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## MUSTARD SEEDS AND TIGER WHISKERS:



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Written by Stephen Silverton

Friday, 11 March 2005

## Mustard Seeds and Tiger Whiskers: The Medicine of Emptiness

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### Introduction

As psychotherapists we experience various pressures to arrive at theoretical clarity. Some of these come from external sources, and some from internal sources. As we engage with the capitalist consumer culture which forms the context for our work, those who fund psychotherapy increasingly demand SMART \* objectives (and it is hard to set out where you are aiming to get to without also knowing something about how you are going to get there). Equally, regulatory pressures drive professionalisation, and with that a push towards the kind of status accorded the 'hard' sciences. There are also competitive pressures among psychotherapy 'brands', which create the need for distinctiveness in theory and practice. And then there is internal pressure: as we deal with the uncertainty, and anxiety, of helping complex human beings in difficult life situations, we need to form judgements about what their predicament is and how we might help them move through it.

Although some are tempted to resist engaging with the theoretical questions, on the grounds that the art of psychotherapy is a purely intuitive one, this is of course still a theory! As Hill (2002, pp 20-21) suggests, it is impossible to practice without some underlying theory, even if that theory is implicit:



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Every clinical practice – of whatever school - has an attached theory. It is not possible to use a clinical technique without there first existing a specific theory that the clinician actively relies on, even if that theory is hidden, intuitive or unconscious. By analogy think of the English language, which you probably read and speak without having to consciously worry about our highly complex rules of grammar.[...] Some clinicians try to hide away their theory so as to gain immunity from criticism. Others try to rely on their 'feelings' rather than 'theories' in their clinical work. This is a misguided and potentially problem making approach, and in any case, is itself a theory. It is a theory that says that '*your feelings inform your clinical interpretations and interventions*'.

But the push for theoretical clarity brings with it the danger of dogma: if we hold too tightly to our theory, we may lose sight of what is in front of us as we try to fit the client into our pre-existing framework. The theory may start to dictate what we can observe, and how we can respond. This would then limit our capacity to be helpful, since every client, every life, is unique

In any case, most experienced practitioners have learned to be extremely humble about what can be known. As Jung says, 'One could as little catch the psyche in a theory as one could catch the world' (CW16, para 198)

Jung even goes so far as to suggest that theoretical 'clarity' is an actual hindrance to good psychotherapeutic work:

Generally speaking, the less the psychotherapist knows in advance, the better the chances for the treatment. Nothing is more deleterious than a routine understanding of everything (CW 16, para 195)

This paper suggests that Buddhist thought – in particular the concept of *sunyata*, usually translated as 'emptiness', but perhaps better rendered as 'the open potential of being' [1] - and practice may provide a path between naïve theoretical nihilism and a doctrinaire fixity of view, offering practitioners rigorous philosophical support for retaining open-mindedness about the client and his situation, whilst meditation practice resources the practice of such 'negative capability'. In this way of thinking and practising, theories about the client remain fluid and provisional. Their therapeutic function is not to 'explain', but to enable and sustain dialogue, both the inner dialogue of

the therapist and the outer dialogue between therapist and client. As such, theory functions as a kind of placebo, which is part of all that which enables the therapeutic encounter. In more explicitly Jungian terms, we might say that theory forms part of the structure of the alchemical vessel of therapy.

The argument is illustrated with two tales of healing from the Buddhist tradition, those of the Mustard Seed and Tiger's Whisker. I suggest that the attitude which flows from this kind of thinking permits a wide variety of interventions on the part of the therapist. It is therefore an argument for an integrative approach, which preserves the place of mystery and grace at the heart of the change process, and which resists pressures to 'scientise' the art of psychotherapy.

Finally, Jung's writings on the theory and practice of psychotherapy and on Buddhist thought, suggest that this flexible and non-dogmatic attitude is one Jung himself favoured.

The ideas presented here have been strongly influenced by the work of Watson (1998), Batchelor (1983, 1990, 2004) Sills (1999) and Ekeland (1997). What follows is largely a response to their contributions, although any misunderstandings and misrepresentation are of course my own.

### **The Buddhist Way**

For those without any background in Buddhist thought and practice, I would first like to sketch a brief outline of these.

'Balham, Gateway to the South' is the title of a famous Peter Sellers sketch in which the late comedian hymned the delights of that South London district with the words 'Balham, city of ever-changing lights. Red, amber, green, then red...'. I would like to begin this exploration of the Buddhist vision in what some might see as a similarly prosaic setting: Camberwell, South London, on a grey Sunday morning in January at about 8.30 a.m. I am in my car, waiting at traffic lights. The roads are quiet. My attention is caught by the sight of clouds blowing across the sky and the scene suddenly takes on a strange and unexpected beauty. The wisps of cloud cross the pale sky. The traffic lights go through their sequence. Cars stream across, rear lights glowing red in the greyness of the day. It is a kind of South London haiku.

It is easy to see impermanence – termed *anicca* in Pali, the earliest written language of the Buddhist canon and one of the three ‘marks’ of existence. Everywhere we look, we need only intend to become aware of change and we can find it. The sound of traffic outside my window, rising and falling as the vehicles approach and disappear. The feeling of my breath inflating my stomach; my heartbeat; the pulse in my left hand as it pauses above the keyboard.

