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THE INHERITANCE OF THIS MOMENT: AN EXPLORATION OF TEMPORALITY,
SUBJECTIVITY, AND LIBERATION IN NON-DUAL CONTEMPLATIVE
PRACTICE AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Jeremy Axelrad, MA

December 2018

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2018

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TEMPORALITY, SUBJECTIVITY, AND LIBERATION IN NON-DUAL
CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

By

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ABSTRACT

THE INHERITANCE OF THIS MOMENT: AN EXPLORATION OF TEMPORALITY, SUBJECTIVITY, AND LIBERATION IN NON-DUAL CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

By

Jeremy Axelrad, MA

December 2018

Dissertation supervised by Will Adams, Ph.D.

This dissertation considers the meaning of “present-moment awareness” and its role in psychological healing and transformation. The current conversation around mindfulness, a secularized practice with roots in Buddhist contemplative traditions, has largely unfolded within a dualistic framework in which subject and object are separate from one another as well as from a discrete entity called a moment. While widely appreciated for its capacity to foster well-being and insight, mindfulness as construed above remains disconnected from Buddhist psychology’s non-dualistic view of experience, which radically challenges our ordinary understandings of subjectivity and temporality.

In the current project, I sought to explore this non-dualistic perspective phenomenologically, and to highlight its potential intersection with psychotherapeutic

theory and practice. To this end, I worked with Peter Fenner, Ph.D., a non-dual teacher and former Buddhist monk, exploring contemplative instructions from a Tibetan Buddhist tradition known as Dzogchen. These so-called pointing-out instructions involve a teacher “pointing-out” to their student “the nature of mind,” the non-dual reality held to be already present but habitually unrecognized in their experience. Over 11 meetings, I worked with Peter as he abided within the recognition of non-dual awareness, reading and commenting on five different pointing-out instructions from masters in the Dzogchen lineage and spontaneously engaging me in conversation regarding my own understandings. I wrote phenomenological descriptions of what it was like to work with Peter and the instructions, and then analyzed the different texts in terms of what they might suggest about subjectivity, temporality, suffering and healing.

From this analysis emerged four themes that cohere as a single way of being: *Immediacy, Letting Go, Not Knowing, and Relating Intimately*. I then explored how these might already be implicit within the psychotherapy process. Through a consideration of psychotherapy in terms of the relational context, the client’s experiencing, and shifts in understanding, I suggested various ways that effective psychotherapy can be understood as an attenuated expression of non-duality. Insofar as we realize that the gap between ourselves, experience, and time is in fact imagined, and we can never truly be separate from “this moment,” we might discover novel possibilities for psychotherapeutic theory and practice.

DEDICATION

May any good that comes of this work go towards the benefit of all beings everywhere.

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Warm thanks and deep gratitude to Dr. Peter Fenner, for your unfailing generosity, kindness, and wisdom, without which this project would not have been possible. I have felt your good heart, integrity, and sheer presence guiding me throughout the dissertation process, and I hope in some way to have expressed what it is like to share “this” with you. Thank you for the blessing of these profound teachings, which continue to change the course of my life.

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Thank you to Dr. Anthony Barton, for your winking, whistling, laughing, nodding, knowing and not knowing way, which has helped me to trust in the process, go with my hunches, and connect the dots; somewhere between a poem and a trance is where our conversations live, I think, and I enjoy that a lot.

Thank you Dr. Alex Kranjec, for your willingness to venture outside of your comfort zone and to bring your critical intellect, common sense, and dry, good-natured humor to this project. You have always struck me as someone who not only wonders, but

experiences wonderment at the possibilities of psychological understanding, and I'm glad to have you as a reader.

Thank you, always, Mom and Dad, for more than I can say. But with respect to this project, thank you for listening, for reminding me that this is about helping people, for always rooting for me and for telling me to "just finish it already!" Ditto, Aka and Ev. Specifically, Eric: thank you for your insightful comments about ... technology. Evan, please refer to the tattoo of hands. I love you guys!

