulate our movement as 'a being with others'. This involves a shift from resting within our core beliefs, the beliefs that generate the feeling of, *'This is me. This is how I am.'* Releasing this identification we start to see that the whole range of our mental life, all our thoughts, feelings, memories and sensations are merely transient phenomena. They are foundational to the fantasy we have of who we are, to the constructed identity that we habitually present to ourselves and others. This self-construct needs to be examined and put into question for the simple reason that our very survival requires us not merely to adapt to rules and regulations but to respond to an emergent field of experience. Rather than being definitions or expressions of our 'self', our thoughts, feelings, sensations, memories etc. are ingredients.

For example if you go to a pizzeria, the people who are preparing the pizza have many little pots of diverse ingredients. The person preparing the pizza has no particular fantasy about what should be done. They wait for the instruction. A customer selects a particular pizza and immediately the hands of the person making the pizza go off to this pot and that pot. It would be not very helpful if the chef were to say, *'Ah! Never in my life will I put these ingredients together on a pizza!'* The customer has decided according to the potential of the menu what they will choose. The person making the pizza just has to get the ingredients which fit this particular situation and put them on and pop it in the oven. The chef's own belief system is not required as the organising factor. It is the same for us.

Every day we make thousands and thousands of choices. Now to make a choice implies that there are various options. Why is it that we tend to have habitual directions in our choice-making? *'I choose to do these things because I am me. You are welcome to do what you want with your life, but I in my life I'm going to do this.'* With this sort of limiting definition we become very small. In reassuring ourselves, in comforting ourselves with the idea of the continuity of our own predictable identity, we blind ourselves to the richness of all the possible moves that are available in the world. Every day we see that other people do things that we don't do and we just think, *'Oh they do that because they are them, but I, being me, do something else.'* This is very interesting. How come they are able to do these things? *'I could not do these things, I would not do these things, but they do them.'* Now, they have two eyes, one nose and one mouth. I am also lucky enough to have two eyes, one nose and one mouth. So what is the fundamental difference that allows them to do things I don't do? *'Oh, it's just how they are. It's just how I am.'*

This answer is both very reassuring and grounded in stupidity. To say, *'Because I am what I am,'* is not very profound. This is just the public relations department broadcasting something about ourselves as a truth in order to avoid the work of curiosity, of examination and enquiry. As therapists we should be inquiring, *'Yes but why?' 'Why am I restricting myself?'* Of course outside the consulting room we continue to have our own prejudices, habits and so on. This is what makes us recognisable to our friends, families and so on. We all have our own way of walking, our posture, our gestures, our tone of voice by which we are immediately recognisable. These are our patterns and we don't have to change them. However, in the consulting room we are there as the servants of the other person. We are there to be available, to try to provide what the other needs, to try to meet them where they are in order to awaken the fullest possibility of contact.

If this is our task then our restrictions, our limitations, our defining beliefs are problematic. For my being me is not just a limitation on my freedom, but, because we are structured dialogically, it also imposes a restriction on the other person. Our defining and positioning of ourselves acts as an induction or an eliciting of the other into a corresponding positioning. All of us are very familiar with the games of adaptation. We find ourselves moving according to circumstances. Yet we move towards new situations not in a fresh way but by being hooked into familiar patterns of response. For example it's very normal for us to have anxieties around authority. When we were children we encountered authoritarian aspects of our parents or schoolteachers or churches. We have a desire for freedom but also an anxiety that we might be punished if we make a move towards that freedom. So if the therapist manifests an authoritarian structure – particularly from the position of being 'the one who knows', the expert, the professional – the patient may well adapt to that. For if that is a game or rhythm that they know, then to participate in it is reassuring as it protects them from having to investigate new possibilities of self-expression.

In therapy the familiar neurotic games are set up, enacted and then, hopefully, awakened to. But awakening to what is going on will require both parties to recognise the assumptions they are enacting. Can we find a way of doing therapy that avoids this endless staging of games? Can we be more aware of the particular games that we might get locked into and find a way of being with them so that we learn from them? This ongoing enquiry is central to our work and can support the possibility of something fresh occurring.

We are faced with the fact that we are always doing and showing something, for our being is performative. Through our bodies we indicate particular levels of interest or non-interest. The quality of our gaze, whether diffuse or attentive, whether we lean forwards or back, the shifts in our breathing, our gestures and so on are all micro-communications. We are embodied beings, our very presence in the room is influencing the co-emergent field. It would appear that this complexity is always present, whether we try to restrain it by applying rules or not.

The early development in Freud's practice generated the idea of the rule of abstinence. That is to say the analyst shouldn't engage in the patterns of ordinary social engagement. They shouldn't shake hands and should sit themselves slightly behind the couch in a position that would ordinarily be a bit spooky. If they go away on holiday and when they come back the patient asks, *'How was your holiday?'* this is met with silence. The idea is that by being as smooth a surface as possible, whatever marks are made would clearly be marks made by the patient and not by the analyst.

Later on this neutrality was seen to be an illusion, for we cannot but make an impact on the other nor avoid acting towards them from the impact they have on us. This counter-transference is the analyst's or therapist's own psychological material arising in reaction to the patient's transference. The transference arises from the stored yet unconscious patterns created by previous interactions. These patterns insist, seemingly with a life of their own, reiterating and impacting distortingly on the here and now.

These configurations are aspects of life – if brought to light they can inform our sense of what is occurring but they do not completely vanish. Manifestation, our being with others, is patterned. The question then is: can we allow this installation, this positioning, to occur without being so fully identified with it? That is to say, however we manifest can we hold this as lightly as possible, not trying to push the transient formation away or make it not happen, but rather nor merging into it, not fusing with it as the basis of our identity? The practice of meditation can be enormously helpful with this.

One of the fantasies we have as human beings is the notion of perfectibility, that we can become creatures that don't make mistakes. Well, part of becoming a therapist is to realise that *mis*-taking is inseparable from life. Mistakes are normal and they are vital because they highlight that actually we cannot know what to do. Our actions move forwards into a future that we don't yet know. This means that the human condition is essentially gambling because we don't know how the field of experience within which we are operating will reveal itself to us. This morning I set off very early from the hotel because of the danger of being stuck in the Milan traffic. There was not very much traffic so I arrived very early. This is normal in life – we don't know. We make some kind of prediction on the basis of previous experience but we don't know. Not knowing means that our relation with the world is going to have a little bit of a judder, a lack of ease. This is important to see because many of the people that we see, and perhaps we ourselves, are persecuted by the fantasy of perfectibility. We feel guilty, feel stupid because we can't have life on our terms, in ways that make us feel OK.

'Why can I never find a nice man to love me?' This is not an uncommon question. In fact this is the basis of a large part of my private practice – women aged thirty-something wanting a man to have babies with. *'Where are all the suitable men?'* How do we work out what is workable in a relationship? What is workability? It's not a fantasy. In order to make something work we have to make compromises, that is clear. But then the accountant in our head starts working: *'Well I did this and this and this and he only did that. That's not fair.'* So then you start fighting a little bit, trying to get justice and safety. But the other fights back, and then what's the point of being in a relationship where you always fight?

Such conflicts are common in daily life. We don't want to be exploited, and the only way to know how to avoid that is to keep an eye on what is going on. Yet if we do that too tightly we end up feeling aggrieved, cheated and betrayed. In seeing what is happening there is a possibility of change, of negotiating a better way of being together. Yet layered on to simple perception are a whole load of feelings and yearnings and fears; all the neurotic structures that we have developed from our early childhood. This mixture makes it very difficult to know, *'Is this ok?'* You can talk to your friends, *'He did this and that, oh what should I do?'* And they say, *'Ah, oh well, I would leave him.'* *'Yeah, but he's quite nice.'* How to know?

Balancing dynamic movement with stability

This is the heart of our situation. We have to find a sense of balance that allows us to work in a dynamic way with our actual situation rather than slipping into fantasies of entitlement. This dynamic path is referred to as 'the middle way' in Buddhism, the way that avoids the extremes of merging and avoidance. This means neither moving to the side of control, which makes everything very tight and grinding, nor going to the extreme of saying, *'Oh well, whatever happens if fine,'* when in fact it's not. The belief that all will be

well is a romantic dream that one can live in for a while, but sooner or later the anger and irritation starts to arrive and then there is disturbance.

We can see what our patients struggle with and what we also struggle with. In ordinary language we would say that it's a question of not knowing how to maintain our balance. Remember when you were a child learning to ride a bicycle? Perhaps at first you had little trainer wheels at either side or maybe a parent was holding the bicycle and running beside you, but sooner or later the little wheels come off and the parent has to step back and you have to find your own balance. Many of us will have scars on our knees because of this, because we tend to fall off. Finding that balance is quite difficult. Cycling is not the same as walking. Walking is much more stable, but of course when we watch infants of about eighteen months trying to walk we see that finding a sense of balance at that level is pretty difficult too. Balance requires the sense of, '*I am moving*'. With each step the toddler makes they are having to re-find their balance. Balance is something which is shifting all the time as we make micro-adjustments. That is to say you will not find stability while walking or riding a bicycle. That which is dynamic is not stable. One of the great problems from the ego point of view is that we want our situation to be stable, we want to have a sense that we know what is going on, we want to be sorted. But life itself is movement.