Less easy to appreciate experientially is *anatta* – insubstantiality or selflessness, the second mark. At the traffic lights there was a sense of what Natalie Goldberg (1991) calls ‘wild mind’, that all of us were participating in a larger dance, or exchange of meaning. The cold Sunday January morning, the quiet roads, the sets of traffic lights, the small queues and flows of traffic, the clouds across the sky - all ‘interbeing’, the word Thich Nhat Hahn (1988) uses to describe the web of relationship in which the entire universe is involved. I can only glimpse this experientially. I have to resort to conceptual thought and imagination to deepen my sense of it.

I know that every object no matter how apparently solid is in a process of change. My car – as I am sometimes only too aware - is rusting, has had many components replaced, is burning petrol and using oil. It is in fact in a process of interaction with the environment, which given another few years will see it making its final journey to the scrap yard and, hopefully, its parts recycled into other Peugeot 205s of 1990 vintage, and its metal perhaps smelted down and recycled into other objects. Though apparently solid and reassuringly permanent as it sits in the street outside my window, my car will occasionally and inconveniently remind me of its impermanence and the way it dynamically interacts with its environment. For example, breaking down because water has got inside its distributor cap.

In what sense then, ultimately, can my car said to exist as a separate object? Its components change. It cannot run without petrol and oil, which require more or less continual replenishment, as my credit card bills testify. The body is vulnerable to all kinds of change via the hazards of water, air, vandals, and other cars. The ‘engine’ is in fact a (to me) mysterious array of components, themselves combinations of sub-components, and all of these, too, are subject to more or less frequent obsolescence. The tyres, mirrors, exhaust, wipers, windows, seats...all of it is impermanent. In fact, its materials are only temporarily

shaped into the form 'car'. The closer I look, the less I am able to see any solid entity I can define as essentially 'the car'. In fact, painful as it is, I have to admit that 'my car' is no more than an fiction.

So from impermanence we can start to impute insubstantiality, lack of ultimate self-hood. Though we see and experience the world as consisting of separate and discrete entities this is true only on a relative basis. Looked at from a longer term perspective (or from far enough away in space) the perception of solid and separate entities is no more than a pragmatic device to get us through the day.

*Anatta* cuts the ground from under our cosy and habitual assumption of a self 'in here' looking out on a world 'out there'. The experience of a separate perceiver is in fact a kind of mirage created in the perceptual process. The colours I see look different depending on the light in which I see them. And of course certain light is invisible to the eye – infrared for example. Colour then, is contextually created, rather than an inherent property of the object. It depends on an interaction between the eye and the environment, which creates the 'perceptual situation'. Not just colour, but all perception, is like this. Bateson explains this with the metaphor of an electrical switch [2]. A switch is only 'visible' to the circuit as a difference. When in the 'on' position the circuit is complete and current flows all around it. When in the 'off' position the circuit is broken and no current flows. The switch is only 'perceived' in the act of switching. All our perception proceeds in the same way, is in fact perception of the 'news of difference'. A perfectly camouflaged object is not perceived.

So all perception is profoundly contextual and relational. The very perception of an 'I' is created by the dynamic interaction of the sensory apparatus, including the mind, with the environment. But here we run into the limitations of language and conceptual thought, because the very concept of environment implies something purely objective and somehow independent of the process of perception. In fact, as we have seen with colour, the I/ environment experience is an interactive process, recursive, and self-reinforcing, resulting from the complex web of relationship between knower and known, where each creates and re-creates the other precisely as 'knower' and 'known'. (This is explored in depth in Varela et al, 1991). Self and world, subject and object appear somehow 'solid', but this solidity is something we invest them with. In the words

of Nagarjuna:

Just as due to error the eye perceives

A whirling firebrand as a wheel

So the senses apprehend

Present objects as if real

(Hopkins (ed and trans) 1975, p 164)

Our attempts to live our lives on the basis of the fiction of a permanent self are founded on an illusion, and leave us only with an anguished sense of hollowness and dissatisfaction. As long as we are stuck in this consciousness, we live like Tantalus and Sisyphus combined, eternally reaching for what is beyond our grasp, working forever to slake an unquenchable thirst. This what the Buddha called *dukkha* the third mark of existence. The word is often translated as 'suffering' but the etymology suggests the image of an 'ill fitting chariot wheel'. The sense is of an all-pervasive unsatisfactoriness stemming from a misalignment with reality. [3]

The Buddhist vision is not dryly philosophical in an abstract sense, but profoundly soteriological. That is, it provides a means not only for understanding our existential situation but for transforming our relationship to it, from one of anguish to one of liberation. In that sense it is not a theory, but a path, or 'way'. If we can let go of our need to grasp – to 'solve, satisfy and set unchangeably in order' (the phrase comes from Larkin's poem 'Love Songs in Age') the universe is revealed in its beauty – as Indra's Net of mutually reflecting jewels, or Blake's 'World in a grain of sand' [4] Beauty, mystery, wonder and the everyday are interweaved, as in the haiku.

