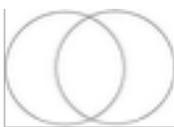


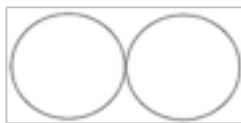
MINDFULNESS, CONTACT AND HEALING IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

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The key focus of this short piece is an initial exploration of the synergy between mindfulness and contact in the practice of psychotherapy. Here the term mindfulness is used to indicate a state of conscious attention: one intentionally attends to what is occurring. This requires that one finds the middle way between identification with what is occurring, either by sensory fusion or by conceptual appropriation, and distraction and non-attention, by preoccupation, dullness or agitation. The term 'contact' refers to the middle way between the polarities of merged confluence and separative isolation. Contact implies 'being with'. This avoids both falling into and pulling away from. For example, if one looks at a painting one might be drawn into it and become immersed in the colours and shapes. Or one might be disinterested or disparaging and thereby hold oneself apart from whatever the painting might offer. In the sense of contact used here, to be in contact with the painting is to be available to it so that one can avail oneself of its potential without abandoning one's own presence.



Confluence



Contact



Isolation

Firstly, a general overview of current practice is offered followed by a brief exploration of some of the different aspects of contact. Discussion of dualistic and non-dualistic approaches to both mindfulness and contact. In the simplest terms and with specific reference to the arena of psychotherapy, the key difference between dualistic and non-dualistic approaches is as follows. In the former, the self, the individual identity, is believed to be an autonomous or quasi-autonomous entity existing in connection with, yet essentially apart from, its environment. In the latter the self is held to be a dynamic participant in the ever-changing field it is part of. When this non-duality is lived the self arises as the ever-changing display of the effulgence of the invisible ground of presence.

At this time many approaches to psychotherapy concern themselves specifically with cognitions, memories, feelings, and behaviours, which may be identified as conscious or unconscious. Due to this they privilege certain aspects of the individual over others. Although this selectivity is affirmative of the therapist's professional identity, functionally it is merely another mode of the biased patterns of interest and non-interest that have generated the majority of psychological problems brought by the patients.

When the therapist starts from within an explanatory model their gaze is already prefigured: they are looking for the aspects that their model indicates to be significant. They are looking for something and with that attitude there will always be something that can be found.

When mindfulness is used as a support for such limited and limiting approaches its use helps to gather attention towards the areas of already established interest. When mindfulness is taught to the patient they learn to attend to what is occurring. The identification of what is occurring requires categories which could be culturally familiar, such as feeling sad, or other categories which may be the less familiar such as the Buddhist 'four foundations of mindfulness' which offer a detailed analysis of experience through a sequential focus on body, feelings, consciousness and phenomena. Such categories and the clarity they offer can bring a fresh sense of personal aliveness and of the potential present in embodied inhabitation of an ever-changing environment. With this, patients can become more conscious of what they are encountering moment by moment in the interplay of subject and object. This helps to release identification with habitual associations permitting a fresh experience of self and world.

For example, with the intentional practice of mindfulness of the breath, attention, once it is securely focussed on the breath, is no longer available to reinforce habitual memories such as those of neglect in childhood. Moreover any affect resultant from that neglect is deprived of reinforcing attention. The withdrawal of attention from these emergent phenomena causes them to gradually lose their seductive power. In this way the seeming givenness, density, and validity of habitual configurations of subject and object, self and other, are gradually lessened allowing more access to the as yet unawakened potential of aliveness. This conjunction of mindfulness techniques and psychotherapy methods of assessment, diagnosis and treatment can bring concrete benefits to both therapist and patient.

We should not forget that Sigmund Freud had, over 100 years ago, established key principles to avoid confirming the patient's neurotic assumptions. Firstly, the rule of abstinence, a radical minimalisation of the everyday dialogic that maintains the sense of oneself as one takes it to be. No social chat or formalities, the use of a couch and the avoidance of face-to-face encounter all help to create an unpredictable setting that does not support familiar knowledge. Secondly, the therapist/analyst is required to maintain a free-floating attention free of bias – everything that occurs is of value. This attention is on the present moment and must be guarded from tendencies to look back over what has occurred or leap forward in expectation of what might occur. Thirdly, the patient is encouraged to free associate, to say what ever comes to mind without editing. As the habit of socially aligning repression is relaxed more aspects of experience come into consciousness. Learning not to anxiously edit one's own life into an acceptable narrative opens one to the happenstance of the moment. This happenstance is free of imposed order yet it is not chaotic; it is an example of autopoiesis. The patient's struggle to allow this is aided by Bion's encouragement to the analyst to be without memory or desire.

Attention is the sustaining lifeblood of both subject and object. Our attention flows to them because we believe them to be real and important and they are reinforced in their seeming reality and importance by the intensity and quality of the attention we pay them. When this fact becomes clear for us we can start to ease ourselves out of the restriction of reification and investment and begin to explore direct experience rather than experience mediated through concept-based entities. By attending to attention itself it is freed from being a servant of habit formations and their underpinning assumptions and so there is the chance to open to experience with a fresh view or ethos. Experience is no longer merely a means to an end, taking us somewhere else, but is a vibrant end in itself as the ongoing appreciation of how this moment actually is. This is the deep potential of mindfulness which can take both therapist and patient beyond the aims of improving social adjustment and/or the achievement of increased personal authenticity.