We might enter into therapy with the sense that we are going to work out our problems so that we won't make mistakes anymore. However, perhaps many of our problems are generated by a fundamental misunderstanding, the misunderstanding that says, '*our life can be sorted*'. Many of us probably have the fantasy that other people's lives are more sorted than our own. When you look around the room you can see the shape of many kinds of other people, you can see how they look. Yet you can't see your own shape in that way. When you look at someone you have a sense that they exist as something, that they are a coherent entity. But with our own bodies it's different. What does your back feel like? Perhaps there is a sensation for it's not a shape that is defined, it's a proprioception, a movement of sensations. You know you have feet, you know what size your feet are, but if you're not looking at your feet, what are they in this moment? Maybe just some sort of tingle, some sort of information of aliveness.

That is to say the very nature of our embodiment is dynamic, though the way we think about it creates the illusion of stability. Our bodies consist of processes: the heart is beating, the lungs are breathing, we are aware of the production of saliva in our mouths, we drink and then we have to pee, we eat and then we have to shit. This is to say we are tubes and pipes through which forces are operating; we have nerves, hormones, indeed our body is a communicative system. Even the tubes and organs are processes, unfolding patterns of change which are ignored when we conceptualise them as entities, as things in themselves. Our bodies are not fixed matter, but rather a ceaseless play, a movement, a patterning, a dance. So how could this be stable? But when we look at other people we don't see what's happening inside them. We just look at them and think, '*Oh, they have very nice hair. Where did they get those shoes?*' They seem to be somebody, persons who can be defined.

However with regard to ourselves there is often less certainty, an anxiety about who we are and how we could or should behave. Such uncertainty is often experienced as a sign that something is wrong, yet it is also an indication of the openness of our potential as it encounters the ever-shifting field of interactive experience: '*What will I say? Will they like me?*' One of the blessings of becoming a therapist is that you learn that everybody is uncertain. With this insight we can start to relax our own self-persecution, and help our patients to realise the normality and ordinariness of the fact that they are moving in a world of uncertainty. The fundamental mark or defining characteristic of our human situation is unpredictability. We don't really know who we are. We're not quite sure what to do with our lives. These uncertainties can generate anxiety and a retreat into comforting fantasies but they can also lead us to some very big questions. Does life have a purpose? Is there some general pattern in the universe towards which we could align ourselves? And if we were to do that then might our lives settle? One of the functions of religion is to provide reassuring answers to such questions. Religions offer propositions, dogmas, and a sense that there is something that we should do with our life, whether it's to glorify God, believe in Jesus Christ or gain enlightenment. This kind of metaphysical orientation gives some sense of liberation from the restricted state we find ourselves in. Relying on this we are shifting the anxious beliefs of the ego into a more stable belief in an established system which has been running for thousands of years.

However, a belief is a belief. We know that psychotherapy is built up of belief systems. Gestalt therapists operate from a set of beliefs which are different from those of CBT therapists. We find something to believe in and then believe that it is true. How do we know what we should believe in? Very often we choose our beliefs the way we choose our clothes. We get a sense of what colours and shapes might suit us and then we buy clothes or beliefs that fit our image of ourselves according to the selection available in our local shops, our families, our schools and so on. Similarly we can train in a system of therapy that somehow fits us. It doesn't mean that this system is 'true' or 'is the best', it just means, *'It suits me.'* Is that a very stable base for planning the shape of our existence?

Meditation offers a different perspective. Is it possible to have an experience which is not resting on a layering of thoughts, beliefs and assumptions? This calls us to an openness to what is occurring, allowing experience to reveal itself with minimal application of organising concepts. Thus we don't have to think of people in terms of livers and kidneys or of an unconscious. When we meet a friend in the street we say, *'How are you?'* We don't say, *'How are your kidneys today?'* unless we know that they have a problem with them. In the same way if you're thinking about the unconscious, about neurosis, about childhood patterns and so on, this can hide the immediacy, the given-ness of our being with the other. We can simply observe how we are with the other, how we mutually influence each other and how this brings about the unique specificity of this moment. We respond to the person through our various aspects, through our body, our voice and our mind. We respond from our head, memories, thoughts, interpretations and so on. We respond with our voice in terms of what we feel we can say to that particular person as they are now in this situation. You have probably found that some of the people in your training are easier to talk to than others. With some people you can talk openly, with others you might have to think a little more about what to say, and with yet others you might find that you have nothing to say.

This is very interesting, this is the given-ness of our encounter with the other. Of course you can manifest your social skills and make some effort to have a conversation. But before you apply that social learning you find yourself opening or not in your genitals, in your belly, through the heart, the throat and the mind. It is this pulsation of availability which largely determines what is possible. When we meet different people different energy fields are set up, doors open or close. This is what we have to work with in therapy and in life.

Three basic principles for psychotherapy

Carl Rogers is famous for setting out three basic principles for psychotherapy. The first is called **Unconditional Positive Regard**, in which we meet the other wholeheartedly. We wish them well: whatever shape they are, we open to them and welcome them without reservation. All the nonsense and the funny stories, whatever they are caught up in has developed through time and situation. It is contingent, adventitious, and therefore it is not their defining essence. What is the essence of a person? Their potential. Their potential which is not yet awakened and realised. So fundamentally the position of the therapist is to open to the potential openness of the other and believe in their basic goodness.

The second principle is **Empathic-Attunement**, to be as close as possible to the lived contouring of the other's patterning of their body, voice and mind. So although one cannot feel what the other feels, one can at least receive what is manifesting as their way of being without entering into judgement or interpretation. This is a kind of aesthetic responsiveness, a being available to receive what is there. Just as when we go to an art gallery or to a dance performance, the primary aim is not to make sense of what is going on but to open ourselves so that we can be touched and moved. We receive the movement and the colours and the gestures of the dancer rather than analysing them or trying to understand them. That is the heart of empathic-attunement. Some people have suggested that you can feel what the other feels and get very excited by the idea of mirror-neurons: *'Oh, my brain is vibrating the way their brain is vibrating. Therefore I know what they know.'* But is this true?

Our existence is infinite. All that you know, all that you have experienced is not far away. This personal richness interacts with the current experiential field, forming the infinite variety of the ingredients some of which come together in each moment. Nobody else can cook your pizza! You yourself have your unique experience which is always just this moment in this context. For example, you may go to a dance performance with a friend and it's very beautiful and you find yourself crying and you look at your friend

and they are also crying. At the end you say, *'Oh, that was incredible.'* They say, *'Yes.'* Then you go and have a drink and you start to talk a little bit about the performance and the more you talk about the performance you realise that their experience was not the same as yours. Whatever you receive in the immediacy of being there with the performance is beyond words; it eludes description as it is. And yet we have such an urge to communicate, to share, that we give ourselves over to the illusion that our description is not really different from the thing itself. However once you start to say something, you're telling a story. You're telling *your* story, which brings in all the bits of your life, and they're telling *their* story. These stories are not the same, and so the direct experience in which you felt that you shared the moment is now refracted through your separate stories, leaving each of you in your separate world.

Empathic-attunement is a kind of paradox. The closer we get to someone the more we realise they are ungraspable. Our energies can vibrate in great similarity for a moment, perhaps when we're cooking together with someone, or dancing or making love. Yet the other is other and so we have to be aware of our colonising desire to appropriate the world of the other as if it were the same as our own. We will never directly understand other people. We might understand some of their story: *'Having heard what you have said about your childhood I can see why you might be behaving in this way now.'* That we can do yet our comment is mediated through our own story. The useful fruit of empathic-attunement is our ethical response into the unfolding shared field of experience rather than the knowledge, interpretation or understanding that we might feel we have gained.

The third principle is **Congruence** which means to be aware of when you lose your own ground, and then to return to it. If you tilt too much towards the service of the other, really being for them, you may find that you have not been for yourself. This creates a perverse bias in the therapy. For example sometimes we meet clients or patients who like to talk a lot. They don't want us to do anything except nod. We're not allowed to go to sleep and we're not allowed to speak. At a certain point we might have to say something: *'I'm finding it difficult to stay present with you and your stream of words.'* We are implying, *'I exist as well as you. In your self-preoccupation you have forgotten that I am here as a person. This is not good for you and it is not good for me.'*

Babies can show a similar degree of self-absorption. The baby wakes up at two in the morning, eyes very bright, looking around, *'Let's play.'* You want to say to them, *'It's two o'clock!'* but babies don't know about time. So in some situations we have to be very open. We don't expect babies to have sophisticated interpersonal skills. But with an adult patient if they are so disregarding of the other person then this is a real problem and, from this point of view, the therapist needs to say, *'I also exist. I am here with you.'* This is not an egoistic invasion of the space of the patient, but rather a reminder that we share space. We are social creatures, our identity is always manifesting within the phenomenological field.

