

A Mirror Beyond Ideas

By Dorothy Hunt

*There is something more important than ideas.
It is freedom from ideas.
--Thich Nhat Hanh*

What Mirror Are We Holding?

Whether we function as psychotherapist/client, teacher/student, parent/child, partner/friend, loved one or enemy, we are continually functioning as a mirror to the apparent “other.” In our daily life, what mirror are we holding? Who are we seeing sitting across from us in the consulting room, or in the mirror each morning? What is being reflected in the mirror of our mind? And from what dimension of our Being are we seeing, moving, speaking, or responding?

Whatever we give attention to, we give reality to. Our experience of “reality” is constantly influenced by how we see it. If we only see the world through conditioned mind, we will see from the limited perspective of duality, time, and “me”. Most humans live thought-bound lives, moving about in a *virtual* reality of unceasing thoughts, ideas, judgments, and their accompanying emotions, which are not the same as Reality, but become our conceived reality. Are we seeing reality or seeing our thoughts about it?

Addiction to Thought

In our world, there is an addiction far more pervasive than any addiction to substance, and that is addiction to thought. All of us have been conditioned from our earliest moments to receive the world and respond to the world through the medium of language. It is lovely that we can communicate through language; this is one of many ways we connect and attempt to share experience. However, we are also conditioned to *identify* with our ever-flowing river of conceptual thought, language, idea, and belief, which inevitably becomes the mode we use to separate from our self, others and the world.

Obviously the word, or the thought of a “me” or a “you” is not the substance or essence of oneself. But we continually define our self, others, and life itself through the conceptual images we hold and the mental interpretations we make of our experience. We then defend, attack or promote our images as if the images were real. If I have an image of who you are in my mind as we sit together, I cannot actually see you; I am seeing my image. If I cling to an image of myself based on my thoughts about a “self,” I cannot actually discover who/what I am.

Thought is clearly one means through which we color our perceptions of the world and everything in it. It is also the means through which we suffer psychologically. Believing a single negative or fearful thought can bring suffering--the perception of threat, self-judgment, self-hatred, shame, anxiety, or fear, if directed inward; or if directed outward—irritation, blame, rage, revenge. In either inner or outward judging, we are moving in separation. Yet even those who identify as “non-dualists” are frequently holding on to a belief system, rather than Seeing undividedly from the dimension of being that separates itself from nothing. Can we see that thoughts are *always* an addition to the bare, naked truth of Reality? Who would you be without the thoughts you believe? Who or what is behind a self-image that props itself up or knocks itself down by identifying with changing thoughts?

All Self-Images are Prisons

Many clients and psychotherapists alike spend years and years attempting to change a negative self-image into a positive one, working to exchange one set of beliefs for another, hoping they can at last feel worthy, or be “enough.” While a positive image may feel better than a negative one, both are prisons. We are not an image, and a self-image will never feel secure because it is not the truth of who/what we are. An image must be maintained and protected, and this creates fear and takes a tremendous amount of energy to uphold. We will never experience feeling like we are “enough” when our identification is with a self-image—be it fragile, wounded victim, on one end of the spectrum, or polished and perfected spiritual ego on the other. A self-image is actually one of the most changeable things around. A single word, a single look, a single experience can threaten an image.

We can acknowledge the validity of relative self-acceptance, softening of defensiveness, increasing flexibility, strength, resilience, self-forgiveness and a more positive sense of self worth that can be hard won in the process of psychotherapy. But ultimately any self-image is limiting and binding. Who/what is prior to the image? What shines light on the image? Can we stop identifying with an image of ourselves and become interested in what is behind the masks we wear? What is continually here regardless of the kind of experience we are having?

If we have discovered in our own experience that there is something deeper than an image of ourselves that is whole, clear, open, and cannot be threatened by the changing weather of emotion or thought, we may both impart and invite that in our clients without any agenda to do so. This is not something an “ego” will “learn” to do; it arises spontaneously from a different dimension of our Being when we wake up out of our limited and time-bound identifications with the thought-content of awareness.

Awareness as a Mirror with No Judgment or Interpretation

A mirror has no thought, no judgment, no beliefs; it simply reflects whatever is in front of it as it is. If nothing passes in front of it, it reflects Nothing. Awareness is like that before it filters through our mind's conditioned ways of seeing, naming and interpreting life. Clear seeing of anything is seeing without identification with the filters. Is this possible? Can we look into the matter? Can we begin to see the depth of our conditioning—not making it wrong, but actually Seeing it, making it transparent?

