

Talk on Therapy & the Spiritual – Jim Robinson 2011

I'd like to start off with a simple awareness exercise?

– sense your body and breath, feel your weight on the chair, any tensions that are present, as you breath into your body give attention to one part, any part and feel the energy, the aliveness of that part of you from the inside. If you notice some tension just give it attention for a moment, let it inform you. Try and hold this awareness of the energy in your body for the rest of the exercise.

– become aware of the thoughts that are going through your mind - notice what they are - just notice them - try to let go of controlling them or being caught by them – maybe you start to sense the incessant nature of them and to then dis-identify with them, to see how they are always flowing and chattering, the content of which varies according to where you are in yourself and what is driving them at any one moment.

- lastly try and notice what you are feeling , it maybe irritation at this exercise! There may be some anxiety in the background. Whatever is with you, acknowledge and allow what is there, you may notice layers of feeling – both about being here now - those around today's events or things further past, those around difficulties or delights that are currently in your life or looming up in the future and so on – notice the layers of feeling that are colouring your being right now.

So from a holistic point of view, this is our basic structure, head, heart and body, it is these three basic aspects of ourselves that we need to be aware of in order to be present, fully here and now in this moment, aware of being alive here in this room, right now.

We all are inclined to favour one part over the others by preference -

Who here is usually in their heads, trusts their heads more than the rest of them?

Who would say that they mainly rely on their feelings to relate to life, they don't trust their thinking, or assume they can't think?

Who here is primarily a physical person, one who trusts doing things to make sense of life?

O.K. - firstly what has therapy to do with this?

When something happens that is too much to bear we adjust ourselves to enable us to cope and survive, whether this was from a specific trauma that happened in our past, or years of being told that you were not good enough, of being put down and being rejected, or being "spoilt" materially whilst being emotionally starved, or by being involved in a car crash yesterday.

All these 'traumas', sometimes in a wider rather than narrow sense, cause us to adjust in what Gestalt calls a "creative solution". Our self's first imperative is to survive, so we instinctively restrict our awareness and push aside, block out, keep at bay or hold in the background aspects of our reactions that are too much to bear so as to protect our 'self'. PTSD is an obvious example of this.

But in order to make these adjustments, and to maintain them, sometimes for a lifetime, we have to sacrifice some of the connections between our head, heart and body. The consequence is that we "split" ourselves into separate parts which then do relate to each other. So that we lose touch with our ability to feel our feelings, or we give up thinking, saying to ourselves that we are not "bright enough" or can't be bothered. Then there is the inevitable desensitisation of our bodies through tension and illness. The result is that we can feel alienated from ourselves, and or the world, always in conflict with ourselves at some level.

These splits in ourselves create corresponding gaps and barriers between our head, heart and bodies which prevents awareness and maintains unawareness, with the result that we are condemned to live so much of our lives as relative automatons, relatively unaware in our fixed reactive patterns. The more we are split the more mechanical we are. Almost all of us have splits of some type. With this comes the experience of doing, or thinking or feeling things that another part of us doesn't like, want or approve of.

Eating too much, drinking too much, buying something we don't need, being lazy, watching too much tele, getting angry, getting upset, not sleeping, feeling guilty, avoiding difficult aspects of life, being addicted at times to wanting more than I have, etc. etc. – and these are just a few of mine ... !

So perhaps you could give a show of hands, of those who have had the experience of feeling caught doing things that another part of you didn't want to do, or that you feel you shouldn't have done???

....

These splits are expressed on many levels in our lives

On the social level, it seems to me, are still suffering from the generational trauma's of the first and second World Wars echoing down the decades, which in turn were echoes of the terrible crippling brutality of life down the centuries. In the West this has, apart from the extreme physical harshness of life, come from the distorted religious dogma of the medieval Christian belief that we were born evil and had to be made "good" by discipline and punishment. This in turn can be seen as the expression of the struggle for power and greed in the early church (Elaine Pagels).

Child rearing manuals from the nineteenth century, especially in Germany, are enough to make your blood run cold. All spontaneity and enjoyment had to be squashed. As Alice Miller has made clear, it is no wonder that the Germans had to fight the world (through a massive cultural projection) and went onto create the horrors of the Nazis. The famous British "stiff upper lip" which "must not tremble at any cost or the Empire will fall", also has its roots deep in this history.

As John Lennon put it
As soon as you're born they make you feel small
By giving you no time instead of it all
Till the pain is so big you feel nothing at all

Cultural trauma seems to be worldwide and an integral part of our history, apart from maybe in a few fortunate primitive tribes. On the positive side, in a recent BBC series on the history of the family since WWII (2010), I found it fascinating to see how far we have come from that stifling emotional straightjacket that permeated our culture after WWI I.

As our standard of living has improved over the twentieth century and our psychological understanding has increased, so the general level of trauma in western societies has diminished. The effect of this is that children today are much freer than ever before – this has many associated problems, but as a whole it must surely be welcomed.

This is also why therapy is such a radical and revolutionary process – it profoundly challenges many of our accepted norms, on the social as well as personal levels.

Splits on the psychological level

As I understand it, every “should” or “ought” we have, is the expression of a split in us. Each “should” or “ought” is a judgement that has a piece of unaware pain, hurt or loss hidden behind it. Every moralistic judgement is a non acceptance of self or the other and therefore an expression of a split. This can easily be seen in how we do to our children what was done to us, “you will eat up your food”, “you mustn’t do that”, etc. If we can look at the force with which such judgements are sometimes expressed its clear that they are disproportionate and come from our own conditioning, our own split off and buried pain from having been punished ourselves.

