

Listening and speaking from no-mind

Peter Fenner, Ph.D.

Founder and Director of Education, Center for Timeless Wisdom, Palo Alto, California

The final aim of all nondual approaches to therapy and healing is to introduce people to a way of being that exists beyond pain and ordinary pleasure and helps them become more and more familiar with this mode of being. A critical skill that's needed in order to open up an experience of unconditioned mind with clients, friends, colleagues or in a group setting, is a capacity to listen and speak from no-mind. When I say no-mind (mushin) I could also use the terms buddhamind, openness (shunyata), unconditioned mind (asamskrta-citta), pure awareness (vidya), witness consciousness (sakshin), suchness (tathata), contentlessness (nihsvabhavata) and so on.

In this chapter I want to explore 'listening and speaking from no-mind' as a vital dimension of nondual approaches to psychotherapy. Listening and speaking from no-mind represents a specialized form of relationship in which it's possible to effect a transmission of contentlessness. The chapter describes the structure of contentless communication and identifies some of the sensitivities that nondual therapists need in order to be able to listen and talk in ways that directly reveal and transmit the experience of no-mind or pure, unconditioned presence.

Most of my own teaching and transmission of contentlessness occurs in a group setting in workshops, retreats and long-term trainings. Within these settings I offer individual sessions. I also work with individual clients from around the world, mainly by telephone. The teacher-student, counselor-client relationship I will describe here, particularly in terms of listening and speaking from no-mind, represent the nondual heart of my work.

When they first hear about what I have to say about "pure listening and speaking", some therapists can make an erroneous generalization that pure listening and speaking represents a very clinical, neutral and even detached way of relating to others. They may think that the human dimension of relationship could be lost if a therapist was to function exclusively from this place.

My experience is quite the converse. The pure listening and speaking that I will describe shortly has a multitude of expressions. It's at once precise and open, sensitive and tender yet rigorous and exact, intimate yet detached, smooth and totally still, yet full of potency and capable of erupting in any moment into joyous laughter and communion. I should also add that the pure listening and speaking that I describe occurs within a container of warm affection. I have the fortune of not being a "therapist." When I'm not "teaching" I have the freedom to share and join in the lives of my students in a very demonstrative and uninhibited way.

Pure listening: listening from nothing

We can distinguish three different ways in which we can receive what people are communicating to us. We can listen to people through a positive filter (positive listening), a negative filter (negative listening), or with no filter (pure listening). Negative listening occurs when we listen through a filter of boredom, disinterest, invalidation, annoyance, arrogance, anger, frustration, and so on. Positive listening is marked by moods of interest, enthusiasm, excitement, approval, and validation.

Pure listening is a quality of being that we can bring to all our relationships. Pure listening is also a central skill that therapists with an affinity for nonduality naturally bring to their clinical relationships. When our listening is pure we listen without being diverted by, or identified with, the filter of our own interpretations. We receive our client without static or interference. We neither add to nor take away from what is being communicated. When we listen from nothing we're like a clear mirror, receiving exactly what's communicated.

Pure listening neither encourages nor subverts another person's communication. We don't need the conversation to continue or stop; we don't need to "understand" it conceptually. We listen without projecting or interpreting, without anticipating what someone is going to say next or attempting to reconstruct or interpret their experience for them. From our point of view, it makes no difference whether a client, friend or partner is talking or not talking. If they stop in the middle of a sentence, we're complete. We don't need them to complete what they're saying. We're completely satisfied with the communication exactly as it is. Such listening arises naturally out of unconditioned mind.

We're not being attentive in an expectant and encouraging way that invites the person with whom we're communicating to continue. Nor do we discourage communication by being inattentive or distracted. We're neither engrossed in our own thoughts nor immersed in the story that we're hearing. We're just listening, being purely present to what's here. John Prendergast (this volume) describes this as the experience of "spacious intimacy."

In contrast to pure listening, positive and negative listening distort the nature of a relationship in which we are fully and totally open to others. Positive and negative listening respectively disconnects us from ourselves and the people with whom we're in communication. Our attention becomes biased, privileging either our own experience or the experience of "the other."

I define positive listening as a form of listening in which we become wrapped up in other people's experiences and seduced by their stories. When this happens we lose connection with our own thoughts, feelings, and values. Positive listening can be identified by thoughts in our own mindstream such as, "This is fascinating. I can really relate to what they're saying. This makes total sense. I can really see how I can help her or him."

When we listen negatively, we become preoccupied with our own thoughts and feelings and trivialize the significance of what we're listening to. "How can I wrap this up? I wish I could change the subject. I've got more important things to do than listen to this." In negative

listening there is an attentive bias towards our own experience. In contrast, in pure listening our field of awareness embraces everything equally. We rest within a field of awareness in which the difference between self and other cannot be found (See Loy, this volume).

When people first begin to explore pure listening, they may confuse pure listening with a feeling of disinterest. If the therapist is familiar with Eastern teaching on the illusory nature of reality (maya) that may even superimpose a judgment that a client's experience is unreal. But pure listening is definitely not disinterested. When we're disinterested, we switch off; we're not fully present to the person in front of us. Usually we're involved in our own thoughts, and we may be lightly judging the person who's communicating with us. By contrast, when we listen from the unconditioned mind, we're neither attentive nor inattentive. We are neither focused nor distracted.