As psychotherapists, if we work from a perspective of pathology, we will see the “truth” of pathology. If we see the world through the prism of a psychological theory, we will see what fits that theory. For example, if we are Jungians, we will see in terms of shadow, anima, animus, dreams, etc. If we are behaviorists, we see in terms of conditioning and rewards. If we are psychiatrists, we may see behavior from the perspective of brain chemistry that functions to enhance or detract from a sense of well-being. If we are acupuncturists, we see in terms of pulses, meridians, cooling, heating, dryness, moistness, etc. If we are Freudians, we see unconscious motivations for life's detail based on Freud's theories of id, ego, superego, repressed sexuality, etc.

Psychological Theories are for the Therapist

This is not to make theories wrong; it is to encourage us not to make them right, either. A theory is a theory; it may or may not be useful, and it may or may not be used skillfully. What happens to the moments or experiences that do not fit into our theory, to the moments that do not fit our concept of our self or the “other”? Do we disregard the wholeness of life in order to support our ideas of a tiny slice of it? Have our “lenses” become unquestionable? Or are we willing to question every single one of our beliefs—not so that we can change one belief into another, not to find the “right” belief, but to see all beliefs as beliefs and not actually reality?

Take a moment to reflect on your own theoretical framework. Whether we are clinicians or clients, all of us live much of our lives as creatures of conditioned thought, and for most, hold that our conditioned thoughts are truth! (e.g., There really is only *one right way* to load a dishwasher, iron a shirt, drive a car, practice psychotherapy, or experience the Divine!) If you are a psychotherapist, how does your theoretical framework affect how you see your clients, or what you see arising in your clients or yourself in your practice? Can we begin to see that the therapist's theoretical framework functions mainly to offer the therapist a sense of knowing, of being in control through knowing something?

Words, themselves, serve this function as well. We think we know what water is because we can use the word. But no word will give us a taste of water. In the practice of psychotherapy, we may use a diagnostic term such as “borderline,” or “obsessive compulsive,” and immediately “see” in our mind's eye an image rather than the wholeness of a person. We may imagine the label tells us who someone is, how to treat him or her, and what to do, but does it? If we are seeing from Wholeness, we will not be

blind to conditioned structures or patterns of personality or behavior. We will notice the ways that apparent “others” or we ourselves seem to move in the world, but we will never mistake our inherent wholeness for a diagnosis. We will see our clients as expressions of a Reality that is perfectly whole. It is only Wholeness that sees itself whole; the limited and conditioned egoic mind will not. Are we mirroring our clients’ wholeness or contributing to an image of limitation and lack?

Ideas of Truth and Lenses of Spiritual Traditions

Likewise, we often think we know what “truth” is because we feel we have tasted it and now have an idea about it, or we have read and adopted the language or beliefs of others whose lives have inspired us. But truth is not an idea, not a noun, not a *concept* of a God, Buddha, or Truth. We might use descriptions to point to its dynamic quality, such as “Stillness moving,” “Silence ever-sounding,” “Openness that sometimes moves as contraction,” “an Emptiness that is continually full,” “Love, without an ‘other,’” “Awareness with no one who is aware.” We might say, “Truth is this moment without thought,” yet here is a thought. Truth cannot be limited or pinned down by a word or concept. To think we “know” is to find a place of comfort, a nest, a way to remove ambiguity, paradox, or mystery because most of us have been taught it is not an option “not” to know with our minds. But Truth knows itself by being itself. It moves without our ideas. Ultimately, we discover it cannot be named, spoken, or made into an image, though we may try.

“I do not know is the only true statement the mind can make.” . . . “The biggest drawback to understanding is the concept that I am an entity and secondly, that any concept I have is truth. . . . You have not understood until you have solved the riddle of the one who thinks he has understood.”

