Core of the Method

Talk by Ron Kurtz, Mexico, November 2006

I'd like to discuss some details about the method of assisted self discovery, ASD.

First, this major difference between this method and ordinary psychotherapy: assisted self discovery requires a commitment on the part of the person being assisted (still called the client), that he or she be capable of entering into a present-centered, self-focused, and vulnerable state of mind. The client must understand the process as experiments done in mindfulness. He or she must be willing to enter into that process even though painful emotions may arise. This commitment is also required of people doing an ASD training.

Being a practitioner of ASD requires some very specific personal developments on the part of the person assisting. Practitioners must be able to sustain a compassionate and aware state of mind called "loving presence". I'll discuss this in a minute.

The central unique feature of the original Hakomi method was doing experiments with the client in a mindful state. These experiments were specifically designed to evoke reactions that would help bring unconscious material such as foundational memories, underlying emotions and implicit beliefs into consciousness. This is still the central feature of the ASD version. What's been added are some new elements and ideas that make the work simpler and fasted, easier to do and quite as effective. Much of the core curriculum will be about teaching these new elements and ideas.

> *The unique contribution of the Hakomi method is this: the method contains as a necessary element precise experiments done with a person in a mindful state, the purpose being to evoke emotions, memories and reactions that will reveal or help access those implicit beliefs influencing the client's nonconscious habitual behavior.*

When we work out of an ASD model, the work becomes very easy. Part of what makes it so is the explicit understanding of the client of how the process works. Maybe in these four days you will discover why this is so. I'm very sure that everyone in this room would be an excellent client for this method. But not everyone who comes to therapy would be. If the person is very anxious or easily distracted, or is someone whose image of psychotherapy is the one portrayed in popular movies and so does not understand what the process actually requires, then the work can be difficult or impossible without some prior preparation.

I remember going to visit Swami Rama to get a mantra. I was so nervous, he had me come back the next day. Because something like that can't be done when you're that nervous. It's the same with this method. But, if the client is capable of mindfulness and understands the process, then it works and it works quickly.

Having mentioned the commitment of the client, let me now talk about the commitment, qualities and skills required of the therapist. The most important of these is the practice of loving presence. Loving presence is a combination of several habits of

mind. It is an integrated combination of attitude, emotional state and focus of attention. Compassion is the key element. In this work, reaching and maintaining a loving state of being is the first task of the therapist. How this is done is an essential part of the training. Of course some people are already good at this and these, I find, are the people most drawn to the teaching.

Still, it's not just the loving part that's essential. It's also the being present part. Being present can be difficult for some people. It means keeping your mind focused on what is going on for you and the client *right now*, moment to moment. To train your mind to be present like that, you have to train it away from one of our strongest, most common habits, the habit of gathering information through talking, through questions and conversation. We're operating out of that habit right now. It's not bad for what we're doing, but when the task is to assist in another's self discovery, it too often gets in the way. It's a bad habit if you're trying to be present. So, you have to train your mind not to get drawn away from present experience by getting overly focused on ideas, words and conversation.

It's what clients are experiencing right now that's the truest expression of who they are, not what how they describe themselves or their histories.

Where you're coming from and who you are as a person

… he [Brian Arthur] *linked these to a different way in which action arises, through a process he called a "different sort of knowing." "You observe and observe and let this experience well up into something appropriate. In a sense, there's no decision making, he said. "What to do just becomes obvious. You can't rush it. Much of it depends on where you're coming from and who you are as a person. All you can do is position yourself according to your unfolding vision of what is coming. A totally different set of rules applies. You need to 'feel out' what to do. You hang back, you observe. You're more like a surfer or a really good race car driver. You don't act out of deduction, you act out of an inner feel, making sense as you go. You're not even thinking. You're at one with the situation.*

—C. Otto Scharmer[1]

I was once at the Saturday Market, up in Portland, Oregon. I was sitting across table from a friend of mine. I was eating something with pieces of chicken in it and he was telling me about some work he'd been doing. Suddenly, I got a piece of chicken stuck in my windpipe. I started to choke on it. I was desperately trying to get a breath. I must have been turning bright red and thrashing about. My friend never noticed. He kept blithely going on talking. He was caught up in what was, at this point and by necessity, a

[1] Scharmer is quoting economist, Brian Arthur. It's from the book, *Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society* by P. Senge, Scharmer, J. Jaworski, and B. S. Flowers

completely one-sided conversation. Besides all the effort that was going into my choking, I was now becoming angry. So angry in fact that was hoping I could launch that stuck piece of chicken right across the table and through his skull.