We hear and understand everything that's communicated. It is a state of pure receptivity in which we are effortlessly present to everything that arises. If our client is talking we could repeat everything that she or he has said, word-for-word. We're aware of the content, structure, nuances and tonality of what is being communicated. As Ken Bradford explains in his contribution to this volume, nondual approaches to psychotherapy are based on a state of unconditional presence that is open and intimate, and to this extent quite unlike the "neutral stance" of classical psychoanalysis, which can be accompanied by a sense of psychic withdrawal and distance.

The difference between positive and pure listening is that in pure listening we aren't "looking" for anything, and we don't do anything with what's being heard. As a result, the person with whom we're communicating may find that they no longer need to communicate something that previously seemed important. In the face of this pure listening, there may simply be nothing to say.

Because we listen without projecting or interpreting, we don't anticipate what the speaker is going to say next, nor do we consciously search for a common reference point by attempting to relate their experience to our own. We don't feel uncomfortable if they say nothing or don't complete what they're saying; it doesn't matter whether they're talking or not talking. We have no needs either way.

Often we tend to think it's important to hear what we're about to hear, and we listen as though it's going to make a significant difference. If our listening is interrupted, we may feel frustrated, which shows that our listening is anything but pure. Even though pure listening is receptive and responsive, it isn't the same as what is often called empathetic listening. The difference is that when we listen *with* empathy there is often an identification with a client's story that isn't counterbalanced by the wisdom (prajna) that sees through the narrational fabric of all constructed experience. Empathy is often accompanied by expressions of active interest, focused attention, conscious availability, and even an active contribution of our own personal experience. When we're active and attentive in this way (even nonverbally) we're consciously or inadvertently encouraging the person with whom we are communicating to continue her or his constructions.

In pure listening we're neither encourage nor discourage the process of interpretation and meaning-making: we're fully present, without distraction, intention or effort. When a therapist in this state of effortless, evenly distributed awareness, people who aren't familiar with the experience, can experience a therapist as being focused, penetrating and intense, when actually the converse is actually the case.

Pure listening changes the structure of what the other person is saying because they're talking into an awareness that isn't conditioned, and they aren't receiving a conditioned response. In fact, they're talking into nothing. When constructions are neither encouraged nor discouraged, they tend to dissolve by themselves.

Entrainment

By sharing our experience of nondual awareness without words or effort, we invite the people with whom we're in relationship to entrain or attune to this experience themselves. As we rest in a state that is free of all ambition, the energy of serenity naturally transfers from one person to another like two bells resonating together. In nondual therapy, much of the work occurs through this process of energetic entrainment.

In fact, one of the greatest contributions we can make in nondual therapy is to offer others the experience of our own serenity, especially when people are agitated or distressed. By remaining in equanimity, unperturbed, we share with others the possibility that there's nothing wrong with what's happening. We model the possibility that there's actually no problem, not because we're creating or inventing that position as a particular therapeutic role or professional identity, but because it's true for us. We share this possibility by staying intimately connected with whomever we're in relationship, yet at the same time the experience of unconditioned mind in uncompromised.

By doing so, we may occasion a creative dissonance between ourselves and those with whom we're in communication. Rather than "coming down" to meet the other on their own terms, we're inviting people to "step up" to meet us in the space of unconditioned mind, where there are no problems. Like the pacing and leading of Ericksonian hypnosis, the entrainment generally occurs in incremental steps.

To this end I have a sense of the "gradiant" at which I am introducing people to nondual awareness. If I move too fast or too steeply I will disconnect from a client and lose the opportunity for contentless sharing. If I move too slowly I waste a unique and precious opportunity that happens every time we meet someone within the framework of engaging in result-oriented psycho-spiritual work.

When people share their problems into the nondual space of pure listening, their experience becomes *our* experience; there's no separation. We experience other people's immediate reality—their thoughts and feelings—as though they were our own. We feel totally open and profoundly connected with whatever anyone is experiencing. We have no resistance at all to their confusion, anxiety, fear, anger or torment. We don't wish that they weren't suffering. We *know* that they're suffering but, at the same time, we *know* that there's no suffering. This

is love without pity or sympathy. Pity and sympathy take people's suffering to be real, and they thereby compound people's problems and pain.

You could say that our pure listening creates a clearing for the liberation of other people's suffering. From this pure listening we can authentically question the structure, the texture, and the nature of other people's suffering in a way that begins to dissolve contracted experiences of the present moment. We identify with our clients' suffering and let this dissolve into our own experience of identitylessness. If our experience of the unconditioned mind is firm and deep, and people stay connected with us, they have no choice but to experience the evaporation of their problems.

We don't push for change. Through the energy of love we're drawn into the structure and full intensity of other people's pain and suffering. And with wisdom we know that this pain is unreal—it isn't what it seems to be. In reality it doesn't exist anywhere. We know that despite our conditioning, even the most intense pain can't be sustained in the presence of the unconditioned mind.