--Nisargadatta Maharaj

As with psychological theories, if we see through the lens of a particular spiritual tradition, we will attempt to fit life and experience into the beliefs and language of that tradition. If we are fundamentalist Christians, we may divide people into those who are “saved” and those who are not. We may speak of Jesus’ commandment to love one another, but inside, think it is fine to hate Muslims. If we were raised Jewish, we may feel very uncomfortable when we hear a Christian hymn being sung. When we identify as any “religion,” we may feel threatened by another faith, another belief system, and cling to “ours” as being the “right” one, failing to see that there is a fundamental experience of wholeness, awareness, and love which belong to no one group but which becomes identified with a particular religion, family, tribe or group. Even our ideas of God, Allah, Buddha nature, or Christ Consciousness are languaged in ways that seem to encourage separation.

And what “ideas” do we have about Nonduality? How many imagine Nonduality is in opposition to duality? That it is Formlessness separate from form? We may have even had an experience or a realization that seems to confirm a sense of “One without a second,” but then decide the One is Peace in opposition to war, or a Love which fights against hate. That which is truly undivided does not stand in opposition to anything. Only minds do that.

When we actually see a moment or a person without separation, we cannot define what sees this way, or how it happens, but such Seeing delivers a profound message of wholeness and non-separation. Awakening can happen in an instant, but the embodiment of such remembrance is a continual closing of the gaps between mind and the moment, between “you” and “me,” between beliefs and That which is free from beliefs.

What is Undivided is Free from Beliefs and Free from “Me”

The mind of thought often imagines it will come to know the Undivided through its knowledge and beliefs. However, thought itself **is** the division—the thought that there is a separate “someone” who “knows.” Attachments to beliefs of any kind color our perceptions and separate us from experiencing our original wholeness. When Nonduality becomes a belief system rather than a felt Presence, thought has divided us from what is undivided. In undivided Presence, there is absence of a “me.”

What really makes up our sense of “me?” Look deeply, and you will find an “I”-*thought*, (our identified “self”) which is identified with many other thoughts, beliefs, sensations and memories. “I am a wonderful person.” “I am screwed up.” “I am smart.” “I am dumb.” “I am kind.” “I am unlovable.” Among the many thoughts we may have about a “myself,” there are some we are more attached to than others, some that seem to appear on a regular basis and remain unquestioned. These might be called core beliefs. By “core belief,” I mean a belief about life or about “me” that is not seen as a belief, not open to question, consciously or unconsciously carried into all kinds of situations, presumed to be true, and maintains our separation from the Truth of what we are.

“I’m not enough” is a common core belief. Many people have a profound, if sometimes secret, presumption of lack or deficiency. We may have made our conclusion based on experience, but if we look deeply, we see that it was our *interpretation* of events that created our beliefs. If we feel “there wasn’t enough”—love, support, contact, connection, guidance—it can innocently be interpreted as “I’m not enough.” “My parents wanted another child because I wasn’t enough for them.” “Daddy hit me because I wasn’t good enough.” “Mommy left because I wasn’t lovable enough.” And when we carry this belief of personal “lack” or deficiency into adult life, we will see mirrors, or reflections for this belief everywhere we look. It will color our perception of reality and become our conception of truth. But Reality is whole; and Truth holds no judgments for or against.

We can also begin to see that if we are fascinated and attached to drama, we will see dramas. If we are attached to emotions, we will elevate emotion as truth. If we continually see only from mind, we will see mind. And in the moments when we are free from ideas, free from beliefs, we will see clearly and simply what is, neither loving it nor hating it, judging it or trying to change it. Neither clinging nor refusing, we can experience the moment in a way that is clear, yet intimate. When I speak here of not loving, I am using the term in opposition to hating. Our true nature actually moves as the deepest, truest Love, but this love does not oppose the movement of life. It does not hate the “hater.” In fact, it sees no one and nothing as separate from Itself. Not being separate from Awareness, it shines on whatever is here, whatever expression life offers, whatever moment is experienced. Clear seeing is seeing free from a “me.”

What *Is*, is More Than Phenomena

Can we see what lenses, what stories, what theories cloud our perception of what is? *What is* is not simply phenomena. *What is* is also the substance, essence and wholeness that moves as life moment to moment. The spiritual invitation to “accept what is” is frequently met by our thoughts as a resignation of mind to what it deems uncomfortable, inappropriate, wrong, or intolerable. However, the mirror of our awareness that makes no judgments and is not separate from anything is not bound by time, so that its “acceptance/reflection” of the moment says absolutely nothing about the next moment. Only thought imagines that accepting the moment as it is will lead to more of the same. When “acceptance” is mind-driven, it is frequently tinged by feelings of a burdened resignation or an emotional rejection, even as it is “trying” to accept—a moment, a feeling, a happening. Openness to “what is,” is also openness to appropriate and compassionate response to what is. We are *not* open when we are refusing or denying the moment.

