

## CHAPTER SIX

# SELF-KNOWLEDGE THROUGH FREE ASSOCIATION IN A MEDITATIVE CONTEXT: A THERAPEUTIC AND EDUCATIONAL PROPOSAL

### I. INTRODUCTION

Along with the extension of meditation to situations of silent interpersonal contact, I have throughout the years explored and refined various applications of meditation to interpersonal situations involving some form of verbal communication. In *Gestalt Therapy: The Attitude and Practice of an Atheoretical Experientialism*<sup>1</sup> I have already reported on one such technique: “the continuum of awareness in a meditative context”—a refinement of the basic Gestalt therapy exercise in which the person verbalizes ongoing experience while omitting from his monologue the description of memories, anticipations and reflections. My focus in this chapter will be a refinement (in light of meditation) of the exercise developed by Freud that was to become the running thread and vehicle of the psychoanalytic process.

Psychoanalysis might be described as half free association and half interpretation. If free association is described as the attempt to say without censorship what comes into one's mind when not intentionally directed to a specific object or goal, the essential strategy of psychoanalysis may be described as the attempt to understand the resistances that arise when free association is attempted.

Freud's early disciple and associate Ferenci proposed that the ability to free associate may be taken as a criterion for the success and termination of psychoanalysis; in this, free association is not unlike various meditation techniques: while for the apprentice meditation is, in fact, a *training* to meditate, the *ability* to meditate is the outcome of practice. In one case as in the other, then, an exercise is both a path and a goal, and the technique is taking the goal as path.

I began experimenting with free association in a meditative context in 1968 when I was an associate-in-residence at Esalen Institute. I already then felt that I had originated something truly useful, yet after some thirty years of experience my appreciation for the method continues to increase. I think that, with a little supervision and coaching, the results of the technique compare favorably with those of psychotherapy in the hands of the inexperienced or ungifted (which is to say, a great many). Additionally, I have found the process a most valuable ingredient in the training of psychotherapists.

Surely the fact that humanistic psychology emerged as a reaction to the limitations of psychoanalysis explains that this valuable and seminal technique of free association remained outside its eclectic repertoire. Given the psychoanalytic beginnings of my own therapeutic training, it was only natural that I would become interested in exploring its usefulness in group situations. Yet there was an additional stimulus to this and related explorations into meditation as a background for verbal communication situations: a description by Ram Dass of some psychotherapy sessions conducted upon his return from his life-chang-

ing pilgrimage in India in the sixties. In these he abstained from any intervention besides silent listening while inwardly repeating the Ram mantram as a means of invoking the divine, and it seemed to him that something useful was accomplished. My reaction was appreciative: I was ready to believe that a spiritual state could be infectious and that it could favorably affect the consideration of interpersonal issues; on the other hand, I wondered whether the repetition of a mantram was the form of meditation most suitable to a situation of listening. In time, I developed various applications of mindfulness and non-doing instead, and in the end gave special attention to the technique of focusing on the other's personhood in a field of space (as described in *Gestalt Therapy*).

There are two elements in free association: one is that of letting go (or "going with the stream"); another, attention.

While in current psychoanalytic psychotherapy it is spontaneity that is emphasized (at least through the injunction not to censor), I think that free association may be enriched in light of our understanding of meditation if we encourage not only a subtle spontaneity but the keen awareness demanded by the subtlety and many-layered structure of the thinking process; and if we pursue a "centeredness" while going along with the stream of thought, the exercise of "just saying what comes to mind without censorship" becomes one of communicating the observation of thought from a position of neutrality. This might be presented by an image such as observing the mind stream with quiet detachment. In such an exercise of simultaneous stillness and flowingness, I think, it happens that the more our mind yields to its spontaneity, the more this furthers a kind of attention that is both panoramic and centered. Conversely, the mental stability obtained through panoramic attention constitutes a condition of permeability that furthers spontaneous flow.

While neutrality is, of course, emphasized in psychoanalysis, it is the expression of this neutrality in the domain of the analyst's *behavior* that is mostly the issue. My proposition is that the

cultivation of a deeper neutrality should be part of the free association exercise itself. And not an indifferent neutrality, but one in which silence is compatible with qualities such as appreciative warmth and humor.

Through the expression “meditative context” in the designation of the technique, I mean more than a meditative intent on the part of the person sharing his stream of thought however, for the interpersonal situation involves a “meditative listening” on the part of the one to whom communication is directed. As the exercise unfolds, it may be appropriate to speak of a “meditative field” under which free association is conducted: an experientially ascertainable “aura” that a meditating individual seems to emanate and which gives his silence a certain subjectively ascertainable quality. For to speak before one whose silence is only a superficial indifference is not the same thing as speaking before one with a calm collectedness or a deep neutrality. Such “noble silence” is one that we do not feel inclined to fill with trivia or pollute with banality, just as other times somebody’s heightened level of awareness may come across as a challenging silence, before which it is not easy to lie.

To document my use of “free association in a meditative context” I am turning now to the transcript of a specific occasion in which I led a group through a sequence of peer therapy sessions involving variants of free association. Though these begin with the practice of the exercise alone (while the therapist remains silent throughout the entire meeting), other specific interventions are explored by the one in the role of therapist. In this feature of the process, as well as in the fact that the free association exercises comprise only part of a more encompassing program, consideration of the said transcript has prompted me to turn from my original intent of simply reporting on a refinement of the free association technique to that of reporting as well on the pedagogy that I have developed—in which people prepare for the free association exercise with sessions of both

individual and interpersonal meditation. Also, without undertaking to explain the structure nor the rationale of the SAT-in-Spain Program (from the 1991 session of which the material quoted was part), I take the opportunity to communicate at least my impression that a rich and powerful process is created through the interweaving of meditation and the “free association laboratory” with an experiential course on the psychology of enneatypes.