Pure speaking: speaking from “no-mind”

While the act of listening from unconditioned mind is powerful in its own right, in the process of introducing people to the experience of unconditioned mind can be greatly accelerated if we are also able to verbally communicate from non-mind. By using words we're able to capture someone's thought-stream, lead it in the direction of having nothing to think about, and thereby help someone rest in a state of non-thinking. When I say non-thinking I'm referring to a state in which we aren't using our thoughts to get someone, to arrive at a conclusion or experience. Non-thinking includes thinking and not thinking. Certainly it isn't necessary to stop thinking in order to experience unconditioned mind. If this were the case unconditioned mind would be a conditioned experience.

Pure speaking arises spontaneously from no-mind. In ordinary communication, we tend to formulate our ideas as we listen, and our goal is to deliver these ideas through our speech. But in pure speaking we don't try to convince anyone of anything. Instead, we focus on responding to what's happening in the here and now. We speak without forethought or strategy, without knowing how (or even whether) we'll finish and without anticipating the future consequences of what we're saying. In pure speaking we don't try to convince anyone of anything.

Ultimately, the point of such communication is to reveal no-mind. Since we're speaking from nothing, the subject matter of our communication is also 'nothing.'

When we speak from no-mind our speaking is continuously accommodated and adjusted to the listening of the other person. As we attune to their body language, their verbal responses, and other signs of their receptivity or confusion, we calibrate our speech accordingly, not as a strategy but as a natural response in the ongoing dance of communication. For example, we may sense that the other person has “gotten” what we've said and we don't need to continue. By acknowledging their receptivity, we may deepen the connection between us. Or we may

begin to communicate something and realize, by the quality of the atmosphere surrounding the communication, that it isn't necessary or won't be received. By acknowledging this apparent lack of receptivity within ourselves, we may create a bridge to the other person that invites more intimacy and reception.

Deconstructive conversations

Speaking from no-mind produces different kinds of conversations all of which move in the direction of dissolving or deconstructing different types of fixations or rigid ideas about ourselves and the world. I call these “deconstructive conversations.”

These conversations dismantle the structures of our conditioning and introduce us to the experience of contentless awareness. They are the life-blood of nondual traditions of spirituality and therapy. They penetrate the seeming reality of our reactive feelings and emotions in a way that dissolves their existence. They are rarely encountered in daily discourse. Most of the conversations we engage in are constructive. They unfold as a commentary on our experience. We interpret what's happening in the moment. We produce histories to explain what has happened, and project into the future, anticipating what will happen. One thought follows the next as we elaborate, modify, develop, rework, add detail, change direction, validate, invalidate, approve, disapprove, and so on.

Deconstructive conversations move in the opposite direction to most of our conversations. They reverse the process of elaboration and complexification. They locate the “core distinctions” upon which a conversation rests. They then show that the core distinctions don't refer to anything. The conversations may have an air of casualness about them, but they're also highly precise. They can unfold gently or as a dynamic and fast-paced exchange of questions and responses that deconstruct a nest of ever-more subtle assumptions and fixations.

Types of deconstructive conversations

In order to communicate the distinctive structure of nondual communication I've identified a number of different conversations that naturally arise when a therapist or facilitator is resting in no-mind. Here I will describe some of the conversations I use in my work with groups and individuals. The conversations aren't original. The same, or similar, ones are used by other teachers and practitioners. They can also be found in the spiritual texts of Buddhism and Hinduism.

The fact that I'm distinguishing “different conversations” might give the impression that nondual therapy can be broken into discrete elements. To some extent it can—at least for training purposes; though in practice this work is organic, spontaneous and highly interactive.

The primary role of the therapist or facilitator is to be aware of the opportunity to drop into this space of effortless being, in which there is nothing more to do; in which we come home

to that state of complete fulfillment—the space of nondual awareness.

When I'm working with people I don't predict what will happen next. I don't know in advance how a session will unfold. I don't know if it will be punctuated by periods of deep, meditative silence, or whether it will consist of a dynamic exchange of questions and answers. In any particular session, a number of the conversations I will describe might come into play, with each one blending fluidly in with others. In order to facilitate nondual work we need to have some fluency in these conversations.

Inquiring into the unreality of an interpretation: unfindability conversations

Normally, when we listen to people talking, we assume that there's some truth or reality to what they're saying. Or at least that what they're saying could be true or false. In ordinary conversation, there's a strong consensual pressure to listen in this way. When we don't understand what people are saying, we still assume it's meaningful, and we typically try to work out what they mean by inviting them to say more.

When we listen to a “story” from the unconditioned mind, we don't take what's being described as true. What seems to be happening may *not* be happening. For example, we no longer assume that people's problems and difficulties are real or fictitious. This innocence and freshness opens up the possibility of engaging with people's constructions from the viewpoint of “beginner's mind.”

From the viewpoint of nondual wisdom, there is no intrinsic meaning. Meaning is a human construction. We may join people in their constructions, agreeing or disagreeing, but we're not compelled to do so. There is another listening in which we may understand that what they're saying is meaningful to them, but we actually don't find any meaning there. This is pure listening, which has been described previously. Out of this pure listening, or listening from no reference point, comes pure speaking.