This is also profoundly expressed in the truism, “What we reject in the other is what we can’t stand in ourselves”. It is the pain behind the split, which we hold out of awareness that we can’t stand and therefore reject in the other. Also, this is why it’s so difficult for us to live by the maxim “do unto others as you would be done by”, because so much of our behaviour happens without the awareness of what drives it.

We split ourselves as a defence from being overwhelmed by whatever form of ‘trauma’ we suffered. Whether it was from the drip, drip, drip of negative put downs, or dramatic suffering caused by accident or abusive behaviour. These splits become habitual patterns of relating to our lives and they result in all the compensatory processes we live with. This can be seen in terms of how we clumsily and blindly struggle to survive by maintaining the avoidance (repression) of the hurt, pain or distress in the background of our selves at every moment. These processes we call depression, anxiety, anger, addiction, neurosis etc., etc., all have their side effects, which unfortunately also cause us much conflict and distress.

Part of the process of starting therapy is often recognising that our method of avoidance and its consequences are in the end so unacceptable and that it would be better to face the trauma, or “catastrophe”, at the centre of these processes. Otherwise, why would we bother facing such difficult feelings?

Our split structure restricts and narrows our living, we are unaware of the needs of our bodies, of our feelings, we have given up thinking or we over rely on it. This means that we can get very little satisfaction, enjoyment and sense of freedom in our lives. The point here is that therapy, in whatever form it takes ... helps us to reduce these splits through helping us to attend to the hurt, loss or pain that we pushed aside. Keeping it pushed aside forces us to constantly maintain these splits – so through allowing the painful feelings back into our awareness we can start to re-make the connections between our head, heart and body. It’s important to understand that we often need the support of our body and of our understanding, to face the painful feelings we are keeping at bay.

When we live with pain, hurt or distress, kept unaware in the background, we are bound to live with fear and insecurity, we fear anything that will upset our fragile balance, but life does that anyway, all the time of course. We try to shut our hearts down, our bodies down and our thinking down to restrict our awareness. We then often over emphasis one part of ourselves in order to find some satisfaction – through physical exercise, or intellectual over control, or perfectionism, or over alert feelings in anxiety or panic or hyper activity (as with workaholics).

When we are hurt, frightened or overwhelmed we naturally adjust by withdrawing our needs in some way and become self-sufficient and then pretend we didn't need it anyway. But we get stuck there feeling defeated and resigned to the impossibility of getting what we need, but the real loss, the giving up of what we needed does not go away and we were then condemned to spend a lot of energy keeping the awareness of it at bay, together with its needs and loss or grief, which all results in lots of internal conflict, even if that shows as some sophisticated cynicism.

Our need to eat too much can be seen as compensation for the lack of satisfaction in our lives, the lack of satisfying contact which what really nourishes our self.

Watching tele, can be straightforwardly an anaesthetic, but also obviously avoidance.

Getting angry is often a self-defence. If our self is vulnerable then we will be over sensitive to threats to ourselves and our anger may be inappropriate, but it still reflects our deficit need for love and support which led to our vulnerability in the first place. Aggression or defensiveness is our attempt to maintain our fragile sense of self, an attempt to prevent sore wounds from opening yet again.

We judge others in order to pass the hurt we have experienced in being judged, onto others – it makes us feel better for second or two, but again the deficit need for respect and acceptance is there in the background.

Being addicted to anything, is more obviously a way of distracting and covering over some trauma, maybe some pain of rejection at some level; so again the pain of the lack of love and acceptance is avoided.

Anxiety is fear, fear that has become generalised and self-generating – the risks of facing our hurt and distress, makes us lose ourselves in panic with many resulting physical symptoms.

Depression is a shutting down, or desensitising of our system, it is a straightforward avoidance of too much pain with the shutting down process getting deeply into the structure of our bodies, which then becomes self-perpetuating.

Arrogance - is a process of over compensating for a sense of insecurity and not feeling good enough, inferiority and superiority are ends of the same stick, when there is one there is automatically the other as well.

Lots of self justification and avoidance comes from our insecurity, our sense of not being good enough at some level, perhaps from lack of support in childhood.

“Self-indulgence” reflects our lack of self-support and need for comfort in the face of our own and the world’s criticisms falling on existing wounds.

Self-pity has too much of bad press (from our stiff upper lip conditioning) - in many ways it can be simply grieving.

Vanity, Pride, Selfishness etc., are all attempts to cope with a deficient sense of self.

Lying, and all those small white lies / half truths that we use, are so often, simply our protection of our sense of inadequacy.

It is through accepting and facing the pain and loss with its sense of deficit in terms of love and support and the need for it - more and more deeply, over as much time as it takes – that the heart can heal and again become a more integrated part of the self. Facing the pain allows the awareness of the need, which it may well not be possible to meet, but allowing ourselves to feel it, to acknowledge it anyway, can be enormously liberating. For example - grieving is an organic need, if we refuse it, we then further split ourselves which causes many resulting negative processes to start working in us, anxiety or depression for example. As we face the pain we can allow the grieving and the healing process naturally occurs.

In order to survive trauma without adequate resources, i.e. when the self is overwhelmed, often the only strategy the self can adopt is to blame itself. "I must be bad for this to have happened". Especially when young, if we have been abused or neglected all we can do is to turn it against ourselves so as to make some sense of the situation and save ourselves from going mad. "I must be not good enough in some way", we internalise this message at a very deep level within ourselves because we didn't have the resources to see that it was the world that was wrong, not ourselves.

I know the truth of this process for myself, after much work I am still coming to terms with the loss I experienced in childhood and I know that my harshness on myself, my sense of "not being good enough" and "wanting more (seeing the cup as "half empty")", comes from having internalised this loss as "I must be wrong or inadequate" in some generalised way.