Thus oOn a general level Buddhist dharma or teaching and psychotherapy are both concerned with deconstructing misleading identities by examining the constituents of such imagined entities and how they are taken to be real. The Nyingmapa school of Tibetan Buddhism organises the teachings into nine vehicles or pathways, each with their own distinct patterns of view, meditation, conduct and result. According to the view of the first vehicle, analysis of a person in terms of how they are constituted reveals our sense of the person to be an epiphenomenon generated by the collaboration of five dynamic

constitutional factors, each lacking inherent existence and unable to create anything possessing inherent existence. These constitutional factors are known as the *skandhas* or heaps, and they are form, feeling, perception, composition and consciousness. This demonstration of the absence of inherent existence in persons is taken further in the Mahayana tradition constituting the third and subsequent vehicles. This analysis shows the absence of inherent existence in phenomena. Instead of encountering separate people and things, we find ourselves participating in and as the dynamic matrix of dependent co-origination. Attentive investigation followed by non-conceptual meditation reveals our presence as radiant openness. Repeated immersion in this openness reveals that at every level of experience individual essences and substances are in fact empty illusion, ghostly projections in the theatre of emptiness.

In our practice of psychotherapy we similarly find that the patient's sense of 'always' being depressed or anxious can be investigated in terms of causal events in the past and predisposing factors operating in the present. This shows the long-held limiting beliefs about one's state and identity to be false and misleading constructs, constructs based on a filtering and organising idea rather than on the actuality of phenomena. Attending to both the processional history of these factors and to their current pattern of their dynamic presenting permits the falling away of fixed sites of identification, such as, 'I am depressed, that's how I am.' As long as the new conceptual restriction of a diagnosis is not rigidly adhered to, there is a chance of participating in the unfolding of the as yet latent potential.

Neuroses of all kinds can be usefully considered as ghost forms. The past moments which were their genesis are gone, dead, never to return. And yet these strange wraiths haunt us so that illusion thickens into dull dark delusion. Resistance to awakening to the unreality of the thoughts, feelings, sensations, memories and so on that restrict us seems, paradoxically, to be life affirming. One exists through one's attachments: I have a body, a mind, a voice, clothes, work, home, food and so on. Identity is generated and maintained by the items we identify as really existing and then select or reject. Subject and object are born together. Subject, this undeniable sense of I, me, myself, is inseparable from object. Self is not self-existing but is the ever-changing result of ever-changing causes. Awakening to this free flow of co-emergence allows one to live in and as the particularity, the unique specificity, the ungraspable strangeness and complexity of each moment. To take oneself to be a knowable person inevitably dulls the freshness of presence into its shadow, the insistence upon being an inherently existing self-entity.

However in psychotherapy the very structuring of the work confirms the validity of self and other as separate real domains and this is likely to remain as the basic organisational polarity of experience since therapist and patient engage as two separate people. In a therapy session two people are physically present in a room together. Whether they are fully available to each other is another matter. The setting installs these two people in different roles with different tasks. These roles are invested with different degrees of authority and they also allow differentiated displays of power and levels of accessibility. Conventionally it is the therapist who has the greater power and who is in charge of the frame and structure of the session. Moments of genuine contact are subversive of this choreography of power.

As is well known, the term 'therapist' has its origins in the Asklepian tradition of minimising technical intervention in order to allow healing to occur. The therapist is one who attends to and is attendant on the psyche of the patient. Psyche can most generously be taken as both soul and spirit and as encompassing all aspects of an individual from the most ethereal to the most substantial. This requires the therapist to be present and not to be preoccupied or distracted. In order to help the 'work' go well both therapist and patient wait patiently in undemanding availability for the epiphany which initiates the upwelling of profound healing.

The discipline of learning to be available for the other in this way involves becoming attentive to the many factors which can diminish one's availability. Availability is both a receptive openness to the many aspects, nuanced and gross, of the patient's way of being in the room, and a capacity to see the other 'as they are'.

Receptive openness requires a non-judgemental welcoming equanimity. Any bias towards or away from aspects of the other or of self that emerge in the interaction will obscure the patterning of the patient's experience. Since the patient's attitude to the therapist is often inflected by their desire to be the object of desire of the therapist, any indication of likes and dislikes by the therapist will tend to encourage the patient to present themselves in the way that most fits their image of the therapist's object of desire.

When practised in this way without agenda, the therapy functions through quiet presence allowing the non-assertion of personality to open a space in which healing can occur. Mastery and leadership of the process, no matter how skilful, are obstacles to this wider and deeper healing. The presence of the therapist is like a wave pulsing between

visible and invisible, impactful and non-impactful. The visibility of the therapist supports the working alliance, the sense of 'being in it together', but then they have to relax to become merely an aspect of the space which facilitates the awakening of the patient to their own spacious being.

The capacity to see the other 'as they are' is crucial and yet exquisitely difficult to 'achieve' since it is a matter of non-activity. Simply to see the other as one takes them to be without distraction or elaboration is difficult enough; to see the phenomenal actuality free of obscuring interpretation is well nigh impossible if one has only intellectual rigour or mental acuity as one's support. To come to see that what one takes to be seeing is actually perception inflected and infected with imagining can be quite shocking. If I largely imagine what I see, then what I describe, what I say in order to live 'truthfully' with others, is not a true objective account of what is there. For me my 'what is there' is truly mine, mine alone and the play of signifiers which seems to establish shared values, facts and experiences is just another imagined 'reality'.