So, with the help of that sweet image and the tremendous pressure being built up in me, I managed to cough so hard, it dislodged the piece of chicken and projected it in his direction at close to subsonic speed. Sadly, it didn't hit him; it went right past him and possibly into orbit around the Portland, Oregon area. It was lost, but happily, I was not.

The method requires that we focus on what the client is doing, that is, what the client is expressing nonverbally. We don't engage in conversations. We don't turn our eyes away to think about what the client is saying. We don't habitually keep our minds busy what Francisco Varela called, an *abstract attitude*. We are present to the observable facts of the moment. As my friend at the table wasn't.

No matter what the client is talking about, your primary attention is to something else. It's true that once in a while you'll hear something that the client is saying that will be significant. It's good to notice and record that. BUT, the information you need to make this method work is not verbal. It's nonverbal. It's all the many behaviors that are observable when you're face to face with someone, behaviors that emails and text messages can't reveal.

There are two kinds of nonverbal information you'll need to be gathering. There's the kind that informs you about what the client is experiencing each moment. We call that kind of gathering *tracking*. We track for signs of the client's present experience. We use that information to connect with the client and to stay connected. It's an essential part of being present. In addition to tracking, you have to train your mind to be able to name what you've noticed about the client's present experience, quickly and simply. We call that naming a *contact statement*. Tracking and contact are two basic techniques in the original Hakomi method. They require knowing and understanding the nonverbal signs of another's present experience.

Another kind of nonverbal information you will have train yourself to notice are the client's habits. We call them *indicators*. Clients have habitual behaviors that they are not usually aware of. (This is natural, since habits are designed to operate without awareness and so preserve consciousness for the things that need it.) Here are two examples of common nonverbal habits some clients have, so that you get a better idea of what I'm talking about:

I have a client I've been working with, who during the first session we had would shrug her shoulders, no matter what she said or what I said to her. Shrugging ones shoulders is a very common gesture. Everyone uses it once in a while. And, we all know what it means. If you say, "I liked the movie" and add a shrug, you're really adding, "but not that much." A blind person might pick up the same information from the speaker's tone of voice, which would also be indicating "not that much".

When someone shrugs his or her shoulders, we don't have to think about what it means. We may not even think about it; we just get it. Whatever the shrug "says"—it could be *"sort of"* or *"there's nothing I can do"* or *"I don't know"*—we get it. Even if we don't think about it, we get it. Even if we don't notice it, it can affect us. (We have our own habits.)

For this work, however, we have to notice such things. And we have to think about them. Such nonverbal habits are indicators of the kinds of unconscious material we want to help bring into the client's consciousness. The habitual shrug may very well be an indication of a loss of hope that things could change, a learned helplessness that can be a big part of depression. When we can notice indicators, we can do experiments with them, an essential part of the method.

So, to do this work, you have to notice both kinds of nonverbal behaviors: the momentary ones and the habitual ones. Noticing the momentary ones is how we track the client's present experience. Noticing the habitual ones is how we find indicators to do experiments with. Both are necessary. One gives us signs of present experience, the other gives us clues to the memories, emotions and implicit beliefs that organize what the client can and cannot experience. Habitual nonverbal behaviors often point toward important, underlying issues that are control the client's behavior. Habits like these may be expressions of adaptations to powerful formative events or situation. The habitual shrug may be an adaptation to a time in which taking responsibility was a bad idea.

Another example is a behavior like rubbing one's hands, or touching one's face. Often habits like this are about self-comforting. They indicate a need to be comforted. If you take the behavior over as an experiment in mindfulness, the client may very well become emotional, remember formative events or realize an important, implicit belief. The idea of searching for indicators like these has become a significant part of the recently refined method. Learning to use indicators is an important part of the SDI trainings.

Nonverbal awareness is just one of the things that makes the work quick. For one thing, we don't have to hear stories about childhood or how the client feels about anything. We only have to observe a client for a few minutes until we notice some indicator that suggests it's connected to the unconscious stuff that's running the client's life. That's what the client has come to discover. Such discoveries need not take several sessions. It may only take a few minutes. Not months or weeks or hours. Minutes! We can all see each other's indicators, anytime we wish to look for them. With all of us so readily visible, so exposed, compassion is the only thing that will support a beneficial relationship. Not only is it necessary, it is the most natural outcome of such an intimate connection.

Once you've noticed what might be a significant indicator, you then create an experiment you can do with it. With so many possible indicators and the variety of possible experiments, this part of the process can be very creative.

If you found a good indicator and if you've done a good experiment with it, you're likely to get a reaction that can begin the discovery process for the client. A good reaction to an experiment will be either strong emotions, or it will provide a clear meaning, or both. The reaction will also tell both you and the client that the indicator was significant.