## II. SAT IN SPAIN

Such is the name of a program for psychospiritual and professional development that I created in the late eighties and of which the above mentioned elements are part. More specifically, the transcript from which I will be quoting during much of the remainder of this chapter echoes an aspect of the first module of this program.

During such first module or segment (which has been offered as a three-year Summer Program), the activities mentioned thus far proceeded in parallel with a variation on the therapeutic approach originally developed by Robert Hoffman and is sometimes known as the “Fischer-Hoffman Process”: a journey into childhood memories with focus, first on the experience of pain and anger, and later on the experience of understanding, compassion and forgiveness. In the fourfold pattern of the program the “HFN Process”<sup>2</sup> and Enneatype Psychology are complementary in regard to their respective “longitudinal” vs. “horizontal” or cross-sectional emphasis, as well as in their orientation to the past and the present. Meditation serves to infuse non-attachment into this twofold therapeutic process, and meditation-in-relation sittings serve as a bridge to transfer meditational experience into the interpersonal and psychodynamic domain. The free association laboratory contributes not only to the elaboration of childhood

material and characterological insight, but also to the processing of the experience of ongoing community life.

The various free association exercises, in which, as I have mentioned, the listener punctuates his silence with various interventions (which range from asking questions to sharing insight), constitute the introductory portion of a therapy training practicum as the three yearly modules of the SAT Program unfold. They are supplemented with group sharing and discussions, and the process ends with a session of further sharing and evaluation. I never repeat exercise descriptions or the exact exercise sequence, but more informative than generalities will be a specific example; and now I turn to the 1991 transcript extracts, including interpersonal meditations, six free association meetings, therapeutic training exercises, some of my “mini-lectures,” and some answers to questions from the participants.

Before this, it only remains for me to explain the procedure followed in regard to patient–therapist pairings: one in which couples are asymmetric in their roles rather than one in which people mutually play the roles of therapist and patient to one another. A chain is created in which each person is a patient to one of his neighbors and the therapist to the other (which requires that partners change between two successive turns). I have ascertained to my satisfaction that the asymmetry of this situation is conducive to more transference, better therapy and a precious opportunity for understanding the play of the ego in the therapeutic relationship.

Though I don’t include here the sequence of meditation exercises that were interwoven with the interpersonal ones below, I will mention that these were forms of *vipassana*, for the three successive stages of the SAT Program focus first on the Theravada tradition, then on Zen and finally on Tibetan Nyingma practices.

### III. PREPARATORY INTERPERSONAL MEDITATION

My presentation of interpersonal meditation began, as usual, with a preparatory period of individual meditation, during which the participants sit face-to-face to each other with eyes closed, place their attention on their breathing, let go of muscle tension, and dwell in peace seeking to silence mental chatter.

Then there follows a transition to the first interpersonal exercise:

See to what extent you can allow this state of peace and silence not to be disturbed when you open your eyes, so that there is as minimal change as possible between having your eyes open or closed.

Now, prepare to open your eyes as you continue in this neutral state without an effort—in this regressive, restful state—however you want to call it—which is easier to sustain with eyes closed.

When you open them, then, continue in relaxation and, at first, do not look at each other face-to-face. Look, rather, in the direction of your partner's chest. Or, better said, gaze without looking. Let the world come in, letting visual impressions enter, not having to do anything about them.

Now begin to open your eyes.

(And then, minutes later,) Look at each other face-to-face now, but always in an attitude of not having to do anything about what you see.

Just be aware of each other, feeling the presence of one another; leave yourself in complete freedom, be at ease to remain physically at rest. Relax your face and seek to remain mentally silent.

Don't let yourself be distracted from yourself while paying attention to the other. Remain, before all else, present. It would be difficult to explain what is it that we call "being here," or just "being." It goes beyond seeing, beyond hearing, beyond feeling your body. It has to do with knowing that you exist, yet feeling it,

rather than knowing it intellectually or, rather, knowing it through a direct perception of being that is beyond sensation, thought and even feeling.

#### IV. LISTENING AS AN OCCASION FOR MEDITATIVE PRACTICE

Now we move on to the exercise of listening to another. I propose that, rather than thinking about what is being said, you experiment with simply cultivating a state of presence in freedom—without trying to do anything besides paying attention to being there, intensifying your own presence before what you see, hear and feel.

The task of the one who speaks will be one of self-exploration in a situation of physical relaxation and while sharing spontaneous thinking: getting to know oneself better through what free association brings into awareness.

In other words: you observe what spontaneously surfaces in your thinking—memories, plans, fantasies, etc.—and perhaps now and then share some spontaneous insight prompted by this ongoing observation.

But now we will introduce an important variant in the free association technique: while the usual exercise consists in sharing what crosses one's mind with a minimum of censorship, we will permit censorship! Only that in such instances the speaker will acknowledge: "Now I am censoring" or "Now I am entertaining a thought that I prefer not to share;" or "Now I will shut up until I come to a thought more comfortable to disclose," etc.