The modern European project of phenomenology initiated by Husserl and taken up by Merleau-Ponty ran aground on the difficulty of using thought to bracket off thought. Thoughts are sticky and, like words, lose their impact and value when presented in isolation. Since thinking is linking, the mental effort not to link is too exhausting to be sustained. This being the case, mindfulness, as the privileging of simple attention over informed interpretation, can be beneficial in the ripening of psychotherapists.

Seeing phenomena 'as they are' can be considered from the point of view of the Mahayana concept of the two truths. Relative or fictional truth refers to the truth of phenomena as they appear when duality is our frame of reference. In this frame, experience is taken up as a means to an end orchestrated by intention and effort. Relative truth rests in the belief in real entities. I exist as me, you exist as you. Our existence as sentient beings and the existence of all the things we imagine and encounter are based on our experience of separate totalised entities. Each of these individual phenomenon stands for itself by itself, and our experience of it, which includes our linguistic definition of it, is taken to be the truth of this thing itself.

Absolute or simple truth is the truth of phenomena as they are when non-duality is our frame of reference. In this frameless frame, experience is an ungraspable end in itself, freely arising and freely vanishing while offering the satisfaction of aesthetic enjoyment of

the ephemeral. With absolute truth all entities are effortlessly released from their imprisonment as isolates and are revealed as seemingly finite moments inseparable from the infinite.

Relative truth has two levels, impure and pure. With impure relative truth we experience the inseparability of our identification of something and our feelings about that something. Thus I might experience spinach as being horrible. My feeling about spinach is 'for me' located in the spinach: I am truthful, spinach is horrible. When such fusions of identity and feeling are applied to people we have, for example, the idealisation of certain musicians as universally wonderful and, on the other hand the denigration of people who seem to be intrinsically inferior or threatening. I exist as a finite entity suffused with shifting patterns of affect while fluctuating between distress and excitement. In this state the world is as I take it to be and my assumptions and beliefs remain unexamined in their function as my vehicles of truth. Fiction is taken to be fact and therefore assertion rather than curiosity becomes the dominant approach.



Awakening from this delusion, according to the Buddhist tradition, is aided by encountering and being mindful of 'the three marks of conditioned existence': dissatisfaction, impermanence, and the absence of inherent existence in persons.

Dissatisfaction, suffering and disturbance have two main causes: not getting what we want and getting what we do not want. Moreover change brings suffering as new situations often bring a sense of being de-skilled and loss of confidence often feeds into loss of confidence. Although these disjunctions between what actually occurs and what I would like to occur are everyday occurrences we are still shocked and disheartened when they

arise. Learning from experience is not so easy when we inhabit our paradigms and remain attached to our axioms and expectations.

Impermanence is everywhere, always. The movement of the planets, of the seasons, of the clock, of the life of the body, the voice, the mind – nothing is stable. When we look and look and look we come to see that not one really existing enduring entity can be found. We have tried to build our existence from the fleeting moments of time. Events arise and vanish. This is how they are and no one can alter this. We know this yet act as if it were not so.

The absence of inherent existence in persons is indicated by the five *skandha* heaps mentioned above. Form presents itself as shape and colour – my form and the form of all 'things'. Shape and colour impact my capacity for experience, generating feelings which can be classed as positive, negative and neutral. These feeling tones influence my perception, the way in which I apprehend and give value to certain aspects of the field whilst discounting others. This selection I make is activated by my opinions, interpretations and through this interaction a moment of consciousness is generated: 'that is a red pen'. I comprehend what is occurring. The seeming clarity of this moment validates the three wheels whose turning generates the world for me: the subject, the object and the relation between them.

Reflection on these three marks of conditioned existence awakens us to the way false beliefs, habits and instincts regarding self and environment lead sentient beings to endless suffering. Not being discrete entities with finite beginnings, middles and ends, sentient beings are revealed as transient forms manifesting out of their misapprehension of the actual status of their existences. The absence of inherent existence is also the interdependent arising of all appearances. Interconnectivity, when directly perceived, gives rise to an inclusive kindness or openheartedness (Tib.: *Thugs rJe*) towards all sentient beings. This warmth of welcome deconstructs the beliefs which secure biased identifications of autonomous beings. The seeming truth that because you are 'this' you cannot be 'that', for example that an enemy cannot be a friend, is exposed as mere conceptual confusion. Suffering arises from delusion and so lifting that obscuring veil becomes our ethical orientation.

With pure relative truth we are able to distinguish between the object identified and our own feelings about it: 'Spinach is very popular but for myself, I just don't like it.'

Appearances are still taken to be 'real', to have their own existence and to be expressive of their own essence. The separation of subject and object is cleaner and therefore the subject, in recognising their feelings to be theirs, can see the object as something more neutral, more open to diverse interpretations. This also allows the subject more opportunity to observe and consider other people's relations with the object and to notice that they see things in it and about it, which the subject does not. Free of the foreclosure of projected feelings being taken as true and reliable, both the object and the subject arise as potentials rather than as defined entities. This brings a curiosity about the lived present, about what is actually occurring, and with this, a sense that meaning is created by engagement. The subject still seems to exist as a finite entity yet with a mood of calmness and non-reactivity. The world and its occupants are not fixed entities 'out there' but are potentials that manifest situationally in tandem with the manifesting of my potential as currently revealed.