If the reaction is an emotional one, I do two things that I didn't do in previous versions of the method: one, I touch the client (or I have an assistant touch the client), gently, on the arm or shoulder or leg. It is a sympathetic touch. (It is a very natural thing to do; chimpanzees do it, ordinary humans, even children, do it. Since touching clients is against the law in some states, like California, you must be careful if you do this in one-

on-one sessions. Still, I would argue, in Shakespeare's words, "It is a custom more honored in the breach than the observance."

This kind of gentle touch usually has these effects: it indicates to the client that we are aware that he or she is emotional, and that we are sympathetic. It also signals that we are paying attention and that we are present for them. The second thing I do is just as important, I remain silent. This silence is one of the very best improvements I have made in the way I work. Previously, I would ask a client who is experiencing sadness as a reaction to an experiment, "What kind of sadness is that?" or "What is that sadness remembering?" That sort of questioning can easily disrupt the natural process that follows the reaction. If I just get a hand on the client and wait in silence. This usually helps the client to stay with the experience. (I could tell the client directly to "stay with the sadness!" But that would signal that I am directing the process and I don't want to do that.) I want the process to unfold naturally, without interference. The Tao Te Ching says, "Mastery of the world is achieved by letting things take their natural course." Well, the natural course of an emotion, given no interruptions, is to draw into consciousness the memories and beliefs that make sense of it. And that's exactly what we want to have happen.

In that silence, we very often can see the external signs that the client is having memories and insights and is integrating the emotional experience. There are signs of deep concentration on the face and nods of the head, indicating realization or agreement with some idea. Integration and an external, nonverbal expression of it takes place. I do not interrupt while that is happening. The client is gathering memories and ideas and is making sense of them, making sense of what just happened and what happened long ago that left confusion, that left painful feelings unfinished and unsorted out.

At such times, silence is best, because at such times clients are doing the work they have to do. They are the ones who do that work best. Clients will find the exactly right memory. Clients will articulate their implicit beliefs perfectly. So, we just wait. We let things take their natural course.

Often, during the silence, the client's emotions deepen, become more intense. A key memory has come up and it's very painful or frightening.

The sequence sometimes looks like this: (1) you do an experiment that triggers an emotional reaction; (2) you wait silently while the client gathers memories and associations; (3) and the memories or the associations deepen the emotion. The process becomes a cycle: emotions, associations, deeper emotions, more associations, and so forth. It's a snowball, pushed off and rolling down a mountain. When the emotion becomes this intense, I offer, or have my assistants offer to hold the client. While held, the client may continue crying, or go in and out of crying. And, at the same time, they will be having insights and integrating. When that's happening, holding is all there is to do.

The original situation, the foundational experience, the event that didn't get integrated (Janet says, couldn't be made to make sense.), had a most significant missing element. To be completely simple-minded about it, the missing element (or elements) had to be whatever it was that was needed to integrate and complete the experience and return to normal functioning. Some aspects of the unintegrated experience are still here, expressing

themselves through the habits and implicit beliefs that keep the person going in spite of them. These habits are functions of the adaptive unconscious.

One of the key missing elements may very well have been someone to hold the client during the emotional process. If you hold a client during this time of emotional expression and integration, you're supplying that key element. In the original experience, maybe the people there were causing the problems and the pain. Or people were there, but they were too disturbed to be able to offer what was needed. Maybe no one was there, to offer comfort or, as Al Pesso once told me, simply to bear witness. It always needs someone to be there. The fundamental missing experience is someone calm, sympathetic, patient and understanding; someone to care for the soul in pain. The client, during the cycle of emotion and association, is reliving an old painful event. At such times, your silent presence and your kindness, if accepted by the client, will provide the emotional nourishment so needed for healing.

Slowly, resolutions are accomplished. New, more realistic beliefs are formed. Energy is drained away from the long struggle and becomes available for the living of this very moment. Confusion yields to clarity. A delicious joy is felt and the pleasure of seeing new positive possibilities arises. In its simplest form, such healing is like the normal course of events that happen when a young child falls and scrapes a knee. Hurting and crying, it runs to the mother. She takes the child in her arms, holds it awhile, soothes it. The pain subsides. The knee is cleaned and maybe gets a band aid and a kiss. A few minutes go by and the child recovers, becomes energized and happy again and goes off to play some more. This is the prototypic process of integration, the natural course of things.

Every session can have a good outcome. In every session, something significant can happen. Some healing can happen. Every time. Loving presence, discovery, comfort and integration. It's as simple as that.