When we see clearly what is here, we are actually able to respond deeply, spontaneously, and compassionately from the undivided dimension that moves with an intelligence and a love that the mind cannot dissect or imitate. When we are refusing anything that is already here—be it a feeling, a thought, an experience, an event—we are moving from conditioned mind and not from the dimension of our being that can actually transform the moment in the service of truth. How do we respond when we see that everything and everyone is an expression of what we are?

Freedom from Ideas Does Not Mean Having No Thoughts

As Thich Nhat Hanh stated so simply, “There is something more important than ideas. It is freedom from ideas.” This includes the idea of a separate “me” who imagines he or she is a victim rather than an expression of life. Do we dare depend on what might move when we are free from identification with ideas? In speaking about freedom from ideas, we are not speaking of never having a thought, or never communicating through language. We are pointing to a dimension of seeing and being that is not identified with

the thought called “me” or the virtual reality of concepts and beliefs. Obviously, thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and mental creations arise in the human experience and are used for functioning, but they also can create enormous suffering. Mind moves as it moves, but there is something deeper that notices the movement. What is that? What illuminates our thoughts, feelings, sensations, memory? What has been awake to every experience of our lives? We cannot separate this underlying basic awareness from the moment it illuminates, but we can see that the movement of thought is only one small aspect of a Reality that is much vaster, deeper and more mysterious than our thoughts about it. We can begin to become aware of the fact that thought does not “see.”

There is profound depth of our Being that thought cannot enter and remain separate. While the undulating or crashing waves of the ocean can appear different in form from one another, they remain as wet as the calm, peaceful depths. Water can be affected by the wind and weather; its “drops” can evaporate and return as rain; it can freeze; but still it is the same substance, whether moving or unmoving, frozen or fluid. Likewise, a thought-form or feeling-form cannot be separated from that which is aware, but if we are only identified with the movement of form, or our own “frozen” concepts about it, we will be unaware of the peaceful yet fluid dimension of our being that is not affected or threatened by the changing weather on its surface, yet remains perfectly content to move at one with its own current.

In psychotherapy, we have an opportunity to dive deeply into a variety of thought and feeling forms to experience the essence underlying all, but generally, we are trying to transform ourselves, our clients, or our world through changing or manipulating a “wave,” or trying to jump onto a different one. We are trying to bring happiness, peace, contentment and love to ourselves through external means such as changing environments, jobs, partners, body shape, thoughts, emotions and experiences rather than discovering that what we are looking for is already within us. If we have not experienced or heard anything other than conditioned thought to tell us who or what we are, then it will seem obvious that there is no other place or way for change or transformation to take place. The majority of people and the majority of therapists operate from this conditioned, mind-identified, level of identity.

However, if we dive directly and deeply enough into any “wave” of thought, emotion or experience, we cannot help but find the essence that underlies all experience. This dimension of our aware being simply sees clearly. It reflects yet is not separate from “what is,” like a living, sentient mirror, free from ideas and judgments about what it sees. A feeling or a thought is seen to be simply that—a feeling or a thought, and not a statement about a separate, fearful, or deficient “me.” This clarity of vision liberates what has felt imprisoned, rejected, unseen, or frozen within us, but the seeing is not through the prism of the intellect. It is an understanding that is a direct, immediate, non-separate *experience* of what is here rather than an intellectual discourse or analysis of what is here.

Touching the Moment with Awareness

If we have even glimpsed the vast, spacious, awake, open presence that is undisturbed by the movement and impermanence of life, can we begin to pay more and more attention to this dimension of our being? Can we see what happens when we simply allow the moment to be touched by Awareness, rather than awareness colored by ideas, including the idea of the one that claims to be aware or unaware? A deeply resonant responsiveness to the moment can arise spontaneously between therapist and client in the course of psychotherapy, and these moments are among the most engaging and healing parts of our work. However, if we are clinging to ideas to such an extent that ideas are primarily what pass in front of the mirror of our own awake nature, we may not be freely functioning in the most compassionate or wise manner, either in life or in the consulting room. But when we are more fully open, our whole body, our whole being is engaged. We can more sensitively receive the moment and open to how life wants to respond.

