

# Landscapes of the Mind Conference, 25-27 September 2009

## Nick Totton's Workshop handout

### Wild Mind

My starting point is an understanding that most of the human race is and has been for millennia domesticated animals, and subject to all the stresses, tensions and chronic trauma that go along with domestication, and with a way of life which conflicts with the needs of our bodyminds.

I am not beating the drum for a return to hunter-gatherer-gardener culture (incidentally wiping out 99% of the human race). We cannot go back. Instead I want to indicate a possible way forward, by pointing out an aspect of human psychology which operates in all cultures and societies, and which we can call 'wild mind', as ecologists speak of 'wild ecosystems': undamaged, complex systems of interaction where each part supports and is supported by the whole. Wild mind exists in most or all tribal cultures; it is also expressed in wisdom traditions like Buddhism and Taoism, and increasingly present in modern psychology, ecopsychology and psychotherapy. Here are four properties of wild mind, each of which has powerful implications for therapy and counselling, and indeed for human life as a whole.

Wild mind is spontaneous.

Wild mind is co-creative

Wild mind is self-balancing.

Wild mind is inherent wisdom.

Wild mind is spontaneous

Wild mind's quality of spontaneity follows from not resisting identification with the body, specifically the body as an aspect or part of the whole system. Wild mind is the whole of our bodymind self, not just the fraction isolated by consciousness. Like an ecosystem, like our physiological functions, wild mind happens of its own accord, as the sum product of local reality: we do not have to bring purpose or intention to bear on the situation, as if from the outside – they arise as spontaneous expressions of the situational gestalt. Like the body, wild mind opens up no gap between impulse and execution: as Gary Snyder says,

Our bodies are wild. The involuntary quick turn of the head at a shout, the vertigo of looking off a precipice, the heart-in-throat in a moment of danger, the catch of the breath, the quiet moments relaxing, staring, reflecting – all universal responses of this mammal body. ... The body does not require the intercession of some conscious intellect to make it breathe, to keep the heart beating' (Snyder 1990, 17).

Nor does the mind require conscious intervention to function! When I experience myself making decisions, neural imaging shows that I have already 'made' that decision fractions of a second earlier – or rather, the decision has already made itself, since 'I' was not involved! (Libet 1985; see

also Wegner 2002).

‘To neither come nor go, but to remain as you innately are, without allowing the mind to become obscured – this is what’s meant by Buddha’, said the Zen master Bankei (Besserman and Steger 1991, 107). The perceptual psychologist James J Gibson puts it like this: ‘Ask yourself what it is you see hiding the surroundings as you look out upon the world – not darkness, surely, not air, nothing but the ego’ (Gibson 1979, 112). Like an ecosystem, like our physiological functions, wild mind happens of its own accord, as the sum product of local reality: we do not have to bring purpose or intention to bear on the situation, as if from the outside – they arise as spontaneous expressions of the situational gestalt.

### Wild mind is co-creative

By ‘co-creation’, I refer to this way in which wild mind is the expression of the situational gestalt: the expression of how the entire universe operates as it comes to bear on this local moment. Hindu tradition speaks of ‘Indra’s net’: a complex network of jewels, each reflecting all the other jewels within its facets. Co-creation is intimately bound up with self-balancing: just as, in a therapy session or a therapy group, each participant expresses a whole relational pattern of transference and countertransference; just as a local ecosystem balances itself through the giving and receiving of biochemical messages transmitted through the air and through the underground mycorrhizal network (Buhner 2002); so wild mind is balanced in and with its whole environment, including the environment of other humans. Gregory Bateson shows that mind, like all complex systems (including mycorrhiza), operates through homeostatic loops, mechanisms for rebalancing the system whenever it goes out of equilibrium. For him, the processes which produce healing in organs, growth in organisms, development in societies, or balance in large ecosystems are all minds – aspects of ‘that wider knowing which is the glue holding together the starfishes and sea anemones and redwood forests and human committees’ (Bateson 1979, 3).

James Gibson developed the concept of ‘ecological perception’, countering mainstream, dualistic theories of perception as a transaction between two separate entities, perceiver and perceived. He suggested that we and our bodies ‘exist along with the environment, they are co-perceived’ (1987, 418): the perceiving ‘subject’ at any particular moment is also the perceived ‘object’, defining and defined by the whole network within which each perception is held. Similarly, another of Gregory Bateson’s crucial insights (1979) was that mind is not bounded by our skin: it is necessarily an interrelationship of brain, body and environment. And part of mind’s environment consists of other minds, all mutually co-arising with and co-influencing each other.