General buddhist view

Generally speaking in Buddhism we look at the different paths in terms of the view, the meditation, the activity and the result. In the most ancient school of Tibetan Buddhism, the Nyingmapa, we have nine different vehicles or approaches to practice. These can be grouped into four styles of practice. The first is called the Hinayana or Little Vehicle and it relates to the Buddha's first teaching which he gave soon after his enlightenment. In this teaching he pointed to what are known as The Four Noble Truths – Suffering, The Cause of Suffering, The Ending of Suffering and The Means to End Suffering.

If you wanted to attract a lot of people and initiate a new exciting method of human development, declaring that life is full of suffering might not be the best strategy! But that is what the Buddha did. He pointed out that we all experience suffering, particularly that of birth, old age, sickness and death. Often in the middle period of our lives things go quite well; we might be physically healthy and our lives seem to be expanding but if we are lucky enough to live longer, gradually our health declines and many of the aspects of our lives start to collapse. Children leave home, you retire and it raises the big question of, *'What is the meaning of my life?'* The Buddha was of course teaching in India where there was already a richness of cosmological concepts, in particular, a sense that this world that we live in is created by our own karma. That is to say, we take on our particular shape according to the results of actions performed in previous lives. According to this view, within the structure of our world there are different domains. There are hell realms, realms of hungry ghosts, animals, humans, envious gods and happy gods and above them some

formless realms. When you die you can be reborn in any of these places according to the ripening of your karma. Life follows life and the profound need is to find a path to liberation from this unsettled and unsettling movement from realm to realm – the movement known as samsara.

In some ways the modern view, that we only have one life, is quite reassuring for when it's done it's done. The end. However, if you have the idea that when you die you're going to be reborn somewhere else and that you can be reborn as a frog or a dog then this is going to reframe the daily concerns of our familiar existence. Here's the question, *'How could I be a dog? I am me!'* OK, so what makes me, me? The arising of certain patterns which are held in place due to causes and conditions. If the causes and conditions change then there can be subtle or gross changes to the form of our existence – for example we become ill, or need glasses – our situation is unstable. The uses of buildings change, national boundaries change. All of us were once children, going to school, having our friends, rushing home to watch something on the television. Now our lives are different. The person that we were is gone. Some echoes of the past run through us but we can't go back. We now have this big body, when once we had a little body. The little body is not the same as the big body. Similarly, when we die there's the possibility to take on another body for this body is not a fixed thing, it's changing all the time.

What we take to be our stability is essentially a mental construct which we can continue to apply as long as there is the continuity of the forces of preservation. It is this that creates for us the fantasy of our enduring particular identity. For example, we grew up after the war, so we haven't had a war in our own country in our lifetime. We hear stories about the war but it's not our direct experience. We've also lived during years when the economy has been quite strong but now there is a decline and perhaps it will not recover. Maybe we will become quite poor again, this is possible. There is no guarantee that just because you are European you will have money. In the past many Europeans have been starving, have had no shoes on their feet. What is stopping that happening again? Social policies. Yet the social policies require a funding and the funding is dynamic. It's trade, it's commerce, a movement and if the movement goes down there's less profit. Less profit, less tax. Less tax, less government money. Less money for social policy. So what we take to be the case is not fixed because of social justice, it's based on things like the state of the American economy, the Chinese economy and so on.

In Buddhism this is called **Dependent Co-origination**. This term indicates that, on the basis of this, that arises, and when that arises, it arises in relation to its cause. If the cause changes then the result will change. For example, we see that now there are fewer fish in the sea. We also find that there are many kinds of fish mutations being caught by fishermen, because industrial pollution is bringing genetic malformation in fish stocks. As people throw plastics into the sea, small grains of it go into the fish, into the whales and so on. Actions have consequences. It is easy to think, *'Oh the water is pure, the river will wash away all the dirt from the factory.'* That makes sense inside the frame of having a factory which has rubbish which you want to get rid of. The factory owner likes to go home in the evening and eat some delicious fish. The fish he is eating is bought with the money which is generated by polluting the river which kills off the fish.

Everything is linked together. We can understand this in terms of modern ecological thinking. That is to say, no aspect of our world is self-existing. The existence of each 'thing' in the world is dependent on the existence of other 'things'. This indicates that there is no inherent or internal essence in anything. For example, here beside me is a table. It's pretty obvious to all of us that this is a table. But you can also sit on this table. If you're a child, you might want to hide underneath the table. You ask your mum for some cloth and you drape it over the table. Then you have a nice little house you can play in. So it's obvious to the child that this thing is a resource for playing. What we see depends upon our vision, our assumptions.

We have the vision of an adult. Although we once had the vision of a child, probably now when we look at this table we don't think about playing underneath it. We understand that it is a table because we have learned to apply this concept and live according to its consequences. We have become more limited. If you turn the table upside down, you have a wonderful boat. You can sit on it, and someone can push you around the room. This object can become anything if we can play with it. But once we decide, *'It is a table,'* then the limited concept locks on to the open potential of the appearance and restricts it. In this way, on the basis of our wanting definite knowledge, we close ourselves to the potential of the situation. In our

culture, as a kind of safety-valve, we have created a special kind of person, the artist. The artist is able to turn the table upside down and call it a boat and sell it for ten thousand euros! We also have imagination, but usually our imagination is projected out into the special people who are given social permission to do these unusual things while the rest of us just plod along like cows in a field.

Here you can see something quite paradoxical. Our freedom, our potential, our creativity are all constrained by the fact that our definitions are conventional, are a shared social agreement. They carry the strength of habitual repetition yet have no internal defining truth. Believing something to be the case, we take it for granted and act on the basis of it being a 'fact'. We then feel supported and reassured by the beliefs which limit us. You can see how this applies clinically when patients have core negative beliefs about themselves. For example, someone might think, *'I'm unlovable. I'm stupid. I never pass exams. I don't know how behave in public.'* These beliefs, which have been built up due to causes and conditions, start to feel as if they express an innate truth. They start to feel as if they are as much a fixed part of us as our own bones, heart or liver. Some event which occurred at a particular moment in time, for example finding it difficult to learn to read, has been distilled into a core defining belief that, 'I am stupid'. This belief has then been reinforced by our interpretation from similar situations and this further invests our patterns of behaviour with energy. This construct then comes to feel as if it is an eternal truth: it has always been true, it is absolutely true now and it will always be true... Wrapped in that kind of formulation you are a complete prisoner. In therapy this is one of the things we try to tease out and re-contextualise in terms of the person's experience. We want to loosen up the identification and help the person see its historic development.

What Buddhism would add to this through the notion of karma is that these causal forces and tendencies are factors operating due to the pattern formations developed in previous lives. This is a radical view, for it says that the forces which put pressure on you when you were small, which moulded and shaped you into the distortions which continue as your neurotic fixations, were not due to the faults of the people around you. Even if they were bad or lazy they are not the true cause of your suffering. This view suggests that the fact that you were born in that particular family, with these parents, these siblings, and were sent to these schools, is the ripening of causes which were laid down by yourself. So rather than blaming your mother and your father or the teachers in the school or the children at school who bullied you, or the partner who betrayed you, it encourages us to see that we are at the centre of the causal matrix generating experience. Thus my own karmic agency carrying its own specific distortions moves in the world with particular twists and turns which set up our spiralling patterns so that I find myself born into this particular family and my life develops in relation to these specific interactions.

That is to say, my parents are aspects of my life. This does not mean that they are mere narcissistic extensions of my existence. Neither subject nor object is the sole cause – both are operating within a coemergent interactive field. Rather than saying my dad is like this or my mum is like that and because they are this way I have had to suffer becoming like this, we look to our own deep causal activity. Hence, *'This field of experience, both the subject side which I take to be me and the object side which I take to be the people around me, all of this is my experience. This is my karma. All that happens to me is the fruit of my individual agency and yet I am not omnipotent for this agency is enacted within the veils and lenses of the limitations of my embodied existence. Whoever I see walking down the street, the weather I encounter, everything is my experience.'*

This is not the insane narcissistic fantasy of *'Oh, everything is the creation of my mind by which, I, as an individual ego, am making it all happen like a mad magician.'* It is not like that. Rather it is that what I take to be me, I, me, myself, my memories, my thoughts, my feelings, all are situational and each entire situation is my experience. For example, I'm sitting in a chair which is made of plastic; it bends in a way that hurts my back. This chair is my luck – it's my situation. I can blame the chair yet the chair and my way of sitting arise together. My posture arises in relation to the chair, just as we walk on the city pavement in a manner different from when we are out on the hills. When you go into a building with stairs you climb the stairs, this is obvious. Why are you climbing the stairs? Because the stairs are there. Your muscles are contracting and expanding in order to lift one leg and then another leg. The stairs are making your muscles contract.