So how does the experience of unconditioned mind guide the deconstruction of our constructions. Let's look at a claim that someone could easily make when in therapy.

“I think I'll be happy when I find someone who loves me.”

Usually when someone says something like this, we assume that this is meaningful, even if we disagree with it. We know what thinking is, we know what it is to be happy, and we think we know what love is. However, when we listen to this statement from unconditioned mind, we find that we don't take things for granted in the way we usually do. At one level we can identify the person's longing and aspiration by presencing our own histories and memories. But at the same time, we can't find any reference to the terms they're using; they have no intrinsic meaning for us.

The way to inquire into the reality of an emotional construct is by first identifying the foundational concepts upon which it is built. Having identified any core concept, we can

inquire into the existence of the reality behind the concept, and dissolve the painful feelings associated with fixed ways of thinking. We find that suffering dissolves when it's examined by the mind that rests in unconditionality. In fact we discover the truth of the *Heart Sutra*: that there is no suffering, never has been and never will be.

If someone says, "I think I'll be happy when I find someone who loves me," this statement replays like an echo in our mind. We gently scan the statement for any intrinsic meaning we can unlock. We hear what has been said, but the statement deconstructs because we fail to find anything that our thoughts can lock into. The process works something like this:

<i>Client says:</i>	<i>We think:</i>
"I"	"You? Who are you? I don't know who <i>you</i> are. Who am I?"
"think"	"What is thinking?" "Where does that thinking happen?"
"happy"	"What does happiness mean?" "Where is that?"
"find"	"How do you find someone?" "I can't find someone by looking for them because this presupposes I haven't found them. For as long as I'm looking I haven't yet found them. So how can I find someone by looking? But how can I find them without looking? How <i>do</i> I find someone?"
"love"	"What is love?"

With this going on in our minds, we might say, "I hear what you're saying, 'that you'd be happy if someone loved you.' And I'm sure that the word 'love' has many associations for you, but what does that word refer to? What actually is love?" We say this in a way that invites them not to elaborate or come out with their story, but to join us in an inquiry into the possibility that we *don't know* what love is. Or we may simply say, "I do not know what you're talking about." We communicate this in a way that doesn't in any way imply any deficiency in the person with whom we're talking. We ask these questions because *we* don't understand what's being said. They may think that we should know. However, if their words are deconstructing in our mind, then we actually don't know what they're talking about. We don't know what we could be expected to know, and we admit this. In fact, our admission becomes a tool entering the unknown.

Even though we understand the language that's being used, when we listen to the above statement from the nondual experience, we can't find any reference to the key descriptors and concepts. Also, because we're not identified with our network of thoughts and associations, the pace of therapy slows down, resulting in the emergence of silence, serenity, and peace. We can't respond to the construction in any immediate way. This is what we've called listening and speaking from the unconditioned mind.

In a therapeutic or teaching relationship, the therapist or teacher usually has a combination of personal and professional authority, and this help people to stay connected despite our

unexpected response. If we want to make sure that our response is accessible we might say something like; “Love – I hear what you’re saying, but I don’t know what that is. I know that might sound strange, because I use the word myself. However, right now, I hear what you’re saying, but I don’t know what it means.” The critical point is that they know we heard them, yet we don’t get it. At this juncture the conversation moves to a different level and leads to the opportunity for the client to join us in an inquiry into her or his original construction: “I think I’ll be happy when I find someone who loves me.”

To respond with these queries in a scripted way won’t produce the same results in the client. We’re not just learning some technique, saying, “I don’t know what you’re talking about”, while we’re still inhabiting our own constructions. In such a case, we would just be comparing our own opinions with those of our client. Whereas, if it’s an authentic experience, we can genuinely say, “I do not know what you’re talking about.”

Deconstructive inquiry should only be used when we sense that the timing is right. We’re inviting people to join us in the space of wonderment and uncertainty; to experience what it feels like not to take things for granted. For this to occur, there must be a certain readiness and a level of trust in the relationship.

Any interpretation can be deconstructed in this way. The primary limitation is the extent to which we identify with the interpretation in question. Stories that may be deconstructed include:

- ω personal beliefs (for example, “I’m a serious person.”)
- ω spiritual beliefs (for example, “By doing this practice, I’ll gain this result.”)
- ω constructions about suffering (for example, that it is bad, it shouldn’t be happening, and that it is happening)
- ω constructions about fixations (for example, that we shouldn’t have them, and that we’re not enlightened until we remove them, that they exist or don’t exist)
- ω stories about enlightenment
- ω stories about the deconstructive process itself.

Here’s an example to give you the flavor of how our unfindability conversation can unfold.

Joanna: What’s happening for me is that I’m breaking up with my partner, but I feel a lot of attachment. I’m thinking about him a lot of the day.

Peter: Is the feeling of attachment (the feeling of being fixated) a sensation in your body or a thought?

Joanna: It’s in my body. It’s a feeling of not wanting to be separated.

Peter: That sounds like a thought, “Not wanting to be separated.”

Joanna: It’s an uncomfortable feeling in my heart area. It’s a feeling of longing.

Peter: Where is it?

Joanna: In my chest.

Peter: Can you feel it now?

