Therapy Without a Therapist: Nonduality, Healing and the Search for Wholeness

By Jeff Foster

“Physician, heal thyself!”
- Luke 4:23

If, as traditional and contemporary nondual teachings suggest, the separate self is merely an ‘illusion’ of thought and perception, and we are in essence the wide open space in which life unfolds, a space which is inseparable from that very unfolding, then what place does 'therapy' have in our lives? Can an illusory self really heal another illusory self? Can an open space be healed by 'another' open space? Who, exactly, is going to do this healing? And who, exactly, is going to be healed?

While I was training as a therapist, I learned about all kinds of theories and techniques – absorbed so many how to's – how to listen, how to be congruent, how to interpret the client's words and body language, how to self-disclose appropriately. There is so much research out there, so many ways of defining therapy, so many people with so many ideas about how to help people, and this is all wonderful – life seems to delight in this variety of perspectives. But I was shocked that despite all of the training I received, despite all of the knowledge and skills that I was required to take on, the question 'What is true healing?' was never really looked into in great depth. As trainee therapists, we were learning how to heal, how to interact with clients, but never did we really stop to contemplate the true meaning of healing. We were learning how to be therapists, how to inhabit our roles, how to 'do' therapy, but never did we stop to ask the most
fundamental question – is healing even possible? Once, in class, I raised my hand and asked, 'Isn't there a kind of arrogance in assuming that we know how to help another human being? Doesn't it assume some kind of separation?', and I was told 'that's a philosophical question, and this is a therapy programme'. Know your place, trainee therapist.

As therapists, as healers, we are the ones who are supposed to know how to help people, how to improve their mental health, their well-being, their quality of life. But what does it really mean to help someone? Are we trying to help the clients have better experiences? Do we want them to be happier? To be more like 'us'? Are we trying to take away their pain? Or maybe we are simply trying to take away our own pain? Maybe in trying to heal others we are really trying to heal ourselves? More crucially, is therapy in the true sense of the word even possible? I would imagine that these are the questions every honest therapist encounters in the end. And there are no easy answers.

The word "therapy" has its roots in the word "therapeia", which is the Greek word for 'healing' - and 'healing' simply means 'making whole'. *Therapy = healing = moving towards wholeness*. But what is this 'wholeness' that therapy claims to be able to lead us towards? Where is it? Is it really something to be found in the future? Can one person really lead another person towards it? Or is wholeness actually present, here and now, in the midst of every present moment experience, as the nondual teachings suggest? Again, I would say that all honest therapists must face these questions in the end – questions that actually threaten to undermine their very identity as therapists.

I would like to propose that true therapy, therapy in the true sense of the word, has nothing to do with fixing a separate self. Any therapy that tries to fix a separate self will simply
perpetuate the illusion at the root of all our suffering. True therapy has nothing to do with
'helping' a person in the way we tend to use the word. It has nothing to do with fixing a broken
'me' and turning it into a happier, more productive, more 'normal', more adapted 'me'. It has
nothing to do with reaching wholeness in the future, with making wholeness into a future goal.

True therapy is more of a rediscovery: that this broken, incomplete, separate 'me' is not
who you really are, and that in fact you are not a 'self' at all, but the wide open space of
awareness in which all thoughts, sensations, feelings, sounds, smells, arise and pass. You are not
a separate person looking out at the world, but the wide open space in which the world appears
and disappears, an open space which is ultimately inseparable from that very world. True
therapy, therefore, is not about working towards a future wholeness – it is the rediscovery of that
very wholeness in the midst of every present moment experience. It is about life as it already is,
not life as it could be or should be. It is about this moment. It is about the place where we really
meet – here and now, a place where therapist and client are radically equal, a place that we could
call 'love'.