Our ego story is, *'I am climbing the stairs.'* The actuality is that the stairs make my muscles move. I am the puppet of the stairs, because if the stairs weren't there I wouldn't be doing this. This is very important from

the Buddhist point of view, because it highlights the way we tend to tell stories which centre on ourselves, *'I am doing this. I am choosing to do this. I choose to climb the stairs.'* The fact that there are stairs and that I need to go up them, results in the stairs causing me to move in a particular way. The shape of the chair makes me sit in a particular way. That is to say, what I take to be myself, my separate autonomous, independent individuality is actually inseparable from the environment. We are always co-emergent with what is going on around us and this emergent quality indicates the nature of each dynamic situation.

Three markers of conditioned existence

Buddhism highlights three markers of conditioned existence. The first marker is **suffering**. Much of our suffering is related to the fact that whatever we try to achieve will, because it is in the world, be influenced by factors outside of our control. If you have a garden, you will have weeds. You can't have a garden without weeds. You might decide that you don't want to have weeds in your garden. But then you have to put plastic all over the garden. This means it's not very nice to sit in the garden, so you take off the plastic and in come the weeds. It's like that. Our life is in a shared environment and hence the fantasy of our will to power is frequently frustrated by changes in the wider field.

The second marker is **impermanence**. Everything which is created will move towards destruction. Our own bodies are moving towards destruction. We start to experience the signs of ageing even when we are quite young. I'm amazed when women aged twenty put anti-wrinkle cream on their faces. Maybe it's a preparation for the future? But there is a concern, *'Oh I will change and the changes will not be so good. The high time of my life was eighteen.'* That's a bit sad. Impermanence means everything we see, feel, touch, think is changing.

Here we have a table. The table has not been running around, for although we say the table has legs, they don't really move. So we can say, *'The table is a table, is a table, is a table.'* It's not changing. How do you know this is a table? Because you have learned to call it a table. Where is the table-ness of the table? Is it here in one part of it, or perhaps in another part of it? You have the concept of table which you habitually put on this object. The table is not able to tell you it's a table. You tell this object that it is a table and because you are educated people you can rest at ease in your confidence that it is legitimate to call this a table. You don't have to worry, *'Oh, maybe it's not a table. Maybe if I call it a table other people will say I'm stupid.'* Free of these anxieties, we have absolute confidence this is a table. We believe that we have accurate knowledge of what exists out there. But how do we gain access to this table? What we have access to is light. Light comes from the lamps in the ceiling and is reflected off the surface of the table and comes into our eyes, and that information is organised by our consciousness and we start to make sense of what is there. That is to say, we are constructing the table as we look at it. This is something you learn to do. Small children don't have a concept of table. They are able to do something with the object without 'knowing what it is'. They can push it and climb on it and so on. They see that it is a shape and a colour, that's very simple. On to that we have added, through our education, the conviction that this is a table.

I would suggest to you that this is an interpretation and because we sit inside the interpretation, because we believe it, we no longer have to truly look, since we already know. The lighting in this room is fairly stable now but earlier when the window was open and some direct sunlight was coming in, the colour which was revealed to us in looking at the table was slightly different. If we switch off the electric light what we will see when we look at it will be different. That is to say, although what we directly experience will be different under different conditions, we will continue to add, *'this is a table'* on to what we see. Thus whether it's day or night, we continue to believe that *'this is a table'*. If we came in the middle of the night and it was completely dark and we couldn't see the table, we would know that there's still a table here.

This is a very interesting phenomenon. One of the basic questions in the Indian philosophical tradition is, *'If a tree falls in a forest and nobody hears it falling, does it make a sound?'* We know abstractly, 'objectively', that of course it makes a sound, but sound is an experience and if there is no experiencer is there any experience? What we call a table is a potential, a potential which shows 'itself' differently according to different circumstances such as the amount of light which is shining on 'it', whether 'it' is draped with a table cloth or according to the mind of the person who is looking at 'it'. That is to say, fundamentally what

you 'get' is an experience. Whether or not there is a truly existing table we can never know, because what we get is our own interpretation. This is radical.

You might have the experience of having a love story with someone and after some time you decide that this person is terrible. They're really, really horrible. They make me really unhappy. They lie to me and they cheat me. This feels completely true. Then you're left with this strange question: how is it that they have friends? How come these friends don't see the real truth about this person? Indeed how come I didn't see it when I was first with them? Well, it's like the table. Our sense of the person is an interpretation. On the basis of your experience of that person, for you they are terrible and you are convinced that that is the truth about them. But other people are having a different experience of 'them'.

This indicates the third marker, the **absence of inherent self-nature** in all phenomena including ourselves. What we call the truth is actually a contingent opinion. It is the view from here. How I am situated in myself, in my circumstances, influences how I see the world. There is no intrinsic defining essence to any phenomena. We are influenced by the time of year. We often see objects differently in the summer time from in the winter, as the length of the day and the amount of sunlight influences our mood, energy and interests. If you're female you are likely to be influenced by your menstrual cycle. You can be influenced by your age, by whether you've been drinking a lot of alcohol, by when you last ate food, by so many things. You might think, *'Oh, last night I drank too much. I don't feel right today. I don't feel like myself.'* But what is this 'right', what is this stable self that you have? Maybe this is a fantasy?

I hope you can see the relevance this way of viewing experience might have for psychotherapy. We give our interpretations about ourselves and about other people and these interpretations, although lacking any enduring validity, very much determine how we behave.

One of the key founders of modern Cognitive Behavioural Therapy is a man called Aaron Beck. He developed a very simple triangle to account for depression, referred to as 'the cognitive triad of depression'. He said that if this equilateral triangle is in place then it will install the experience of depression. Each corner of the triangle represents a belief. The first is: I am worthless. The second is: nothing around me is good, and the third is: nothing good will happen in the future. If these three are in place then you're likely to feel depressed because there is no basis for hope inside yourself, outside yourself or in the future.

The person who is trapped in this feels it to be true. If they come to see us we say, *'Oh, hang on a minute are you sure this is true? You told me that last weekend you were out with some friends. If you're a really horrible person, how come you have these friends? They must see something good in you.'* *'Oh I think they just pity me, they're nice people who put up with me, but they know I'm terrible.'* You have all probably had that kind of conversation, where every time you've tried to present some contradictory information, the person explains it away. They feel they have to because they're defending the 'truth' that is defining their existence and you're trying to put that truth into question. It is as if you are offering to cut off the legs that they are standing on. Why would anyone agree to that?

Bowlby and Buddhism on attachment

What is it that binds us to identification with propositions which actually don't have much basis in truth? In Buddhism this binding force is called attachment and has a very different meaning from John Bowlby's attachment theory.

Bowlby suggests that healthy attachment helps a child develop a sense of independence and freedom. This is true in terms of a normal developmental cycle. However the objects that we often attach to are unreliable and the paradox in Bowlby's formulation is that secure attachment is actually the state of not being attached. That is to say that if you're lucky enough to develop a secure attachment you feel grounded and settled in yourself. You have resilience, you're able to engage in a playful relationship with the world, you can experience difficulties and come back to yourself and find your balance – all of which is actually about not being dependently attached anymore. If we go back to the example discussed earlier about how to ride a bicycle, secure attachment in Bowlby's terms is actually having a sense of balance, feeling the line of gravity running through you, being able to feel when you move out of that balance and then being able to act in a way that returns you to balance. The other forms of attachment that he describes, insecure and

so on, are problems of not finding your balance. Thus the person who has an insecure attachment tends to move between avoidance and an unrealistic dependency, and in moving between these extremes they don't find the middle point of being relaxed and grounded in themselves in context.

However in Buddhism the concept of attachment points to our habit of engaging with an appearance which is moving and changing and without true essence, and fixing on it as if it were a really existing entity which was stable and reliable. For example, you might recognise, *'Oh my mum is getting old.'* Who is getting older? *'My mum. She's my mum.'* So the fact that she is getting older doesn't really interrupt us in thinking, *'This is my mum.'* The symbolic identification with this person as having a particular function for you continues across time as if she was always the same. If you have a reasonable relation with your mum, then, in the language of object relations, she's a good object in your mind and this continues as a psychological presence which helps to keep you afloat.

Where is this enduring good object? It seems to be out there, as her, but is this really the case? Outside, the actual person is getting old – they're not able to do the things they did with you when you were small – but you still think, *'This is my mum.'* In this way, the mental construct invested with memories, feelings, with a whole complex set of identifications, has been cut adrift from the actual situation of the person in the world. This is why when somebody comes to die, even if they're quite old, people still get shocked. It's very common to experience, *'Oh I knew they were getting sick, I knew they were old but I was so surprised when they died.'*

The internal matrix of interpretation, the internal object relation, has been the actual object of identification and the person out there in the world was just a kind of prop to hold that in place. So when they die, it's not just that this outer person has died, but the framework holding that person in your mind – which is holding you in place – is given a severe jolt. The felt sense that my mum is a kind of duvet I can wrap around myself, who guarantees the safety of my existence, is then exposed to us as a fantasy, because this person has died. How could they die? We are shocked; it seems so inconceivable, so unnatural.