Joanna: Yes.

Peter: How big is the feeling?

Joanna: About the size of my hand.

Peter: Let's just stay with that a little while. Is it stable or is it changing?

Joanna: It's changing.

Peter: How?

Joanna: It's becoming more intense.

Peter: Okay ... And now how is it?

Joanna: It's lessening.

Peter: What are you feeling?

Joanna: It's a sensation. I can't say what it is.

Peter: Is it still uncomfortable?

Joanna: I don't know. I don't think I like it.

Peter: What don't you like?

Joanna: The idea that I'll be living alone.

Peter: We can come back to what you are thinking, but let's stay with what you are feeling at the moment. How is the sensation in your heart area?

Joanna: It's gone, but I can't help thinking about my partner.

Peter: [Allows some silence.]

Peter: Are you still feeling attached?

Joanna: Yes, I can't get him out of my mind. Sometimes I forget about him for a few minutes, but then he comes back to my mind. I like to think about him only occasionally, not all the time.

Peter: Okay...can we look at that?

Joanna: Sure.

Peter: Let's be silent for a couple of minutes and see how much of your thinking is tied up

in thoughts about your partner.

[Silence]

Peter: How is it going?

Joanna: Well it's interesting because I only thought about him twice.

Peter: What do you mean?

Joanna: Most of the time I was thinking about other things – what we're doing, you, my work...

Peter: In terms of time, how much time did you spend thinking about him?

Joanna: Perhaps ten seconds... Can we do this again?

Peter: Sure.

[Silence]

Joanna: It is really interesting. I barely thought about him.

Peter: But there are still some thoughts about him.

Joanna: Yes. The worst thought is that "It's going to be terrible without him."

Peter: Can we look at that thought?

Joanna: Of course. It's the word "terrible" that makes it bad.

Peter: "Terrible ... terrible ..."

Joanna: Yes, the thought "terrible."

Peter: Can you think that thought a few times and tell me what happens?

Joanna: [Silence, while thinking the thought "terrible".]

Peter: What happened?

Joanna: Nothing really. It's not the thought "terrible." It's the thought that links "me", "Michael [my partner]", and "terrible" together.

Peter: You're saying that each one individually is okay, but when you think them together or in a stringed sequence, then it makes you feel heavy in the heart.

Joanna: Yes, it must be.

Peter: Can we test this out?

Joanna: Of course.

Peter: So can you put together the set of thoughts that make you feel heavy and think them several times?

Joanna: Okay.

[Silence]

Peter: So what happened?

Joanna: Nothing. I thought, “It will be terrible without Michael” and I feel fine.

Peter: Interesting. Just as an experiment, can you think of any way you could make yourself feel heavy hearted at the moment?

Joanna: Right now, that’s impossible [laughing]. This is ridiculous.

Peter: Is that a problem?

Joanna: Of course not. It’s ridiculous in a completely liberating way. It’s amazing what we do, isn’t it?

Peter: Yes.

If we’re identified with your own history, it will be difficult to help clients see through the reality of their attachment or aversion. Our questions need to come from a place of innocence. We’re like an empirical scientist who wants to “see” the fixation, or suffering. If we find ourselves agreeing with our clients, we’ve become caught in their construction. We’re buying into their experience. And this can only happen as a consequence of moving out of “beginner’s mind” (no-mind) and into our own emotional history.

Natural koans

In our journey from a structured (knowing) to an unstructured (not knowing) state of consciousness the conceptual mind can naturally generate thought forms that are rightly called “natural koans.” Natural koans are questions that can’t be solved with the analytical mind and whose resolution opens us up to the experience of nondual presence. In nondual forms of therapy, we provide a space for natural koans to arise.

They may be questions or declarations like:

ω Why am I doing this?

ω Is there any point in this?

ω Who is doing this?

ω This is a waste of time?

ω I am bored?

A common feature in all of these questions is that they refer to “This”—the experience that’s happening, or “I”—the person who is meditating. Often we don’t go on to ask the next question—“What is this?” or “Who am I?” We assume that we know what we’re thinking about in those first set of questions. These two questions, “What is this?” and “Who am I?” are at the heart of many forms of deconstructive inquiry.

"Who am I?"

The classical Hindu form of nondual inquiry is called “self inquiry (atma-vichara).” It dates back to Shankara (7th century) and Gaudapada (6th century) before him. It was popularized last century by Ramana Maharshi. It is based on the question “Who am I?” and involves an inquiry into the subjective foundations of our experience. This form of inquiry invites us to discover the *experiencer* of whatever is being experienced. It’s an unfindability inquiry that has the potential to connect people with “consciousness that witnesses all without there being a witnesser (sakshin).”

In a therapeutic setting, I find that it’s best to introduce this type of inquiry by saying something like: “I hear what you say you’re experiencing, but I’m wondering who it is that’s actually experiencing that?” Sometimes we may have to add, “I know that might be a strange question, but I’m wondering who or what it is that’s actually having those experiences.” Once we’ve signaled that the conversation is moving in a different direction we follow the inquiry by asking questions such as: “I hear what you’re thinking, but I’m wondering *who* is thinking that? Who is actually thinking that thought?” If they answer, “I am.” Then, we respond, by saying, “Yes, but who thinks, “I am.” Ideally, this line of inquiry proceeds until the client arrives at an experience of “not knowing,” of not being able to find themselves.

