Learning at the Edges between Knowing and Not-knowing: ‘Translating’ Bion†

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To come to what you know not,
you must go by a way where you know not.
   St John of the Cross (The Ascent of Mount Carmel, I; 13: 11.)

In order to arrive at what you do not know
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
   T.S. Eliot (East Coker, p. 201)

And this gray spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.
   Alfred, Lord Tennyson (Ulysses, in Albery 1994, p. 306)

better discuss no further, since we are in the dark
   Job

*   *   *

Learning arises from working at the edges between knowing and not-knowing.

This idea is a direct ‘translation’ from Wilfred Bion’s thinking about psychoanalytic method into the context of our own work as teachers, consultants, researchers and writers. In their book on Bion’s clinical thinking, Symington and Symington (1996, p. 3) summarise the point very succinctly. They write that the ‘only assumption’ underlying Bion’s thinking was that ‘the mind grows through exposure to truth’ (their

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By growth of mind, he meant the ability to act more consistently and rigorously in relation to truth.

While ‘learning’ equates well to Bion’s ‘growth of mind’, our translation of ‘exposure to truth’ as ‘working at the edges between knowing and not-knowing’ requires more careful explanation.

Bion used the symbol ‘K’ to represent ‘knowing’ and the symbol ‘O’ to represent his notion of ‘truth’ which, in direct contrast to K, he defined as both unknown and unknowable. O is often rather grandiosely described — following Bion himself, it must be said — as ultimate reality, ultimate truth, the godhead or, in Bion’s borrowing from Milton, as the ‘formless infinite’ (1984a, p. 31). As Eigen (1998) writes: ‘O can be the ultimate reality of a session, emotional truth of a session, growth of the experience of an analysis, the ultimate reality of the personality. It can be creatively explosive, traumatically wounding, crushingly uplifting’ (p. 78).

Bion’s notion of O becomes more accessible, however, — and more usable — when another aspect is brought into play: that the truth of O is also ‘imminent’ (1984b, p. 147); that is, O is truth or reality in the present. O is the reality of the here and now, what we refer to as ‘truth-in-the-moment’. Hence his description of the encounter between analyst and patient as ‘the intersection of an evolving O with another evolving O’ (1984a, p. 118).

By definition, it is not possible intellectually to know the full reality of each passing instant: ‘O does not fall in the domain of knowledge or learning save incidentally; it can be “become”, but it cannot be “known”’ (Bion 1984a, p. 26). However, it is Bion’s assumption that exposure to truth-in-the-moment can lead to growth of mind. Such truth is, therefore, worth pursuing because it has an impact upon us and can inspire learning, even though it remains unknowable and unknown.

Our assumption is that working at the edges between knowing and not-knowing offers the possibility for exposure to truth-in-the-moment, hence opening up the potential for learning. The edge is important because whilst the truth-of-the-moment never enters the domain of knowing, it is through encounters at the edge that we may be subject to its influence.

It could be argued, for example, that such things as the gardener’s ‘green fingers’, the painter’s brush stroke, the actor’s gesture, the confident tennis stroke, the consultant’s intervention, or indeed the scientist’s insight, depend on being in touch with truth-in-the-moment. In none of these situations can the moment of insight be either controlled or predicted. The knowledge gained is a ‘gift’, rather in the way a forgotten name is often remembered or the solution to a mathematical problem is ‘discovered’, only when one stops thinking about it.
Our understanding of the nature of not-knowing and of its positive value for our work has been formed in exploring the interaction between ancient tradition and Bion’s thinking. This exploration has been enhanced by the fact that Bion himself explicitly worked with some of these same traditions, as represented by Meister Eckhart, St John of the Cross, the Bhagavad Gita, poetry, philosophy and the Bible.

Bion’s use of ‘O’ to denote present but unknowable truth, for example, echoes the use of the circle in the Zen discipline of painting (see figure 1), in which O is regarded as ‘an expression of enlightenment — an experience of completeness — at each moment’ (Tanahashi, 1994, p. ix; also Schneider, 1994, p. xviii.1)

The truth-in-the-moment of the Zen master’s brushstroke (Herrigel, 1988) is also the ‘nothing’ of Meister Eckhart (Smith, 1987, pp. 68–9) and the nada (nothing) of St. John of the Cross which is the beginning and end of knowledge. In Bion’s view the very capacity to think develops from the infant’s experience of absence, of ‘no-thing’ which, well enough contained, can become a thought (Bion, 1962, p. 31–7; Symington and Symington, 1996, p. 102–3).