In this way we can see that what we refer to as 'the symbolic' becomes, for us, something eternal, something outside of time. Thus a mental function which presents by reiteration, is taken to be an enduring map, even although the actual territory is always changing. The map can appear to be reliable because it's an abstraction, a mental construct, and not a concrete experience in the world.

This is what you see at the heart of neurosis. Every neurosis is a clinging to the truth of the map and an ignoring of the territory. In psychotherapy we try to help the patient redraw their map and to move if possible, from reliance on maps towards a more direct, spontaneous participation in the evolving field which is our actual existence.

Mindfulness practice

In this first level of Buddhism, the so-called 'small vehicle', we develop a sense that, *'All that I imagined the world to be, is not secure. Things are not as reliable as I thought, therefore I have to be careful.'* This is the basic view out of which mindfulness practices arise. Mindfulness means not relying on your map or interpretation, but looking directly and seeing what is happening without being distracted by thoughts about it. In the Buddhist tradition mindfulness is supported by two practices, Shamatha and Vipassana.

Shamatha means calming the mind. This is developed by focusing our attention on the breath as it goes in and out or by resting the gaze on some fixed prop like a pebble or a small statue of the Buddha or something like that. Then when we find that our attention has wandered off into a feeling or thought, we very gently bring it back on to our chosen focus. Through that we come to see just how distracted we usually are. Again and again we have to go back to settling on our object of focus. This practice unites two aspects, intention and attention. We decide, *'I am going to focus on my breath.'* This involves discipline, a shaping of myself in commitment to this object. Then we mobilise that intention to the task of keeping our attention on whatever we have decided to focus on.

The other basic practice is **Vipassana**, which means clear vision or seeing clearly. It builds on the calm state of focussed attention by using our one-pointed attention to track through the body, attending to the

simplest, most direct presentation of our experience. Rather than relying on habitual interpretation to make sense of what is going on, we allow the raw phenomena to present themselves.

For example, if you have a sore shoulder and tell a friend they might say, *'Oh that sounds terrible.'* *'Yeah, it started aching last night and I don't know what is wrong and so I put some cream on it.'* This gives us a storyline similar to, *'this is a table'*, as if something is really there. We know what is happening: 'my shoulder is sore', yet what is actually occurring? Some sensation is arising and we have taken it to be a sign that something is wrong with a part of our body. When you do the vipassana meditation, you move your focused attention from the end of your nostrils up to the top of your head and then gradually scan down through your body right to the soles of your feet and back up again. Up and down, up and down. Each time you come to your shoulder you attend to what is there as it presents itself. What is there? Sometimes it might feel very heavy and maybe sometimes it feels hot. Sometimes there might be a heavy feeling, at another time, a hot stabbing sensation. All of these diverse sensations can be packed together into the story of, *'My shoulder is sore'*. If you say to a friend, *'Oh I have this scratchy, heavy, hot, burny, funny thing in here,'* they are likely to look confused. So we tell them in a way that makes sense, we tell them a comprehensive story that confirms us both as intelligent people. Social meaning resides in how we make the package and yet the package hides the actual phenomenology and cuts us off from the immediacy of experience.

The actual phenomena are arising and passing. They present themselves, they are impactful, yet they are not stable. To see this is to see clearly, is vipassana. *'My shoulder is sore.'* I can say this in the morning and again in the evening and it seems as if a single state has been present all along. It's sore. But what has actually been happening is a whole range of different kinds of sensation. If we carefully attend we start to see the basic ingredients out of which we cook the dish of communication. When we're in ordinary communication with our friends we're cooking, we're preparing a tasty dish of meaning within the semiotic web. The actual is inexpressible, so we're sharing stories. This is not unhelpful socially yet it helps if we can see that each story is an elaboration of the raw material, and the raw material is impermanent and ungraspable. Whereas when we generate a storyline we create the illusion of there being something graspable and this reinforces our sense of identity and agency.

This can have a lot of implications for therapy. For example, it would influence how we help a patient explore the nature of their depression. If you start with the assumption that the depression exists, you might ask, *'How long have you been depressed? Is there a history of depression in your family? Is your mother depressed? Did anything significant in your life happen just before you found that you were depressed?'* These are all very interesting questions, yet they all operate on the basis that there is this thing called 'depression' which is both something that the patient has and also something which has the patient. But if we enquire, *'Can you tell me about how you experience what you are calling depression? What actually occurs for you?'* this promotes attention towards the flow of experience and away from habitual narratives about the experience.

We might ask the person to let the feelings and sensations speak through their body. *'What impact is it having on your breath? Can you be with how you are breathing at the moment? What's happening with your gaze? How does it feel if you make eye contact with me?'* Through this attentive, rather than cognitive, enquiry they can become more directly aware of how they are constructing the story of *'I am depressed'* out of these various moments.

It's not wrong to say, *'Of course you're depressed.'* That is one level of communication. If we couldn't speak in that way we'd become almost autistic. However, in having the story we also need to hold in mind its ingredients. Now this is easier if you are making a salad, because the ingredients put together in a salad can be quite easily identified. If you're making something in the oven like lasagne then it's different, because the heat brings about a transformation. The various flavours run together to create a composite taste. The function of being mindful in the clinical setting is to help the person to eat the raw food of direct experience. Every time you cook experience you kill off a lot of its vitamins. Let's stay closer to the freshness of your experience and then we can see the process through which you construct the story. You're welcome to have the story. You need it, but you need also to know that the story is a story, because if you get caught in the story and take it to be true then you will lose your clarity.

This small vehicle approach is concerned with renunciation. It involves being careful about how we proceed in the world. In a sense it's about recognising, *'I can't trust myself. I have a tendency to get lost.'* One of the painful things about learning meditation is that it shows you just how easily you get lost. When we're wandering around chatting and looking at everything we seem quite clear and we know what's going on. However once we start to focus our attention on our breath, we find that this simple task is incredibly difficult for again and again we slip away from it. Although we say, *'my mind'* it's not the same as saying, *'my hand'*. I have quite a lot of control over my hand, because it's my hand. I can't control your hand, but this one I can control. Grammatically, *'my hand'*, *'my mind'*, would indicate that they are both *'my'* possessions. So if I can control my hand, how come I can't control my mind? This is a very interesting question. What is the nature of our mind? Our mind does not function as a personal possession and yet we talk of it as if it were a personal possession.

Clinically this is important, because people often struggle against situations they find themselves in, as if they should have mastery over outer and inner events. It is as if whatever is happening, shouldn't be happening to them. *'I don't know why I feel so anxious, I mean it's really stupid, there's no reason for me to be anxious. You know, usually when I think about what's going to happen I understand everything yet I feel anxious.'* That's not an unusual experience. From the Buddhist point of view, this arises because we don't have any clarity about the actual nature of our mind. We imagine that we, an autonomous agency, can control it the way we learn to control our bodies. Soldiers can learn to march up and down, they can learn to stick their bayonets in people and cut their guts out. These are things that we normally don't do. Yet all kinds of discipline can be established, habits can be over-ruled and the body can be co-ordinated in precise ways. But perhaps the mind itself cannot?

In terms of training in psychotherapy, if you really look at yourself and allow the actuality of your lived situation to reveal itself then you can see that the mind is not at all like the body. The mind is something quite mysterious. It's not entirely chaotic, nor is it rational and controlled. Although it is ungraspable in itself it seems to move through manifesting patterns. It has rhythms and we can find a way of being with these. That is to say, you can learn to put yourself in the way of the clarity of your mind.

Let's say you go to a party and some music is playing and you think, *'Oh. Who's going to dance to that?'* Then you hear the first chords of some song you like. The heart feels a little light, the body wants to move, and you find yourself swaying with the music. You don't make yourself move, because that would be very artificial. Rather you receive the music; you are pervaded by the music and the music brings you into the movement. You're both active and passive, and this experience gives us an image for the nature of our relationship with our mind. Our ego self, our active agent self, the one who can make things happen, is also passive and receptive to the cues which are coming from the environment and the whole field of experience – both the aspects which appear to be the *'subject'* and the aspects which appear to be the *'object'* – is revealed by the clarity of our awareness. We are both the finite engaged subject, the one who acts and is acted upon, and the open awareness which is not finite or definable. We are both nothing in particular and this concrete particular moment of subjectivity. But what we are not is a continuous entity of definable, reliable subjectivity, a knowable, essential person or self.

If we receive the world as openly as possible through our senses and we're free of our habitual driven responses, we can find ourselves moving in a way that fits the situation, and I would suggest to you that this is the basis for non-violent psychotherapy. We're not seeking to impose some structure on the patient. We're attempting to be open to participating with them in a mood which is co-emergent.