The contention is that when we fully accept this reality, wisdom and compassion arise, with release from the anguished clinging to the fictitious notion of a self which characterises *dukkha*. The path of meditation, ethics and wisdom mapped out in the traditional teachings provides a set of principles and practises for transforming consciousness, eventually releasing us from the illusion of self/other duality in which we remain trapped. Meditation provides a method for quieting and clarifying the mind so that it may perceive the way things really are. In a traditional metaphor, the mind is

a lake and the truth of interbeing is the moon above. When the surface of the lake is not blown around by thoughts and emotions, the water becomes less and less choppy, more and more still. This still surface can then reflect the moon more and more clearly. Actions of speech, body and mind which are more and more aligned with the reality of deep interconnection between all beings bring greater stillness to the mind, enabling clearer perception of the way things are. So meditation and ethics act in tandem to produce wisdom, and the three operate together in a kind of positive feedback loop.

This is the Path or Way leading towards wisdom or insight, a process of gradually deconstructing the fiction of a permanent, distinct and separate self and the fear and craving to which this illusion, and the need defensively to sustain it, give rise. As practitioners progress along the path they realise at deeper and deeper levels the true nature of self and world as *sunyata* – empty. This does not imply non existence (the nihilistic pole of the erroneous and habitual dualistic view) nor existence (the eternalist or substantialist pole at the other extreme of the duality) but *tathagata*, usually translated as ‘suchness’. This has the sense of both uniqueness and relatedness. The consciousness which sees *tathagata* sees the wonder and mystery of all beings in their being here at all, in all the poignancy of their transience. As such, that consciousness is imbued with penetrating wisdom, profound compassion, a deep and unshakeable freedom and equanimity. This consciousness sees the ‘Buddha nature’ at the heart of all beings. All beings share in the universal process of coming into and out of form, and all have the potential to become as deeply conscious of the nature of this process as a Buddha, or fully awakened consciousness.

It is in this sense that the Buddhist path offers a ‘medicine’ of emptiness. Buddhist principles and practises can offer psychotherapists a potent resource to ‘rest in emptiness’, and so to create therapeutic relationship which becomes the vehicle for changes analogous to the liberation which is the fruition of the Buddhist path. As Gaye Watson suggests, the change which therapy aims at is different in quantity, not quality, to the goal of the Buddhist path. Whereas the latter aims at a total liberation from all attachment, the former aims at greater freedom and flexibility:

The healthier the human being, the more they are wholly available for free response[...]. In terms of

Buddhist epistemology [...] ideal cognition means ideal and fresh cognition, free from subsequent conceptuality. In a somewhat similar way, the more areas of the personality are bound by rigid defensive and cognitive structures, the less is available for spontaneous and open response. The very work of psychotherapy is to bring awareness to these structures and in exploring them, loosening them, freeing the energy bound up therein, allowing moment to moment free response to events, in contrast to being confined within a pre-determined script written with fear or resentment or whatever, often relevant to a time now past. (1998, pp147-8)

As Watson suggests, the Buddhist concept of *sunyata* radically undercuts our habitual view of reality as substance, replacing it with 'reality as emptiness'. However, far from leaving us stranded on an existential 'road to nowhere', the medicine of this emptiness opens up a path, a possibility of recovering the potential for creative change. This path was always there, but may have become obscured by developmental factors, compounded by an ordinary daily living which entails 'a gradual thickening of the psyche's arteries as layers of patterned responses deposit themselves on the open potential of being' [5]

## Two Tales of Healing

I would like to explore how the therapeutic relationship can promote the recovery of the open potential of being, and the role of the therapist and his theory within that, by examining two stories of healing. Here, then, are the stories.

### *The Mustard Seed* [6]

Some 2500 years ago at the time of the Buddha in Savatthi in India, near where the Buddha had established himself with his followers, there lived a woman by the name of Kisa, or 'Skinny', Gotami. She was from a poor family and unable to raise much in the way of dowry for a potential husband. Eventually she did marry but even then her in-laws treated her with disdain, calling her a nobody's daughter. Then one day she bore a child and their attitude towards Kisa changed. And Kisa herself found a new joy in this child, whom she loved dearly. But one day when the child was just old enough to run about and play, he became ill. The illness worsened and Kisa Gotami could only watch with desperation as, despite all her efforts, he weakened and died. Hysterical with grief, she clung to

the child's body and would not let her relatives take it away.

Taking the corpse on her hip she went from door to door in the village pleading for medicine for her child. 'Medicine? What's the use?', she was told, as people responded with bewilderment or confused embarrassment, or else tried to reason with her. But she could not accept that the child was dead. Eventually she came upon a man who saw that her mind was unbalanced with grief for the child. This man sent her to the Buddha, saying that he was reputed to have all kinds of powers, and maybe he would have some medicine for her child. With renewed hope she ran off to seek out the Buddha. Finding him, bedraggled and tearful, she stood before him and urged him to give her medicine for the child.

The Buddha looked kindly at Kisa Gotami and the dead child in her arms. 'Yes, I can help you', he said. 'But to make the medicine I will need a mustard seed'. Overjoyed, Kisa Gotami was about to run off to find one, knowing that this would be easy, since every home at that time had a pot of mustard seed in the kitchen. 'There is just one condition, though,' the Buddha added. 'It must come from a home where nobody has died'. Without giving this a second thought, Kisa Gotami ran off on her quest.