Figure 1 (from Tanahashi and Schneider, 1994).
The centrality to human development of the unknowable truth of O is well illustrated in the icon paintings of the Eastern Orthodox tradition (Ouspensky and Lossky, 1982; Temple, 1990).

Icon images are quite familiar outside the East, from book cover illustrations or from Christmas cards. What is probably less familiar, however, is that these images can be read as an early example of 'organizational role analysis' (Armstrong, 1997; Reed, 1976). In the case of the icon, the organization is the cosmos, and the role being depicted is the cosmic role of the human agent: that is, our role in relation to O, to the unknowable and unknown.

The modern eye tends to focus on story or on the historical accuracy of events, also on colour as decoration and on the authenticity of the emotional impact. In a sense, however, none of these matters in icons — even the story, at least as history: 'The icon never strives to stir the emotions of the faithful. Its task is not to provoke in them one or another natural human emotion, but to guide every emotion as well as the reason and all the other faculties of human nature on the way towards transformation' (Ouspensky, 1982, p. 39). Everything has its impact and gains its meaning from the symbolic sense: 'In the art of icons, it is content that is the criterion of form' (Burckhardt, 1982, p. 7).

What is represented in figure 2, for example, symbolically represents a ladder similar to the ladder of Jacob's dream.

Like the ladder in Jacob's dream, this is a ladder between heaven and earth, stretching from the hand of God in the top corner to the rocky earth at the bottom, and right down to the cave in the corner, representing the lowest place of existence, 'the dark place in ourselves where God has not yet entered' (Temple, 1990 p. 132).

A double movement is portrayed, therefore: starting with God we can see his power, in the form of the Divine Ray, being transmitted through the human to the earth. Here, by submitting himself to God's power, the saint is able to master the power and strength represented in different forms both by the white horse and by the dragon. The dragon is not killed but mastered — and in many such icons almost seems to look lovingly at the saint as though gladly acknowledging his superiority.

This movement on the 'ladder' can, however, also be reversed: humans are born in the darkness of the cave, Bion's Ur-catastrophe, perhaps (Eigen, 1993). (Icons of the nativity generally portray Christ's birthplace as a cave, caves also being seen as 'focal points for the exchange of cosmic energies' [Pherykedes in Temple, 1990, p. 21].) We then have work to do, work of understanding, development and self-control, in order to master or come to terms with the powerful forces represented by the horse and the dragon (the id, perhaps). Only then
can we begin the transitional or transformational work, which is required at the edge between the known earthly realm and the unknown spiritual realm.

So the icon’s function is to draw our attention to the edge at which we may have some contact with the Divine and to our unique role in working at that edge. The image and the movement depicted are equally ‘true’ in terms of the individual psyche or the relationship
between the individual and the human community, or humanity and the rest of the natural world. The very formalised style of icons, which can seem so static and foreign to the modern eye, should not blind us to the fact that the experience or reality they depict is far from static. The edge is not reached once and for all, but must instead be the object of constant attention in each and every present moment.

In a way that is very similar to psychoanalysis, the practice of the mystical traditions to which icon painting belongs, depends on a training which involves particular forms of 'spiritual exercise' (Hadot, 1995). The purpose of these exercises, whether for the contemplative or, in Bion's view at least, for the psychoanalyst, is to develop a level of awareness and attention that can make possible moments of insight into or from the unknowable unknown. Access to truth-in-the-moment depends on the development of this state of awareness and attention.

**PARALLELS TO BION**

The hand of God, which appears in the centre or one of the top quadrants of many icons, is accompanied by a segment of a circle, rather like a section from a halo. In diagrammatic form, the energy of development in the icon of St George (figure 2) moves from the hand of
God through the saintly figure — represented in figure 3 below by the saint’s halo — to the earth.

If one were to finish this diagrammatic representation of the icon image, therefore, by filling out the circle — always left incomplete by the painter — the symbolic truth would be made explicit (see figure 4).

The movement of the ‘Divine Ray’ is from the ‘completeness-at-each-moment’ of O, the divine realm, the unknowable unknown, to the misshapen ‘O’ of the primal cave. To work at this movement leads to growth of mind through exposure to truth, and each movement of development inevitably exposes another edge, where the encounter with our not-knowing or ignorance and limitation, may block us or free us to further growth.