There is no concrete enduring substance to the personality, rather we are a multitude of different voices, different energy streams of the potential of the mind. In therapy we tend to look at these voices or self-aspects from a developmental stance, seeing them as works which have largely been internalised from the environment, from parents, school, novels, films. Our personality emerges dialogically as part of the ongoing conversation of the culture we are born into. Many voices come out of our mouths, voices which both create and are expressions of the many aspects which form the patterns of our co-emergent identity. So who is the real inhabitant of our body? These voices are like little pulses of energy, impactful yet without intrinsic substance. Each of them carries a particular pattern or constellations of belief. They have their own capacity to mobilise, and their specific limits of activity. In this view the *'self'* is a potential devoid of specific

form yet able to manifest a multitude of transient forms in collaboration with the vagaries of the unfolding environment. Aspects of our potential are evoked and briefly become figural but then recede to merge in the energy of the ground potential.

When a small baby encounters the world they bring to this a capacity for selectivity. Their parents are also selective. What we call secure attachment arises when there is some degree of harmony between the patterns of selectivity of the child and the patterns of selectivity of the parents and the people in their environment. If that harmony is absent then many difficulties occur. The child feels unseen and misunderstood by the parents. The parents are thinking, *'How did we have a child like this? I don't know why they behave like this? It doesn't make any sense to me.'* If the expectations of the parents are rigid and imposed the infant will have to adapt in order to survive yet with mounting anxiety, irritation and eventually hopelessness. The rigidity of the parents' narrow range of voices is mimicked by the child – or they may go in the opposite direction into full-scale rebellion. And if the parents have a very wide range of voices which arise and shift unpredictably then again the child may mimic or move in the opposite direction towards creating their own structures and sense of order.

However, if the parents have a wide range of voices which arise in accordance with the mood and needs of the infant then the infant can also explore not just the range of their own potential voices, but how and where they might be presented in order to promote the connectivity necessary for survival. Optimally this is not based on conscious choice but arises rather from tuning into feeling participatory connection with the environment. With this the child experiences themselves as belonging, as being part of a wider field of shared experience which includes them, welcomes them and acknowledges them. Taking one's place in the world requires that the world has a place for one. By being freely available for communication we allow the pulsation of our many voices to move through us, as us. We and our environment are both nothing but patterns of voices. There are no fixed entities, no enduring substances; we and our world manifest moment by moment as patterns in the flow of becoming. When this is flowing freely there is spontaneous polyphony. However when things don't go well we become anxious and think something must be done. So we mobilise our energies to try to sort it out, choosing control because we don't trust that free participation will give rise to new kinds of patterning. When one participant in the field is dominating and directing we have the conductor and the symphony. Keeping everything on the beat is the conductor's task. If this order breaks down the polarities fix and freeze and grind together and then there is cacophony.

The environment is not something separate that is outside you and you are not something which is self-existing. Now, I could say, *'Well this is crazy. I can get up and walk out of this room. I can say goodbye to this environment. I don't ever need to come back here. This place has nothing to do with me, because I am just me.'* So I march out of the room and find that I am somewhere else. So I'm being James somewhere else and however that somewhere else is, it's going to influence how James is. James is always somewhere and the 'where James is', is part of James. It's not added on. We are inseparable from our context – we change, the context changes. If there is a 'me' there is a context.

With the view that the subject and the context are inseparable we move from a sense of entities to the experience of non-dual flow. There is nothing to grasp or maintain although one can identify patterns. Each pattern is not an entity but a resemblance – each 'repetition' being unique, specific to the moment and to the situation. The next moment is actually different even if the pattern appears to be the same. There is the undeniable facticity of the moment, its insistence, its presence. Yet it is ungraspable, slipping easily through the fingers of the thoughts, feelings, memories, theories, plans and so on by which we seek to capture it.

Karma

Our karma is revealed to us through patterns which we take to be the pattern of the 'things' to which we give ourselves. Each of us has our own unique range of patterns to which we are drawn or from which we move away. In therapy it is common to seek the origin of these patterns of attraction and aversion in our childhood. Identifying the causal events gives shape to both the cause and the effect. This clarity can be a little over-determined, tilting us in the direction of mastery. The notion of karma subverts this for it points towards unknowable but impactful causes in the past, generating ungraspable yet impactful patterns in the present which in turn give rise to as yet unmanifest yet impactful circumstance in the future. To work with

this is to renounce knowability and mastery, and to open to the emergent patterning with an attitude of relaxed but confident workability.

We have always already given ourselves to the situation before we can even begin to understand what has happened. In life our cognitions are always coming along after the fact of experience, retrospectively trying to make sense of what has already passed. Our life has already happened before we, as a conscious ego, catch up with it. One of the functions of meditation is to help us to relax our energy so that we avoid over-investment in meaning-making, in storytelling. The present, this moment that is immediately unfolding, is a precognitive experience although cognitions may be present in it. This is very difficult, indeed impossible, for us to conceptualise because it occurs prior to conceptualisation. However we can learn to relax and trust and through this letting go of control, we can find ourselves resting at the point of balance, neither merging nor retreating but open, available and never overwhelmed.

For example, I look around the room and see different people. I am me and you are you. But I will never see you as you are for you. All I can see is the you for me. The you for you, I don't get. I get the you for me, and the you for me is mine. It's not yours – indeed it is something you can never get. Now that's very interesting. It means that each of us is forever estranged from the actuality of the other, and that we meet each other with the chaperone of 'nature of experience'. We imagine that we have a sense of the other and are even in intimate contact with them but this is just our sense of the other person for us. What arises for us is our karma. Whatever you are for you is not my karma, but the you for me, that's my karma.

I remember when I was a teenager saying something to my mother about how she was with my father and she said, *"James, what happens between your father and me is something you can never know because I am not married to your father, I am married to my husband. You call my husband 'father' but for me he's my husband and he is married to his wife. I am his wife but you call me 'mother.' These stories don't meet, so you will never know."* That was very helpful to me. Karma is not some special ingredient that is added to what is happening, it is the mystery of life. We find ourselves born into this strange environment with so many things happening all the time which we try to sort out by imposing our sense of pattern – and our patternings arise in and for and as us as the ripening of our karma.

The more we try to sort life out, the more we are trapped in ourselves and thereby less connected with the environment, which in turn feeds into our alienation, making us more hungry for meaning. The Buddhist view and practice can help us trust the experience of participation; participation means opening to the fact of being already a part of what is going on. We are always already inside, within in the world. We are not moving towards the world, we're inextricably in it irrespective of any fantasies we might have to the contrary. The world is not other than ourselves. The world is our self, for the only world we have access to is the world of our experience. If the patients who you see were to start to experience their life in this way it could remove many of the burdens of anxiety, loneliness and depression. This orientation would place them at the centre of the unfolding field and they would have access to intrinsic clarity and meaning. Whereas in our usual neurotic positionings meaning is something that we seek to add to life: *'I've come to therapy because I don't know who I am anymore. I've lost the sense of why I exist.'* This is a person who has vanished into their own sphere of ideas and having more ideas about life is not going to release them from that prison of illusion.

Play and meditation

This points to a key aspect of psychotherapy – the need to move from concepts to play. Play, as beautifully described by Donald Winnicott, is direct – it begins with participation not with planning. If you are with a four year old child you get down on the floor to play with them. You say, *'What shall we do?'* They reply, *'Let's do this.'* By entering into shared activity, play commences. You have to start with not knowing, simply opening and trusting and giving yourself fully to whatever emerges. This not knowing is powerful and generous. It is grounded, warm, friendly and spacious because there is nothing to defend. However, if you start thinking, *'I don't know how to play. Oh, I haven't done this for a long time,'* then you get wound into your own story, into your own neurotic world, and this becomes a barrier to being with the other. Children don't know how to play. They just play. So that poses a question for us. Can we find a way to sidestep knowing and simply be available for participation with another?

Meditation can help us do this. We relax our muscles, letting our skeleton do its work. We relax our diaphragm and let our breath flow easily. We stay relaxed, at ease and open to whatever is occurring. If we get lost in thoughts we simply return to relaxed openness when that little journey is over. Don't blame yourself. Why give yourself a hard time? Has this ever truly helped you change? There are plenty of people out there who are ready to give you a hard time. Leave that work to them. Be very sweet with yourself. All that occurs for us is our life, it is our share of experience – so welcome everything. Integrate everything that arises within the open hospitality of your presence.

All the movements of our thoughts, feelings, sensations, hopes, fears, all that we see around us, is the dynamic unfolding of our experience. This is what is actually available to us. We can open to it, be available ourselves, be infinitely hospitable. Or we can enter into judgement, splitting ourselves from the field of experience and commenting on it, attributing value and meaning: this pleases me so it is good; this displeases me so it is bad. The open option allows integration of all aspects of ourselves. With this capacity we can engage with our patients and help them taste this freedom too, whereas with the narrow option of judgement, selection and rejection, we remain within the discriminating field of neurosis and are likely to reinforce that tendency in our patients. They already inhabit a world of narrow focusing – that's why they have come to see us. They are used to over-identification and a sense of inevitability, *'I have to do this.'* They have nothing to hold on to that would help them resist their familiar impulses.