Unless we have experienced ourselves the unwinding that our true nature begins to do from the inside out when we have let go of trying to control our experiences by manipulation, suppression, repression, indulgence or denial, we will undoubtedly be drawn to continue to attempt to “fix” something or someone. But the freedom we discover in awakening is the freedom to have any experience without refusing it, without judging it, and without attributing it to a fictitious “me” who is either doing it right or doing it wrong. Now, conditioned mind thinks this would be a very dangerous way to live—all hell might break loose. But when we have discovered there is no separate “one” doing anything, we come to see that there is love, compassion and wisdom that operates on its own when no one is claiming to have it or needing to figure it out!

In the natural development of human beings, there is a normal winding together of consciousness, which is rooted in the ground of Being, and conditioning, which carries identification with the “I”-*thought* and with the body/mind. One may call this identification ego. It is not actually an “identity,” but rather a state of consciousness that identifies nearly exclusively with form and conditioned thought or memory. We are taught that this identification is who we. It begins to develop in our earliest years and maintains itself until there is a movement to inquire who or what that really is.

Such investigation may reveal that ego is not an enemy to be overcome, or an identity to be improved, but rather an illusion. In the process called awakening, ego, or identified consciousness, simply becomes transparent. The ideas that egoic consciousness holds of “separation” and “control” are simply seen by the deeper dimension of our “whole” being to be illusory. Spiritual seekers seeking the “death” of the ego are simply engaging in another egoic thought. Thought creates the separation and then seeks to overcome it. Seek the source of ego, and see what *you* find.

The ego is like one's shadow thrown on the ground. If one attempts to bury it, it will be foolish. The Self is only one. If limited, it is the ego; if unlimited it is the Infinite and is the Reality.

--Ramana Maharshi

Whether or not one is interested in finding out the truth of who/what is true nature, or original essence, awareness itself can begin to liberate suffering by simply touching consciously the moment as it is. When we are no longer invested in getting rid of a feeling, but become curious about what the experience actually is, consciousness has begun to have a different “relationship” to its own productions. The willingness to directly experience anything can liberate it from the suffering caused by our ideas and judgments about it. When we no longer imagine life should only deliver one kind of experience (the good, the beautiful, the true), we are open to being present for whatever arises--without the thought that what is already here should not be. Awareness begins to liberate from the inside out whatever has been unloved, refused, judged, rejected—not because there is a “me” doing it, but because the “me” is temporarily absent in direct experience.

The direct experience of the moment, without separation into a “me” and an “it”, is the movement of our Nondual nature. “Being” fear, “being” anger (not its expression, projection, or story, but its felt-experience), eventually leads to a deeper peace. Why? Because we are no longer being the one trying to manage, control, suppress, fear or analyze such experience, which keeps us separate from the moment and separate from our own awareness that is free from ideas. This separation, it turns out, is what causes most of our suffering. The simplicity of touching the moment with awareness, rather than judgment, seems too simple to the mind that is busy creating and then trying to solve “problems” in order to maintain its sense of separation and control. There is no “I am aware” in Awareness. This is the touch that is healing.

Problem or No Problem?

I once had a client who was seeing many different practitioners for many different services. However, at one point she told me, “I love coming here because this is the only place I come where I don't have to have a problem. Life is just what it is here, and there is nothing I have to fix.” She was meeting with various practitioners who, in her experience, were continually trying to fix something—her body, her diet, her habits, her energies, but I was simply inviting her to “be.” To be where she was, how she was, and who she was. In seeing from a perspective of what is undivided, I do not see clients, or even their issues, as problems to be solved, but rather as expressions of an infinite wholeness that is simply moving to liberate whatever is not yet seen, free, or loved within its own expression. This perspective often seems to impart itself beyond any reference to a thought or belief that could be verbalized.

Another client asked, when we had dropped into the space beyond ideas, “What just happened? You just don’t see this as a problem, do you?” I replied that I did not, but I appreciated that she did. Any moment when we are seeing or moving from the space beyond ideas, life is simply what is. As we worked together, this client also came to see fewer and fewer things in her life as problems. Our work did not deny the reality of any experience, expression, feeling, or moment, but invited the experience to be touched more deeply by awareness than judgment.