Instead of interrupting yourself because you think that you don't feel enough intimacy to share, just keep quiet; yet you remain in contact with your own thought process, so that the basic situation continues to be that of observing your thinking and sharing it—only that the freedom to occasionally *not* share is likely to protect the spontaneity of your thought and add to your awareness. And, of course, by observing something of your

resistance to disclosure, you will surely understand more of yourself and your neurosis.

The work of the one listening will be simply a continuation of the interpersonal meditation already described: sustaining an attitude of relaxed and mindful presence in the contact situation.

## V. A REFINEMENT OF FREE ASSOCIATION: THOUGHT AND EXPERIENCE

On this second occasion we will introduce a new detail. The one who speaks will not only conceive the exercise as one of following the course of *thinking*, but, as far as it is possible, one of being in contact with what happens at the feeling level too—and to report on feelings every now and then. Whether speaking about what happened yesterday or what will happen tomorrow, whether the thinking reported refers to a scene with father, or something seen at the movies—maintain ongoing emotional contact with the situation of speaking, and occasionally include reference to your ongoing feeling in the course of the exercise of sharing what happens in your thinking. Thus you may say every now and then such things as: “now I am feeling awkward before you,” or “this moment seems artificial to me,” or “at this moment I am concerned about how you are going to judge me,” or “I am no longer interested in continuing with this chain of thought.”

It is a very well known fact (and widely acknowledged after the advent of Gestalt therapy) that unfinished situations haunt us, following us like phantoms. If one had no unfinished issues from the past, one would be much more interested in the present. When childhood problems have not been fully digested, everything else becomes unfinished as well; important unfinished situations from early life cause everything else to be lived only incompletely.

The more one allows the mind to go where *it* wants to go, the more it gravitates towards things that need to be processed, things

that are claiming attention. And while in life this persecution by the past is a great interference, in the therapeutic situation it is something good; the fact that the mind spontaneously turns to the issues that need to be looked at entails a great potential. An organic process develops as one goes from issue to issue, clarifying things little by little, until increasingly fundamental issues emerge.

According to this, then, the situation of free association is an invitation to let go into that which has meaning for one. It is not a matter of binding the mind (“the everyday I”) to what things one should be thinking about; not even is it the case of binding the mind to the present, but of trusting in the spontaneous process that arises when it is allowed to go wherever *it* wants to go.

Perls, who used to say that he had “given his best years to psychoanalysis,” opened a different path and ended up preferring to use, instead of the free association exercise, what he at first called “concentration on the present.” He humorously referred to free association as “free dissociation,” for he was well aware of how easily (voluntarily or half-consciously) it may be turned into an evasion; but I think that he was too rash in discarding the method. One more thing: I suggest that, as you leave your mind to its freedom while communicating what happens in the process, you also observe how you resist doing so.

## VI. A RETROSPECTIVE EXAMINATION OF RESISTANCES

Now let us move on to the retrospective consideration of your free association experience. I want to invite each of those who just spoke to ask themselves how they resisted allowing their mind its flow, or perhaps resisted communicating its content.

The ways of resisting are inseparable from the forms of character. Some people will find, again and again, that they are putting on a mask, rather than daring to be as they are. Others will have occasion to see, before all else, their fear. For others the

problem will be a sort of deadness: it would seem that they are carrying out the exercise according to the instruction, but it is as if they were there not really present, or as if everything were too mechanical. There are those for whom the exercise flows easily, but words distract them from their inner experience instead of serving them to discover more of their inner process; in spite of a facility for expression, they may discover that they use words as a smoke-screen. I do not need to enumerate every variation; one form of resisting is excessive control, another an excessive distraction from the core of one's experience, so that the mind stream becomes too much the mirror of the environment, etc. Dedicate some time now to the examination of the issue in dialogue with the person who was your silent listener.

## VII. A DIFFERENT WAY OF MEDITATIVE LISTENING

Again I want to propose a brief silent experience in dyads. An experience of contact. A brief silent demonstration of a different attitude that will then be sustained by those in the role of listeners.

We have been working on presence—on the sense of “I am here.” Now I invite you to focus on the sense of the other's presence. Even in meditation-with-an-object, when it is not a person that is before you, it may happen that this object becomes more real, becomes alive, so to say. The object is then no longer quite an object for it takes on, to some extent, a subject quality. It is no longer a “thing.” And if this is something that can happen with a mantram or the image of a deity, so much more is it the case with a living person.

This time I will propose, then, that you do the very opposite of what you were doing during the earlier exercise. Or, rather, something reciprocal: instead of practicing an intensification of the “I am here” sense, practice intensifying a sense of “you are there”: concentrate as much as possible on the existence of the other as a person; the other as somebody who not only is there as

an object but as a living and conscious being, and as an *awareness* that is looking at you. To quote Antonio Machado<sup>3</sup>:

The eye that you see  
is not an eye because you see it;  
it's an eye because it sees you.

This capacity to see the other as a subject is something we move in and out of, to some extent. Sometimes people seem alive to us, sometimes they seem more like things. Buber has philosophized on this in his beautiful book, *I and Thou*.<sup>4</sup> He believed that the saving factor for the human species would be that we could discover and feel “you-ness.” For the “I” that sees “You” is not the same “I” that sees things.