We are then faced with living with the resulting insecurity and splits between our heart head and body constantly undermining our confidence and ability to live life to the full. But the heart of the problem is that this "badness", this "not good enoughness" is always being re-stimulated by life's "slings and arrows" so there is a constant struggle to find some equilibrium. The world seen through fearful eyes can be a very negative place.

This insecurity is the same for 'Introverts' and 'extroverts', but each often reacts to the same "slings and arrows" in very different ways –

Introverts version of the process

As a generalisation, introverts turn the pain of the loss more directly onto themselves, and are more likely to get "depression", which is a process of withdrawal and shutting down. There is also the inevitable reverse of this process of "inferiority", which is "superiority" with its grandiosity and narcissism.

Extroverts version of the process

Extroverts often try and turn the blame outwards, to punish the other and move into anger. On investigation, what emerges is that they are blaming someone else because it is much easier to do that than face the pain of what is within them – a process we call projection. They are more likely to find that their compensatory process involves anxiety rather than depression; there is a constant state of high alert, which can lead to panic attacks and OCD.

From this a huge generalisation is that those people who commit suicide are introverted and those who commit murder are extroverts?

In practice we are all a mixture of both, just with one tending to predominate. With either "style" the process of allowing, facing and healing our wounds means that we become less fearful and more secure. Fear and anxiety so often comes from the sense that we will be

overwhelmed by those forces in us we don't trust or understand. Pushing them out of awareness, into the dark, makes monsters of them. Where there is un-faced hurt or pain there is bound to be fear. The insecurity and sense of deficit in both introverts and extroverts is very similar, a lack of love, support and attention. When this is faced and owned, it enables the heart to open and start to heal - when guilt, anger and blame are re-owned and re-allocated, love can return.

My nervousness at giving this talk now, is a case in point – I don't like it or want it, it connects me to my insecurity which has its painful roots deep in my past - but if I refuse and try to pretend it's not there I deny a part of myself and I become a lie.

But lying is something that we all do, all the time --- and we often then go and harshly judge anyone who lies.

To forgive those who commit crimes means that we have to accept that we all have parts of ourselves that are capable of doing the same – they exist in us all. But the point is that through accepting our pain, hurt, insecurity etc., we change our relationship to it – it doesn't disappear, but its power diminishes – I no longer have to live with a part of me denied and split off from my awareness, it doesn't mean that I'm yet free of my insecurity, but I am not as un-awarely dominated by it as I was.

This is about the movement to understanding the needs behind negative behaviour, to seeing how the harsh self judgements are part of the fixed prison like structure we constructed to avoid the pain, fear, distress and suffering that felt too much to bear. I think that all our negative behaviour is the distorted compensatory expression of our genuine needs which have been kept pushed into the background. Often our un-faced hurt, distress, loss, etc., exists inside us by hiding behind our belief that we, or the other is 'bad' in some way. With increased awareness we can see and accept those "shadow" aspects of ourselves, those aspects of us that are 'mean' or 'narrow' or 'ugly' or 'bad'.

Awareness helps us to make an object out of our compensatory processes, we are then not totally subject to their influence. We can name them and work to know them better, allowing our bodies and our feelings to incorporate the grief and loss at their centre, expanding our understanding of our self as process and therefore understanding the meaning of the developmental path we are all on, whether we know it or not.

Therapy supports us to face the pain that we have been avoiding. Often the first part of this process is anger and rejection of what "apparently caused" it, but then comes understanding and finally acceptance – these are the classic stages of grief. When we can accept our pain it can, as it were, break our hearts open, this process can break the armour with which we encased our hearts. Through allowing ourselves to feel the distress, hurt, grief, loss, rejection, insecurity, vulnerability or whatever it is that we have been defending ourselves against, we become less defensive and more open and trusting. Integrating ourselves can take a long time, but it works!

Our "problems" though, whatever they are, are also the very gateway through which we start our journey towards integration, wholeness, presence, and indeed, even to re-find the ability to love and be loved that we all so dearly want. Without the need to address our problems we would not need to understand ourselves, not need to open to love and awareness and the possibilities that growth and developing maturity present.

As a therapist it is a wonderful privilege to see this process unfolding, helping people to allow the pain, the tears, the vulnerability and then seeing the heart opening, being renewed, so the person can face the world afresh, liberated from their 'shadows'. It is a magical process with qualities that come straight out of a fairy-tales.

What sometimes comes to my mind, is the analogy of a hurt and distressed young child coming for support, if they get their needs met and are supported in facing the upset, it can be accepted and they can then bounce back into exploring and engaging in the world again.

When children repeatedly can't get what they need, they withdraw into a much less alive, self-sufficient place. Therapy is about reversing the process of that damage, through helping to build self-support in order to be able to accept 'what is' and take responsibility for ourselves, towards self-acceptance and self-forgiveness.

So, what has therapy and our holistic nature to do with the spiritual

The process of healing our splits, of knowing ever more deeply what is in our hearts, our bodies and our sense making, helps us towards more awareness, towards an integration of the self that can also be called presence, or 'being'. We can allow ourselves to be who and what we are without justification, or defence, or attack.

What I want to put forward is the idea that spiritual experience emerges from this same experience of heart, head and body coming together in a here and now self-awareness that in ordinary language we call presence. Here there is a self-awareness of our being, of our perceiving selves together with what is perceived. There is awareness of the input from our senses, silence, sound, light, smell, taste, sensation, energy, etc., together with awareness of myself experiencing it.