At the first house she asked for a seed and they were happy to give her one. But when she asked if anyone had died there, she heard that only last month they had lost a grandparent. At the second house, the third and the fourth, it was the same story. Everybody she met was happy to give her a mustard seed, but everybody had lost someone: a father, a mother, a sister, a brother, a beloved child – no family was untouched by death.

After just a few houses Kisa Gotami broke down and wept. She had accepted that her child was dead. Taking his body to the funeral ground, she bade him farewell, weeping with all her heart. After a time, she felt her natural being restoring itself. Breathing deeply, she thought of the Buddha and was deeply moved by the wisdom and compassion he had shown her. She realised that death comes to all, that she was not alone in her loss, and that the Buddha had sought to show her just this. She went to him.

'Did you find the mustard seed?' asked the Buddha.

'The work of the seed is already done', replied Kisa Gotami, and she asked the Buddha to accept her as his disciple. This he did and later, whilst meditating in the forest, she gained enlightenment.

### *The Tiger's Whisker [7]*

A long time ago in what is now Korea, there lived a young woman called Yun Ok. One day she arrived at the door of a famous and venerable sage who lived as a hermit in his mountain hut. He was famous for his magic charms and potions.

Yun Ok entered and found the sage looking into the fire. Without raising his eyes from the fireplace, he asked her 'why are you here?'

'Oh famous sage,' said Yun Ok, 'you must help me. I am desperate! Please make me a potion.'

'Yes, everybody wants potions. But can we cure a sick world with a potion?'

'Please Master, you must help me.'

'Well, what is your story?'

'My husband, who is very dear to me, recently came home from the wars where he was away fighting for three years. Since he has come back he is much changed. He hardly speaks to me, or to anyone at all. If I speak he does not seem to hear. When he talks at all, it is roughly. If I serve him food which is not to his liking he pushes it aside and angrily leaves the room. Sometimes I see him, when he should be out working in the rice fields, sitting on a rock just staring at the sea.'

'Yes, it is like that sometimes when young men return from the wars,' said the hermit. 'Go on'.

'There is no more to tell,' said the young woman. 'I want a potion to give to my husband to make him loving and gentle, like he used to be.'

'Ha, so simple is it?' replied the sage. 'Very well. Come back in three days and I will tell you what we shall need for such a potion'.

Yun Ok returned three days later. 'I have looked into it,' said the sage. 'Your potion can be made but we need

one vital ingredient: the whisker of a living tiger. Bring me this tiger's whisker and we will make the potion'.

'A tiger's whisker! But how can I possibly get it?', said Yun Ok, incredulous.

'If the potion is important enough, you will succeed,' replied the sage, and returned his gaze to the fireplace.

Yun Ok went home and thought carefully about how she would get the tiger's whisker. Then one night whilst her husband was asleep she left the house with a bowl of rice and meat sauce in her hand. She went to the place on the mountainside where a tiger was known to live and called to him, holding out the bowl of food. The tiger did not come.

The next night, she did the same thing. This time she approached a little nearer to the tiger's cave. Every night she went there, each time getting a few steps closer, until the tiger was accustomed to seeing her there.

One night, Yun Ok went to within a stone's throw of the tiger's cave. This time the tiger came a few steps toward her and stopped. The two of them stood looking at each other in the moonlight. The night after, the same thing happened. This time they were so close that Yun Ok could talk to the tiger in a soft, soothing voice. The following night, after looking for a long time into Yun Ok's eyes, the tiger ate the food that she had brought. It was now six months since she had first come to the tiger's cave. The next night, she found the tiger waiting for her. After he had eaten, she was able to stroke his head very gently with her hand. At last, one night, after softly stroking his head, Yun Ok spoke to the tiger.

'Oh tiger, generous animal, I must have one of your whiskers. Please do not be angry with me'.

And she snipped off one of his whiskers.

The tiger accepted this calmly and Yun Ok went back down the trail, now breaking into a run, the whisker clutched tightly in her hand.

The next morning, as the sun rose over the sea, she was at the door of the mountain sage. 'I have it! I have the tiger's whisker! Now you can make the potion for my husband to make him loving and gentle again.'

The sage took the whisker from her and examined it carefully to make sure that it was indeed the whisker of a living tiger. Satisfied that it was, he dropped it into the fire.

‘Oh sir, what have you done?’ cried Yun Ok.

‘Tell me how you obtained it,’ said the sage.

‘Why, I went to the mountainside to where the tiger lives, taking a bowl of food with me. Each night I approached a little nearer to the tiger’s cave, holding the bowl of food and calling out to him. I spoke gently and soothingly to him, to make sure he understood that I wished him only good. Each night I brought him food, knowing that he would not eat. But I did not give up. I came again and again, always speaking gently to him. Gradually I won the tiger’s confidence. At last came a time when he would meet me on the trail and eat from the bowl I held in my hands. I stroked his head and he made happy sounds in his throat. Only after that did I take the whisker.’

‘Yes,’ said the hermit. ‘You tamed the tiger. You won his confidence and love’.

‘But it is all for nothing!’ exclaimed Yun Ok. ‘You have thrown the whisker into the fire’.

‘I do not think it is all for nothing,’ said the sage. ‘The whisker is no longer needed. Let me ask you, Yun Ok: is a man more dangerous than a tiger? Is he less responsive to love and kindness? If you can win the trust of a wild tiger through gentleness and patience, surely you can do the same with your husband?’