### VIII. FREE ASSOCIATION AS AN OCCASION OF CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Now I will propose to those who speak that they combine free association with reflection on the subject of their own personality or character. As you carry out the free association exercise, you will have in mind how the different memories or scenes of your life that present themselves involve specific roles, particular ways of being in the world, various personality traits. As you move from thought to thought in the associative chain, then, interject certain observations concerning your own personality as it is reflected in the free association mirror; allow, for instance, a measure of reflection on what similarity there may be in your relation or attitude to various persons of your past or present. I have already proposed that you use free association as an occasion of reflecting on yourselves; now I am only specifying the matter a bit further, in suggesting that you take the emerging thoughts as an occasion of specifying what your character is like and what moves you.

## IX. LISTENING AND ASKING QUESTIONS

Now the therapist will observe the voice of the other and his or her gestures, undertaking to stay in touch with the immediate experience rather than his thinking. Above all, he will seek not to be distracted from the exercise of perceiving the other as a conscious subject, a “You.” Besides this, we will introduce a new resource—which involves an additional degree of freedom. *One* form of intervention will be permitted—and this will be that of posing questions, but only very few questions. Pose them carefully, endeavoring not to interrupt the spontaneous associative process—particularly when it is felt that the patient is getting closer to something. Take this as an occasion of training in the art of posing questions. Both the “when” and the “what” are important. And take written note of the questions you make. For now we will not make any rule in regard to what questions are made; only be aware of what you do—so that we may comment on the subject later, and we consider what categories of questions are possible and what was behind those you chose to pose. Sometimes we want to say something by means of a question. Sometimes we are curious, and we want to know more. Sometimes we don’t understand something that was said, and it is legitimate to want a clarification—which often turns out to be useful also to the one who has spoken.

## X. I AND YOU

On this sitting, once more, we will begin with closed eyes, letting go of every intention to do this or that. Just being there, and being aware of our body.

Let go of every intention aside from dwelling in a state of restful ease.

I will ask you that, when you open your eyes, you seek to sustain as far as possible this relaxed attitude, this passive and

even regressive state—not looking at the face at first, but at the belly of the person before you—as if to evoke the state of being centered in your own belly.

Just be there, without doing anything, letting visual impressions come to your eyes without having to do anything about it, and without making a special face to offer the person you are with.

And with the mind at rest as far as possible, in an attitude of not having to do anything, begin to concentrate in the sense of “here.” Insofar as there is thinking, let your thinking be concentrated on this “I am here.”

And now combine this exercise with the previous interpersonal meditation—so you are at the same time attentive to your own presence and that of the other; minding, at the same time, the “I am here” and the “you are there;” or, better: “I am” and “You are;” “I exist” and “You exist.” The exercise may be simply summarized in the words “You and I.”

## XI. CHANGE THROUGH DIGESTION OF THE PAST

In free association—which is to say in allowing thought to flow while sharing its ongoing observation with another—the situation is akin to that of meditation; sometimes a spontaneous elaboration of experience takes place as a result of which we may find a new, different attitude in face of some memories and impressions.

While we are there, paying attention to our own thought process, something unfinished about the past comes to visit us—karma makes itself present (for this is how we can call such residues of the past that constitute a burden before we find an alternative way of relating to them). When a given situation, be it from yesterday, from last year or from childhood emerges, it may happen that we understand it in a new way; and instead of

adopting the usual attitude, we place ourselves before it in a different manner, so to say. Perhaps we acknowledge that something was not so, or perhaps we feel “what an idiot have I been,” or we apologize in our minds to somebody—and then we can let go of the issue.

I am only making explicit something that we all surely know: that there is a way of working on ourselves—here as in meditation—that is not effortful, but an elaboration of experience that comes about through an allowing attitude, an openness and inner freedom.

When we use the free association situation as a mirror to develop self-awareness of our “machine” or little ego, sometimes the outcome may be described in terms of the traditional concept of “repentance.”

I imagine that most therapists today would not be fond of this concept, since the word has been used to instill guilt in the context of an authoritarian religiosity; but its true sense is that which the Greek version of the New Testament calls *metanoia*—mind change.

Let me tell you a story. It is the argument of a poem written by Thomas Moore, which begins when an angel is expelled from paradise. Schumann took this poem as a text to his oratorio “Paradise and the Peri.” The Peri is a feminine angel that is cast out from paradise until she successfully may accomplish the task of bringing back from Earth the most precious thing in it. On her first journey there she collects a drop from the blood of a hero that has sacrificed his life in battle for his fellowmen. But the cherub at the door of paradise tells her she must try again, and she returns to earth. On a second occasion she brings back a lover’s tear—a tear filled with a longing for union with the beloved. But the cherub at the door once more tells her that there is something more valuable than what she has thus far found.

At the end of the story she brings back a tear of repentance, and only then the cherub tells her that *this* is the most important

thing. For we can only return to our home or higher nature through repentance—in the sense of a turning around, through a saying “not this way, but *that*.”

And so it is in the process of self-knowledge. We become aware of things; we acknowledge things that we are not happy about—until the moment comes when it is completely clear that we have been fools, that our functioning has not been good, that we have been mistaken. And then everything begins to fall by the wayside. Of course the process can involve much self-disgust, shame, guilt—but karma is being burnt in their painful flame—if we can only stand it. And it is detachment in face of the here-and-now that allows the burning, which in turn makes possible the relinquishment of the past.

Simple self-observation, then, may lead to self-disgust, self-criticism, boredom; yet these are not to be disdained—but taken as signs of an incomplete process; when the sense of wrongness becomes obvious enough, and bonds are severed, we become more humorous: we can laugh at ourselves.

Next time, listeners, seek to bring to the exercise something of the “I-You” situation that you attempted on the last occasion of silence-sharing. You will intervene every now and then, sharing some insight, but try to return to the neutrality of the meditative attitude: evoking the presence of the other and your own without getting lost in the words you hear.