The very incompleteness of the circle at the top of the icon is clearly significant: it indicates the impossibility of finding any adequate way of representing ‘heaven’, the divine realm, the ‘formless infinite’ of Bion’s O. The darkness of the cave, on the other hand, suggests the incomprehensibility of infantile emotional experience, that is, Bion’s ‘beta elements’: ‘initial catastrophic globs of experience’, ‘raw material, primal thoughts, noughts, mindless hallucinatory globs’ (Eigen, 1993, p. 216 & 217).

There is another striking, if somewhat fanciful, pictorial parallel in Bion’s work. His ‘Grid’ — ‘a method I have found useful in thinking
about problems that arise in the course of psycho-analytic practice' (Bion, 1963, p. 6) — could be thought of as a visual representation of the movement from the 'cave' of blind ignorance to 'O', the unknowable truth.

It is interesting to 'read' the Grid (see Figure 5) rather as we have suggested icons should be read; that is, to take the form as the key to the whole. If one tries merely to understand whether a particular event or interaction belongs in B3 or C4, then the focus is on the content of each individual 'box'. If, however, the Grid is turned on its side — and overlaid with the earlier diagrammatic icon image — (see Figure 6) it too could be seen as representing a kind of ladder linking 'earth' and 'heaven'; in this case, stretching from the earth or cave of Bion's beta elements up the ladder of successively higher level abstract conceptualisations — in the direction of an always unattainable truth. If there is
also a reverse movement, it is stimulated by the impact of any encounter with the truth: the truth is always available, and the mind inevitably grows when exposed to it.

This reading of Bion’s Grid highlights the importance of ‘edges’ and of movement; for example the movement across the edge between ‘conception’ and ‘concept’, or between inquiry and action. As development always involves movement up the ‘ladder’, the boxes themselves can become a distraction or a seduction, if we become preoccupied with how things are to the exclusion of what they are becoming.

The focus of our work has to be on the intersection of evolving Os, that is, on the edges where known meets unknown in our shared experience. As in Goethe’s Faust\(^2\), what matters is growth of mind rather than attainment, that is, the ability to strive constantly to find a new edge without ‘someone who KNOWS filling the empty space’ (Bion, 1991, p. 578).

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*Figure 6.*
THE EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE OF THE EDGE

It is important to emphasise that the experience of reaching the edge of our knowing can be unsettling as well as stimulating and fruitful. It can, as a result set in motion well-worn defensive routines.

The edge is not a comfortable place to be.

The image (see Figure 7) from an etching by Paul Klee shows vividly the tensions and defences that the experience of the edge of not-knowing can evoke. It is entitled: 'Two men meet, each supposing the other to be of higher rank', and clearly the two men have a real problem. All the usual marks of recognition that would help them to know — to know who the other is and therefore how to behave — all these signals have been removed with the removal of their clothes: 'It is an interesting question how far men would retain their relative rank if they were divested of their clothes. Could you, in such a case, tell surely of any company of civilised men, which belonged to the most respected class?' (Thoreau, 1910, p. 18.)

In the visual language of icons — and Klee's entirely non-specific, rocky background is very reminiscent of an icon — clothing is used to depict the inner state of a person. The removal of clothes or outer garments can therefore signify a psychological change of state, a transition from what is outer and seen to what is covered and within. The problem for Klee's two men, however, is that they cannot give up

Figure 7 (Klee: 'Zwei Männer einander in höherer Stellung vermutend, begegnen sich.' in Jaffé, H. L., 1972, p. 13).
their hold on knowing. Their transition to what is within simply uncovers their state of inner dependency on knowing. Completely thrown, therefore, by not knowing and by the resulting anxiety, each tries to outdo the other in the depth of their bowing.

The emphasis in Klee's title on 'higher rank' clearly directs us to the picture's social critique. However, this should not obscure the fact that at every level we clothe ourselves with our knowing. So although we may feel somewhat superior to these ridiculous looking elderly men, their anxiety and deep bowing is precisely what can happen to us every time we bump unexpectedly against the edge of our ignorance. Not to know even the littlest thing can make one question one's competence — and even identity. Just at the moment when working at the edges between knowing and not-knowing can allow space for a new thought, it can also let in the anxiety of one's nakedness.