At this Yun Ok was speechless. She stood there for a long time, reflecting on the sage’s words. Then she started out back down the trail.

### Reflections on the Stories *The Placebo Effect and Emptiness*

Not the least striking aspect of these stories about healing is that they both concern potions which are ineffective as potions. In fact, they do not get as far as coming into existence as potions because they do not get made in the first place: all the healing takes place in the quest for the missing ingredient. The potions act as non-ingested placebos! So, what is happening here?

Tor -Johan Ekeland (1997) has written perceptively of the placebo effect in psychotherapy. Ekeland borrows the terms *pleroma* and *creatura* from Bateson, who in turn borrowed them from Jung. He explains that *pleroma* refers to matter, the physical universe consisting of particles and energy, whilst *creatura* refers to the mental, the meaning system created by human beings. (1977, pp 82-83). Placebo is a phenomenon of *creatura*, the bodily reactions being effect rather than cause:

When taking a pill, the input is both the pill as chemistry (*pleroma*) and the pill as information (*creatura*). As chemistry the pill is digested through a metabolic process – biochemical communication. As a symbol the pill is taken perceptually and ‘digested’ as a mental process. The pill as a symbol is not in an inner way related to the pill’s materiality, but to its meaning as *creatura* – in the same way as it is not the quality of material in a flag that creates the feeling of national pride. In the same way that the energy that the feeling of national pride demands is not in the flag, neither is the energy that produces the placebo effect in the pill itself. It is there already as potential in the body, released by something the body finds meaning in. (1977: 83)

In these ‘cases’, the potion is not even ingested. This is because the vital and missing ingredient is either not found at all, or found but now seen to be superfluous. It is superfluous because, as Kisa puts it, ‘the work of the seed [or whisker, or pill] is already done’. But in what does this work consist? What actually happens?

Initially what happens is that there is an act of faith. The act of faith consists in going to the sage (or psychotherapist) in the first place. What animates both Kisa and Yun Ok is the belief that things can change, that ‘It can be different’. What enables this is their trust in the sage, and this in turn is initially dependent on a trust in him at the level of *pleroma*, as a maker of magical potions. The sage is perfectly happy to go along with this, yet he already knows that the potion will be absolutely without healing potential on the level of *pleroma*. So in what does the sage trust? He trusts in his client’s ‘self-healing capacity’, that ‘potential in the body’ to which Ekeland refers. And on what is that trust based? My contention is that it is based on the perception of Buddha nature. And what is Buddha nature? No nature! Yet this ‘no nature’ is not a collapse into nihilistic negation, but a groundedness in universal process, in the web of interbeing, in emptiness – ‘the

open potential of being'..

### **Emptiness, Therapeutic Presence and Negative Capability**

In the words of the original text, The Buddha 'sees the promise' in Kisa Gotami, and the sage in the Tiger's Whisker trusts that Yun Ok's determination will be the decisive factor. If the sage sees the potential in his clients, this seeing comes out of his ability to rest in the open potential of being and to sense this in his clients. That is, his ability to sense the Buddha nature of the person before him comes from his capacity to be alive to and resonate with their being, his capacity for therapeutic 'presence'. As Ekeland reminds us, most research on outcomes in psychotherapy suggest that 'therapist variables, and relationship variables, are more important than therapy theory variables' ( Ekeland, 1997, p78). Jung himself asserted that

The great healing factor in psychotherapy is the doctor's personality, which is something not given at the start; it represents his performance at its highest and not a doctrinaire blueprint. (CW 16, para 198)

My sense of what Jung means here by 'the doctor's personality...his performance at its highest' is the capacity of the practitioner to be alive to the open potential of being. Perhaps this is why it is 'something not given at the start; it represents his performance at its highest', and has nothing to do with any theoretical framework.

Another way of describing this capacity for openness, but from Western literature, is the phrase 'negative capability' The term comes from a letter by John Keats:

That is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries and doubts without any irritable reaxhing after fact or reason [8]

While Keats suggests that this ability distinguishes great creative artists like Shakespeare, it also succinctly describes that fundamentally alive and receptive frame of mind, centred in the present moment, which captures the therapist's 'performance at its highest.

In 'The Mustard Seed' the Buddha, 'seeing the promise' in Kisa gives her his instructions. The sense is

that he not only takes in her life situation but her potential for wisdom, which in Buddhist terms is her potential to embrace the reality of emptiness. He does not try to reason her out of her current state of mind. Unlike the other people she has encountered as she goes through the village with the corpse on her hip begging for medicine for her child, who have responded with words like 'Medicine! What's the use?', the Buddha sees that in her current mental and emotional state she is unreceptive to the bald truth. He feels the anguish of her state of mind and meets her just where she is, offering the prospect of a cure through the mustard seed. But he knows that the quest he sends her on is bound to end in a disillusion, but in the positive sense of a *dis*-illusion which, paradoxically, will begin to effect the true healing she needs.

The Buddha's action has been all-important, although he has done nothing directly to alter Kisa's consciousness. What he has 'done' is to be absolutely present and responsive to her and her situation, responding to her just as she is, with just the perfect 'intervention' to catalyse this change in consciousness. It is informed by a genius of presence, wisdom and kindness which is both perfectly appropriate to her current emotional state yet also speaks to 'the promise in her'.