Now, of course we hope that with the development of the working alliance our patients can start to trust the therapeutic relationship and through that find something new and useful to hold on to. But they only see us for a short time every week and as soon as they leave our room they are at the mercy of not only the habits which arise as them, but of all the confirming invitations which are coming from their environment that they should continue as usual. In the face of this matrix of habit if we can introduce them to the dynamic nature of their experience this will start to open up the possibility of actual choice. When we feel, *'I couldn't do that,'* or we feel, *'I have to do that,'* the felt necessity takes away any sense that there are other options – or that I could make a choice.

To choose means to exert a degree of freedom within a limited menu. We can't just do what we like, but we don't have to do what feels to be inevitable. Through meditation we become aware that a sensation, feeling or thought, which seems very strong and very real, is actually transient and has no true essence to it. If we just stay relaxed with whatever is occurring we see that it is something that arises and passes. Thoughts, feelings and sensations have no energy of their own. They are like balloons. They arrive inflated with the unpredictable creativity of the winds of the open infinite hospitality of the ground of being. These arisings are already on the point of deflation, the point of vanishing, when we become conscious of them. If we don't blow more air into these balloons they won't float and fly. But generally when a thought comes we breathe our life-force into it, inflating it with our sense of its meaning, value and function.

The attracting power that we sense in the thought, its capacity to hook our attention, is actually something we have already projected into the thought. For example, if a bottle of wine had an intrinsic magnetic attraction, then everybody walking down the street past the café would be pulled inside. Now clearly some people do feel pulled inside but it's not the bottle which is pulling them. The power is not in the outer object. The power is in the thought. But is it? When the thought *'I need a drink'* comes, it appears as if the power is in the thought, in the inner object. Yet this is because I always follow it, as if I had a ring in my nose and was like a bull in a field with someone pulling on the rope. Yet the thought is energised by attitudes, habits and tendencies and these are the patterns of the energy of my mind itself. The thought *'I need a drink'* will lead some people to wine and lead others to water.

The fulfilment of the thought feels inevitable because it is energised by our habit and when we sit inside our habit it feels like home, for habit is habitation, a dwelling. Or like a monk's habit, it is something that you wear. So when this thought seems to wrap itself around us, it feels like 'me'. Yet, through the practice of meditation, by just observing, the thought is seen to come and then go. If, when it goes, you don't follow it, it gets weaker. It is similar to a love story. You break up with someone, then in the middle of the night you know you have to phone them. The phone is in your hand. You want to hear their voice. You think, *'Aha! Why am I phoning them? What good will come of this? I don't care. I have to phone them.'* Every time you don't phone them it becomes easier not to phone them. But if you *do* phone them, and talk and arrange to

meet again, and have sex again, then the confusing, unfulfilling story goes on. So why did you phone them? *'I had too. The story wasn't finished.'* But how is the story going to end? You are the writer of the story. Your pen can put the full stop.

It's the same issue in meditation. Where do thoughts come from? The energy of our mind, the potential of our mind, our creativity, can reveal itself through many, many different forms and when one or two such forms get over-invested it is as if the energy always has to go down these particular pathways. The function of meditation is to be able to observe, to be calm and clear so that we can see the actuality rather than simply following our narrative about it. If we know, *'I don't have to,'* then we have a choice. Will I do this? What is the point? Maybe there's a good reason? Maybe not? However I won't be able to stop, look and see if I've already jumped.

This is a very important skill for therapists. You're in the room with someone. You feel an urge to say something. Can you trust that? *'I feel I have to say it.'* If you can relax and hold that thought in mind, then you can open to the actual context and see if the impulse still feels valid. If there is space for the thought – a ripeness in the moment for the thought – then you can express it, but if there is no space and you just bring it in because you feel you have to, that is not likely to be very helpful.

By attending to what is actually occurring rather than to our fixed ideas about it, we start to experience that the environment and our subjectivity are the same. They're not the same in the sense of being homogenised but they're the same in being movements of experience, and these experiences arise as patterns. In each situation we have to rapidly yet freshly evaluate the actuality of the arising pattern so that we can respond ethically with affective attunement and clarity. To offer advice to a patient could be supportive, but it could also be experienced as punishing or as judgmental if the person is not able to carry it forward and thereby feels criticised or misunderstood. To minimise the risk of offering such an internally formulated monological response we need to feel the co-emergence of ourselves and the other. This co-emergence appears clearly to non-dual awareness yet is rarely glimpsed by dualistic consciousness.

For example, we are sitting here together, we look around the room and we see different people. As we look around the room we have the sense, *'Here is a person.'* There's a particular quality to the shape of their face and body and how it impacts us. We see the colour of their top, the angle of their head, the way their hair falls, and we have our subjective response to that. The perception and the response are both arising for, and are revealed by, our awareness, an awareness which is not a personal subjectivity. That is to say, my subjectivity, my personal response is a part of the ever-changing flow of experience. What I take to be 'me, myself', is not a thing, it's not a home that I sit inside, but it is a particular rivulet of experience and this is flowing within the stream of non-dual experience. It is said to be non-dual since all the concepts used to describe phenomena are based on polarities, on binary opposition – but these are also part of the flow; they are mere conventions which cannot establish truly existing entities.

This is a very different view from that of our ordinary perception. It suggests that 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity' are modes of experience revealed within the open clarity of awareness. The traditional example used to illustrate this is that the mind is like a mirror. When you get up in the morning, you clean your teeth while looking in the mirror. You see your face, the brush is in your mouth and you also see the reflection of a bit of the room behind you. The figure and the background are there together, there is no boundary or barrier between them in the reflection in the mirror. In the same way just now, you see things around you and you feel things within you. However it is our usual practice to hold a pair of mental scissors and cut a line around the shape of our body, *'This is outside; this is inside.'*

According to the Buddhist teachings, this seeming separation between subject and object is an illusion. These two manifest together all the time, they are inseparable. Like a mother and her child, they are inseparable. Even if they are apart, they are always together, because if you don't have a child then you're not a mother, and if you are a mother you're bound to have a child. It's obvious. Mother and child are inseparable. Subject and object are inseparable. They are experiences arising within the shared field.

A self-narrative that says, *'This is my experience and I'm going to tell you what is happening,'* feels quite solid and strong. *'I'm standing on proper ground here.'* We feel that our opinions are the truth. We seem to stand apart from the flow of events and so can comment accurately on them. Our concepts about events

feel very strong. But then they are gone! Events and our thoughts about them are transient, passing like twigs in a stream – there, yes! But already vanishing. You cannot make solid ground in this world; it is a flow that never ends, there is no full stop.

Life is just comma, after comma, after comma; experience is movement. If you try to stop the river of experience you will only get trouble. If you want something stable and reliable you have to get to know your own awareness. Awareness is the primordial clarity of the mind. It doesn't wax or wane like the moon, but like the sun, it's always shining. Our familiar consciousness is not like that. Sometimes we're clear, sometimes we're unclear. We can be full of jealousy, pride, anger, desire. Many different moods flow through us. Trying to stabilise yourself and hold on to the clarity of knowing who you are is an effort which is exhausting and ridiculous because in fact it is impossible. Self-knowledge is an illusion because it's always about that which is already past. You meet someone and start to tell them about yourself. Why? What does this narrative describe?

I remember years ago in India I met a very lovely woman and when I started to tell her something about myself she said, *"Sssh! I'm going to find out who you are. What you tell me is not what I'll find out."* That's how life is. If we were our stories then life would be more simple. Our body, voice, and the movement of our mind are all-changing all the time. Essentially, these are gestures of compassion, they are how we show ourselves in the world with others. They make links in the flow but they cannot establish stable 'truths'. However, the mind itself, our natural awareness, never changes. By learning to relax we open to the experience of ourselves as an open, spacious awareness which is always full of the flow of experience.

A mirror is always empty in itself. It is precisely because it is empty that it can show many different kinds of reflections. Similarly our mind is essentially empty. It is not a perceivable, substantial entity. This lack of fixed content allows us to have many different kinds of experience. However our dualistic consciousness is not like that. Our consciousness gets filled up. At the end of the day you feel you've had enough. You, the limited subject, have been dealing with an onslaught of stuff, events, opinions, other people's stories – all of which seem to demand that you take them seriously.

Who is constructing our story? If we say, we are each constructing our own story, then immediately there is the question of agency. Do we tell our stories or do our stories tell us? In families there is usually a cross generational transmission of stories. So when a patient comes to you, they might say, *'I'm worthless. I can't achieve anything.'* They're telling us a story, a story that someone has probably told them at some time. But it is also a story that tells them, that speaks the potential of their existence into the particular patterns of their manifestation. An essential aspect of our work is to help people to become aware of how much energy goes into maintaining their story.