"What is this?"

The question “What is this?” is a well known koan in Zen Buddhism. So, in nondual therapy, we ask ourselves this question in an authentic way. We don’t know what “this” is and we are seeking to know what “it” is, whatever “it” is that we are seeking to know. At some point we see that “this” isn’t anything. There is no it. It does not exist. What does not exist? The “this” that we are now experiencing—that we are always experiencing—in fact, does not exist. It is and it isn’t. In fact, it is because it isn’t.

I personally prefer the question “What is this?” over “Who am I?” The question “Who am I?” is more introspective. It tends to point us inwards. Some people on the spiritual path can become confused by the question “Who am I?” It can disconnect them from their problems rather than deconstruct them. The question “What is this?” doesn’t point us in any direction whatsoever, because “this” includes everything inside *and* outside of ourselves. We don’t

know where to look! And this is what the question is designed to do.

When and how to pose these questions

With skill, these questions can be consciously introduced into the practice of nondual therapy. However, the same questions that can be used to release us from our thinking, can also embed us further in our thoughts. Generally, someone needs to be in fairly refined, unstructured state of mind before we invite them to contemplate these koan-type questions. If they're introduced prematurely the effect can be counterproductive. If we ask these questions too early, when people are in a thick interpretation, the questions will only invite elaboration. The questions will lock into people's belief systems and lead them to construct responses. They'll produce *more* thinking rather than a disidentification with thoughts. If the questions are well-timed they lead directly into an unmediated experience of the present moment. The questions are asked without any suggestion that they should be thought about or contemplated. They aren't designed to be answered!

Nothing to think about

One of the functions of these questions, and all deconstructive methods in fact, is to give us nothing to think about. If the delivery of such questions is carefully timed they can help to slow down peoples' thinking and reduce the density of their thoughts. "Thinning out our thoughts" produces an experience of inner peace, within which unconditioned mind can be more easily be recognized. Traditional teachings use the metaphor of clouds and the sun: The clouds don't have to disappear in order for us to see the sun, but they do need to thin out a little.

In nondual approaches to therapy, the thinking process is thinned out by not feeding the interpretative process, not digging for problems, not offering people anything to think about. We stay in communication and in an intimate relationship while gradually reducing the ideas, concepts, and advice we give people to process. I say "gradually" because if we suddenly stop giving input, it can be extremely upsetting and disconcerting for people. The initial responses can range from boredom, listlessness, and sleep, to restlessness and agitation. Some people may find it challenging to stay conscious when they have little or nothing to entertain them. It can be challenging to remain aware and awake in the absence of any cognitive stimulation. Others may find the experience frightening or threatening.

Just as fasting can be easier if we gradually eat less and less over a period of time, "thinning out the thoughts" by reducing conceptual input can gradually prepare our minds for thinking about nothing. One way to reduce the density of a person's interpretations is to ask a question such as, "What would be happening now if we weren't doing what we're doing?"

So we need to calibrate the level of cognitive input we provide as we skillfully introduce people to inner peace. There is no need to eliminate thoughts completely and no need to understand what is happening in the present moment.

Seeing through—thinking about nothing

When a person's thoughts have slowed down somewhat, we may move their thinking into an inquiry into the nature of unconditioned mind. When we try to think about nothing, not an idea we have about nothing, but absolute nothing itself, we can quickly enter into the experience of the unconditioned. When we think about nothing, we have fewer and fewer thoughts because our thoughts have no content to attach to and so our capacity for conceptual elaboration is seriously undermined. Using Buddhist terminology, this is where the cultivation of serenity (*shamatha*) transforms into the practice of "seeing through (*vipashyana*).” The practice of not giving ourselves (or someone else) anything to think about simply reduces the topics we can use to stimulate our minds. The practice of “thinking about nothing” becomes untenable—in fact impossible—because the practice simply doesn't provide a basis for our conceptualization.

The relationship between the practice of serenity and “seeing through” should now be clear. The practice of serenity begins by giving us less to think about. Then, at a certain point, “having nothing to think about” is the same as “thinking about nothing,” which is the practice of seeing through all presenting structures (*vipashyana*). In turn, “thinking about nothing” becomes untenable because there's no foundation for our thoughts, and this naturally slows our thinking down even further. This in turn gives us less thought material with which to identify, which deepens our ability to see through conceptual structures. In this way, serenity and “seeing through” empower each other.

There are many ways in which we can invite someone to think about nothing. If they're relatively open and spacious, we might invite them to think about nothing by asking, “What would you say is happening right now?” They may recognize that there isn't much structure or content to hang onto; what's happening is actually *nothing*. At first, people tend to think about their ideas or images of nothing, but these concepts are progressively seen through, bringing them closer to a direct experience of nothing. Then, at some point they relate to the experience that has no content, which directly reveals unconditioned mind. The following dialogue will give you some idea about how this might unfold.

Peter: I'm wondering what this is?

Beth: Well we're sitting quietly talking.

