

# Three Recent Essays

Ron Kurtz

**Editor's Note:** In this contribution Hakomi Founder Ron Kurtz offers some of his latest reflections on the method in dialogue with a number of other creative thoughts and thinkers.

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**ABSTRACT:** Hakomi Therapy founder Ron Kurtz offers a three part sequence of reflections on the method in dialogue with Eastern thought, Richard Schwartz, George Hebert Mead, and Richard Feynman, and the concepts of Niroda, multiplicity, phantom communities, freedom, science, and spirit

## 1. Nirodha

*Yoga is the containment [nirodha] of the modifications of the mind.*

**Patanjali (Yoga Sutras)**

*The third noble truth is Nirodha This word means to confine. 'Rodha' originally meant an earth bank. 'Ni' means down. The image is of being down behind a sheltering bank of earth or of putting a bank around something so as to both confine and protect it. Here again we are talking about the art of containing a fire.*

**David Brazier, The Feeling Buddha**

In Patanjali's second sutra, the one I've quoted above, nirodha is often translated as inhibition rather than containment. Some of the words the Thesaurus coughs up when the prompt is inhibition are: coercion, force, compulsion, pressure, restraint, repression. The sense of all of that is too severe. The word contain, on the other hand, gets us: hold, accommodate, receive, embody, carry. That's much more the sense of Patanjali's nirodha. The basic idea is protection. Inhibition sounds much more like oppression. How many times has oppression been proffered as protection. Nevertheless, containment involves at least some inhibition. A gentler kind perhaps.

Back in the 60's, my friend Philo Farnsworth, III once took me to visit his famous father. (He was famous for the invention which made television possible and was included in a set of stamps of famous inventors, along with Marconi and Edison and a few others.) Philo's father and I talked (he talked, I listened) about a lot of things. One of them was cancer. Although his field was physics, he thought a lot about cancer and he had a theory about it. His idea was that cells became cancer cells at some given rate due to random

fluctuations and mutations. This was normal and unavoidable. The body, just as naturally, had mechanisms for finding these cells and destroying them. This goes on continuously, like a lawnmower continuously keeping the grass cut. Problems come, he thought, when the lawnmower slows down or the grass grows too fast. It was just a rough idea at the time. For him, it was fun to think about.

Of the four noble truths spoken by Buddha the first says that some affliction is unavoidable and the second, that we will have reactions to affliction when it happens. The third, nirodha, is that, for freedom's sake and peace, when these reactions occur, practice containment. (The fourth truth is about how you do that.) For me, the message is this: affliction is a part of life, you cannot escape it without escaping life. Cancer, Farnsworth was saying, is a part of life. You can't kill something like that without killing life itself. He was saying that the natural thing is to contain it. Life is full of things we need to contain. Balance is another good word. Like keeping our body temperature from going too far this way or that, by doing something to balance the inevitable changes in the weather.

I bring this example up because there's something real and basic about it. It's a reflection of our models of life and living in this world. Our fundamental stance, our way of being in the world, is tied to these simple ideas. The usual approach to cancer, drugs, surgery and radiation, in its imagery of destruction and war, in its goal of the total destruction of all cancer is just one expression of the denial of affliction, and therefore misses the truth of containment.

Buddhism and Yoga are spiritual disciplines, practices with the aim of having life altering experiences such as seeing God in everyone and everything, experiences of peace, love

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*Everyone talks to himself; the problem is: nobody listens.*

—Fritz Perls (a rough translation)

and understanding. Buddha said that upon awakening, he understood everything. These experiences, he told us, come about through containing the passions that arise in reaction to the inevitable pain and loss that afflict all sentient beings. Its okay to love, to feel joy, just train yourself to be ready, to hold yourself together, to contain yourself when the inevitable changes come. Train yourself!

For Buddha the middle way was the right path; drawing back from extremes; balanced between fire and ice; a moderate temperature and a moderate life. The passions, it would seem, require containment. Well, look at all the horrors that flow from the uncontained. Hate, for instance, or greed. Are these reactions to affliction? I think so. How else do such things quicken, but through pain? After years of practice, after long hours of watching and containing the passions and the images, memories and thoughts that feed the fire, after that comes understanding, freedom and peace.