Not only the listener but the speaker, of course, can produce observations, every now and then. After a memory there may emerge a reflection on the memory; but let it now be the witness that does most of the reflection, much as in the situation of psychoanalysis. Rather than speaking of “interpretation,” however, I prefer to describe the situation as one of “sharing intuitions” concerning what is happening with the “patient.”

In doing so, it is very important to be tactful, seeking to be minimally invasive of free association. Timeliness is as important

in this as conciseness, and I recommend that your tone of voice or manner of wording your intervention be such that it does not invite conversation. Let us make it a rule, too, that on listening to such intuitions or “interpretations” the speaker will not feel pressured to express agreement nor to argue (to prove that the listener is not right). Let him, rather, just concentrate on observing the spontaneous effect of the therapist’s statement in the flow of his thinking, letting the mind go where it wills.

## XII. I AND YOU IN THE UNIVERSE

We turn once more to meditation in pairs, so as to bring in a new element.

Begin with closed eyes, as on previous occasions.

Let yourself be just as you are.

Leave yourself in peace, trusting in the regenerative forces of your mind, the self-healing potential of your organism.

When you open your eyes, as before, seek to continue as much as possible in the same state in which you find yourself—a peaceful state of letting yourself go without trying to do anything in particular.

Now begin to open your eyes, though not looking face-to-face, feeling the presence of each other. The presence of the other as a person and your own presence—with a minimum of thoughts, as if your mind were only active enough to remember the double task of concentrating in the sense of “I am” and in the sense of “you are.”

Now raise your gaze, little by little, until you find the eyes of the person before you, and keep up the counterpoint of “I-You” in inner silence. Silent presence together.

And now also pay attention to the space around you, the silent empty space. Get the sense of being a pair of persons in the

space of this room, to begin with; then, little by little, encompass outer space as well, and explore the evocation of an ever widening space or until you get a sense of the horizon's vastness.

And drawing inspiration from the sense of the horizon, seek to go beyond, evoking infinity. Seek to contemplate immensity, while always grounded in not-doing and stillness.

If there is any thinking at all, let it be absorbed in the intention of concentrating as far as possible in these three aspects of the present: "I," "You," "Infinity."

### XIII. THE SUBJECT OF TRANSFERENCE

Is there anybody here for whom the subject of how he feels towards his or her "therapist" has not come up thus far? Is there anyone who, during the work of the past days has expressed either positive or negative feelings toward the therapist?

I see that for most it is the case that the relationship was included among the things spoken about, and I would like to hear something on the subject.

*Participant: I think I have projected a lot. My interpretations have been the expression of projection. And this leaves me with the anticipation that I am going to continue to project—and then I say nothing. It is like "next time I'll think twice about it, before speaking." What do I do with this?*

There are two answers to that. One is to bear in mind that the main training a therapist can receive is the individual therapeutic process. It consists not in learning techniques but in acquiring the ability to see things as they are (instead of projecting) through his or her own evolution. The second is that, however much you may project and be mistaken, it is still useful for another to hear what you "see"—if you only avoid turning your view into an imposition. The professional psychoanalytic situation implicitly embodies an authoritarian position, in which it is claimed that an expert

is saying to another that certain things are the case. Yet you may, alternatively, take a position like: "I imagine (or *it seems to me*) that such and such is the case with you," through which you leave the other in freedom. If it happens that what you think is the case, excellent; if not, your statement will still be a stimulus for the other to realize that it is not true. So a mistaken interpretation is not serious in the context of a non-authoritarian relation.

*Participant: in playing "therapist" this morning my client thanked me, because he felt that he was receiving something, that I was really helping. It was a matter of two or three minutes, but it seemed to me that I went through thousands of situations. At first, I reacted in a way familiar to me: not to believe it, through devaluation: "this is a projection," or "it's a fantasy," or "I don't deserve it," or "I'm just shit," "I've tricked him." Then I felt "I'm wonderful," "You've been lucky in finding me," etc. He was coming closer and closer, as if about to hold my hands; his gratitude increased and I didn't know what to do with that. In the end I found something. I said: "I don't know how to respond to this." At other times, not knowing how to respond led me to deflect. This time, however, I remained there, without doing anything: neither over-valuing nor feeling tricked, and that was very good. I was there, and it was not I who was there. I didn't know how to react, but present I was. I felt very good.*

Congratulations!

We are approaching the subject of transference. This is how the analytic tradition refers to the feelings that develop in the therapeutic relationship—particularly the positive sentiment that develops progressively in the course of therapy.

The standard idea is that "positive" or "negative" transference is a reflection of past attitudes and feelings vis-a-vis the parents, but I think that the positive feeling that commonly develops in a situation of intimate sharing is more than an echo of the past. It is true that one grants another something of the trust that originally was granted to a parent, and that one may become

childlike in one's unguardedness and openness to see the other as a benevolent ally. But I think the interpretation of present feelings as a repetition of the past blinds us to the validity of these feelings. For if we allow ourselves to be naked enough before another, we soon have reason enough to develop true gratefulness—since we give another an opportunity to be truly of help in a way that does not commonly take place in ordinary life. After sharing intimacy and being accepted as one is, one has a present basis for love toward another; and because of this one should be aware of over-interpretation, and resist thinking that the so called “transferential love” of the patient toward the therapist is only that.