In 'The Tiger's Whisker' the 'client' is a young woman who 'presents' a relationship problem. Her husband has been traumatised by his war experiences. He is depressed and irritable, prone to angry outbursts and often unable to work. He is unrecognisable as the loving and gentle man she married and all her efforts to communicate with him meet with failure. She does not know what to do, or if she can go on for much longer. In her desperation, she seeks some kind of miraculous drug, some magic bullet of an anti-depressant which will bring back the man she married. We might say that she too is stuck with an impossible wish: that her husband be restored miraculously to his former self, as if his war experiences had not happened.

Our sage takes some time to reflect on her and her situation. We can imagine him listening carefully, then for three days just sitting with the case, waiting contemplatively ('gazing into the fire') until the right course presents itself. He knows from the start that no potion can work this magic. We might suppose that his contemplative holding of the case in his consciousness then leads to the inspired suggestion of the quest for the tiger's whisker. His reflection has led him to the

intuition that only immense patience, kindness and love will heal the husband's war trauma sufficiently to enable him to love and trust again. The key will be the depth and extent of Yun Ok's love, expressed through immense patience and persistence. Since she has requested a potion she has no clue as yet that she must find these resources within herself. Her consciousness and her self-image must change to accommodate a new picture of her own courage, strength, resourcefulness and patience - her own capacity to respond.

But the sage knows that words alone will not effect this change in consciousness. Like the Buddha, this sage meets the client where she is, at her own level of consciousness. He initiates a quest for the potion's missing ingredient. And so Yun Ok seeks the tiger's whisker, taming him with precisely that enduring patience and love that will be required in her marriage. It is her quality of presence with the tiger which ends in her being able to take the whisker. Just as Yun Ok's presence, her quality of paying kind, patient attention, of waiting and waiting with no expectation ('Each night I brought him food, knowing that he would not eat. But I did not give up. I came again and again, always speaking gently to him.') is what tames the tiger, so she needs to bring these same qualities of presence to her relationship with her husband. And it is the sage's quality of meditatively waiting from which the 'intervention' of the quest springs forth in the first place.

### **Calculative Mind and Meditative Mind**

Another way of defining therapeutic presence might be as the ability to meet 'calculative mind' with 'meditative mind'. The terms come from Heidegger and are discussed at greater length in both Batchelor (1990) and Watson (1998). The calculative attitude is the habitual approach we bring to problem solving, involving linear, conceptual thinking. This, of course, has its uses but has no creative element to it. A computer performs calculative 'thinking' brilliantly, but of course can only perform operations on the information already contained in it. Nothing new or surprising can emerge from calculation.

The same distinction is expressed pithically by DH Lawrence:

Thought, I love thought.

But not the jiggling and twisting of already existent

ideas

I despise that self-important game.

Thought is the welling up of unknown life into consciousness,

Thought is the testing of statements on the touchstone of the conscience,

Thought is gazing on to the face of life, and reading what can be read,

Thought is pondering over experience, and coming to a conclusion.

Thought is not a trick, or an exercise, or a set of dodges,

Thought is a man in his wholeness wholly attending [9]

This is precisely the kind of attitude which informs meditative thinking, which relies on a broadening of attention so as to be receptive to how the whole situation touches the body-mind.

The hermit sage asks to hear Yun Ok's story, and while hearing it, continues to gaze into the fireplace. This is a beautiful symbol for the meditative attitude. As Batchelor points out, such an attitude might be better described with metaphors of listening rather than seeing:

If we draw an analogy with sense-consciousness, a meditative attitude *listens* rather than looks. Listening is more receptive than looking. In attuning our ears we sharpen our attention so that it opens up to the vast and subtle range of sounds that constantly surround and assail us. Even when we select and concentrate on a particular sound, we do so in such a way that the sound is allowed greater ease of access to enter us. Looking, however, is often characterised by a narrowing of the attention and an almost acquisitive focusing upon its object. It is not that the form of the object is being allowed to enter consciousness; rather, it is we who seize and invade it. (1990, pp 47-48) [10]

The sage does not look at Yun Ok whilst she talks. (Of course there are parallels with the classical psychoanalytical setting here.) He turns his gaze to the fire and enters a state of contemplation.

What Kisa and Yun Ok bring is not solvable through calculative thinking. They both have problems which require a change in consciousness, which can only come through a meditative attitude. This is perhaps true of all psychotherapy clients. Each one is wrestling with his own 'koan'. This word has been popularised in our culture and is often taken to mean a quaintly puzzling oriental riddle such as 'what is the sound of one hand clapping?'. Batchelor points out that the word comes from 'kung an', meaning 'public case'. Koans were instructive in the sense that they gave the student a feeling for the breakthrough made by previous students but these could only act as clues and cues for the kind of completely open, authentic, individual and spontaneous engagement with the question which each practitioner must make for himself. Each life situation, each moment, is unique and unrepeatable. No pre-figured or 'ready-made' formulaic, calculated approach will untangle the knot of each individual's own dilemma. What is required is *un*-knowing, a radical quest-ioneing where the quest is everything and quest is pursued by staying very quiet and waiting, listening, with no expectations.