Awakening from this belief in the illusion of real entities is aided by encountering and being mindful of 'the three doors to liberation': untouched by signs, undirected by hope and intention, and emptiness of all phenomena.

Untouched by signs indicates that language floats above actual phenomena, talking to itself. Our ceaseless commentary on ourselves and our world talks them into their (seeming) existence. Our making sense of 'things' is dependent on concepts. All concepts in their actuality are fleeting, arising and passing in seconds. Yet they are taken up as the validators of the true existence of all that occurs. By analysis and meditation one can come to see that actuality is not what we think it is, for it is forever untouched by signs.

Undirected by hope indicates that one is at peace in presence. Hope has us leaping into the future, imagining different scenarios and how we might operate within them. But these are mere mental fantasies. They exist nowhere but in the mind just as clouds exist only in the sky. When mental energy is no longer projected into an imagined future we are released from hopes and fears and can settle into the infinity of the ever-vanishing present moment.

Emptiness of all phenomena indicates that everything that appears is not the appearance of something else: there is no inner essence or substance supporting the presenting appearance. Appearance is the display of both our open potential and momentary capacity for experience. The basis of this potential is the intrinsic brightness of our all-revealing awareness while our momentary capacity arises from the interplay of self

and other as field factors. When we relax from our fixation on dualistic looking we find that we see much more, we receive the whole emergent field all at once. With this the non-duality of fullness and emptiness is apparent. There is nothing to be emptied out in order to 'achieve' emptiness – all experience, both what is experienced and the experiencer, are intrinsically empty.

Reflection on these three doors to liberation widens our attention to encompass all aspects of experience inanimate as well as animate. All that arises for us and as us is unestablished as existents. Appearances are not the appearances of 'something' but are simply appearance with nothing behind them or in them. They are the inseparability of appearance and emptiness. Everything is my experience including 'myself'. With everything included within experience this directly reveals that neither the experienced nor the experiencer is a finite entity. Free of conceptual division all experience evokes inclusive kindness on the basis of phenomena being not-other and not-self. Now non-duality becomes concrete with the deconstruction of the deluded conceptualisation of discrete entities.

This shift from immersion in impure relative truth to the increased clarity of pure relative truth often arises in breakthrough moments in psychotherapy. The hated mother, so self-absorbed and selfish, is revealed to have other aspects. For example, we suddenly recall that she had close friends who loved her. These aspects were always there yet invisible due to the intensity of our own affect-ridden conclusions about her. Rather than being an apprehendable two-dimensional figure the other is revealed in their unapprehendable sculptural complexity. Now we encounter a subject revealed (yet always only partially) in co-emergent experience rather than as a mere knowable object. Life becomes dialogic emergence rather than monologic definition.

As the over-determined other is being freed from the prison of one's projections one is simultaneously freed to think and feel and not merely be the bearer of thoughts and feelings. The frame is still the dualism of subject and object where self and other can each arise as subject or as object. Even with this relaxation of anxious determinism, free deep open inter-subjectivity tends to be a rare occurrence rather than the normality we might wish it to be. This is because we are fabulists intoxicated by our own tales, whether emotion-driven or rational. Moreover our fables are the very substance of what we take to be self and other. What we call 'reality' is a story. Belief in this story is required if we are to be taken as 'normal' by others. The pull of group delusion is intense. To maintain even a limited sense of the illusory nature of phenomena while participating with others and

experiencing the power of their assumptions can be a very lonely experience. The dharmic antidote to this is to increase kindness which, while personally heart-warming, can in turn increase one's troubling sense of the desolation that envelops so many sentient beings. It is not surprising that the word 'disillusioned' carries such negative connotations.

Absolute or simple truth is what is revealed when the veil of separation thins offering less and less opacity of screen for projections of identity. What we see is light, what we hear is sound – both are dynamic, instant, ungraspable. Our grasping grasps concepts and nothing else. Self and other, me and you, are ideas, ideas arising in the mind as the mind. They are fictions, inventions, signifiers without actually existing signifieds. They are 'real' merely because they are believed to be real. Their basis is the self-deception of make-believe, of let's pretend. The play of the ever-fecund mind is inseparable from its emptiness, its ungraspability. So much occurrence, so much happenstance, and yet all phenomena are simply the unborn radiant display of non-dual experience. When the habitual and unrecognised effort of self-creation is no longer fed by belief and investment, 'I' as simple presence is non-referential and non-indicative. 'I': open empty infinite presence.

Awakening from the belief in separation and autonomy manifests as effortless mindfulness of the integrity of our three-fold presence: essence, clarity, and connectivity.

Essence indicates the essence of all, and this is emptiness. This is not a nihilistic vacuum. The emptiness of all is inseparable from the awareness which reveals all. Empty awareness is like the sun in the sky illuminating equally in all directions.

Clarity is the ever-unfolding field of experience, the inseparability of subject and object. Clarity is the brightness of display revealed by the light of awareness. However things appear to us, they are themselves the clarity or bright display of the essence, our essence. Separate entities are merely the shadow of the imagined and imagining self.