ORDINARY WORK AT THE EDGE

In our experience, the remarkable thing about working at the edges between knowing and not-knowing is that whilst at times it can appear esoteric or mystical — that is, extra-ordinary — it is also, at times, very ordinary and practical.

For example, during a recent role analysis consultation, my [RF's] client said: "I want to ask you a question. Do you think I'm naive?" Two people had told him that he was naive and he had clearly experienced this as an accusation. He was now seeking some kind of reassurance. I was hesitant but said a few things, feeling as I did so that I was just stalling till I could find something useful to say. For the first time, however, — and as a direct result of being engaged in thinking and writing about the ideas in this article — I became consciously aware both that I did not know what was going on and that I could actually choose to work as though my ignorance might be the indicator of a potentially creative edge. So I assumed for a moment not that I knew — knew the client, his presenting problem (that is, naivety) or the solution (reassurance) — but, instead, that I did not know and nor did he.

This is clearly a very limited context and a really very everyday encounter. We were not dealing with 'ultimate reality'. However, the imminent truth of that moment was indeed that neither of us knew what we were talking about — and acknowledging that brought about an immediate change. The recognition of not-knowing enabled us to explore what 'naive' might actually mean to each of us — and to the two others, his wife and an aggressively competitive male colleague. For example, why did he assume that to be called naive was derogatory
rather than, say, a high compliment? The shift away from our naive assumption that we knew what we meant, opened up the possibility for learning in several areas: his own personal and professional history, his expectations of me, of his father, and of his own manager and colleagues, and, as a result, in relation to the leadership and management dimensions of his own role.

**NAIVE VERSUS POLITICAL: WORKING WITH PARALLEL TRUTHS**

The attempt to work at the edge of uncertainty demands what might be called a 'sophisticated naivety'. This state of mind is reminiscent of the comment attributed to Picasso to the effect that he had learned by the age of 16 to paint as well as an old master but it took him another 30 years to learn to paint like a child.

The naivety our work demands is the ability to be alive to the impact of each new moment, as though 'born again' in each instant: 'naive' being derived from the Latin verb 'to be born'. Bion's view of analytic work with patients was that 'The only point of importance in any session is the unknown' (Bion, 1967, p. 272). This is a radical expression of sophisticated naivety.

If 'naivety' involves openness to truth-in-the-moment, the 'sophistication' required is the ability at the same time to remain in touch with context and, as a result, to maintain the ability to differentiate between 'truths'. Even in individual work, 'an analyst can not cover all possible meanings of any moment' (Eigen, 1998, p. 66). Working with groups and organizations, or even with an individual in an organizational role, involves many additional layers of complexity. 'Sophisticated' naivety therefore requires us to recognise that there are indeed many truths in every moment: 'To a certain extent, one can select what O to focus on when' (ibid., p. 78).

A great part of the skill of the teacher, for example, is to recognise and respond to the truth at any particular moment that will most effectively further the aim operating at that moment. The extreme complexity this involves arises from the fact that the truth of any moment can involve many potentially conflicting emotional, intellectual and/or political needs: of an individual or individuals, of a subgroup within a class or of the whole class, of a colleague or group of colleagues, or of the wider system of department, school or university, or of the local or national community. The excitement and inspiration of the teachers portrayed in the films 'Dead Poets' Society' and 'The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie' come from a naivety which is radical but not sophisticated: their single-minded belief leads them to pursue only one
truth. In both films, the ultimate death of a pupil symbolises most graphically the dangers inherent in the exclusion of other 'truths'.

Our suggestion that naivety may be opposed to politics is an attempt to capture the complexity of all group and organisational work that incorporates a psychoanalytic understanding of human relations. The ability to select among available truths-in-the-moment depends on the ability to work at the edges between knowing and not-knowing; that is, to recognise a variety of edges, one’s own and the client’s, and to recognise limitations as well as possibilities. For example, an edge we see as important, may be a step too far for the client. Resistance from a client may be a defensive attempt to avoid facing up to a difficult truth, but it may also indicate that we have reached an edge of insight into a previously unknown area which interests us while the client is, as it were, heading a different way and has a different agenda. Entry to the unknown or not-yet known may, on the one hand, release an individual or group into new areas of creativity or, on the other, make any further working relationship with the client impossible.