The breakthrough, if it is to come at all, must be won by the student herself, spontaneously, in the moment, by fully embracing the actuality of her life situation in its fullness and complexity as she meets it in the now. In therapy this may not be the sudden flash of *sartori* or Zen style enlightenment. It is more likely to be the analogous step or shift in the direction of 'freeing up'. By analogy, the therapist can perhaps do no more than provide the conditions for this forward movement.

In my experience, many clients begin with a calculative attitude. One of my own clients suggested to me in all seriousness that therapy should be like fixing a car. If the therapist cannot be like the mechanic then why should he get paid? In our culture, with its emphasis on targets and measurable outcomes, this attitude is pervasive. The therapist's art is then to find the equivalent of the mustard seed and tiger's whisker which will satisfy or distract the calculative ego while the real work of transformation happens at a deeper level and over a longer period, probably, than we might wish it to. This leaves scope for all kinds of approaches to be used, as long as they are informed by the presence which ensures these responses are appropriate to that client in that moment.

### **Form and Emptiness**

The process of meeting calculative mind with the spacious, waiting, contemplative attitude which informs meditative presence is a way of meeting 'form' with 'emptiness'. These are really two aspects of one reality, form being the aspect of impermanence which emphasises the 'suchness' or 'isness' of phenomena, and 'emptiness' that which emphasises their transience and non-essentiality. In the words of the Heart Sutra, a key text of Mahayana Buddhism:

Form is emptiness and the very emptiness is form  
(Conze, E (trans), 1988)

In meditation, one cultivates an attitude which holds both of these aspects. John Welwood draws an analogy between psychotherapy as practised with this kind of presence and meditation practice:

In the therapy situation, the client's problems or emotions are like the thoughts that arise when you are sitting. You, the listener, provide the space which coming back to the breath allows in meditation. You have to fully respect and bow to the form – the client's real problem- listen to it and take it in. If you don't do that there isn't a connection between the two of you that can effect healing. The transformation that happens between two people in therapy is similar to what may take place inside a single person in meditation. In mindfulness practice, as painful thoughts and emotions arise, we note them, bow to them, acknowledge them, then let them go and come back to the breath, which is a concrete manifestation of open space. The process of going into and out of form in meditation is what allows transformation to take place...the great challenge of working on oneself is in bringing our larger open awareness to bear on our frozen karmic structures and transforming them. That is the core of practice, I believe, in both psychotherapy and meditation. [11]

In these stories, the medicine that is promised is equivalent to meeting the form of the problem in the form it is originally presented by the client. But in the end this medicine turns out to be unnecessary because the original form of the problem has dissolved, as it were, into emptiness and a new perspective dawns, from which the original problem now appears misconceived.

### **Transformation**

What does this transformation which Welwood

describes look and feel like? How would someone who has recovered the open potential of their own being feel and behave? Colloquially, it looks and feels like a 'loosening up', like a gaining of 'spaciousness' around archaic psychic and emotional patternings. The transformation can be described in terms of a move away from a literalistic, dualistic and predominantly 'masculine' attitude towards a more metaphorical, non-dual and androgynous one.

Going back to our stories, both Kisa and Yun Ok begin with the wish to find a cure from outside themselves for a situation which appears as an objective one. The 'I' 'in here' wants a potion to act on a piece of the world 'out there' and change it. The subject here is polarised from the object and both are reified. But the result of the quest in both cases is a bringing together of subject and object in inter-relationship. Kisa is changed by her quest, and in changing she comes into a new relationship with her reality. She accepts her loss and is able to begin mourning it, symbolised by her taking the child to the charnel ground. She is restored to the reality of process, and also finds a new relationship to that process wherein she starts to see herself as process, interconnected with the whole of life, which is the seed of her later enlightenment.

Yun Ok is also transformed by her quest, finding a new sense of empowerment and response-ability which connects her to the world in a much more creative and inter-active way, which renders the tiger whisker itself unnecessary. Before, both seekers are separate from the world. Afterwards, they are inter-connected with it in a way which is closer to the reality of non-duality of subject and object.

Another way of characterising this change in consciousness is to speak of it as a move from a literalistic perspective to a metaphorical one. My Collins English Dictionary defines the first three meanings of the word 'literal' as follows:

1. in exact accordance with or limited to the primary or explicit meaning of a word or text.
2. word for word.
3. dull, factual or prosaic.

The root is the Latin *littera*, letter. This is a kind of consciousness that sees the surface of things, which perceives the world in terms of separate and discrete objects or persons, each sharply distinct one from the other. It is a perspective limited to the 'primary and

explicit', ignoring the deeper resonances of the implicit. In contrast, for the word 'metaphor' we have:

a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action that it does not literally denote in order to imply a resemblance, for example *he is a lion in battle*.

The root is the Greek *metapherein*, to transfer. It is all about linkage, connection, three dimensions rather than two. Again this a potentially rich avenue of exploration, which can be only touched upon in the present discussion. Some of the many possible links which suggest themselves are Piaget's (1969) work on the development of thinking in children, Searles' writing on concrete and metaphorical thinking in relation to schizophrenia (1996), archetypal psychology with its emphasis on the imaginal (for example, Hillman, 1997), and theories of art therapy (see for example Levine (1992))

As Watson suggests, the realisation of *sunyata* entails a seeing through the metaphoricity of metaphor itself. Analogously, our potion seekers see through their own literalism, the kind of consciousness which sees only surfaces and discrete objects to gain a new perspective, one which has a far deeper appreciation of relationship and process.