In not seeing life as a problem to be solved, I am not speaking about a type of denial or spiritual by-pass that says, “All is one, so this (moment, feeling, experience) does not really matter.” What is actually undivided within (what is awake) never divides itself from experience, never rejects an experience, and thus is totally intimate with the moment. When nothing is refusing the moment, this intimacy is healing because it does not contain the cause of suffering, which is separation. Such direct experience is exceedingly liberating because most people spend enormous time and effort trying to control themselves, others, or life in order never to feel “X” (fill in the blank) again.

However, when you or your therapist are not frightened of experience, there is room for it to be welcomed completely, experienced completely, and thus we discover that of course, we CAN feel whatever it was we are avoiding--be it helplessness, vulnerability, rage, terror, grief, etc. We took our self to be the separate victim of such experience, but when we are one with experience, the threat dissipates and dissolves. We may actually discover that That which is at one with all of our experiences cannot actually *be* threatened.

When a therapist knows that simply allowing the moment to be experienced directly, without analysis, without manipulation, without a story—even if a story needs to be told—is ultimately healing, he or she continues to encourage the client to touch the ground of being where peace is possible, even when the moment is not peaceful. What we mirror, based on the presence or absence of identification with condition mind, is a factor that may be seen to either increase or decrease the perception of suffering. When the therapist sees challenging life situations as simply that, rather than an indication that there is something wrong with a “me” who needs to be “fixed,” that view is imparted without anyone “trying” to impart it.

What Direct Experience Reveals

It is impossible to experience anything directly (all the way through, without refusal or judgment, without making a story, a problem, or an interpretation of it), and not come to the other side of the coin. The other side of the coin called relative is absolute. The other side of the coin called form is formless. The other side of the coin called phenomena is noumena. These apparent opposites cannot be separated except by a thought. When we are not worshipping our ideas, but are willing to simply have the direct experience of

anything, we cannot help but bump into a Reality that does not oppose its own expressions.

We may ultimately discover that what we thought would take years of effort and years of analysis might only need the willingness to directly experience whatever is here that is currently being judged, refused, rejected or unseen. The mind does not believe it could be this simple, and for some, perhaps it will not be, but when we are working from a Nondual perspective, we do not see anything as separate from what we are and what the world is. The wholeness out of which we move, speak, listen, breathe, and work is the healing. It may not look the way we were trained to imagine it would look. It may not look like the initial desired “result” our client was hoping for, but if our client leaves believing fewer beliefs than he came in with, there is more space for the Mystery to move, to reveal Itself directly, and to invite everything to be liberated--returned to its pure and innocent source. Deep seeing that loves what has been unloved, sees what has been unseen, brings all aspects of ourselves back home.

Trusting Life’s Unfolding

In the training for and practice of psychotherapy, we may learn many tools that may become part of what we have to offer our clients, but can we begin to depend on life/true nature to use them wisely, rather than thinking there is a separate “me” who must figure it all out? I realize this goes against the grain of all methodology; however, the one identified with egoic states of consciousness, who thinks he or she is using the tools—be that active listening, developing a relationship, using active imagination, art, sand tray, dreams, history-taking, EMDR, somatic experiencing techniques, attachment theories, etc.—is our separation from That which is undividedly living life in all its forms, in all its unfolding moments. Can we trust the movement of life in all its forms? To do so, we cannot remain separate from the truth of life, the truth of what is moving life, the truth of who we are beyond ideas. Can we investigate, without judgment, our attachment to both theories and methodologies? Both theory and method are composed of ideas based on experience or research (or lack of either), and neither, in themselves, are necessarily barriers to wise action. It is our attachments to them that limit our freedom and availability for a wiser, more compassionate, and unconditioned response to the moment.

When we are listening, speaking, and working from the dimension beyond ideas, we are also transmitting a sense of wholeness, worth, and trust to our clients. We are holding a mirror up for our clients to see and to sense their infinite wholeness and lovability--not because they have changed anything, but because what Sees is seeing who/what they truly are. When one discovers that “the one you are looking for is the one who is looking” (St. Francis of Assisi), you discover the Love you longed for has been right here all along. You discover it is not only who *you* are but who/what everyone else is also, including your clients.