A recent case example may illustrate some of these layers of tension between the naivety which can open up a fuller view of the broad emotional, practical, intellectual and political truth-of-the-moment, and the parallel, contingent political truth which may exclude further exploration.

Recently I [PS] was approached by a manager who knew he had a problem — a team which was not functioning properly — and was motivated by a desire — to remove the problem by getting the team to work the way he wanted. However, he did not know how to achieve his aim: he had come to the edge of his knowing. He therefore did what many will do in such a situation: he looked for someone, an expert, who would know how to get what he wanted. Some members of his team had worked previously with Bristol Business School and so he approached me for some Team Building consultancy. The problem was that I did not know how his aim might be achieved either, nor whether his analysis of the situation was accurate — whether what he wanted would be what he needed.

As is typical of such instances, it turned out that the situation was indeed much more complex than the manager himself realised. I first conducted a series of diagnostic interviews to try to assess the state of this malfunctioning team — and then spent the subsequent weekend in a state of high anxiety, having been brought very clearly to the outer edge of my knowing and, as a result, also feeling at the edge of my competence. However, I could not give up the desire to know. I could not get the project out of my mind, and tried to find a ‘constructive’ way to approach it. I saw constantly in front of my eyes a single
sentence, spoken by Phil, the manager, which I had written at the top of one page: “Martin is a problem.” It was so clearly right, partly because of Martin’s stance and personality, but partly also because he was being scapegoated. That much was obvious, and it seemed to me important that Martin was offered some individual consultancy — role analysis, perhaps — as a way of helping him to understand and to come to terms with the situation. However, I also could not shake the dark mood that had settled upon me, nor could I get away from the feeling that I was missing the point.

When I met with RF on the Monday afternoon following my troubled weekend, I talked him through the project. The more we talked the greater was our sense of confusion and despair at ever finding an effective way of intervening. The sense of incompetence and mild panic that arises when we don’t know was palpable. After about an hour and a half, apparently out of nowhere, RF started to say again what could be done, but this time in terms of what he would like to be able to do, if only it were possible. I felt my dark mood shift. By the time he had finished, we had both realised that we had become completely caught up in the process of the group, the splitting into positive and negative, the scapegoating of Martin, and the despair about ever changing him. What I knew was the historical fact that “Martin is a problem”. This knowledge stopped me from making the necessary transformation of the truth-in-the-moment that was presenting itself to me: that the dominating pattern within this team was of splitting and projection.

What helped us most was that we managed to continue working explicitly with the awareness that we did not know what to do — even to the point that not only did we not know what to do, we had even lost our sense of how to deal with not-knowing. This double pit, as it were, actually forced us to wait for something to happen.

My subsequent work with this team focused largely on encouraging them to let go of the scapegoating and to explore other possible causes for the blockages in their work together — for example, an over-dependence upon the manager, a lack of ability within the team to self-direct, and a huge reluctance to allow each other to make mistakes in leadership. However, I realised at the end of this piece of work that I had based my approach on a false assumption: I had assumed we all shared a desire to find and work at unknown and perhaps uncomfortable truths. This simply was not the case. My own interest in engaging with the truth, whatever it might be, allowed me a degree of naivety that helped me to recognise some interesting and potentially important issues and dynamics. On the other hand, my lack of sophistication blinded me to the political truth-in-the-moment, that the manager and I had different commitments. His interest in developing a
self-managing team seemed to end at the point where the team might want to do something of which he disapproved. Put bluntly, he wanted them — collaboratively and independently — to reach the decisions he favoured. If they did not, he would almost certainly resort to telling them what to do.

## STAYING AT THE EDGE: A NECESSARY DISPOSITION

We have come to realise that in the all too rare moments when we are able not only to recognise that we have come to an edge but also to stay with the experience of not-knowing, we really do not know whether we are doing something or whether something is being done to us. Do we reach for the truth-in-the-moment, or does the truth reach for us? In the same way that Bion wrote of ""thoughts"" in search of a thinker’ (Bion, 1984c, final words), might we think in terms of ""truth"" in search of a seeker’?

Reaching the edge of not-knowing and recognising it as such is one thing; staying there is quite another. If knowing does not keep us there, what does? Although the word may not be the best one, we think of this element, to use an ancient term, as a ‘disposition’ — that is, a state of mind, a way of being, a way of attending to experience. It is this disposition that allows one to bear the experience of encountering an edge.