Connectivity is our ceaseless participation in the field of disclosure. Moment by moment posture, gesture, facial and verbal expression are arising in interplay with other field factors. We and all beings are always already within the field. This is our home, our belonging. It is actually inalienable. Yet due to relying on concepts as vehicles of truth we have wandered into the labyrinth of our own imaginings. We have hidden that which cannot be hidden for it is also the hider. This is the play of illusion—see it and there is awakening. But if it is not seen there is endless delusion.

The open empty ground of this presence is not, of course, mine alone for it shines forth as the other, as everything. When the interpersonal effort of mutual confirmation subsides we see that: I am not who I think I am, I am not who you think I am, you are not who you think you are, you are not who I think you are. The subsiding of effort occurs with the dissolving or self-vanishing of the familiar sites of identity. Entities show themselves as they have always truly been, appearances full of sensuous vitality yet devoid of self-existence.

Reflection on this followed by direct revelation of the non-duality of open empty awareness and open empty phenomena brings a final deconstruction and dissolution of all reifications. Inclusive kindness is all-pervading and unimpeded as the wisdom of emptiness.

Mindfulness or recollection is usually taken to be inseparable from duality: someone is being mindful of something. This certainty applies in both impure and pure relative truth where mindfulness can bring a clarity of attention which allows the de-reification of projections both affective and cognitive. However when we approach mindfulness (Tib.: *Dran Pa*) with the view of the ninth vehicle known as Dzogchen, the great completion, we enter the domain revealed by absolute truth which is radically different from what we have encountered within our habitual terms of reference. In Dzogchen the term 'mindfulness' is applied to the non-dual recollection of the actual ground and field of being, the original openness of awareness. This unchanging intrinsic openness is not apparent while experience is mediated through the two aspects of relative truth. The actual, the as-it-is, has been obscured by absorption in fictitious imaginings. The creativity of the mind obscures itself by itself. Because this is the case actual direct recollection of the mind itself is not an activity performed by a subject. Rather it is the effortless simultaneous showing to the show-er of how it is when recollection of arisings identified as entities is allowed its own inherent demise.

This points to the possibility of therapy becoming a mode of awakening, of liberation, rather than simply a means of development and adaptation. Few therapies are able to avail themselves of this deeper potential as they lack the sense of co-presencing, of the contact of presences rather than of the meeting of entities. What is required is a view and a preparatory practice which supports the therapist in offering naked availability unclad in theories, accumulated experience and so on.

The Gestalt approach to therapy offers an orientation which could offer a starting point from which to effect a shift from dualistic to non-dual contact. Such a shift requires the therapist to abide in relaxed open presence always available for contact. It is this accepting availability itself that facilitates profound meeting with the truth of the other and for this truth to be experienced beyond conceptualisation.

When the therapist is present as the patterning of their self-formation then that invisible furniture exerts a subtle influence on the interaction. The presence of the therapist as a person with specific qualities may help to induce a sense of trust and containment but it also is likely to elicit familiar patterns of adaptation in the client, for example adaptive idealising child to strong caring father. Preoccupation with habitual contents of the mind defends against ontological insecurity by diverting attention from being/presence itself towards unanswerable questions of identity which can feed existential anxiety. However as the therapist gains more sense that their aware presence is not some stable 'thing' or self-essence to be maintained, but is the medium through which their potential for creative connectivity manifests, they can start to release identification with the current content of their body-voice-mind continuum. With this the therapist can relax into their foundational openness which is self-proving, requiring no confirmation or validation. In turn this friendly presence offers neither a confirmation of nor a destructive abandoning of the patient's habitual reiteration of their own identity patterning. This non-confirmation offered within welcoming presence allows the patient to shed the clothing wrapping their sense of individual self. Unclothed, the naked self is naked presence and with this the patient can awaken to who, what and how they have truly always been.

When the therapist expresses interest in the symptom, in the truth of the patient's story, and the patient's sense of self, they are colluding in the hiding of the as-yet unactivated potential of the patient. The patient is not who they think they are nor are they who the therapist thinks they are. Identity is constructed out of concepts, out of the editing of experience, whereas presence is not composed of thoughts, memories, sensations or any of the other manifold contents of personal experience. The relaxed presence of the therapist provides a holding environment within which the non-confirmation of the patient's habitual identity may lead the patient to a new and surprising sense of being fully here.

However the deconstructive potential of non-confirmation could also be experienced as destructive abandoning by a patient with a less than secure attachment.

Therefore the guiding principle is to avoid separating contact with the patient's profound potential from simultaneous contact with their growing edge.

Meeting the other where they are without demand offers an ambiance of acceptance facilitating both the release of identification with self-sabotaging patterns and the awakening of the potential to awaken. This unites the wisdom of relaxed openness with the compassion of contactful presence. This brings a wider and deeper meaning to the commonly held idea that the therapist employs an intentional use of self. Here 'self' is used to deconstruct reified self.