*Participant: it seems to me that free association goes beyond linking thoughts to one another. Sometimes a chain of associations comes to an end and then I have nothing further to say; then I move on to what I feel, what I perceive. I don't know whether this is free associating, and whether this should be pursued.*

Of course, and I usually specify this in the description of the exercise. Even when in psychoanalysis the exercise is described in a way that does not explicitly refer to the description of ongoing experience besides thinking—there is a shared understanding that this is so. It is like in Descartes' “I think, therefore I exist.” That *cogito* originally meant every kind of mental activity including feeling and willing, and not just thinking: “I experience, I am conscious of mental events—therefore I exist” would be a more exact translation of Descartes' intention. And that is certainly the case in regard to “free association of thought.” It is a real accomplishment when free association brings the subject to what is called “primary process”—which is to say, to the freedom to fantasize and get in touch with primitive emotions. Throughout its history psychoanalysis shifted gradually from a predominant interest in the past to an interest in the transference situation (to use that verbal formula again) in relation to “what is happening at the moment.” This shift culminated in Gestalt, of course, where the past is de-emphasized vis-a-vis the “here and now.” But

something is lost if you become “imprisoned in the present,” to use Polster’s expression—impervious to the call of unfinished situations of the past and anticipations. There is a kind of double-talk in Gestalt, in that you are invited to stick to the present when the past haunts you, while again and again the therapist invites you to re-live this or that situation, treating the past as if it were present. In fact, while we have not cleaned up the past, it is necessary to pay it periodic visits, one way or another. But it is good to allow the mind, “free association” notwithstanding, to brake the associative chain of thought to remain there where you want to be. That is the best.

*Participant: I told my therapist on the second day: “Please shut up”—and since then I have felt much better. More fluid, better in every way. And she has not said anything to me again.*

You earned a greater freedom for yourself. Saying that left you feeling at ease.

*Participant: I have felt pushed. I had come to a deep sense of emptiness within me. I was very much in contact with the feeling of that. I was not trying to think about it—freely or in any way. I sensed that by just dwelling in that state this could lead me somewhere. To perceive this inner emptiness and not knowing well where I am going; not exactly seeing—rather seeing underneath the things I am properly “seeing” in reference to my character and my behavior. Then there was a moment in which I felt a little pushed. “Get into it, get into it.” And I resisted, I didn’t do it, because I felt that what I needed to do was just to remain as I was in the perception of that emptiness—painful as it was. And I feel perplexed about this. And I also wanted to say that when I chose you (addressing her “therapist”), I feel I seduced you. The first thing I did was to try to seduce you, and I feel that I achieved it.*

But it seems that you don’t feel happy about having achieved it.

*Participant: I appear to need to seduce the therapist first to make sure that he will not harm me, and to conquer him so he is*

*for myself alone. Once he is seduced, he is mine. He is not going to harm me any longer, and I can do with him what I wish. This works against me, I am seeing, this seduction. I realize what is happening but I fall into it, and it really goes against me.*

Thank you for sharing that. Very well observed.

We will go further into the subject of transference, not only in the sense of “good feelings,” but in that of “everything that happens in the therapeutic relationship.” Whatever the ego mechanism, whatever the interpersonal strategy of the person, it, of course, will manifest in the therapeutic situation as well. Instead of continuing to share as a group at the moment, however, I will ask you to take some time to write on your own experience as patient and on the relationship that you have established with your “therapist,” so that tomorrow, during your customary meeting, you are as aware as possible of the issue.

I don’t find a transcript with my exact description of the exercise on the following day, but I am sure that it involved using free association as a stimulus for reflection on the ongoing therapeutic relationship. I am sure that I also made clear that the discussion should focus on the patient’s experience without becoming a dialogue that breaks the asymmetry of the therapeutic relationship (with its defined roles of patient and therapist). This is something I arrived at after considerable experience in leading groups where I had invited participants to switch roles. I have already explained how the present manner of association between the participants was designed to avoid this reciprocity. It is, of course, the stability of the role over a series of days that permits the development and spelling out of a transference reaction.

The last therapeutic exercise in the series was not one of free association, but as an alternating monologue form of the awareness continuum.

I have already described the “continuum of awareness exercise in a meditative context” in *Gestalt Therapy: Attitude and*

*Practice of an Atheoretical Experientialism*,<sup>5</sup> in which the instructions to the speaker are to observe and translate into words ongoing feeling-sensing-doing experience without indulging in the promotion or expression of thoughts—i.e. memories, anticipations, reflections and fantasies.

In the present situation the exercise is not a monologue, as usual, nor a dialogue, but what I call (in spite of its dialogic character) an “alternating monologue” to emphasize openness rather than engagement.<sup>6</sup> Though ordinarily it happens that the ongoing “here-and-now” of participants is spontaneously interactive, the instructions are simply to “say something of your own experience at the moment.”

Why such an ending after a string of free association exercises?

Because in the context of the SAT program the above-described cycle constitutes the first segment of a three-part basic therapy training program that emphasizes the therapeutic implication of authentic relation.

Since I claim that authenticity on the part of the therapist is, along with self-insight, the best basis for therapeutic ability aside from mere technical skill, I am appreciative of the fact that some therapeutic situations don't call for a dialogic exchange, and that the analytic situation in particular capitalizes on an asymmetry.