We all find something of this presence in the "peak" moments in our lives, as Maslow argued. The sense of wholeness or inspiration that comes from, for example, exercise and the relaxation afterwards, or after a church service, or from singing, from being in nature, or experiencing a special piece of art, or maybe in the resolution of an argument, or being in love, or hitting a tennis or golf ball beautifully, or suddenly understanding something.

Often these experiences are around an awareness of two parts coming together, head and heart, head and body, heart and body. Sometimes they also come from all three aspects of ourselves being connected in a full awareness, which is quite rare and special I think; then there is an alive sense of the energy in our bodies, our hearts are open and resolved and our minds are clear in knowing the truth of the situation.

The crucial part of this is of moving into 'now', which necessitates "waking up" and moving out of being caught in dreamland, with all its unaware reactions, its top-dog / under-dog battles, its playing out of scripts and games, projections, introjections, confluences, retroreflections, narcissism and fantasy, all the ways in which we avoid our what is, here and now.

I'm arguing that here and now experience is "holistic", or "spiritual", whether it is labelled that way or not. It is this connection to "reality" (now is the only reality, the past is memory and the

future fantasy) that connects us to a sense of embodying the energy of life. The deeper into 'now' we go the more miraculous and the mysterious life is, the more there is the sense that we are participating in something greater than our usual "narrow selves", to even seeing that we are an integral part of life and that our consciousness has a special role in this universe.

The degree of spiritual connection depends on the degree of integration between head, heart and body within the "here and now". The other variable that determines our state of being is the stage of our development; which I hope to address in Part 2.

The style of spiritual experience however - when it is partial, which it inevitable is - is influenced by which of the head, heart or body is more developed.

If the head is dominant then it can be more of the "I am" consciousness that Eastern Religions, meditation etc., emphasise. If you now become aware now of your body, your head and your feelings – your aliveness now - here in this room - this is presence – we can become aware that "I am" – that "I" am alive right now, present to myself.

If the heart is dominant – then the spiritual is more about feeling – more the sense of a direct relationship to the divine – if you imagine that God in some form came into this room now - what would you feel – Western religious rituals were designed to engage us on this feeling level.

If the body is emphasised – then a full and sensitive aliveness to our energy and physical presence is what is arrived at, as in Yoga, Tai Chi etc.

What characterises these different emphases is a sense of becoming aware of ourselves as an object to ourselves, we are brought to a place where we are not totally caught in reaction of some sort. I am present to myself and there is a sense of being present to that which is greater than myself. There is a sense of relative silence and stillness where the awareness of our existence and its consciousness can be felt. The noise of our internal conflict quietens. In the end though these three aspects cannot be split, each is intimately connected to the other.

I next want to look at how these three aspects of ourselves 'flavour' our relationship to the spiritual in more detail

First – The Head

The intellectual aspect of this is about our recognition of what is happening to us, seeing how it happens, what we are doing, what's happening in our relationships, and the effects of all the internal and external influences that we live with. We need to know and understand ourselves, and the world we live in, if our "non-integration" is to be faced and worked through. We can't face what we don't understand.

For this to happen we need to be able to look at ourselves relatively objectively, to gain insight and see what is going on inside us. This is really difficult and itself needs some degree of integration which is why in Gestalt we emphasise the holistic approach to support our ability to look at our "what is", which can only ever be a here and now act.

I was deeply struck doing my MA, by how, when time and again my understanding was stuck, I became aware that it was because my psychology / emotions were stuck. It was through working on myself, on my fear and hurt in therapy together with working out my ideas in writing, that enabled me to move my understanding; it was a two way process, my understanding helped me to face what I needed to, and my processing helped my understanding, my heart and head connecting up.

Making sense of the past and understanding the influences of the future are important, but this can still only happen from a place of relative integration that comes from engaging in the here and now with head, heart and body. If we are totally caught in reaction, whether it takes the form of "talking about" with its defensive intellectualisation, emotional reactions, or some physical activity, there is no space in which reflection and insight can take place. This can *only* happen through the movement into now and the integration that this brings.

As we find greater freedom we are more able to be present to ourselves, rather than being wholly caught in reaction. With more integration comes more presence, which includes this state of being aware of my being, of being aware of observing what is going on inside me, i.e. self-consciousness.

This is what many Eastern religions are attempting to support people to understand, that consciousness itself exists beyond us as individuals, it is the "Breath of God". The consciousness in me is in the end the same consciousness that is in you. The Eastern view is about how our consciousness is the expression of God's need to see itself embodied through form, to make its essence manifest. Enlightenment from this perspective is the process of letting go of all our deficit needs and sense of separation, (or attachment, viewed from the other end of the telescope), into participating more and more in being now, in consciousness itself.

This is the cerebral aspect of the spiritual. The self-consciousness that comes from an open, connected, awareness which is head orientated. Presence is in terms of "I am" consciousness, it needs the connection with the body to exist, but can still easily remain split from our deeper emotional reality.

2nd the heart

The process of facing our pain is what the religious traditions have talked about in terms of suffering. For Christians and many of the world's religions it is through accepting our suffering that we find God. The recent TV programme "The Big Silence" about five people experiencing a silent retreat, was a wonderfully illustration of this process. The silence brought each of them face to face with something painful in their psychology which they had to work through in order to find their presence and from which they could then embrace the silence. Therapeutically we know that people heal themselves and make themselves whole again by facing their hurt and insecurity, thereby enabling them to re-connect with their feelings at a deeper level, including opening to love, which is always waiting for our return.

Jesus made himself an example of accepting suffering, not turning away from it, (as much as a part of him wanted to). It never made sense to me that he "suffered so that we don't have to"; it seems to me that he presented an example of accepting suffering, indeed the ultimate suffering, of an excruciating death.