Simple presence is not the presence of someone or something. This is different from the general usage of the term 'presence' where it indicates either the presence of something other, for example beauty, God, pain or the presence of myself as myself, for example, 'I love being with you all, I feel so present in your company.' Here someone or something is presenting and this announces their 'presence' whereas non-dual presence is instant and is not a personal quality. In fact it has three inseparable aspects: the presence of the unimaginable, inexpressible ground /base /source; the presence of the indivisible field; and the presence of our ungraspable participation. These three aspects were referred to above as 'essence, clarity and connectivity'. Since we are exploring experience that is outwith accurate description in language many different terms have been employed within the Buddhist tradition to say the unsayable.

The aim of Gestalt is the integration of the seemingly disparate parts of the person. From the dualistic point of view this requires active intervention such as contact-increasing experiments. From the non-dual point of view the invitation to be present with, in, and as the presence of awareness that is always already present is itself healing in wholeness by releasing identification with parts taken as entities. There is no need to integrate self-states into a coherent self since all self-states and environmental states are already integral in the infinite hospitality (*dharmadhatu*) inseparable from awareness.

For as long as one is not able to be present in awareness then ego-self will continue to be caught up in its pulsation between identification and dis-identification with the transient contents of the mind. The patterning of these contents can be classified in various ways including for example the diagnostic categories of the DSM5. The paradox is that a strong flexible resilient ego can take some interest in its own dissolution whereas a fragile sense of self is unlikely to see the invitation to relax as anything other than a path to terrifying

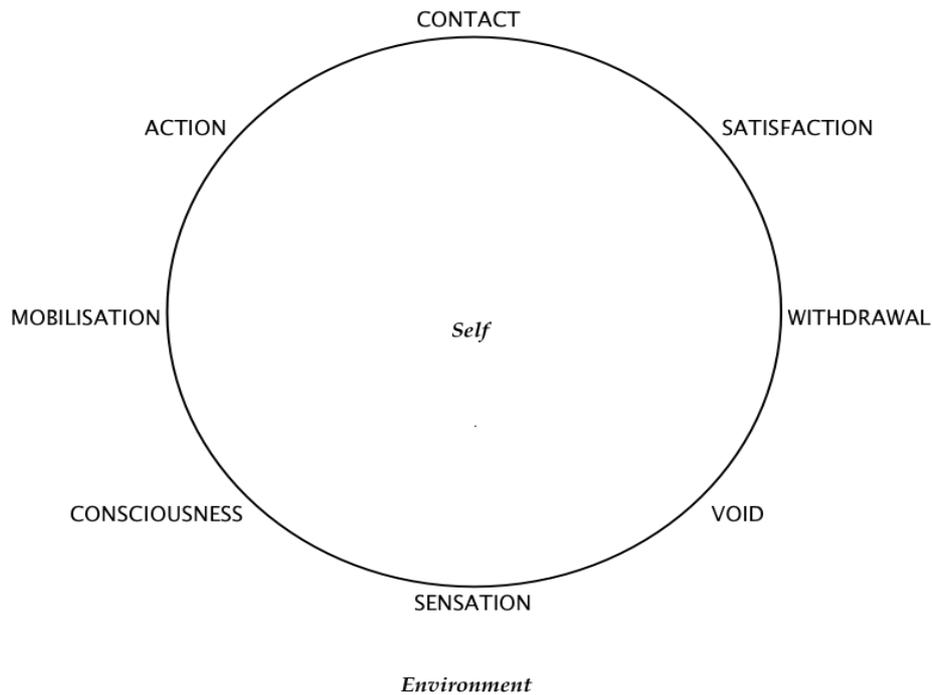
collapse. Hence patients with psychotic disorders, dissociative disorders, borderline structures and so on should be facilitated only towards ego-syntonic contact until stability is gained.

Gestalt points to contact as the middle way between confluence and isolation. With confluence subject merges with object or with the other's subjectivity. For example, if you watch a film and are absorbed by it you are no longer monitoring what is going on. This fusion can be experienced as a blessed relief from the burden of self. Yet the relief is momentary for the sense of self lingers on and in its inherent limitation easily feels overwhelmed and withdraws to a self-protective isolation. While the fragile ego is shuttling between these polarities it is unable to avail itself of the midpoint of contact, the door of presence which is always already open.

Mindfulness as non-distraction, non-merger, non-dispersal is a useful practice as a support for maintaining clarity of attention towards the object of attention. If attention cannot rest on the presence of the object it is likely to follow speculation about the object, inventing a substance for it which it does not possess, or it may lose contact with the object and follow after other more interesting phenomena. Mindfulness in this mode not only strengthens the capacity to gather one's attention back to its intended object but also to gather that intended object back to the simplicity of its actual presenting appearance.

The Gestalt cycle outlines a simple description of how a person can move towards contact with the factors in the environment required to alleviate a felt need. The quality of this contact is determined by the relative degrees of clarity and obscurity present in the moment. Firstly we can look at contact in its dualistic mode.

As with the Buddhist wheel of life, the momentum of the Gestalt cycle of interdependent moments means that there is no actual beginning. Conventionally however, sensation is often taken to be the starting point. Here we will look at the stages of the cycle as described from a dualistic point of view.