I, then, have designed a group process in which the above described exercises occur in non-symmetric patient/therapist relationships; yet in view of the danger that the designated “therapist,” hiding behind his role, may fail to grow throughout the therapeutic process with the patient, I have emphasized the joint participation of therapists and patients throughout the program in a situation of group transparency, and I have made it a point to break up the asymmetric relationship at the end of the series of therapist/patient sessions. The dyadic awareness continuum exercise, in this context, amounts to a means of transition to mutuality after an interactional mode that, without such stimulus, could foster a relation of authority or one-sided protection.

## XIV. RESULTS

I have regularly asked the participants for a personal evaluation of their experience—both in the role of patient and in that of therapist, and I have never yet been told that it was a loss of time.

Though I will be concentrating here on the results of the therapeutic technique for those using it as patients, let me state from the beginning that the experience of apprentice-therapists is not negligible in aspects that go beyond mere “therapeutic training.” It provides, rather, an occasion for a training in which the outer or professional aspect goes hand-in-hand with an inner aspect of personal development. The coming together of both may be conveyed by the following report (from an E5<sup>7</sup> person):

*1) Participant A<sup>8</sup>—As a therapist I have experienced a pleasant fluidity, a lightness that is not common for me in work situations. I have experienced a de-dramatization of the therapeutic process, and known a less punitive attitude—less in search of what is wrong in the other; a more affectionate partaking of the other’s experience in his problems or shortcomings.*

A providential pairing of persons sometimes contributes to the value of experience for one participant or the other, as in the following report:

*2) Participant B (E1)—For me it was important to be the therapist to somebody who resembles my mother. Like my mother, she is proud and seductive, and indeed I worked on the I-You. As she expressed herself and showed herself freely as she is, this helped me very much to see how hard it is to be like that—to understand the human side of my mother, and what there is of her in myself. I have understood my mother better as a human being.*

For the patient, too, personality matching may be significant, as in the report below:

*3) Participant C (E1)—It was an interesting experience that helped me see myself better. It helped me flow better to recognize in M.*

*somebody with a personality style similar to my own. I felt understood and well received, except during the last day, when she was more distant. My work with her was a support during days of elaboration. As I worked with her, I was particularly in touch with a trait of mine that has been important throughout my whole life: the tendency to worry; though I have always been aware of the suffering entailed by my excessive worrying, on this occasion I feel I have seen the issue better, and feel at the edge of change.*

The most widespread outcome of the string of free-association sessions has been, as may be expected, self-insight. In the next report, the exercise was used to look into the pain of the here-and-now, and it led to both an understanding of its childhood origin, and to the lingering of childhood pain behind a personality trait:

*4) Participant D (E3)—the possible withdrawal announced by Claudio put me in touch with a possible abandonment, and without realizing it I distanced myself from him. “Before he leaves me, I leave.” Association to that: my father loved and abandoned me. In face of fear, I miss out in the here and now. The past has separated me from reality.*

*I looked into my fear of losing control. My association to that was that if I don’t control there is no script, and I need to know what to do. When I was little this distressed me, made me insecure—it was easier to be adequate. I lacked self-confidence. In order to survive, then, I adopt a certain model and I let myself be guided by it, because it works and I put my trust in it. I am what I do.*

In the context of a many-faceted program involving a substantial communal experience, the “free association laboratory” (as I usually call it) constitutes a needed occasion for open-ended processing of ongoing impressions, a time for elaboration or “digestion.” Here is an acknowledgment:

*5) Participant E (E4)—Free association allowed me to look at everything that was happening to me in Babia<sup>9</sup>; it made it easier for me to be here. I understood better things that I was writing in my*

*journal, and it helped me be more aware of the same issues during the rest of the day. It was therapeutic.*

Most effective were sessions in which a salient personality trait became manifest in the therapy situation itself, as in the case below when the patient enviously resented the therapist's role:

6) *Participant F (E4)—Already in my first sessions I dealt with my need to bring down those who are above. After L., in the second or third session, cued me in saying “your ego is hurting and you don’t want to acknowledge it,” I discovered how I had never accepted the superior position that I, at the same time, allowed both my mother and my older brother.*

In the best cases, transference insight brings along an attitudinal shift:

7) *Participant G (E4)—My therapist made me aware of how I demand attention and how I tend to overwhelm others. I needed him to look at me, and that he would give in to my seduction. I have grasped the importance of respecting others, of not invading their territory. I have learned to practice equanimity.*

I want to illustrate with the following account, from a woman, how every now and then a very few sessions of “free association in a meditative context” can by itself constitute effective deep psychotherapy:

8) *Participant H (E9)—My experience of being before a man, communicating my inner experiences, caused me to feel naked, shamed and terrified at the thought of showing how I truly am. Looking deeper, I discovered to my amazement that I had been living and thinking as if I had been a man, or rather, a boy. I have not allowed myself to feel a woman or a girl. There is no room in me for the subtlety, the charm of seduction, I have not felt the innocence or the modesty of an adolescent girl. I have also discovered that the great box that is my chest is empty. I don’t know how to give tenderness, or love; or how to receive it. Men are beings like myself, they are not over an altar, nor are they so extraordinary as I had believed. I*

*struggled so much to top them or to invalidate them. They feel just like myself. It is incredible to feel how my mind is growing, even though I am so mixed up I have discovered what it is to relinquish controlling and organizing what I say, just allowing myself to feel from my heart. It is so wonderful, and I am filled with a love that I have never felt before. For the first time in my life I feel ALIVE. I feel that the blood flows through my body and it is as if filled by light.*