Peter: Yes, but I'm wondering what “this” is?

Beth: What?

Peter: This. What's happening now.

Beth: I don't know what you're talking about.

Peter: I'm not sure I can describe it. I'm talking about this.

Beth: You mean this moment?

Peter: Perhaps. I'm not sure I can even say if it's this moment, because Well it's not this moment in contrast to another one.

Beth: It's this Right?

Peter: Yes.

Beth: This—right now?

Peter: Are we talking about the same thing or not?

Beth: I don't know. What are you talking about?

Peter: This. I can't say anything more than that.

Beth: It's not anything is it?

Peter: It's certainly not a thing—not a thought or sensation.

Beth: I know what you're talking about.

Peter: You do, do you?

Beth: Yes, it's this. I've got it. There's nothing more to say, is there?

Contentless conversations: talking about nothing

In order to support people in cultivating the experience of “seeing through” or vipashyana we also need to be able to talk about nothing. We need some fluency in a special type of conversation that can look like other conversations except that they have no subject matter. These conversations are used to induce an experience of unconditioned mind. This is the real transmission of nondual therapy: the sharing of no content. Zen speaks about this as the mind-to-mind transmission; Dzogchen as “direct introduction” or pointing out instructions.

Since we're speaking from nothing, our communication is ultimately contentless. We're using speech to impart a contentless transmission. The point of such communication is to reveal the unconditioned mind. Sometimes, however, therapists new to the nondual approach may find themselves talking about nothing and begin to feel uncomfortable. Their words don't have the obvious and familiar structure of ordinary therapeutic communication, and they may doubt themselves and stop talking out of embarrassment or confusion.

So we need to develop confidence in the therapeutic value of communicating about nothing. After all, it's the only way, short of teaching practices or techniques, to introduce the client to unconditioned mind in the therapeutic interaction. Inevitably the other person won't be able to understand what we're saying within their normal frame of reference, and they may become confused as they attempt to understand it in their usual ways. At this point we might introduce a question like “What are we talking about now?” If they reply, “I don't know,” we may say “I'm not surprised because I don't know either. In fact, I can't know, because we're

not talking about anything. Even though we're using understandable language, there's no subject matter." Of course, we need to be able to say this with confidence in the nondual experience, or else the other person may think we've lost our sanity or become confused.

In these conversations we distinguish that which can't be distinguished. We point to the unconditioned mind by showing that we can't point to it. We weave our subjectless conversation into the thematic conversation of the person with whom we are in communication. We braid our contentless responses with the other person's communication until their mind-stream is brought to the experience of unstructured awareness. The following illustrates how this may happen.

Clive: I had a whole lot of questions when I came in here but now I just can't formulate them. I haven't experienced this before. Where does this lead?

Peter: Here.

Clive: Where is here?

Peter: Yes. Where is here?

[Silence]

Clive: I want to know if this supports creativity.

Peter: What is creativity?

Clive: Creating something that hasn't existed before.

Peter: This would seem to fulfill your criterion. We began a few minutes ago with what you knew, and now we are somewhere that you haven't been before.

Clive: But what have we created?

Peter: This.

Clive: But what is this? I don't know what this is. It doesn't seem to be anything at all.

Peter: Perhaps we have created nothing.

Clive: I think so. We have created nothing out of something.

Peter: Without anything changing at all. Everything is here, exactly as it was when we began.

Clive: Except that we aren't interpreting our experience.

Peter: But that is exactly what we are doing right now.

[Silence]

The paradoxes of nondual conversations: articulate contradictions

When we begin to speak from no-mind it is inevitable that paradoxes and contradictions will creep into our conversations. They arise when we describe unconditioned mind with any real accuracy and precision. One of the most obvious paradoxes is that the unconditioned mind is simultaneously something and nothing. It *is* because it *isn't*.

In the 20 or so years that I have been teaching and facilitating nondual work I've found that communicating fluently and naturally in paradoxes is the most difficult aspect of this form of therapy for practitioners to acquire. Somehow we need to make a leap of faith and be willing to articulately contradict ourselves in a totally up-front and confident way. If someone says to us that we've just contradicted ourselves we need to be able to say; "Yes, that's right. I have. Because that is how it is. There's no other way to accurately describe this state."

At a certain point we betray the experience of the unconditioned if we aren't willing to say that the unconditioned mind is because it isn't; that it's totally unrelated to our conditioned existence but indistinguishable from it; that it can't be lost or gained, yet it repeatedly arises and disappears. India's most celebrated and "rational" philosopher, Nagarjuna, had no problem speaking paradoxically. In a verse of praise at the beginning of his famous text, *The Fundamental Verses of on the Middle Way* he says of the ultimate teaching and the ultimate state that:

It is unceasing yet unborn, annihilated yet not permanent, neither coming into or going out (of existence), without distinction, without identity, relatively arisen and free of conceptual constructions.

When our thoughts are born at the point where the conceptual touches the nonconceptual we are *compelled* to use paradox, negation and absurdity.

Concluding dialogue

The following dialogue integrates a number of the conversations we've been talking about in this chapter along with other moves that feature in my expression of nondual work in a group setting.