As a psychotherapist, one of my tasks is to help people learn how to contain without repression, how to express without extremes. I help people bring painful thoughts and memories into awareness, and these often evoke very strong emotions. I help people hold onto these emotions long enough to understand them, without letting the emotions completely hijack their minds and bodies. Healing starts with honesty and acceptance and the process needs patience and strength. The wound itself tells us what is needed. So, we give it time to speak and more importantly, we listen.

For me, containment is the heart of the healing relationship. Clients learn to handle their suffering without running from it or being overwhelmed by it. Through that they gain understanding and the freedom to change. For the client who is repressed, some way to express that offers relief. For the client who is out of control, a way to calm down. The method, like the eight-fold way, is a path to peace. It starts with whatever is real right now and passes safely through whatever comes to release and understanding. Helping with that is more than just skill, more than expertise and objectivity. It is that yes, but something more.... I would call it friendship.... as a friend might hold us, when a great hurt sweeps through our hearts and minds.... holds us as we pour out our pain and gather the strength to go on. Banked earth, a fire contained and kept safe from the wind.

## 2. Listen to You

*We are what we think,  
All that we are arises with our thoughts,  
With our thoughts we make the world.  
—from the **Dhammapada***

*You are what you repeatedly do.  
—Aristotle*

It's true that nobody listens. Well . . . hardly anyone.

We call all this talking to ourselves “thinking.” Basically it's self-talk, and it runs us. Decisions are made. Emotions are triggered. Speech is created and spoken. (Just as I'm writing this.) And almost all of it is automatic; it goes on without a conscious, internal witness, without . . . deliberation.

Orchestral music is generated by about one quarter of a million small, automatic, habitual acts per minute, carried out by something like a thousand fingers, two hundred arms, another two hundred each of legs, eyes, ears, lungs and a hundred hearts and brains. The outcome of all this is beautiful, organized, synchronized, harmonized, complex musical sounds. Almost none of those millions of habitual acts could be called “thought out” or, in that sense, deliberate. The movements are not planned before they're carried out. They've been rehearsed, memorized. If there is anything deliberate about them, it's that they've been deliberately practiced and memorized, and put beyond consciousness. These habitual acts are not witnessed (unless one of them fails, perhaps). Something is witnessed . . . the sounds that emerge, but not the vast majority of acts that are creating them. Why? Because it's the only way to have an orchestra that works, one that people will listen to.

Similarly, we don't generally listen to all our self-talk. We don't pay attention, unless we have to, to all the little habits that go into creating speech sounds, which are also operative in a minimum way, when we're just thinking. But more than that, we don't even “hear” a lot of what it is we are thinking. We're thinking it, but we're not listening to it with any kind of critical faculty, as someone might who was carefully evaluating what was being said. Or in some cases, even just listening to what was being said. As a result, we are organized, synchronized, etc., and we operate in the world. We make the “music” that is our character and personality, but we do not noticed how it's made. We are self-created beings. We have organized who knows how many habits out of the experiences of our lives; habits of thought being a big part of that. More than any other things, those habits are precisely who we are. We are what our thinking makes us. Because that's the only way to have a self that works, a self that other people will recognize as such.

So, everyone is who they think they are. That is, who they say they are to themselves. Only they don't listen. It doesn't work that way. It couldn't. Not in the everyday world of work and relationships and “playing the music of your life.” That needs a lot of things to happen that only habits can make happen at the rate they need to happen. Still, if you're going to change the habits that make you the self you think

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you are, you're going to have to listen. If you're going to conduct the whole orchestra, you're going to have to pay attention to the music you're creating.

As you may have guessed, I've got a plan for that. First though, a little something about a mistake we're making when we talk about "the self."

Richard Schwartz calls this particular mistake, "the myth of the monolithic I." It is the idea that the self is one thing. (Of course all of us who've read Ken Wilber know that everything is a part of a larger whole, and every whole is made up of parts.) The orchestra is a whole made up of a bunch of musicians. They're made up of body parts, organ systems, organs, cells, the various parts of cells, molecules, atoms, subatomic particles, and maybe even something much smaller yet, (if those physicists are not just super stringing us along.) Every whole is made up of multiple somethings. And the self is no different. As anyone on a diet considering desert knows, there is more than one voice in our minds, each with its own thoughts about what to do.