Though not explicit in the account quoted, it was the support of a meditative attitude that allowed for the fluidity and de-dramatization reported. The relevance of the meditation background is made explicit in the report below (from an E4<sup>10</sup>):

9) *Participant I (E4)—I was S.'s therapist. I felt that meditation practice helped me very much, and now it is easier for me to transit between I and you, and vice-versa. The technique of dropping everything worked very well, not only in meditation but when I was with S., and I found myself judging or interpreting, or when I was judging myself for not listening well enough; I would then let all these interferences fall away with the breathing, and I could listen to him again.*

The next retrospective further documents the observation of how meditation impinges on the therapeutic process for both therapist and patient:

10) *Participant J—I felt overwhelmed in the anticipation of the exercise, which I envisioned as a test of my ability. When I was therapist for the first time, I felt I did it very poorly—I didn't know whether I was myself, whether I perceived the other properly or projected. I ended feeling bad, lost and discouraged. As a client, the same: impotence, inability to manifest how I felt. But after beginning with the exercises concerning the chief personality trait, the meditations, the face-to-face sittings and the experience of the infinite, everything changed. I saw my client, for I could now look at her eyes, and she allowed herself to be looked at, too; I could let myself be seen, feeling that it is OK to allow myself being seen, and feel the distance, too, the distinctness of one and another in space. Since that experience everything changed. I felt a therapist and I felt myself a patient.*

11) As a last report I would like to register the statement of a participant who affirmed that he was able to speak of things that he has not dared to bring up in the course of three years of psychoanalysis. It is not at all uncommon—but almost the rule that in a group someone with extensive exposure to *bona fide* psychoanalysis will report on such unprecedented openness.

## XV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In view of the traditional slow tempo of psychoanalysis, the achievements of the brief and simple peer-therapy situation are even more remarkable than what they seem in isolation. I think that the fast results have been a consequence of a conjunction of factors: the proposed refinement of the free association exercise, the proposed techniques of intervention and their strategic sequence, the theoretical remarks on the techniques employed, which contribute to the motivation of participants, the preparation of sessions with periods of individual meditation, and the bridge that interpersonal silent meditation allows between the traditional meditation techniques and the neo-analytic situation that I propose. I believe that an important additional element has been the equalitarian relationship between the participants. Another, the residential setting in an isolated place—maximizing the intensity of the communal experience and minimizing distractions. Lastly—as I have pointed out already—the parallel introduction of the group to the psychology of enneatypes gave the participants a theoretical frame of reference comparable in function to that which is present in different psychoanalytic schools.

As some reports suggest, I believe that the excellent results of the outlined program in terms of individual self-understanding as well as its usefulness in terms of elaboration of the daily experience in the course of a joint communal experience are the outcome of the whole curriculum in which free-association has been embedded, comprising:

1. free association in a meditative context, combined with
2. basic techniques of therapeutic intervention; supported by
3. meditation practices pertinent to the cultivation of a clear and calm state of mind, and also by the “bridge” to the meditation domain provided by
4. interpersonal meditation.

Though the set of practices listed above constitutes by itself a substantial proposal, I don't doubt that in association with an introduction to the psychology of enneatypes (and the corresponding characterological diagnosis) this curriculum becomes an even more effective occasion of self-understanding.

The combination of the theory of protoanalysis with this work in shared observation of thinking, has seemed such a felicitous one, that I cannot but recommend it as a more potent curriculum than one devoted only to either theory in the context of simple self-disclosure, or free association in a meditative context.

At a time when human development becomes a pressing political issue and the irrelevance of traditional education to interpersonal growth becomes manifest, it is natural that we wish for a “self-insight” laboratory that might be imported into schools. I hope that the present “package” may one day fill a need in curricula heeding the Delphic “know thyself.”

The potential usefulness of free association in education was pointed out by Dr. Harold D. Lasswell decades ago, though I am not aware that his proposition has been taken up. He writes in his book, *Psychopathology and Politics*,<sup>11</sup> that “It is quite possible to train people to use free-fantasy method with considerable success and to outfit them with a device which they can use in the ordinary problems of professional and private life.... The absence of effective logic is a symptom of a disease which logic itself cannot cure.”

Since “a totally different technique of thinking is needed to get on with the task of ridding the mind of the distorting results of unseen compulsion,” Lasswell rightly regrets that “schools

have found no place for the cultivation of this additional technique of thinking,” and that “our judges and administrators and policy-makers are turned loose on the world armed with faith in logic and incapable of making their minds safe for logic.” Of course, he is right in that “logical thinking is one of the special methods of using mind, and cannot itself achieve an adequate inspection of reality, because it is unable to achieve self-knowledge without the aid of other forms of thinking.”

While today free association is not the only way of self-exploration that educational practice might import from psychotherapy, Lasswell’s contention is, I think, valid, and it has never, that I know, been taken into account. Today it is not only in the realm of psychotherapy that free association could be useful, but—structured into a process such as I have demonstrated—it could be of great use in educational settings, not only in view of its value as a means through which individuals can help each other, but in view of the difficulties of communication between students and teachers in authoritarian environments. In such settings it is much more likely that teenagers are willing to open up to each other’s ears than to teachers by whom they are supposed to be evaluated and who they are likely to mistrust.

With this I bring this chapter to an end. Though I set out to just describe the technique of free association in a meditative context, I ended up by not divorcing such account from the description of the didactic situation in which I have regularly employed the technique and found it to yield such good results. I hope that my exercise descriptions and outcome report may serve as a stimulus for the application of the program in other educational and therapeutic communities.