Grandpa, I hope you know what an inspiration you have been to me throughout my life. Thank you for celebrating me and helping me to become myself, thank you for "the listener," thank you for our long talks with *țuică* about the past, the future, and *tikkun olam* in between. I have been thinking lately that maybe another way to say "Dzogchen" is *elohai neshama shenatata bi tehorah* - my G-d, the soul that you have given me is pure.

My Flavi, you are sleeping next to me as I write these words, and I can only shake my head at the love I feel. Thank you for being my best friend and for *really helping me out* through every deadline, every outline, all of the places I've had to bring my laptop and all of the conversations that ended with "glazing!" Thank you for always believing in me. I can save you a couple hundred pages: you are the meaning of this; every moment with you is a gift.

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Introduction

The Depths of Presence

In September of 2016, I was attending a meditation retreat in the mountains of Northeast Colorado. The days were crisp and sunny, and the cloudless blue skies overhead seemed to brim with presence, stretching as far as the eye could see. The retreat was organized around a form of so-called objectless meditation, a practice of pure awareness, with instructions taken from a text of Padmasambhava, a revered figure in the Dzogchen tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.

The instructions were simply: “don’t follow the past, don’t anticipate the future, remain in the present, and leave your mind alone.” These instructions were offered to us by Orgyen Chowang Rinpoche, a contemporary teacher and lineage holder in the tradition, who was leading the retreat. “The most important part,” we were told by Rinpoche early on, “is just leave your mind alone. Don’t pursue any inner or outer object.” By way of elaboration, he added “just like this,” and put his hands on his knees, resting his gaze in space and settling in to an alert yet relaxed full-bodied gesture of equipoise. Immediately expressing a palpable, mountain-like effortlessness, time seemed to stand still around the teacher.

In between sitting sessions, we would have the opportunity to ask Rinpoche questions about the practice, and he would provide guidance to individuals and the group as a whole. During one such question and answer session, the following illuminating conversation took place. A questioner in the audience stood and spoke into the microphone. He was a middle aged man, whose quiet composure attested to some

familiarity with mindfulness practice. The sun streamed in through the window on to his face as he spoke.

“Rinpoche, it seems to me that what we call the present moment is just the fleeting perception of one object after another - the out breath, in breath, a sound, a thought, and so on. Without pursuing inner or outer objects, how do we remain in the present moment?” He seemed genuinely perplexed, but curious. The question was met with several nods from the rest of the audience, who appeared to share the man’s confusion.

As the question was spoken, the teacher listened in a focused way, as though listening behind the words, searching for the understanding and dilemma contained within. He seemed to register this all at once and then spoke. “Ah, very good question!” he chuckled, seeming pleased. Orgyen Chowang Rinpoche paused for a moment and leaned forward, seeming to search within his own experience for a way to respond to the question, and then spoke.

“Awareness is naturally present, always present, even as objects come and go. Present. Aware. Self-aware. Not by effort, but by itself.” He gestured with his hands, repeatedly making a circle in the air in front of him, moving outwards and downwards, then inwards and upwards, like the flow of a fountain. “It is self-sustaining, yes? Self-refreshing. Awareness is fresh, always fresh. By itself.” As Rinpoche pointed out the knowing, present quality of the mind, the room suddenly became silent and still, as though it were brimming with the same vivid and insubstantial presence as the skies above.

At this point, Orgyen Chowang said with emphasis, pointing at the questioner: “this is your real *mind*, the nature of mind. Even without thoughts, feelings, other mental events, you have a mind, right?” The man nodded, looking a bit stunned by the sudden and direct question, and yet responded with the undeniable answer - “yes.”

Rinpoche nodded and went on. “Even without these, you are still here. This is your *awareness*. It doesn’t need to go after objects. It is just here, by itself. Like the sun just shines by itself,” he said, pointing out the window at the bright Colorado sunshine. “Mind is always in the present, so remaining in the present means remaining with your awareness, letting all mental events dissolve naturally. They dissolve, awareness remains. Just leave your mind alone.”