Lastly, there is the perspective of masculine/feminine. In both the stories a female 'client' approaches a male sage for help. But the kind of consciousness that both approach with is 'masculine' in the sense that it is informed by a sense of separation and seeks mastery over events. The 'therapist' in both stories brings a 'female' consciousness to bear: open, receptive, spacious. They meet the clients' urge to fix the problem by doing something, but finally, as we have seen, what they offer is a meditative way of holding the problem which enables another kind of resolution. Their attitude and the 'therapeutic field' it helps to create is something like the Taoist bowl, the usefulness of which is the emptiness inside.

The outcome of these 'interventions', for both clients is a better balance of masculine and feminine. Kisa Gotami gains the beginning of an identity based not on the fragile foundation of her social role as a mother and wife, but on the open potential of her being, a step which will eventually lead to her towards enlightenment, which we can understand as an unrestricted embodying of this open dimension of

being. Yun Ok leaves behind her sense of helplessness and starts to experience her own authority, heading back down the mountain trail to meet her husband with (we imagine) a new sense of her power to influence the relationship, and perhaps much more beyond this.

The re-initiation into presence (*re*-initiation because this was never lost, only obscured) which this change in consciousness promotes is beautifully described by Huntingdon:

The Madhyamika [Buddhist tradition] is radically deconstructive, pragmatic philosophy designed to be *used* for exposing, defusing and dismantling the reifying tendencies inherent in language and conceptual thought....All it does is dissolve the old questions which are seen to have been misguided from the start, leaving behind nothing other than a dramatic awareness of the living present – an epiphany of one's entire form of life. No form of conceptual diffusion remains, and no questions begging for answers that reinforce a deep-seated resistance to acceptance that this life, as it is now lived, is the only arbiter of truth and reality. [12]

Analogously, a psychotherapy which offers the 'medicine of emptiness' can help clients to free themselves of efforts to defend and sustain archaic identities and to re-ground themselves, through a process of healthy dis-illusion, in the community of interbeing – which, paradoxically, they never left. The experience is conveyed beautifully by these words of William Carlos Williams:

I have had my dream-like others-  
and it has come to nothing, so that  
I remain now carelessly  
with feet planted on the ground  
and look up at the sky-  
feeling my clothes about me,  
the weight of my body in my shoes,  
the rim of my hat, air passing in and out

at my nose – and decide to dream no more. [13]

### **A Core of Mystery?**

Of course the quest for new and better theories goes on. Indeed, I have spent the last many pages expounding my own variety! Here I am tempted to paraphrase the Zen master Shu – an, who counselled that ‘When one happens on a [paper] of this kind, he is well advised to throw it away’.

In a culture of SMART objectives and cost-benefit analysis, the psychotherapy profession needs to engage in dialogue with the culture’s collective ‘calculative mind’ and it is right that it does so. But perhaps we should do so whilst also knowing that we do not know. The two tales which I have recounted here may suggest a way of holding that paradox and at the same time of making room for a rich and diverse range of therapeutic interventions. Psychotherapists have many mustard seeds and tiger's whiskers to offer, whether of Cognitive- Behavioural, Experiential, Psychoanalytic, humanistic, Buddhist or other varieties. As we do so, however, we need to avoid that rationalistic pride which might take our medicine too literally, and give space to the possibility of a ‘medicine of emptiness’ which preserves the place of mystery and grace at the heart of healing. Such an approach would, I believe, have been favoured by Jung himself:

Theories are to be avoided, except as mere auxiliaries. As soon as a dogma is made of them, it is evident that an inner doubt is being stifled. Very many theories are needed before we can get even a rough picture of the psyche’s complexity. It is therefore quite wrong when people accuse psychotherapists of being unable to reach agreement even on their own theories. Agreement could only spell one-sidedness and desiccation. One could as little catch the psyche in a theory as one could catch the world. Theories are not articles of faith, they are either instruments of knowledge and of therapy, or they are no good at all. (CW 16, para 198)

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\* Specific, Measurable, Realistic and Timebound

[1] See Watson (1998) for a very thorough discussion of Western understandings of 'sunyata'

[2] See Waldon, 2002, p141-160

[3] See Analyo, 2003, p244

[4] 'Auguries of Innocence' in (ed) Erdman, 1997

[5] James Low, 'Buddhist Developmental Psychology', p120

[6] This version of the story comes from Saddhaloka (2001) and the original text from Rhys Davids (trans) 1980.

[7] This version of the tale is from Courlander (1995)

[8] Gittings (ed), 1970

[9] Thought' in Lawrence, DH, 1932

[10] Interestingly, the word 'theory' comes originally from the Greek *theorein*, 'to gaze upon'.

[11] Welwood, J 'Principles of Inner Work: Psychological and Spiritual' in *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*. Vol 16, no.1 1984, quoted in Watson

[12] Huntingdon, CW 'The Emptiness of Emptiness', p136, quoted in Watson, 1998,

[13] 'Thursday', in 'Sour Grapes', The Four Seas Company, 1921



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