The metaphor of the wave and the ocean is very useful here. The experience of being a
separate individual, a person in the world, is the experience of being a seeker – a separate wave
in the ocean. Every individual is a seeker – the therapist and the client alike. And this wave,
experiencing itself as separate from the ocean, seeks the ocean. The core experience of being a
seeker is the experience of lack, of incompleteness, of homesickness, of feeling as though you
are always looking for something you cannot find, something you cannot name. The wave
spends its life, in a million different ways, seeking this unnameable wholeness. “I am
incomplete, but one day I will be complete,” it says to itself. “One day I will find what I'm looking for – love, success, greatness, enlightenment, healing – and then I'll be complete.”

In reality, of course, there is no separation from the ocean in the first place. The wave is already the ocean, the ocean appearing as a wave, and so wholeness is already present. The completeness we seek is actually already here, in this present moment experience, and it's because we don't see this completeness that we seek it in the future. All suffering begins here, in the rejection, on some level, of this present moment. The entire search rests on an astounding illusion of time.

This realisation totally transforms our relationship with the one we call 'client'. Seen from this perspective, no client is never really broken, damaged, or lost - they are always already whole, even in their experience of being broken, incomplete, separate, even in their pain, their fear, their distress, their devastation. The goal of true therapy, then, is not to fix the client, not to move them from 'negative' to 'positive' experiences, not to turn their pain into pleasure, their depression into joy, not to lead them towards what they think they are looking for, not to 'do therapy' on them, but to expose, without compromise, the root assumptions underlying their experience of separation, their experience of brokenness, their incompleteness, their seeking. True therapy does not add to the illusion of separation – it shatters it, it wakes you up. It does not remove pain, it points to the wholeness in pain. It does not get rid of fear, it illuminates the wholeness in the fear. In this sense, the point of therapy is the point of all authentic spirituality: to wake you up from the dream of separation, the dream that you are a separate person on a journey towards a future completeness. True therapy wakes the client from their dream of 'client', and wakes the therapist from their dream of 'therapist'. And make no mistake, the therapist needs
waking up as much as the client. When it comes to waking up, no qualification, certificate, degree, or any number of letters after your name, can help you.

Wholeness, seen in this way, is not something that 'happens' one day, it is not something that we 'work towards', alone or together; it is not a distant goal, it is *that which is already present*. Life itself - what you really are, beyond your image of yourself - is already whole, already healed in the true sense of the word. And so in true therapy, we do not aim to heal a separate person, because there is no such thing - we simply get back in touch with *that which is already healed*. Therapy is a beautiful paradox when seen from this perspective.

So, what does this mean in practice? It means that the client’s position of “I’m broken, please fix me,” becomes “I am open to the discovery of wholeness within my present experience of brokenness.” And the therapist’s position of “you’re broken, I’m going to fix you” becomes “I see that there’s nobody there who is fundamentally broken, but I also acknowledge your present experience of brokenness. I acknowledge your pain, your fear, your sadness, your struggle, your suffering, but I do not for one moment assume that there is anyone there separate from me who needs to be fixed in any way. I honour your dream, *and* I see it as a dream. Of course, I am open to exploring your experience with you, and I’m open to rediscovering that which is already whole, within that experience. I see clearly that wholeness is already there in all the aspects of your experience that you are currently at war with, in everything you are running away from, in every thought, sensation, feeling that seems unacceptable to you right now. So let’s shine light on the various forms of seeking in your experience, let's expose the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which you are at war with this moment, and in that light, in that exposure, let's discover together the ever-present healing that you are, that I am.
I’m not here to cure you. In that sense I’m not really a ‘therapist’ at all, that’s just a role being played in this moment. I hold that role very, very lightly. Really I’m simply here to go on an adventure with you. An adventure with myself, because it’s all the same mind, it’s all the same seeker, in the end. We are explorers of experience, already healed, shining light on that which is looking for healing, coming to see that this search is not necessary. We do not deny the search, but we do not fuel it either. We do not deny the dream, but we are not here to indulge it either. We simply come together like this to see through illusion.”