Anne: I'm feeling bored with what we are doing right now. I want to actually do this work, rather than just describe what is happening for us in this room. I want to get into my fixations. I want to see how I'm fixating, and how to avoid this.

Peter: Can you see that you are fixating right now? You are creating that this isn't it. Actually you can see from your mood and the way you are holding your body that you are stuck. Given the general mood you are in, whatever you say, it will be an expression of the

feeling that this just isn't it.

Anne: Yes. I can see that. I know that I'd like things to be different, but just wanting it to be different isn't changing anything. And you're right. I do feel stuck with this.

[Pause]

Peter: You seem to be wanting me to do something. It also feels as though you want some attention directed specifically towards you, in the hope that something will then shift.

Anne: Well yes. I do.

Claude: I'd like to ask if

Peter: Please excuse me interrupting. We will come back to your query. But I'm just wanting to observe Anne, that you are already poised to interpret whatever Claude is about to say as, "more boring description." At this moment you are predisposed to interpret whatever you hear as less than relevant. In other words you are predisposed to create that "this isn't it."

Anne: Hmm, yes. Well, I prefer what you are saying now. This is more like what I've been wanting to do. I finding this useful.

Peter: Perhaps. But now you are starting to move in the opposite direction. You're interpreting that this is it, or at least that this is closer to how things should be. Your experience is suddenly lighter. You don't feel particularly stuck at this point. In fact, in the absence of any obstruction this could evolve into an experience of ...

Anne: I've got it. I just got it. I've got what this whole process is for.

[Silence]

Henri: What happened? What did you do?

Anne: Nothing.

Henri: But you must have done something. You seem so certain and clear.

[Silence]

Henri: So what is it?

Anne: I don't know. I can't say what it is. I can't describe it, but I've got it.

[Silence]

Henri: But if you can't say what it is, how do you know you've got it?

Anne: But I have got it. I know. There's no need to know what it is. I've just got it. There isn't anything to know.

Henri: But what about the Zen saying Peter sometimes quotes, that “the moment you think you've got, you've lost it.”

Anne: You can't take this away from me because in fact there isn't any IT. There's nothing to lose.

Henri: I can see that.

Anne: I'm just thinking. I could lose this. I'm wondering if there is a different experience that is completely invincible.

Peter: Be careful! [Laughing] You can't afford to think like that.

Maurice: My understanding is that enlightenment is permanent.

Peter: You have to be very careful who you listen to right now.

Anne: What do you mean?

Peter: If you take Maurice's suggestion seriously and begin to participate in his construction, your present experience will very quickly dissipate.

Anne: So what should I do? Who should I listen to?

Peter: I'm just pointing out the consequences of the different interpretations you could take on board.

Anne: I already feel that something has been taken from me.

Peter: But you say that as though you have no role in it. If we hang onto something for long enough, it is bound to shift at some point. In fact, the moment we judge that it is valuable we have already distorted the original experience which lay beyond any judgment of good or bad, desirable or undesirable.

However, it is also very easy to become fixated on the idea of observing our fixations. We can think there is some intrinsic value in doing this. In fact if we think there is some value in doing it, then we will condition ourselves to observe our fixations, even when this is quite unnecessary. If we become attached to the notion of observing our fixations, or any other type of spiritual process for that matter, we condition ourselves to becoming perpetual seekers. This is just to say that balance is required when observing our fixations, so we don't become self-aware in a neurotic or obsessive way.

Michèle: But it still seems to me that you are saying that this is it, because you like it. Before, when you were feeling frustrated and bored you said that that wasn't it, and now you are obviously feeling great, so you think that “This is it.”

Anne: This has got nothing to do with what I want. In fact I don't want this. It just is.

[Silence]

Peter Fenner, Ph.D.

Peter is a leader in the adaptation of Mahayana nondual wisdom for western needs. He was a celibate monk in the Tibetan Buddhist traditions for 9 years. His main teachers include Lama Thubten Yeshe, Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche and Sogyal Rinpoche. He has a PhD in the philosophical psychology of Madhyamika Buddhism. His books include *Radiant Mind*, *The Edge of Certainty: Paradoxes on the Buddhist Path*, *Reasoning into Reality*, *Essential Wisdom Teaching* (with Penny Fenner) and *The Ontology of the Middle Way*. He was a Senior Lecturer in Asian philosophy at Deakin University for 20 years.

Peter is the Founder and Spiritual Director of The Center for Timeless Wisdom (www.wisdom.org). Since 2003 he has been offering an innovative and comprehensive 9 month course in nondual presence called Radiant Mind in USA and Europe. He also offers telephone work to individuals.

Peter has taught at Naropa University, Omega Institute, Open Center-Tibet House, Spirit Rock, Trimurti (France), Les Cormettes (France), ZIST (Germany), Center for Mind-Body Medicine (Israel). He has presented his work at Stanford University, Columbia University, University of California, Berkeley, CIIS, ITP, Saybrook College, University of Hawaii and JFK University.

Peter's way of teaching is known for its dynamic and engaging deconstruction of all fixed frames of reference that block entry to the unconditioned mind, and for the purity and depth of natural, uncontrived silence that emerges in his work.