Gurdjieff called this facing of our pain “conscious suffering”. It is the acceptance of the pain of grief, hurt, loss, or whatever it may be, simply because it is there, within us waiting to be attended to.

Trying to connect to love first whilst bypassing our held ‘trauma’, often can’t work because it’s too painful, we refuse it because it provokes our experience of the loss and pain of having lived without it, threatening to reveal how unbearably hurt we actually are before we can face it. Sometimes focusing on love first can also become a method of avoiding the underlying feelings through the telltale ‘over enthusiasm’ of evangelism.

We can’t take on board all the horrific pain there is in the world, but the more open we can be, the more we are also free to love. Integration means being connected up inside, so that we don’t cut ourselves off from the sorrow as well as the joy there is in life. From war, to child sex slavery, to hunger and poverty, to disease and natural disasters, to our friend’s daughter very slowly and very painfully dying from ME, to facing our own death and that of our loved one’s – there is so much pain in the world that it is not surprising we find ourselves overloaded at times, especially when we have not yet managed to face the pain from our past.

This is why so many people refuse the idea of God, “how could all this suffering be allowed?” But I think that most suffering in the world can be seen as having been created by us and our “mad” behaviour, motivated by fear and the avoidance of pain. Also I don’t see God in terms of being “out there”, but that it is only through bearing our suffering that we can learn to open our hearts enough to let the spiritual dimension of life in on the emotional level. I think this also makes sense of why so many impoverished communities often have such a deep sense of emotional spirituality.

So healing our splits is not an easy process, it makes us more open and vulnerable, but also paradoxically stronger, and with it also comes love and joy and freedom and aliveness and meaning. This movement to finding freedom in our hearts inevitably enables us to become more whole and open and thus closer to the spiritual dimension of life whether we interpret it this way or not.

Being able to open ourselves to love brings compassion for ourselves and others. There is freedom and non-attachment in this love; it can be experienced as a force running through our self, a force which can be called “God’s Love” or “Eros” or “Agape” or whatever name a particular tradition calls it.

Contact with Love brings with a profound sense of acceptance, which is another emotional characteristic of spirituality. With this our internal conflicts are healed, if only temporarily, we have permission to “be”, to be ourselves without being haunted by our usual insecurity with its qualifications and justifications. It is this that makes spirituality so attractive at times.

This is the emotional aspect of the spiritual – Love coming from an open, connected, fear free heart. But we still need the head for a fuller understanding, perspective and wisdom.

3rd the Body

When we give attention to the body it goes through a magical process, it responds instantly and profoundly with appreciation and energy and vibrancy. Whether the attention is through relaxation, exercise, massage or meditation; our bodies respond like something dry and shrivelled being given water and transforming back into life.

I know more about yoga and meditation than the other physical spiritual paths. I've experienced yoga as a simple physical exercise which had a big impact on my body. I've also experienced yoga when it combines the body and the heart in a more devotional way, when it was wonderfully powerful for both these aspects of being.

When we contact our bodies our minds cannot be as busy, if we can be with our sensation and our breath it changes our state instantly. If we can stay long enough and deeply enough with our sensation we can break through to silence. At this depth of meditation it is possible to contact a very different quality of being, than that of everyday life; a place of reconciliation, silence and pure 'being'.

So, in summary, the spiritual is presence, it is the here and now, and for a full expression of our spiritual possibilities we need all three dimensions, head, heart and body to be fully integrated and working freely together, each bringing their own special resource to the overall quality of our being. When there is integration there is space to 'be', it becomes possible to sometimes go deeper into now, into silence and to experience consciousness itself.

The spiritual journey is towards being able to let go of our separate sense of self, towards living more permanently connected to Being, the Void, Silence, God or whatever name you prefer for this unknowable possibility that is the universe.

Problems that occur

From looking at these three aspects of spirituality we can see how each can also be a double edged sword with its own pattern of misuse, avoidance and defensiveness.

The arrogant head orientated "know it all" (that I used to be) who has some "I am" awareness supported by a connection to the body, which can use this "beingness" to avoid facing their insecurity.

The evangelical person, can easily be led into cults – they desperately want to be loved and accepted, and can then use a opening of the heart to bypasses their insecurity.

The physical "junkie" that is satisfied with the "high" that exercise and lots of attention on the body brings, also enables them to avoid their insecurity.

Each brings some connection, which can support a sense of "specialness" which strengthens the ego without addressing the underlying insecure structure of the self.

Then there is the age old self-contradictory trap of trying for the spiritual or God or enlightenment in the first place, which is hopeless as it is trying to grasp the ungraspable. We try for the spiritual as though it is something in the future, but it can only be approached through 'now'.

There is another important aspect to this; as soon as we manage to connect to now, or God, or whichever term you favour, our ego is boosted. We naturally feel better and some of that is inevitably taken by our compensatory needs around our insecurities, to support our inevitably unbalanced need to feel 'special' and of value. The degree of this process obviously reflects the

degree of our insecurity and as we gradually reduce the power of that insecurity, through knowing ourselves better, the clearer our connections can be.

Part 2 - Choice

Morality

From both the therapeutic and spiritual perspectives there is no morality in all this, only process, awareness and energy. As I understand it all the negatives in our lives and society emerge directly and mechanically from trauma and the unawareness it creates, with all the blind attempts to get unaware needs met, in all the crazy compensatory ways we can invent. By morality I mean the cultural imperatives we have 'taken in' concerning how we "should" and "ought" to be. Apart from not damaging others I don't think there are any "rights" or "wrongs".

Morality is so hard to pin down - where is the line to be drawn between right and wrong? Even if we restrict morality to the imperative of not hurting others, it is impossible to define any dividing line; it's possible to argue that we are often damaging others to some degree. Are we not ravaging the planet with our way of life?