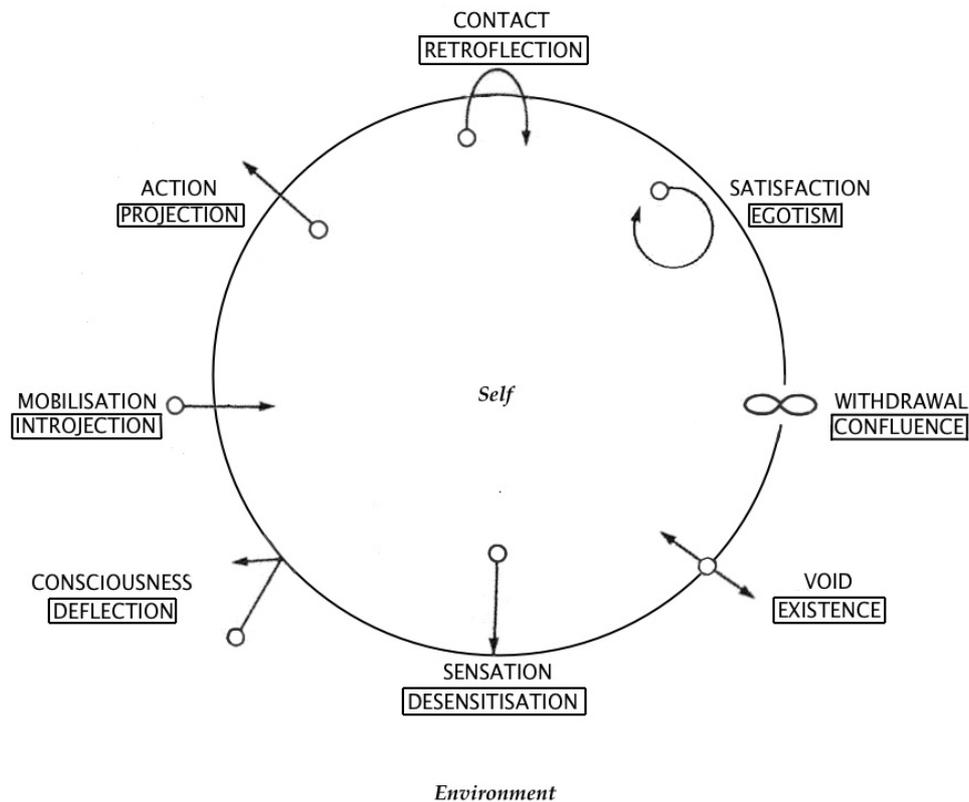
THE GESTALT CYCLE

To give an example of how this process unfolds, a *sensation* arises in my mouth and throat. When this enters *consciousness* I notice the sensation which I identify as indicating thirst leading to my sense that 'I'm thirsty'. Now the subject, I, has a specific colouration, thirst, and this leads to *mobilisation*, a gathering of embodied capacity and sense of the current environment. If no liquid is available I may be able to release the sensation into the background so that it is non-intrusive. However if liquid is available I start to formulate a sense of what I want and how I can mobilise to get it. This leads to *action* in which I am purposefully going to the kitchen and performing all the activities necessary to make a cup of tea. If I can sit with this cup of tea, feeling its warmth in my hands, savouring its aroma and bringing it to my mouth so that its refreshing flavour is in *contact* with my taste buds, I can find myself fully in contact with the tea. I am not thinking of anything else – the tea is worthy of my undivided attention. The fullness of this moment brings *satisfaction* followed by *withdrawal* from both the presence of thirst and the focus on the tea. Now there is a *void*, a relaxed open non-preoccupation and this availability to the field allows new *sensations* of impingement to arise.

In this example the potential of the moment of contact is more or less availed of, according to whether one is available for contact or not. Gestalt is concerned with the ever-varying interface of self and environment. Self and environment are mutually influencing and the many permutations of availability which this generates means that there is no limit to the specific interruptions to contact which arise.

However, some common interruptions are outlined here according to the stages of the cycle. This is shown in the second diagram. With **desensitisation** there is anaesthetisation so that many of the factors which impinge on a person make no discernible impact. Even when there is an impact attention maybe **deflected** from it due to distraction and preoccupation. In the next stage limiting and prohibitive **introjects** such as 'you are worthless' or 'what's the point?' are activated in the person blocking mobilisation and confining them within the beliefs they have internalised. Action is often blocked or limited by **projection** whereby one is sure that one knows how the other person is going to respond or that the task is too difficult. At the point of contact there can be a **retroreflection** or avoidant turning away from the object so that the energy of arousal is turned in on the self, manifesting as thoughts and feelings, for example as blame or self-recrimination. The satisfaction arising from full contact can be diminished or avoided by self-referential **egotism** which holds one's self apart from the experience. The contented withdrawal resultant on satisfaction can be interrupted by a **confluence** with satisfaction and an unwillingness to let it go. Such immersive identification diminishes the very satisfaction it clings to. Full withdrawal leads to a healthy void rich in the potential of new interactions with the field of experience. This openness to the happenstance of life is obscured by holding on to a fixed sense of one's own **existence** for then the cycle ends in a return to oneself rather than to an availability for fresh experience.

When life is understood in terms of existence and nonexistence then nonexistence as death, as oblivion, as nihilistic nothingness, as boredom, as *ennuie* and so on is something to be feared. This fear often drives a foreshortened engagement with the cycle where one goes from a mental event arising in consciousness to mobilisation and activity, with one's endless busyness employed as the exhausting maintainer of the ego's sense of agency. It is not surprising that the most difficult of all yoga *asanas* is the corpse posture, *shavasana*, where one is simply doing nothing at all.