The therapist recognizes that, ultimately, he or she is not really a ‘therapist’ at all. As the open space, the vastness in which all thoughts, sensations, feelings and sounds come and go, there is no fixed identity, and no role can define you. A ‘therapist’ cannot heal a ‘client’, because both ‘therapist’ and ‘client’ are simply temporary roles being played out presently in this open awareness – and these roles are not who we really are. And so we hold these roles very, very lightly.

‘I’ cannot heal ‘you’, because healing is the space in which the dualistic split of ‘I’ and ‘you’ arises in the first place. And so there is no longer any burden on the therapist to ‘heal the client’. I remember during my therapy training how my fellow trainees would exhaust themselves by carrying the belief that they were personally responsible for their clients' healing. And oh, the panic that would ensue when clients didn't show up! When you are identified as a 'therapist', the non-appearance of your client threatens your identity. But seen from this new perspective, the burden of healing no longer rests upon anyone's shoulders, and the client no longer poses a threat to the therapist's identity. In other words, the therapist knows that healing is already present, before the client even begins to speak. The therapy session then simply becomes
a dance within wholeness. It not about fixing the client, it is not about proving yourself as a therapist, it is about dancing with each other as the ever-present healing shines. We dance, together, in wholeness.

The client may go to therapy to get healed – and in therapy, he or she may come to realize that no healing is necessary, because who they really are is already healed (whole), and always has been. Even throughout all the traumatic experiences of his or her life, there was something there that was already whole, and was never damaged or even traumatized by those experiences. Experiences may be traumatic, but nobody, ultimately, is traumatized. What you are cannot be damaged, cannot be broken, cannot be destroyed, cannot die. Life is already healed, and on some level, even the most ‘damaged’ client knows this. And so, in therapy, we do not speak to the ‘damaged self’ – we speak to that which already knows that they are not that. We speak to that which is already healed.

Any therapy that does not recognize the already-healed nature of life will simply fuel the seeking, keep the client dependent on the therapist (and vice versa), keep both client and therapist trapped in the dream of separation, and make true healing an ever-receding goal. Any therapist who does not recognize that a ‘therapist’ (in the sense of ‘one who can heal another’) is not who he or she really is, will simply keep the client trapped in their dream of ‘client’ (as in, ‘one who is waiting for healing, one who is broken’).

But the therapist who recognizes that they are not really a ‘therapist’ at all, that they are simply the open space in which ‘therapist’ arises, that they, as open space, are equal to that in which ‘client’ arises, that they, as open space, are already healed, just as their ‘client’ is already healed – this therapist is no longer hiding behind their role as therapist. They are no longer using
their professional identity to defend themselves from true, authentic, intimate relationship. They are no longer afraid to confront even the most ‘damaged self’, because they do not see this self as ‘other’. And so they are free to dive, head first, fearlessly, into the client's pain, which is their own pain. *We meet in our mutual brokenness, and we call that love.*

‘Therapist’ and ‘client’ fall away, to reveal total intimacy. This, I would say, is what therapy is really about – going beyond the roles, the games, the beliefs and ideologies that apparently separate us, and meeting, truly meeting, in intimacy, in nakedness. The therapist strips off their ‘therapist’ clothes, metaphorically speaking, and stands naked in front of their client. They do not pretend to ‘know’ how to help the client, for in this nakedness, they are just as vulnerable, as helpless, as open to life as the client is. They meet the client in this not-knowing. Underneath all the roles, the games, the social norms, the pretend-play of ‘therapist’ and ‘client’, this not-knowing shines, always. It is where everything begins, and where everything ends.

A true therapist admits that they do not know, and they meet the client there. They do not know, and their client does not know, and there, right there, is the intimacy. And from that place of intimacy, they begin to explore. The exploration is then a dance *within* intimacy. It is not the attempt to *reach* intimacy, in time, through exploration – for the very exploration happens within the intimacy. And so it is not an exploration that is coming from seeking. It is coming from fascination.