Criminal behaviour can be understood in this light – although it obviously crosses the real boundary of damaging others. Theft is compensatory for a sense of worthlessness. Violence is a reflection of not being able to contain the violence that has been done to us, our brains don't distinguish between physical or emotional and verbal abuse (the "sticks and stones" story is not true). The held pain from trauma causes the desire to traumatise others or ourselves, even if only in fantasy. As above, there can be a force in us, which, in the extreme would destroy the world, or ourselves, rather than face the pain we have inside.

This perspective seems to me to be one of the main differences between the religious and therapeutic. Historically, religions did not have access to our current understanding of our psychology and so had no other way of understanding "negative behaviour" but in terms of "sin", that the person is bad. This seems especially so, but by no means exclusively, true of the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions. But I don't think 'sin' exists in terms of morality. If we take the original meaning of the word sin – which is to "miss the mark" – then we nearly all miss the "perfect mark" of "Love" and "Being" nearly all the time, because our awareness is relative and we are caught up in compensatory processes – not because we are bad.

Responsibility

But do we then say that it is OK to commit crimes, as doing so is simply the acting out of unaware compensatory processes? Obviously not, we are responsible for ourselves and our actions, even though we can only own and accept responsibility for what we are aware of. This is I think a crucial distinction and it is thrown into relief by the instances of children and young teenagers who commit terrible crimes. They are responsible for what they have done and will live with the consequences for the rest of their lives, but they won't be able to own and know that responsibility fully until if/when, in time, they really understand themselves. This reminds me of the difficulties we experience as parents when seeing the damage we did to our children.

From the work I do with people caught in substance misuse, it is clear that nothing can change until we start to really take responsibility for ourselves. The first step (as in AA) is the admission of having a problem and wanting to sort it out. The awareness of what drives that behaviour and an understanding of it, comes later. We have to first take responsibility for ourselves,

through acknowledging that there is something we are doing that is 'dysfunctional', before we can move into developing our awareness around the issue. Somehow we have to become conscious of what we are doing, in order to be able to name it (often this is with the help of others telling us!), before we can start developing our awareness and understanding, and through that support, our growth.

But then I wonder, isn't this "acknowledgement" also about awareness? Don't we need to be aware of something to take responsibility for it? What comes first, responsibility or awareness, or is this a false distinction? Responsibility is, after all, a form of awareness but an 'existential' level.

It seems to me that the alcoholic is superficially aware of their drinking problem, but their task is to own it, to say "this is me", "this is my problem". Those caught in substance misuse are masters of denying they have a problem in the first place, then of putting the blame for their behaviour outside of themselves. Most of us are masters of this in some aspect or other of our lives. We can't find a fuller awareness and understanding of an issue, until we have owned it. This "owning" is often the first task in therapy, we avoid it because at some level we know there is pain, fear, shame, or distress at the bottom of it all.

But to be able to take 'full responsibility' for ourselves we need to have processed all of what was being repressed or pushed aside, we have to have become free of hiding and denying, free from our "compensatory processes", but this is often a lifetime's work. As we take more responsibility, we become more aware, our self-support then increases enabling us to own more of what we have pushed aside. This is the process of growth. So in many ways it seems to me that responsibility and awareness are just sides of the coin, different but inseparable.

Conscience

This is where I think conscience comes in. Conscience is, as I understand it, is simply our ability to distinguish what is true from what is false. We have this capacity, which we often ignore due to other overriding needs, but it is there and it is a profound part of us. Without being able to recognise what is true for us we would obviously be totally lost. As above, it is obviously a relative process, the closer we are to the here and now with its deeper awareness of what our experience actually is, the clearer our conscience is (in both senses!).

When we are unaware of ourselves we can't help but perpetuate the trauma we hold inside, by punishing ourselves or hurting others. Here we act from our pathology as described above. How can we not do so when we are unaware of what is going on? But it is our conscience that supports us (sometimes at long last), to accept the truth that we are responsible for ourselves. Responsible for living in the past, for blaming others, for being resentful, for lying, for being a victim - or - for living in the future with wanting more, gambling, hoping and living in fantasy. With the truth accepted we have a chance of moving back into living in the here and now, facing and relating to the 'what is' of ourselves now.

If we ignore our conscience we can then find ourselves moving towards the dangerous psychological cliff of acting out our insecurities in ways that further split us up and deepen the inner conflicts we are trying to run away from. We can get caught into cycles of addiction, depression, anxiety, gambling, over eating, not sleeping, criminality, hurting others, or any other compensatory process. It is a form of madness where we move deeper and deeper into compulsive behaviour in a downwards cycle of ever more denial of our truth, it can continue until the negative consequences become sufficiently dire that we either end up dead, or stuck

in and committed to a deep negativity, or, if there is enough grace of self-support, we choose instead to say “yes” to life.

Some call this negativity “evil”, especially where there is an apparently conscienceless commitment to deeply negative behaviour. But I think that when we look more closely at any particular person, it becomes clear that they are just extreme versions of ourselves and that their “evil” is not some fundamental negative force in nature, but the expression of disowned compensatory processes at work. We see them as “evil” through the projection of our own split off ‘badness’. The perspective outlined here speaks to the possibility of redemption for all.

Even in our apparently ordinary everyday lives where we are caught in reaction, caught in the “top-dog’s” shoulds and oughts and “underdog’s” resistance and compulsions, it is fascinating how, at some level, our conscience knows that this conflict is ‘madness’. If the “top-dog” gets the upper hand we feel superior or arrogant or over-confident, if the “underdog” gets the upper hand we go with our compulsions and feel bad and guilty and inadequate. It seems to me that it is from these struggles all the world’s epic myths of good and evil emerge.