The Mirror of Relationship

"If we allow it, all relationship acts as a mirror in which to perceive clearly that which is crooked and that which is straight."

--Krishnamurti

In the realm of the purely Undivided, there is no relationship whatsoever because there is no perception of distinctions, no one to perceive, and nothing to be perceived. The most we might say of this mind-disappearing, non-experience is that Awareness exists without being aware of anything. Yet using any words, even the word "awareness," cannot touch the mystery that one disappears into. However, in the dream state of both waking life, and night dreams, we have the perception of relationship. As soon as there is a "me," there is a "you" and a "world." Mind creates the illusion of time and space so that the dream can happen, so that there can be both duration and the experience of form.

Psychotherapy occurs in the dream, in duality, and concerns itself with relationship—relationship with self, other, emotions, energies, memories, beliefs, and behaviors within the therapeutic encounter. And within that encounter, we do have opportunity to see "that which is crooked and that which is straight." To me, this phrase does not indicate there is judgment against crooked and attachment to what is straight. It simply means we realize our ability to *be* whatever we can see. If we see "fear," it is because there is fear within. If we can see "love," it is because there is love within. Whatever we see is what we (as what we truly are) can be. And relationship allows us to perceive the vast array of expressions life offers moment-to-moment. Our closest relationships, which include not only seeing, but also physical and emotional touch, mirror us in ways that are very influential in developing our self-concept, our sense of trust, indeed, even our sense of existing.

I have been quite amazed by the similarity of responses when working with folks who feel exceedingly angry or threatened when they do not feel understood or mirrored exactly or precisely in relationships in general, or in the therapeutic relationship. In simply and quietly looking together at what happens in these moments, the response has often been, "When I am not seen, or understood, I feel invisible." And I ask, "And what do you experience then?" The response has been, "I don't exist."

Samuel Taylor Coleridge described how his own child, then three years old, awoke during the night and called out to his mother. "Touch me, only touch me with your finger," the young boy pleaded. The child's mother was astonished. "Why?" she asked. "I'm not here," the boy cried. "Touch me, Mother, so that I may be here." *

(*Raymond Martin and John Barresi, *The Rise and Fall of Soul and Self: An Intellectual History of Personal Identity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, p. 184)

Could it be that our deep experience of what we are is actually empty of any definition? And for a young child or an adult spiritual seeker that feels very threatening to one's very existence. We come to know our "self" through relationship, but when we deeply want to

discover what that self really is made of, what do we find? What is here behind the thoughts, memories, body, mind, beliefs? What actually exists? What is true?

As psychotherapists, sometimes we are drawn to mirror a “self;” sometimes “no self.” Can we notice that life itself will move the moment, our intuitions and our responses? Can we avoid imagining we must either prop up a self-concept or deconstruct it? When we are deeply present, without an agenda, life will simply move in response to the moment. Love becomes the movement of this whole-hearted engagement with life and sensitivity to it.

“I” and “Myself”

One very interesting aspect of relationship that continually arises in the practice of psychotherapy is the “relationship” one imagines one has with one’s “self.” Who is the self and who is the one having a relationship with it? Who “loves,” “hates,” “is proud of,” or “disappointed in” one’s self? Who is the “I” and who is the “myself?” Does anyone—therapist or client--stop to ask, Are there really two selves? Which self is mirroring the other?

Once, when one of my clients was quite depressed, immersed in self-doubt and self-hatred, she tearfully told me, “Sometimes I want to kill myself.” I felt moved, not by thought, or some idea of what to do when a client is suicidal, but by a deep dimension of my being. I called her by name and said, “I have a very important question to ask you.” She immediately became present and attentive. I continued, “Who is the “I” and who is the “myself?” Immediately, with no “thinking” about the question, she responded, “The ‘I’ is the perpetrator, and the ‘myself’ is the victim, and neither of these are who I am!” Where our questions come from can invite a similar dimension of Seeing in the client.

What Happens When the Structure of a Separate “Me” Collapses?