"All men are frauds." H. L. Mencken said, "the only difference is, some men admit it." Then he added, "I, personally, don't." Well, all selves are multiple. The only difference is that some selves know it and some don't. Sometimes the parts communicate and sometimes they don't. Some parts communicate with other parts and some parts don't. Freud emphasized conflict as the source of mental anguish. One part against another. Schwartz calls it "polarization." Subpersonalities aligned against one another. Dissociation: parts not communicating. Multiplicity: lots of parts.

George Herbert Mead called this internal world of parts "a phantom community." They're like people, these parts. . . Schwartz says that, too! They have some of the complexity, motivations and beliefs of "whole" people". Each level of organization has its corresponding level of complexity. Parts, and the members of our phantom communities, are one step down from the top—the top being a more or less self-aware, individual person. Naturally, these parts at times come very close to acting like complete people. From the outside, one can hardly tell they're not. But, if you listen . . . they each have their own voice.

Let's take an example. Say you've lost your ability to cry. The habits that organize sensitivity and vulnerability have shut down for some reason. You've gone numb. Maybe the reason was being shamed and told that "big boys don't cry" or you were hit for crying and heard things like, "I'll give you something to cry about." So, a part develops that toughs it out, takes over in "mushy" situations, and that part won't cry. You can call yourself a real man.

Of course, if the people in your world like "real men" and reward you for it, you're likely to stay one. The self is a

social phenomenon. It is formed and maintained through social experiences. Schwartz would say, your internal world is also a social world, full of internal relationships among the parts. I like to think of these parts as stable states of mind and I see, along with others, the possibility of a "higher" state of mind that is conscious of the others in a way that they are not conscious of each other or themselves. That would be the part that listens. We can, if we want, study ourselves by becoming aware of these parts, the members of our phantom communities. We can cultivate and develop higher selves.

I like Mead's word "phantom". It resonates with the Buddhist idea that the self is "empty of separate existence." "All is impermanent. All is without a [separate] self." (That's the mantra that puts you on the A-list of the Amitabha Buddha.) Selves are only phantoms, ghosts that meet in ghostly ways and go about their ghostly business in a dark realm. The situation would be bleak (Many think it is.) were it not for the possibility, the inevitability, that consciousness will come to recognize selves as ghosts.

"In the silence you will see God in everyone and everything." Swami Premananda said. Yes, when the noisy business of the ghosts goes quiet!

To examine our phantoms, we have to stop being them, if only for a moment. We have to observe them doing their phantom dancing. That requires mindfulness. A mindful moment is one in which we are simply observing the doings of our own minds. We're watching, hearing thoughts go by, without "being" them. If only for a moment. In a flash of lightening, a whole range of mountains may be seen. And once seen, we know forever that they're there.

The beginning of freedom is awareness used for self-study, for noticing yourself, for listening to your "selves." We have become who we are: complex creatures, members of our cultures, families, communities. We have developed complex sets of habits, beliefs, thoughts and phantoms. And from this mix we made a self.<sup>1</sup>

The good news is that, if we wish to, we can remake it!

There are many descriptions of the structure of the self: hungry ghosts and hell beings, top dogs and bottom dogs, managers, exiles and firefighters, orals, masochists, schizoids . . . , Eneagram types, from one to nine, to name

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<sup>1</sup> Inheritance plays a part in all this, so it needs to be mentioned. On this subject, I recommend two books: *Entwined Lives* written by Nancy L. Segal and *No Two Alike* by Judith Rich Harris. The first is a book about twin studies and what they tell us about personality, experience and genetic inheritance. The gist of it is this: we inherit tendencies. Nothing is fixed as far as personality is concerned, but there will be genetic influences, more or less strong, depending on the trait. It's the interaction of nature and nurture. So, it's not black or white; it's complex, subtle and juicy. Harris' book also states that what we call personality is as roughly as much learning and social interaction as it is genetic.

the merest few. They're all good ways to sharpen up our listening. However, just knowing your type won't change what wants changing.

For that, God gave you inner ears, my dears.