Unfortunately conscience can be so easily falsely conscripted by our “top-dog’s” “shoulds and oughts”, which is what happens in “moralistic” ideas where it moves into being about “the difference between “right and wrong”. Internally this is what happens when we are aware of what is true and yet cannot live by it because the compensatory forces in us are still so strong and we then move into punishing ourselves even harder for our ‘indulgencies’, ‘stupidity’ or ‘weakness’. This is one of the reasons why working hard to confront and undo our “introjects”, all those “shoulds and oughts” that constrict our lives, is so valuable and liberating. It leaves our conscience freer of the clutter and confusion about how we “should be”, so we can see our truth more clearly. But again, it is only in the here and now that we can hear our conscience and its clarity.

So conscience is an essential part of being able to take responsibility for ourselves. Without it we would not have the possibility of choice, of seeing how and what we are and therefore of having the possibility of working towards freedom and love.

Conscience, in this sense can also support our relationship to the spiritual and its call ‘to be’. It supports our glimpse of the spiritual truth that there is a wider more meaningful frame that can contain our fears and pain. This frame affirms that there is something greater and more meaningful than our caught reactive selves, and this can be really supportive in helping us to face the unbearable pain in our lives (AA was founded on this).

Choice

So, conscience underpins our ability to choose, but it doesn’t take away the mystery of choice. How do we make this movement back into the here and now? How do we choose life over death, Hamlet’s “to be or not to be”? What is the nature of this taking responsibility for ourselves, choosing ‘opening’ over ‘closing’, ‘facing’ over ‘avoidance’, choices we are faced with making at every moment? This is surely central of the nature of our consciousness itself.

I do think that the story of Adam and Eve has a real truth in it, by eating the apple of knowledge, they became aware of themselves as separate from God and were evicted from the Garden of Eden (or pre-consciousness) and thus humankind was embarked on the journey and the struggle, to find our way back to God or Consciousness. Self-awareness by definition

requires there to be choice, otherwise there is just determinism, either 'scientific' mechanical behaviourism or the "Garden of Eden" variety. This myth corresponds with many creation stories from around the world, which talk in terms of God creating the world in order to become conscious of itself (e.g. The Upanishads). There is no meaning to our lives if there is no choice. Some scientific materialists and postmodernists argue that this is the case, but this denies our experience above of growth, development and freedom.

For people who had a traumatic childhood and who did not get their basic needs met, (more of us than you might believe!) life is difficult. There is so much pain that has to be kept at bay, which in turn means that the awareness of needs has to be kept un-aware, which in turn means we are driven by strong forces which are we blind to, forces hardly dreamt of, let alone understood. What amount of choice is there in this picture?

Those stories we hear of people coming good from appalling backgrounds have often had, I suspect, some, however small, redeeming touch of light or goodness from someone in their lives that touched their soul. From the little I know of their backgrounds, it seems that those people who commit horrific crimes were stuck with deep unremitting negativity throughout their lives. But there is still choice, because it is part of the fabric of being a human being.

If we have been blessed with a "good enough" upbringing which provided us with at some sense of being valued and respected then life is more straight-forward, we more naturally choose life enhancing options as opposed to ones that are destructive of self or other. But even for such lucky people, life is not perfect all the time, there is still the struggle to face the difficulties of growing up, choices still have to be made, and we have to, all, in the end, face the ultimate suffering of the self, in death.

So choice is a profound paradox, but what is it in the overall picture? Is the force of life / consciousness or God enough for us to grow, integrate, develop or find our freedom and love? Is it simply enough to be a part of the process of 13.7bn years of creation? Or is choice and its process of our taking responsibility for ourselves an essential ingredient of our consciousness? How do we choose?

Will

So often choice seems simply one part of us expressing a preference. We decide to stop eating biscuits one day and simply ignore that choice the next. We decide to say something to someone, but when it comes to it, we don't. This is a reflection of what I started this talk with, our self being split, where one part of us unable to relate to another, e.g. often our heads don't understand our fears and unaware needs. Trauma is obviously responsible for this, but whether there is a more fundamentally 'cause' of having been "ejected from the Garden of Eden" is an interesting point, but not one there is space for here. The point here is that, for whatever reason, we are often not integrated enough to be sufficiently coherent to really have much "will".

There is the difficulty here of discriminating (in ourselves and others) between the 'doing' that is driven by "compensatory processes", which is often are about following our "top-dog" introjects about how or what we "should" do (often with apparently convincing and masterful determination), and the 'doing' that comes from a more integrated whole expression of the self.

The process of choice in its fullness needs to be an expression of the whole self. Those who successfully give up substance misuse have often been around the houses of choice many times before their choice is an expression of a more integrated self. Often this is expressed as “having had enough of it” in some form other, the decision then starts to be real and able to support action. Choice has become an expression of a more integrated self, but in the end that person had to create that integration themselves, without that choosing or wanting nothing happens. Real choice then comes from a relatively integrated self expressing its will, as opposed to a partial self expressing its un-integrated momentary desire. Such integration is a fundamentally creative act of the individual.

Bessier’s “Paradoxical Theory of Change” states that change happens (in accordance with the laws and flow of nature, or the Tao) through facing and becoming what we are, rather than any direct efforts to change. Yet there has to be our will, our choice, our wish, as part of this process. This I think is one of the profound paradoxes of life. The paradox of the absolute and the relative, Symington’s “necessary” and “contingent”, nature versus nurture, choice and no choice.