And what happens when the whole structure of the separate “me” collapses, when what Sees is simply seeing itself? What does “relationship” look like without a separate someone who is seeing a separate object? When consciousness awakens out of the dream of separation, the dream continues, but without conceptual identification. In awakening and beginning to operate more consciously from the “flow” of life rather than the world of ideas, psychotherapy begins to look and feel different for both therapist and client. What is undivided begins to transmit its being, its peace, its fearlessness, its truth. But there is no one “doing it” and no one to figure out “how.” We have only to be open, available, and intimate with the moment that is before us. The Mystery that is moving the world is moving our expression as well.

Thought divides self, world, Reality, and Source, and then sets out to have a relationship with its creation of “other.” What is Undivided is not an object mind can “relate” to; it

cannot be manipulated; it is what we deeply are, and simply moves itself whole. Yet we continually see in that movement the truth of impermanence, the truth that because there is “this,” there is “that.” We and our clients, in being together, are that movement of creation moment-to-moment. We are mirrors for one another.

Mirror Neurons and the Discoveries of Neuroscience

Another dimension of the mirror beyond ideas comes from recent research in neuroscience of “mirror neurons.” Scientists are learning how mirror neurons are involved in both the action of imitation/learning/the passing down of culture and civilization, as well as in the development and movement of empathy. We are told that mirror neurons for touch, for example, fire even when one is simply watching another person being touched. There are skin and pain receptors that also provide a feedback loop, or signal in the brain that tells us that the person being touched is not actually our self, thus avoiding confusion about whose body is being touched. However, in the case of phantom limbs, or an anesthetized limb, a person *will* experience the observed touch as touching their own body, i.e., feeling touched on the arm or leg in which there are no skin and pain receptors operating. In other words, in these instances, skin receptors are all that exist between the experience of a “you” and a “me.” This certainly appears to contribute to a discovery based not on mysticism but on science, that there is no independent “self.”

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(* V i l a y a n u r R a m a c h a n d r a n , http://www.ted.com/talks/vs_ramachandran_the_neurons_that_shaped_civilization.html)

When we awaken to discover that the whole universe is our “body,” we may perceive either directly or indirectly that whatever is happening is actually happening in us and not to us. Empathy, resonance, love operate from a completely different perspective based on wholeness rather than separation.

How mirror neurons might work in the relationship between therapist and client is beyond my level of knowledge, but it occurs to me that what we know through intuitive and experiential means—that we are always transmitting where we are, that truth sees itself, etc.—may very well have an observable physiological dimension. Rather than science debunking the validity of “no separate self,” it may actually support it.

Does this mean that we will eventually discover “awakening” is a brain function? What I might suggest is that our brain may be programmed or adapted to receive the revelation that what is eternally awake and always here is what we are. For in awakening, one is no longer identified with the body-mind, but with a Mystery that reveals itself, sees itself, and affirms itself, not through beliefs but through direct experience that arises outside of thought. That there is a difference between brain function, including consciousness, and undivided Awareness seems self-evident to me, but let science continue its exploration of consciousness. The thing is, even though we may be able to study aspects of consciousness, there is always something aware of consciousness. What is that? A brain

that can contemplate an infinite universe can also see itself in the act of contemplation. What is aware?

Whether we look at life through the means or medium of a spiritual awakening or the medium of science, we are interested in looking directly at data to discover what is true. The difference may be that the scientist usually begins with an hypothesis, whereas the spiritual seeker, even though he/she may begin with hearsay or hypotheses about enlightenment, Self, or God, will at some point be drawn beyond ideas, beyond thought to the mirror that is simply Seeing or reflecting the search, the longing, the discoveries, the pain and pleasure of human existence, or the remembrance of the totally Unknown mystery on the dark side of the mirror—the side that makes reflection possible!

Either way, we may discover that we are not separate from one another, that we are more the same than different, that we live, move, learn and communicate in myriad ways that have nothing to do with the ideas of our conditioned mind, and that our conditioned brain may be able to take in information from, and be restructured by, a Source much more vast than itself and simultaneously, totally indefinable.

What is is. It is neither subjective nor objective. Matter and mind are not separate; they are aspects of one energy. Look at the mind as a function of matter and you have science; look at matter as the product of mind and you have religion Neither mind nor matter come first, for neither appears alone. Matter is the shape, mind is the name. Together they make the world. Pervading and transcending is Reality, pure being-awareness-bliss, your very essence.

--Nisargadatta Maharaj

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