### 3. Science, Spirit, Psychotherapy

My goal here is to place the Hakomi method within three different disciplines: science, spiritual practice and psychotherapy. Any one-way description of the work is not enough. The work is inspired and shaped by all three disciplines. This short article is an attempt at a "three-dimensional" description. First, looking at the work as science, two quotes from a Nobel physicist and a great teacher of science:

*The principle of science, the definition, almost, is the following: The test of all knowledge is experiment. Experiment is the sole judge of scientific "truth." But what is the source of knowledge?*

—Richard Feynman, *Six Easy Pieces*



I once saw a video tape of Feynman lecturing at Esalen. He said there that the scientific method involved three basic steps: make a guess; calculate the implications of your guess; then do an experiment to test those implications. Do we do something similar in Hakomi? We do! Here's how: These three steps—observe/guess, reason/calculate, test/experiment—describe, in a

very simple way, exactly what the method does. Step one: observe! We watch for indications of the client's present experience. We call that tracking. We watch for the external signs of ingrained habits and deep beliefs. We call those, indicators. We make a lot of observations, a lot of looking and listening for the unusual and the characteristic. We make a specialty of looking and listening for the nonverbal expressions of beliefs and attitudes. We observe in order to get ideas about the person.

In other words, step two: we guess. Guess is another way of saying, we hypothesize. We generate hypotheses about the person. This process is creative. It requires intelligence and a good imagination.<sup>2</sup> We guess about what beliefs are

<sup>2</sup> "...the key feature of intelligent acts is creative divergent thinking, not memory per se. What we need is a process that will produce good guesses." —William Calvin

influencing the organization of this person's experiences. We get ideas about what childhood experiences led to this. We hypothesize about what core beliefs are part of this way of being in the world.<sup>3</sup> Our reasoning process is based on the idea that experience is organized by the deep structures of the mind. We can observe the signs of experiences. We have to guess about the deep structures.

The third thing: we have to test the ideas we've come up with. (*"The test of all knowledge is experiment."*) We do experiments. We call them, "little experiments." Still, they're tests. They also function to bring beliefs, emotions and memories into the client's consciousness. That's one of the ways we help client's discover how they're habitually organized. Still, we're experimenting and we have to come up with these experiments all the time. Whether it's a probe or taking something over, we are testing our ideas. That's scientific method. (Some notes on this are given below.)

*The basic work of health professionals in general and psychotherapists in particular is to become full human beings and to inspire full human beingness in other people who feel starved about their lives.*

—Chogyam Trungpa *Full Human Beingness*<sup>4</sup>

The second aspect of the method I want to talk about is the spiritual one. I want to touch upon how this method reflects spiritual principles and practices. To begin, let's simply state that the work is spiritually informed. Literally, it has information learned through spiritual practice. As students of this work, we have all spent time doing deep work, using mindfulness, seeking out the depths of our own minds. We are trained to understand that we are more than separate selves; that wisdom and inspiration can be found in spiritual experiences; that love and consciousness are as real as mass and energy; and more. The work for clients is self-discovery. Not problem solving. Not counseling. Not curing diseases. This work is the same internal search that is the work of all spiritual disciplines. It tackles the question: *who am I?*

The work takes place within a spiritually informed mental-emotional container that the therapist establishes through his or her way of being. The work rests within that container in a palpable way.<sup>5</sup> The feeling is one of warmth, presence and kindness. The therapist puts aside other agendas and is totally present for the other. Chogyam Trungpa calls it, warmth and wakefulness. In Buddhism it's Wisdom and Compassion.

A basic part of this method is learning and using this spiritually informed attitude. We call it, loving presence. There are exercises and talks about it. We practice it every day of the trainings. There are definite skills that have to be

<sup>3</sup> See the paper: On Core Material in this book of Readings.

<sup>4</sup> in *Awakening the Heart* edited by John Welwood

<sup>5</sup> See the paper *Nirodha* in the book of readings

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learned. Certain habits of thinking and doing can get in the way. So, we study ourselves. That's our spiritual work.