In fascination, we explore the nature of seeking together. In fascination, we shine light upon the workings of the mind (thought). We look at ways in which you (I) run away from certain experiences. How we run away from feeling certain feelings. How we have become lost in the *shoulds* and the *shouldn'ts*. How we’ve been seeking love when love is already here. How
we’ve been looking for intimacy when intimacy is already here. How we’ve been clinging onto false images of ourselves, when in fact we are simply the space in which all these images appear. Everything, literally everything – the whole world – can appear in this intimacy, and therapy is the space in which we can shine light on all of it. Literally all of it. The world comes to meet us in therapy, and nothing is hidden. Everything is allowed in this space. Everything is lit up here. Everything is enlightened here.

The space of therapy is the space that we are. So in the end, therapy is not something that happens in a room, sometimes, between two or more people. It is not something that happens when a therapist and a client get together and start talking about life's problems. Therapy is not something that we do – it's what we already are. And this is always available to be discovered.

It looks like two people are making this discovery together, when in the end, it’s the very idea of ‘two people’ that falls away in this discovery. In this intimacy, who heals whom? The therapist heals the client? Well, it might be as true to say that the client heals the therapist. The client destroys the therapist, in fascination, in love. It's total humility in the presence of another human being. It's seeing - really seeing who and what is in front of you. And being seen in return. Being exposed. Being, exposed.

I was once talking to a woman who was about to leave her husband and move into an apartment on her own. She had never lived alone before and was terrified. She had been to therapist after therapist, all of whom had tried, in one way or another, to help her, to heal her, to make things more okay for her, to change her in some way. Nothing had worked, and her fears had grown to the point where life was becoming unliveable. She was telling me story after story about her fears, her worries, her anxieties over the future. She hadn't slept in three months, she
said. She wasn't eating. She was becoming dependent on pills. She kept on repeating “I just don't know what will happen to me. I just don't know”, as she rocked back and forth in her chair. I sat there, listening to her, interested. I had no answers. I didn't know what would happen to her either. I am as helpless as she is in the face of life. I couldn't promise her that everything would be okay. I couldn't promise her anything in fact. All my training as a therapist meant nothing in the face of this not knowing. No technique, no theory, no set of guidelines can last in the fire of not knowing. As open space, I live in not knowing, just as she does. I don't know what will happen. Being a 'therapist' gives me no special insight into the mysteries of time.

    I looked her in the eyes and simply said, in all honesty, “I don't know either. I really don't know.” She went quiet, slumped back in her chair, and we sat together in silence for the rest of the session. She didn't turn up the following week for her session, or the next three sessions. My supervisor was worried, and tried to analyse everything away, but I simply trusted the experience. A month later my client returned. She seemed different. Somehow more alive, more in her body, more grounded, more rested. She told me how helpful our previous session had been, how something in her had deeply relaxed since then, how she had realised that not knowing was okay, and that she needed no answers, no support, no therapist. She just needed to plunge headfirst into life, without crutches, and experience everything. It was something she had never considered before – that she was okay as she was. For once in her life she had experienced being in the presence of someone who hadn't been trying to fix her. For her, that seemed to be enough - for now.

    I knew that I had done nothing. I had simply met her in the truth. I didn't know. She didn't know. I hadn't pretended to know. I hadn't even pretended to be a therapist! And yet there we
met, naked, beyond our roles, in spite of our roles. Naked, in front of life. There, in not knowing.

Alone, together. Whole. Healed.

In true therapy, the therapist does not heal the client. That is not possible. It would perhaps be more true to say that, in true therapy, the client heals the therapist. The therapist gets stripped of their false roles, their games, their defences, their 'I know' attitude, and learns to stand naked in front of another human being. The therapist dies, and there, true therapy can begin.

Let your client heal you. They won’t teach you this in your psychotherapy programme. Some may say you are mad. Some may say you are hopelessly naïve. Some may say you are simply a bad therapist. But when you discover who you really are, it all makes perfect sense.