In writing about his own personal and intellectual development, for example, Paul Tillich chose the image of the ‘boundary’ to symbolise this experience of living at the edge between knowing and not-knowing:

> The boundary is the best place for acquiring knowledge. ... Since thinking presupposes receptiveness to new possibilities, this position [between alternative possibilities for existence] is fruitful for thought; but it is difficult and dangerous in life, which again and again demands decisions and thus the exclusion of alternatives. This disposition and its tension have determined both my destiny and my work. (Tillich, 1967, p. 13.)

Some people may be more naturally disposed to living on the edge than others, rather in the way the ‘capacity for tolerating frustration’ — to which this disposition may be related — varies from one person to another (see for example Bion, 1962). In addition, many other factors influence the development of the disposition to stay at an edge and the value attributed to doing so — from the individual’s experience as an infant through to the broad culture of a society, community or organization. Because the experience of the edge tends to provoke anxiety, for example, a group or organization can develop ways of being, relating and acting, which are designed unconsciously to protect
them against the recognition of the limits to their knowledge. Defensive habits can then become built into patterns of organizing, both into organizational roles and structures and into ways of relating. This is one way of understanding the development of 'social defences against anxiety' (Jaques, 1955; Menzies, 1960) or, from the perspective of systems theory, of systems archetypes (Senge, 1990).

One of the difficulties of even talking about the disposition required to stay at the edge of one's knowledge — and it is a difficulty we have faced throughout the process of writing this article — is that it is so easy to slip into making the experience of being at the edge sound acceptable. The uncertainties aroused by the encounter with not-knowing can indeed be exciting and can provoke significant learning. However, as Paul Klee's image illustrated, they are often unsettling and anxiety-provoking, confusing and even terrifying. They can inspire a sense of incompetence and loss of control, and can obliterate all sense of role and identity and of the task in hand.

The practical, political and emotional pressures on us to know are constant and almost irresistible. It is hard to be called 'ignorant' and to take it as a compliment, despite the fact that there is a long tradition, which asserts the opposite: 'How can he remember well his ignorance — which his growth requires — who has so often to use his knowledge?' (Thoreau, 1910, p. 4). The disposition which equates growth of mind with ignorance has taken many forms, from Freud's 'evenly suspended attention' and Keats' 'Negative Capability' to the 'yoga of knowledge' in the Bhagavad Gita. All of these appear in Bion's work.

It is not by chance that one metaphor to describe the emotional experience of not-knowing is of a cloud — not as viewed from a comfortable distance, but with the disorientation and panic one can experience when lost in the fog — the 'cloud of unknowing' (Walsh, 1981). Another image is of a dark night — the 'dark night of the soul' (Bion, 1984b, pp. 158–159). This is not, however, a night as we know the night in our electrified and urbanised experience. It is a truly bewildering and terrifying night, where nothing can be seen, where there are no clear roads as we know them, and where there are, by contrast, real dangers to safety and even to life. This is the basis for Bion's comment that 'In every consulting room there ought to be two rather frightened people: the patient and the psychoanalyst. If they are not one wonders why they are bothering to find out what everyone knows.' (Bion, 1990, p. 5.)

The challenge is to stay with the moment rather than to retreat into what Needleman, in an idea reminiscent of Bion's notion of basic assumptions, has called 'dispersal' (Needleman, 1990, p. 167). Dispersal
manifests as a flight from the anxiety of the meeting with the unknown into explanation, emotion or physical action. The method of working at the edges of our not-knowing therefore depends on developing an awareness of one’s own particular valency for dispersal, as well as of the strategies of others. Such work requires a training and awareness equivalent to, though not the same as, that of the analyst.

To put it most simply, the disposition required to stay at the edge of uncertainty is one of waiting: ‘such “waiting,” however, is not dead or inert but intensely alive and accurate in its shifting sense of where the patient [client, student] is moving.’ (Eigen, 1983, p. 12.) It is ‘an attitude of pure receptiveness … an alert readiness, an alive waiting’ (ibid., p. 326). It is a state of openness almost identical to ‘the prayer of faith’, St John of the Cross’s first step in contemplation: ‘my counsel is — learn to abide with attention in loving waiting upon God in the state of quiet.’ (The Ascent of Mount Carmel, II, Chapter 12: 11; see also Butler, 1926, p. 14.)