Here and Now

On the one hand, as above, we experience an integration of the self when connecting more fully with the here and now, heart, head and body together. It is here that we experience the wisdom of the Tao with its knowledge that “non-doing” is the way to live our lives with its natural flow, and how this ties in with the understanding above of how allowing and seeing “what is” is a profoundly therapeutic process.

On the other hand there is the obvious ongoing need for us to take responsibility for ourselves, for our being and our actions and our future; which seems more about ‘doing’.

Both are surely true and yet they seem to contradict each other. Choice and action - versus - awareness and non-action, these are surely another great theme of humanity which have played out through the centuries, from the Upanishads (the Bhagavad Gita) to Buddha and Christ to Shakespeare and even into the present day political tension between the left and right in politics; between socialism that knows about the importance of support and understanding and helping the less well off, and conservatism which knows about the necessity of people taking responsibility for themselves and the creative energy that this can bring.

As I understand it our deepest spiritual experiences tend to point towards the former, that ‘doing’ is an illusion our ego is caught in. And of course following the logic here, it is. After all egoic ‘doing’ simply reflects our need for the “compensatory processes” which we are stuck with until we have achieved our freedom. Then as Perls/Goodman say in “Gestalt Therapy” the ego becomes “otiose”.

What is also clear is that we can’t find our freedom, our way “back to God” without paradoxically struggling for it in some way, without the struggle to take increasing responsibility for ourselves. Logically, from this perspective choice remains central for us right up until the moment before our ultimate enlightenment, or our merger with God, when we become totally reconciled and no longer need our separate ego.

Needing both these elements is what Gurdjieff referred to by his repeated insistence on our need for “conscious labours and intentional suffering”, which I understand as developing our

ability to choose, to take responsibility for ourselves and express our “will”, as well as the process of facing our ‘trauma’ with its avoided suffering through increased awareness.

The spiritual, the profound, the sacred is always here waiting for us to contact it. The ‘ground of being’ is always here, now, always ready to reward our effort in contacting it, a thousand fold. Touching ‘now’ opens us to the possibilities in being, of incorporating and moving closer to presence, to our ultimate creativity of participating in this amazing cosmic experiment that the word “consciousness” represents.

Part of the paradox here, is because as many spiritual paths have emphasised, enlightenment is only ever a process of waking up now, but then it also true that we develop over time. This is something that Ken Wilber has clarified, he makes it clear that enlightenment is relative to the stage we are at, if we were at a more developed and integrated stage, then enlightenment would be a different experience. There is no time to explore these “stages of development” here, that is for Talk 2.

The depth of our contact with ‘now’, which I understand as the quality/quantity of our energetic being, Wilber refers to as our “state” of being. He makes clear that we can experience many different “states” at whatever “stage” of development we are at, but that we will interpret and understand them differently depending on our “stage” of development. This corresponds with my experience.

Summary

Embracing this psychological understanding, together with its developmental perspective, enables us to understand ourselves and our needs and provides a practical way to work through what gets in the way of our living closer to ‘now’, to God. It moves us away from cultural and religious determined morality, with all its shoulds and oughts to leave simply our process, our truth and our destiny.

Both therapy and connection to the spiritual support the integration of the self and helps us heal our splits, allowing our presence, or God’s presence (not sure which it is?), to ‘be’. I don’t see therapy as a substitute for the spiritual; I see therapy as a practical aid to finding our freedom to live closer and closer to ‘now’, to the spiritual dimension of life. The TV programme about the silent retreat was such a clear demonstration of this process.

We are a process of growth – we all get stuck at various times – but if we do choose to unstick ourselves, now – the creative force of life itself naturally moves us down the river towards growth and integration, towards more freedom and the expansion of our awareness, of our consciousness, our love and our connection with the energy of our bodies. As Ramakrishna put it, “The winds of grace are always blowing; it is up to us to put up the sails”.

The fact of human development and our self-responsibility in the process makes no sense without choice being an essential element in our lives. Adam and Eve had to bite into the apple of knowledge in order to engage in this process of developing consciousness in the first place, to become human beings. It seems to me that the meaning and purpose of our lives is about engaging in the creative force of the universe that wants to free itself from form, from cause and effect, in order to realise itself, to become self-conscious through our developing consciousness.

As many have argued down the centuries, there is no separation between God and ourselves, at the level of awareness / consciousness, of love and energy, here we are the same. Here there is no choice, life is as it is, if we wake up we have to accept that our meaning and our destiny is this journey that we are engaged in, whether we like it or not. We can and often do (indeed daily and minute by minute) turn our back on this, but it doesn't go away, it is always there patiently waiting for us to return and re-engage in its meaning. For some people it remains too risky, too painful and too difficult to touch, for others there is contact and withdrawal until there is enough self-support to more fully face our existential reality, yet others seem to come to understand and embody this truth in the process of dying,

It is as though choice is essential in the process of our development and gaining our freedom up to a certain point. Then, as I understand it (but have not yet experienced!), when we are "ripe enough to fall", it is 'surrender' that naturally becomes the process we need to follow. Different demands and needs at different stages of development.

The great spiritual traditions are all talking about essentially the same process, just interpreted differently, from different perspectives. To me this process is our experience of the here and now, at holistic depth. This is the experiential spiritual heart of all the religious traditions; the experience of moving into connection with something greater and more meaningful than oneself. There is always newness and expansion to the experience of engaging in now, of being connected to energy, silence, love, self-awareness, in a direct way.

The 'magic trick' is to enter 'now'. One thing that I am sure of is that 'now' is the 'portal' into the spiritual, and that it is as amazing as any "Stargate", and it is only through this 'portal' that we can experience the miracle that is Consciousness, with all its levels.