These stories often feel like the given truth of our existence but in fact they function like an umbrella. If you want an umbrella to keep the rain off then you have to hold it up. If you decide not to hold it up, it won't keep the rain off. We are putting a lot of time and energy into maintaining the stories which define us and this has become so normal that it doesn't seem to be something that we are doing. How then do you help some one see that they are identifying with a very limited pattern, without that being experienced as an exposure, which, in its capacity to shame, may cause further shrinking? If I'm going to accept that I'm limited then the one who accepts this has to be bigger than the limit, otherwise I will just become more limited.

This is where encouraging the person to observe their breath can be very helpful. We often wind ourselves up, increase our tension, not necessarily very consciously, in order to maintain the right dose of arousal. Just as an alcoholic likes to have a little bottle with them, and someone who smokes wants to make sure they have their packet when they go out, so the person who has had a traumatic childhood has got used to a higher level of adrenaline pumping in their system and will act to maintain this level. This generates cortisol in the frontal lobes leading to hyper-vigilance, hyper-sensitivity and a general over-rapidity of arousal. So in the most kind and normalising way we might say, *'Because of what you have experienced you've become a bit wound up and you've tried very hard over all these years to find a way out of this prison. You've come up with some D.I.Y. solutions such as cutting and heavy drinking but they haven't really worked. This is not because you are stupid but because the answer that you need to find is hidden in a place*

that you wouldn't think of. You've been trying to think your way out of the prison, but the prison is made of thought and so we need to find another way out. Luckily it's not far away and it's something you can open to all the time.'

I might then teach them some aspects of autogenic training and deep diaphragm breathing and in that way the excitation in the sympathetic nervous system relaxes. With this there is a bit more sense of space, of not being so driven, and that lets the glue of rapid arousal and involvement dissolve. Now there is an observer and something to observe whereas before, when our system is hyper-aroused, we're very likely to launch ourselves into an identification without being able to reflect on what we are doing. Once the patient's breath is stabilised you can start very gently to bring a sense of calm into the room. You can find the rhythm of their breathing and bring your breath into their rhythm. Once you are breathing together if you slowly reduce the rapidity of your breathing theirs is likely to slow down too.

The key way to learn is to observe ourselves. The idea that we are normal and healthy while our patients are not is not helpful. Buddhism points to the universality of suffering and limitation. The more we see and release our limits and start to live our freedom rather than just having fancy narratives about it, the more we will be able to help without reifying or shaming the other. At various stages in our life we have all been objectified and perceived in terms of other people's prejudices and assumptions. Our capacity to move from being a subject to being an object is part of the balanced movement of our life. If you have to wait in a queue in a post office or at an airport then you become, as it were, an object. You merge yourself into the state of a cow; you look around, your plane is late, 'Moooo!' This is necessary otherwise you'd just get crazy. But of course many people have been turned into objects due to being shamed, and for them the road back to felt subjectivity is hard to find. The mood of a meditative approach is to gradually increase our clarity by seeing that there are no self-existing entities, neither subject nor object.

You can totalise objects but human beings are beyond totalisation. If we free ourselves from the anxious habit of putting people in boxes, if we experience the falling away of the desire for control, then we can start to be playful. This establishes a mood in the therapy session of the possibility of there being no threat. There's no point in telling someone, '*This is a safe space*' because the words do not really mean anything to someone who is frightened. So we need to be in a state which is not frightening. Relaxed, at ease, spacious, available and welcoming without making demands, but also without being abandoning. Now, this is hard to manifest but meditation can help. We have to find the safe and effective point of contact.

We want to be like a heart-warming fire. The right distance is vital. If you go too close to it you get burned, if you're too far away you don't get any heat. Now of course in this example the fire stays where it is, but in our meetings with others we move towards them and they move towards us; we move away, they move away. This is a much more dynamic interaction. Relaxing our agenda, our treatment plan, allows us to be locating again and again at the ever-shifting point where something new might be possible.

It is important to be clear about what can be taught and what can't be taught. You can teach someone about breathing, you can teach them about the physiology of arousal, you can suggest they go to a yoga class or a tai chi class but you can't teach someone how to open, because openness is not a volitional act. We find ourselves open when the ambience is right. So our job as therapists is to provide an easy welcoming atmosphere. In order to be able to do this we have to continue the work of our own therapy and our own meditation practice. Putting ourselves in the way of opening we start to see how we slip away and close down. Where do I freeze? What am I afraid of? What do I feel incapable of doing? If we aim to become healers our path is to continue to put our own limitations into question.

Our positive intention can also function as an unhelpful limit. For example, we might really want to help other people and some of these people might want to be rescued. I don't think it's possible to rescue anyone. Their sense of our strength, our power, our clarity, our knowledge might well reinforce their fantasy that we both care for, and will, rescue them. Paradoxically all our qualities then need to be directed towards letting their hope down gently rather than playing at fulfilling it.

There is a famous Buddhist story which illustrates this. Once when the Buddha was walking in India he came to a village, and a young woman approached him, crying and wailing. Wrapped in her arms she had a bundle. She put her head at his feet in the Indian style of showing humility and said, '*You are a great man.*

You are a great master. You must help me. My baby is not well. Buddha said, *'Let me see if I can help.'* But when he looked at the baby he said, *'Oh, your baby is dead.'* She replied, *'Yes he's dead, but you can bring him back to life. You must be able to do this!'* He considered, *'Well, let me see. I will try, but in order to do this you have to bring me some mustard seed.'* She said, *'Of course. I'll go and get it.'* He cautioned, *'But the mustard seed must come from a house where nobody has died.'* So she went to the first house and asked, *'Do you have mustard seed? Quick, give me some.'* They said, *'Of course we have mustard seed.'* *'Has anyone died here?'* *'Yes my grandmother; she died last week.'* Gradually she went round the whole village from house to house. Every house had mustard seed but they also had someone who had died. Gradually it became clear to her that death is everywhere and through that she came to accept, *'My baby has died.'*

If the Buddha had just said, *'Death is everywhere,'* that would have been too painful to hear. Such truth doesn't mean much when you're caught up in something. In the same way we want to create an exploration through which the person can have their own direct experience. Showing is often much more helpful than saying. In order to do that, we have to free our own creativity. Our job is to stay present in connection with the person we are seeing and to trust that the flow of our own creativity will give rise to something useful. This is where our own neuroses can tie us in knots. Self doubt, over-intellectualisation, anxiety about getting it right, thinking about what to say but not finding the moment to say it... These are all things we are familiar with. We can explore these sabotages in our own therapy and also through the practice of meditation. The heart of this world is rhythm, and rhythm is about timing, so feeling the pace of the patient, feeling the nature of the movement of their embodied being, will allow what is required to spontaneously arise in us.

Rather than training we are de-training, going off the tracks into the new, relaxing our own fixation on our definite identity, and starting to experience our qualities, our memories, our skills and attributes as ingredients which can be mobilised into the unique specificity of this moment. That is to say, it's not all up to me, and it's not all up to the patient. We are neither leading nor following, for the whole field is co-emergent. We've all had this experience; we have it playing with children, with dancing, with making love and so on. You find yourself in the same space as someone and there is an ease of being. It just seems to happen. At first this is an unusual experience but if we really enter the practice and trust, it can become our daily life. Then you find you can do a lot of work without getting too tired. Because it's not all coming from you the sense of responsibility reduces. The sense of guilt if you make mistakes or if it doesn't go well reduces. You have the blessing of being an ordinary person, just taking your place in whatever is going on.

The key thing is not to try too hard, especially when you are a beginner. Don't get caught up in the idea that you don't know, because of course you don't know. Why would you know, if you're a beginner? Yes, you're going to make mistakes. The only way to learn is by making mistakes. You're not training in surgery. Surgeons have a very sharp knife. If they make a mistake, it's somewhat critical. If therapists make a mistake it's not so likely to kill the patient. So it's very important to relax.

Sometimes it will go well, sometimes it won't go well. When it goes well don't make a big deal of it. When it goes not so well, don't make a big deal of it. You can always apologise, repair the rupture to the working alliance and stay open, present, available.

This does not mean that anything goes. But we stand at the crossroads. Which way is the right way? To have a clear treatment plan and stick to it? Or to be present and allow your life to flow through you into the field which you are always already part of? This is the choice we have. If you chose the latter option you need to support yourself by exploring your own existence with honesty because you yourself are the main tool. If you choose the former path, then you need to read a lot of books and remember what they say because your theories and technical knowledge are the main tools that you have.

In brief, our work is serious but not *too* serious, playful but not playing about with other people. Finding ourselves always in the middle of the flow, whatever happens, we can settle into our balance. Our balance is us. It's not a gift from anyone else. We are naturally balancing, intrinsically open and grounded. Trusting this simple fact we can get to know the ways in which we abandon our own balance. How fortunate we are to find this way of life!