**TRADITIONS OF THIS STATE OF MIND**

Bion and Winnicott both learned to wait: ‘to wait and wait for the natural evolution of the transference arising out of the patient’s growing trust in the psychoanalytic technique and setting’ (Winnicott, 1980, p. 101). As the Symingtons put it: ‘To the question “How is the analyst to penetrate through the sensuous to the psychic reality?” Bion’s answer is that he waits until a pattern begins to emerge and then he *intuits* the psychic reality.’ (Symington and Symington, 1996, p. 178; italics in original.) To describe this ‘alive waiting’, Bion used the everyday term ‘patience’, intending it to ‘retain its association with suffering and tolerance of frustration’. With it he described the ability of the analyst ‘to be aware of the aspects of the material that, however familiar they may seem to be, relate to what is unknown both to him and to the analysand. … Any attempt to cling to what he knows must be resisted …’ (Bion, 1984a, p. 124.)

To wait can, however, be the hardest thing to do. Consultant, manager, teacher — and even, ironically, researcher — are all roles where one is inevitably perceived as ‘the subject who is supposed to know’ (Lacan, 1979, p. 232). The fear induced by the sense of not-knowing what one is doing really is of catastrophe — possibly as a nameless disaster, but probably as a very obvious one: of one’s incompetence revealed, accompanied by a loss of self-esteem, the potential loss of the client — and hence a loss of income.

Underlying the capacity for patience, for alive waiting, is the capacity for faith, which Eigen (1993, pp. 211–225) has argued most convincingly
is the only effective counter to the fear of catastrophe: ‘Faith is openness to truth, to reality, whatever it may turn out to be.’ (Watts, 1983, p. 40; see also Simpson, 1997.)

Bion’s own description of the disposition necessary for staying at the edge between knowing and not-knowing is well known: ‘Discard your memory; discard the future tense of your desire; forget them both, both what you knew and what you want, to leave space for a new idea.’ (1980, p. 11.) In his view, exposure to the unknown truth-in-the-moment demands that the analyst bracket out not only memory and desire, but also understanding and sense perception (1984a, p. 43) — even the desire for understanding or the desire for 'cure' (1967, p. 273).

This is why Bion was attracted to Keats’ notion of ‘Negative Capability’ (for example, 1978, p. 8; 1984a, p. 125). Keats was describing the poet’s capacity to wait — and to tolerate the emotional experience of waiting in a state of not-knowing. To have this capacity, he wrote, is to be ‘capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.’ (Keats, 1970, p. 43; see also Bate, 1964, chapter 10.).

Faith in the pursuit of truth — openness to the rich seam of learning that can be mined from the pit of ignorance — can help to get one to the edge, or to recognise those moments when one has, unexpectedly or more or less deliberately, reached the edge of one’s knowing. In its turn, the disposition of ‘alive waiting’, means being able at that edge to attend to the experience of that unique moment, and to survive the encounter with the limits of one’s knowledge, in order to let something new emerge, a new thought perhaps, but without any sense of certainty that it will:

‘be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought;’

T.S. Eliot (East Coker), 1963, p. 200

All the traditions of this disposition describe facets of ‘alive waiting’ and an orientation towards the edge of ignorance: ‘the slenderest knowledge that may be obtained of the highest things is more desirable than the most certain knowledge obtained of lesser things’ (St Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, I, 1, 5 ad 1, quoted in Schumacher, 1978, p. 11). They are also linked by the notion of the discipline, or askesis, of learning. Access to truth-in-the-moment may be uncertain, unpredictable and difficult to interpret. However, the disposition on which such insight depends is not random but disciplined: ‘The wise student,
therefore, gladly hears all, reads all, and looks down upon no writing, no person, no teaching. From all indifferently he seeks what he lacks, and he considers not how much he knows, but of how much he is ignorant' (Hugh of St Victor in Illich, 1993, p. 16).

In this sense, as we have suggested above, psychoanalysis can be seen as a modern form of the tradition of training which existed in ancient Greece and Rome, and has re-emerged in every age in response to the needs and philosophies of the day: the tradition of 'philosophy as a way of life' (Hadot, 1995), learned through the discipline of 'spiritual exercises'.

ENDING

In her book 'Drawing on the right side of the brain', the author, Betty Edwards, captures the artist's problem very precisely in terms of the dilemma of knowing and not-knowing. She writes: 'The problem with drawing chairs and tables, as with many other things we might want to draw, is that we know too much about them.' (Edwards, 1982, p. 106; italics in original.)