In his wonderful book *The Lost Language of Plants* (2002), Stephen Buhner describes how plant communities exist within and communicate through huge networks of coevolved, symbiotic fungi around their roots, mycorrhizal systems sometimes extending for hundreds of acres below ground, forming sophisticated biofeedback loops which exchange information with and between plants – so much so that, in a sense, the plants are no more separate individuals than mushrooms sprouting from the same mycelium. Mycorrhiza is a vivid example of how ecosystems work – how the universe works. It has been described as ‘Indra’s Net’: a network of threads holding an infinity of jewels, each jewel reflecting all the other jewels in its depths, and these reflections being in turn reflected. All beings, all minds, mutually condition and create each other, forming larger unities through these interconnections. Wild mind is one.

Humans, however, have developed a further level of abstraction from this homeostatic mentality: consciousness, which seems to privilege purpose, intention and separateness. 'Purposeful consciousness pulls out, from the total mind, sequences which do not have the loop structure which is characteristic of the whole systemic structure' (Bateson 1973, 410). However, 'the part can never control the whole' (Bateson 1973, 413): the conscious mind's impression that it is in control of the bodymind is simply an illusion, and maintaining that illusion creates tremendous stress and anxiety.

Wild mind is self-balancing

Actually, nothing controls the bodymind: everything just happens of its own accord.

The world is ruled by letting things take their course.

It cannot be ruled by interfering.

(Tao Te Ching, Feng and English 1972, Section 48)

Wild mind seeks constantly to communicate this reality to consciousness, as a rebalancing – through dreams, visions, slips, symptoms, psychoses and sudden enlightenment. It also expresses itself through 'ideomotor movement', the spontaneous and unconscious body expressions which accompany us through life. Barrett Dorko (<http://www.barrettdorko.com>; see also Spitz 1997) argues that the constant disciplining and discouraging of these movements in children – 'Stop fidgeting!' – is responsible for a large proportion of bodily problems in adults: wild mind prevented from natural homeostatic re-balancing.

Wild mind is inherent wisdom

And the inherent wisdom of wild mind follows from and sums up all of these qualities. In her novel *The Telling*, Ursula LeGuin describes a human 'wild culture' on another planet, where a teacher says:

"Animals have no language. They have their nature. You see? They know the way, they know where to go and how to go, following their nature. But we're animals with no nature. Eh? Animals with no nature! That's strange! We're so strange! We have to talk about how to go and what to do, think about it, study it, learn it. Eh? We're born to be reasonable, so we're born ignorant."

(LeGuin 2000, 143)

Wild mind, however, is not ignorant – although it doesn't 'know' anything (we project knowledge onto its unknowing wisdom). Rather, it is the summation and direct expression of all our experience, of the entire local situation; and, through our co-creation with the rest of the universe, it mirrors and expresses everything the universe is. 'The depths of mind, the unconscious, are our inner wilderness areas ... The conscious, agenda-planning ego occupies a very tiny territory, a little cubicle somewhere near the gate' (Snyder 1990, 17).

Again, wild mind's response to events is a rebalancing one: it seeks to restore peace, to re-establish harmony. This doesn't come about through eliminating our conscious, domesticated, 'no nature' mind, but through reuniting it with its source in wild mind - re-minding us that we are in fact animals, and that we control nothing. Arnold Mindell's program for therapeutic conflict work sums this up nicely: 'Value trouble. Accept nature. Make peace with war' (Mindell 1995, 241).

## Wild mind and therapy

All this has implications for the practice of therapy. From the point of view of the ecology of mind, our work as therapists is to interrupt purpose-obsessed consciousness and relax into wild mind, so as to facilitate the same process in our clients. Insofar as therapy then has a 'goal', it is to let go of goals and settle down to what is (Freud called it 'free association', roaming the networks of wild mind). If consciousness can abandon its mad, quixotic quest to control reality, a radical lessening of anxiety follows, through a reappraisal of our situation as human beings. We become aware that we experience ourselves as subject to impossible demands; and that these demands are, indeed, impossible - in other words, they do not really exist. Something which previously seemed hugely important and hugely difficult is now quite unimportant. Our domestication becomes rebalanced with our wildness. This is an enormous and life-changing relief.

The Sufi poet Kabir says:

We are all struggling; none of us has gone far.  
Let your arrogance go, and look around inside.

The blue sky opens out farther and farther,  
The daily sense of failure goes away,  
The damage I have done to myself fades,  
A million suns come forward with light,  
When I sit firmly in that world.  
(Bly 1977, 57)

What I have described is, naturally, nothing new: many people, including therapists, have talked about a similar process. What I hope may be useful is to connect up several different approaches: ecopsychology, ecosystem studies, psychology, neuroscience, enlightenment practices, and various psychotherapies. We need to access wild mind, both for our own sakes and for the sake of the whole: any radical change in our behaviour towards the rest of the wild world depends upon making friends with our own wilderness inside. Until then we are Toad of Toad Hall, egos posturing in the mirror and trying to ignore the Wild Wood.

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