All this is not just pretty talk. It's hard work. Eventually, one learns to rest in this loving state, with patience and faith and good humor. We learn to find inspiration and love within the process of helping others, so that we too are restored and nourished. Over and over again, we are nourished by a source that does not fail. These experiences remind us: this stuff works! It feels right and good and it works!

*I rise to taste the dawn, and find that love alone will shine today. And the shining says: to love it all, and love it madly, and always endlessly, and ever fiercely, to love without choice and enter the All, to love it mindlessly and thus be the All, embracing the only and radiant Divine: now as Emptiness, now as Form, together and forever, the Godless search undone, and love alone will shine today."*

— Ken Wilber

About the method as psychotherapy: First, it happens within this container full of compassion, patience and encouragement. That makes the method *error tolerant*. It is precisely because the scientific steps we take happen within this spiritual container that makes those steps so effective. The guesses, the experiments, they're all happening within a relationship filled with good will and kindness. The atmosphere is open, creative and full of hope. This atmosphere is the most significant aspect of the whole endeavor. It sustains both client and therapist through the difficult work of feeling what is at times deeply painful. Let's not make the mistake of believing that the method works because of any technique or group of techniques. It works because the people using those techniques are loving and inspired. Unlike Thomas Edison's well known description of genius, the work is more inspiration than perspiration. This special atmosphere is the source of our success.

There is a clean and simple logic to the method, and many techniques. For all of that, there are many papers and notes within this book of readings.

### Notes on the Work as Science

This is the view of the work as science. It follows Feynman's description of science above as: observe, guess, deduce and test.

**One:** Observe and Think (Gather Data, Get Ideas)

**Two:** Make deductions

**Three:** Experiment (Test your deductions). And of course,

**Four:** Observe the outcomes of your experiments and GET THE DATA!!<sup>6</sup>

### The Steps in a Little More Detail

#### 1. **Observe:** Gather Data

What the therapist sees and hears, e.g., facial expressions, gestures, posture, tone of voice (not words or the meaning of words, actual sights and sounds).

#### 2. **Think:** Get Ideas

With this data, the therapist gets ideas, makes guesses, hypothesizes about:

- what the client is experiencing at the present moment (especially his/her emotions)
- what general qualities the client possesses, like his/her general emotional state, general mental state
- the client's attachment style
- emotional/psychological history

#### 3. **Think:** Make Deductions

The form is: well, if that's true, then if I do this (the experiment), this ought to happen. It is how you think up experiments to do. It's a bit like guessing.

An example might be: you see the client sitting forward, talking fast, lots of energy. You make the guess that this client probably has trouble relaxing. So, you think: well, if I tell him (while he's in mindfulness) that it's okay to do nothing, he'll have a reaction to that, probably won't believe it. So, you go ahead and do that experiment to see if you're right about your hypothesis that this client won't believe it's okay to do nothing.

#### 4. **Experiments**

The therapist creates and, with the cooperation of the client, performs an experiment to test his/her ideas about the client. (How the therapist gets the cooperation of the client is another topic of major importance. It is covered elsewhere.)

#### 5. **Outcomes**

The outcomes of the experiments are sights and sounds and verbal expressions that the client makes and, for the client, the outcomes are experiences resulting from the experiments. All this becomes new data for the therapist and possibly new information for the client. Experiments (especially those in mindfulness, since mindfulness is such a sensitive and vulnerable state) may trigger a change of state for the client. The client possibly may go into an emotional process that needs to be supported right then and there. (How that's done is also covered elsewhere.) We want to know the outcomes. We did the experiment in order to get the outcome. When clients don't give us a report on what they experienced as an outcome of an experiment, we have to ask for it. It's the first rule of doing experiments: *GET THE DATA!!!!*

#### 6. **New Data**

For the therapist, the outcome is new data to be thought about and responded to, either with another experiment or with support for the emotions that have been evoked, or

<sup>6</sup> Find out what your experiment evoked in the client!

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with an attempt to create a missing positive, psychologically/emotionally nourishing experience for the client. The process has these several branches at this point.

Note: All of this takes place within a relationship between the therapist and client. Creating that relationship is more important than anything else, because the process is only going to work if the relationship is in place. The relationship is one where the client feels safe and understood, and has a commitment to being authentic and finding out who he is and how he got that way.