Her words are strongly reminiscent of Bion's comment about the way in which, from the very first contact with a patient, the interaction between knowing and not-knowing is of central importance. In one of his lectures he said: 'An individual comes to see me; he thinks I am a psycho-analyst; I think he is a patient. In fact I don't know.' (Bion, 1978, p. 14.)

In this article, we have struggled with two questions.

Firstly, how can we use psychoanalytic theories to bring us to the edge of a new thought?

But also, secondly, how can we let go of all of our theories, psychoanalytic or other, when an experience of truth-in-the-moment makes us face up to our ignorance?

We would like to end with a story by the Sufi poet, Idries Shah, (in Needleman and Appelbaum, 1990, p. 50) which captures the heart of the emotional problems of this approach — indeed of any attempt really to apply psychoanalytic theories in our work, whether in the consulting room, in the classroom or in organizations. The story is called 'Nobody really knows':

*Suddenly realising that he did not know who he was, Mulla Nasrudin rushed into the street, looking for someone who might recognise him.*

*The crowds were thick, but he was in a strange town, and he found no familiar face.*

*Suddenly he found himself in a carpenter's shop.*

"What can I do for you?" asked the craftsman, stepping forward.
Nasrudin said nothing.
"Perhaps you would like something made from wood?"
"First things first," said the Mulla. "Now, did you see me come into your shop?"
"Yes, I did."
"Good. Now, have you ever seen me in your life before?"
"Never in my life."
"Then how do you know it is me?"

Notes

1. The circle has held some very similar meanings in Western art and architecture. See, for example, Burckhardt, 1995, pp. 102-4; Campbell, 1988, pp. 214-8; Jaffé, A., 1964; Moore, 1982, p. 128.

2. In Goethe’s version of Faust, the pact with Mephistopheles is very Bion-like. Goethe’s Faust does not ‘sell his soul to the devil’ unconditionally, in exchange for being provided with everything he might desire. Instead, Faust’s soul will only be relinquished if Mephistopheles can offer Faust an experience which satisfies him:

If I be quieted with a bed of ease,
Then let that moment be the end of me!

... If to the fleeting hour I say
"Remain, so fair thou art, remain!"
Then bind me with that fatal chain,
For I will perish in that day.

Faust I, Faust’s Study (iii)

Werd’ ich beruhigt je mich auf ein Faulbett legen,
So sei es gleich um mich getan!

... Werd’ ich zum Augenblicke sagen:
Verweile doch! Du bist so schön!
Dann magst du mich in Fesseln schlagen
Dann will ich gern zugrunde gehn!

(lines 1699-1702)

3. Bion argued that what he called faith (F) is a state of mind that allows the analyst to use ‘the piercing shaft of darkness’ to shed light on the ‘dark features of the analytic situation’ (1984a, p. 57). Although at this point he derives from Freud the idea of ‘rendering oneself “artificially blind”’, he is clearly also indebted to the apophatic tradition, as expressed in St John of the Cross’s ‘dark nights’ of the soul and spirit, themselves a reworking of the ‘dazzling darkness’ of Dionysius the Areopagite (Louth, 1992, p. 189; Matthew, 1995; McGinn, 1992, p. 175–6). With the need to establish
itself as a respectably scientific pursuit in an exoteric age, this dimension of psychoanalysis has remained perhaps necessarily under-explored, although more recently there does appear to be, alongside Bion, a revival of interest. (See, for example, Arden, 1985; Bettelheim, 1983; Coltart, 1985, pp. 164–175; Eigen, 1993, 1998; Milner, 1973). It has been argued by Bakan (1990) that Freud himself was directly influenced by the Jewish mystical tradition. He may also have been indirectly influenced through the impact of his great master, Goethe, who was similarly inspired by these traditions and whose view of science was in radical contrast to Newtonian, reductionist approaches. (See, for example, Arden, 1997; Prokhoris, 1995; Stephenson, 1995.)

Acknowledgements

For figure 2. We are grateful to the Hellenic Institute of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Studies, Venice, for permission to reproduce the icon of St George Killing the Dragon.  

For figure 5. © 1970 by W. R. Bion, reproduced by permission of Mark Paterson on behalf of Francesca Bion.

References


Jaques, E. (1955) 'Social systems as a defence against persecutory and