INTERRUPTIONS TO THE GESTALT CYCLE

At each of these points the discipline of mindfulness is likely to be efficacious in limiting the impact of habitual interruptions. The quality of contact is limited by the constraints of duality. The sense of subject and object provides plenty of fuel for the subtle ongoing commentary that clouds the space of awareness. This subtle narrative flow reifies self-reflexive proprioception which in turn confirms that, 'I am doing this; this is happening to me'. Unexamined assumptions are employed as the guarantor of this deceptive normalcy.

Yet self and other are merely conventional terms and do not point to truly separate entities. Our environment exists for us as experience. Our self arises for us as experience. The field of experience is not actually divided. The ongoing communication between these two aspects of the field is our life. Life is connectivity, random and intricate. Self and environment are neither just one nor are they two – they are non-dual and manifest in dependent origination. When reification is recognised as the deluded and deluding consequence of not attending to non-duality, the reliance on the contrived function of consciousness ceases and the integrity of the field is revealed as awareness of co-emergent diversity. Now each moment is self-arising and self-liberating and the causal chain of the

Gestalt cycle self-resolves into the completeness of each moment. Freed from the endless trajectory of the arrow of time, past present and future are clearly always within the deep and infinite present moment.

Our basic choice is between freedom and restriction, between awakening to infinity or one damned thing after another. When we choose the familiar we have the seemingly comforting staleness of the known. We are in a world that we can take for granted. Then contact is merely contact with the idea of the object. This is similar to the meditation techniques and paths that seek improvement and development such as more concern for others, lucid dreaming, or ability to observe one's thoughts, feelings and sensations.

To choose freedom is to let go of the supports of self-identity, to let go of knowledge and interpretation based on science. This is similar to meditation as simply being present with whatever is occurring, neither adopting nor rejecting but allowing the freefall of experience as it arises and passes without commentary.

When mindfulness is not mediated by concepts, subtle or gross, it is the inherent integrity of the mind as the sphere or space of experience. Now there is no object to be recollected and no mindful person to do the recollecting. The intrinsic clarity of the mind reveals itself to itself in the inseparability of infinite stillness and uninterrupted movement. Open awareness needs no recollection, no mindfulness, since it is self-present from the very beginning (Tib.: *Ye Shes*).

For open awareness there are no interruptions to non-dual contact since contact is immediate as the infinite variety of radiance. For the individual ego there are endless interruptions to contact. No matter how hard the ego-self tries to improve or purify itself, its own self-reflexivity binds it to duality. The issue is not about trying harder – since the intrinsic is here, always. Release tension, relax effort, open to the ever-present presence. Open presence is intrinsic and infinite whereas distraction and fusion are contingent and finite. Whatever effort the Gestalt therapist makes to remain present at the contact boundary will itself lock them in a dualistic encounter no matter how fine and unbounded their contact seems.

When we awaken to non-duality we see that presence and distraction are not mutually excluding polarities. Within the mirror of presence, focus and distraction, clarity and obscurity, arise and pass as empty reflections. It is unhelpful to conflate relative dualistic presence with open infinite presence. Presence as open awareness is undeniable

and ungraspable – it is not a thing among things. With this, therapy moves beyond problems to be solved and becomes an invitation to live in the shining heart of the mystery of the self-healing whole.

Limited contact is the fullness of the moment when I am in contact with someone or some particular thing. This is deepened when contact arises between us as intimate intersubjectivity – neither of us is doing 'it'. In fact we do not know how to make 'it' happen – all we can do is to put ourselves in the way of it by not succumbing to our habits of conceptual interpretation. This negative capability, this capacity to not know, is actually the profound door to the openness which is the ground of presence. With open non-dual presence we are present as sky to sky – the ungraspable de-selfed self and the ungraspable de-othered other are vast, deep, unveiled and undivided.

With this, therapy as self-development on a path of struggle falls away, revealing therapy as self-liberation, as the fact of intrinsic freedom. Since the other is not other and self is not the primary site of identity, the play of co-emergence manifests the inseparability of wisdom and compassion, and healing is effortless and continuous.

POSTSCRIPT

The pure unadulterated tradition of Dzogchen maintained in Tibet has now been generously made easily available in the wider world. This pure tradition is the basis of my teaching and practice and I endeavour to uphold its integrity. However in writings such as the above I seek to offer some bridges whereby at least some of the enlightening tradition may be encountered by those with interest. The pure form will be of greater value – yet for those who cannot or will not avail themselves of this unbroken flow – to put old wine in new bottles may be an ethical gesture of connection and inclusion.

Many new crises erupt as the consequence of past and present selfish beliefs and activities, and if the views expressed in the short piece can aid the development of kindly connectivity then its purpose will be fulfilled.

If traditional or adapted presentations are worked with respectfully and with a kind wish to help others then all should be well. But if the motive is self-serving and engendered by a desire for status, power, wealth and so on then this egocentric orientation is likely to cause problems for oneself and others. In Tibet the hierarchical structure of society made it easier to protect the teachings from those with merely worldly intent. Now in our more unstructured social formations with easy media access to all levels of teaching and practice it behoves each student to maintain the humility and integrity which will keep them close to the whole.

Further consideration of many of these topics can be found in the material freely available at www.simplybeing.co.uk.