Orgyen Chowang chuckled again, and was this time met with laughter from the audience, who seemed delighted and somewhat relieved by this clarification. “That’s easier than I was making it out to be!” said the man, to more laughter. “Yes, not difficult,” responded the teacher wholeheartedly, “it is just *you*.”

After the session, I sought out the man who had asked the original question, crunching across the gravel outside the meditation hall and thanking him for initiating what I had found to be an essential and direct teaching. He shook his head and chuckled a bit, his eyes widening – he looked at me and said “you know, I had no idea that would go so deep!”

Indeed, the deeper dimensions of Buddhist psychological understanding and practice, and the depths of present-moment awareness, are only just beginning to be fathomed and opened to within the field of clinical psychology. It is my contention that the aforementioned exchange illustrates not only a common progression of Buddhist

contemplative practice for individual practitioners, but also the general historical progression of Buddhist theory and practice. Most significantly for the current project, it may also represent the evolution of the interaction between clinical psychology and Buddhist understandings of the mind. Specifically, the vignette from the retreat points to the distinction between a dualistic view of awareness – awareness as a capacity possessed by a subject and directed towards objects – and a non-dualistic view, in which awareness is the very nature of what we are and what presence is.

Despite the recent explosion of interest in mindfulness and related practices, there are, perhaps, some fundamental questions that have received scant reflection if any, overlooked in the search for quantifiable effects of non-reactive, present-moment awareness in alleviating depression, anxiety, career burnout, chronic pain, or the like. Such questions as: what does it mean to be present? What are the implications of the fact that our mind, our very experience of life, is naturally, simply present? Indeed, what follows from the fact that effort and contrivance can actually obscure this simple fullness of being, and that profound experiences of well-being can arise naturally from being intimate with our own experience and leaving it as it is? Might this point to different - perhaps radically different - understandings of subjectivity, temporality, suffering, and healing than have been presupposed by psychotherapists, even those inspired by the notion of mindfulness?

In this dissertation, I consider these questions through the lenses of psychotherapy and non-dual contemplative practice, with the intention of developing a clearer understanding of the role of present-moment awareness in transformation, healing, and

liberation from suffering. As my fellow retreatant shared in awe, the depths of presence and its practice await our discovery.

The Movement Through, and Beyond, Mindfulness

Since its inception, various thinkers within the field of psychotherapy have noted the importance of attending with openness and curiosity to the immediacy of one's moment-to-moment experiencing, weaving back and forth between this sensitive exploration and fresh articulation of its discoveries via language or other means. Indeed, the new experiences, new renderings of experience, and new ways of being with experience that emerge from this process are part and parcel of therapeutic change. Somehow, through relating to their subjective experience closely yet spaciouly, accepting and attuning to the nuances of its continuous unfolding, and finding novel, accurate ways of expressing it, clients can live their histories differently and open to the possibilities of the world in new ways.

This process has been conceptualized as one of free association, of making the unconscious conscious, or as achieving catharsis, exposure, transmutation, or congruence. Regardless of the terms used, however, non-reactive intimacy with one's own experience in the moment, and the associated relinquishment of familiar yet limited ways of holding it, seem to be core constituents of effective psychotherapy in general. Thus, the nature of the relationship between oneself and one's present experiencing clearly holds significance for the task of psychotherapy, both theoretically and in practice.

The description of therapy above suggests a process of relating to experience such that it can transform and suffering can dissipate. Suffering, in this context, is distinct from pain or difficulty, and entails a driven kind of resistance against our experience, a

felt need for it to be otherwise. By exploring their lived experience from moment-to-moment and attempting to remain as honest and nonjudgmental as possible with respect to what they encounter, it seems that clients are able to alleviate their suffering and arrive at new, liberating understandings of themselves and life. The nature of this healing way of being, though, and its implications for our more general understandings of the mind, remains unclear (Kottler & Montgomery, 2010).

The current project explores this essential aspect of the psychotherapy process in terms of subjectivity and temporality. In what follows, I connect existent literature about psychotherapy and present-moment awareness with the more recent conversation around mindfulness, considering how these understandings and practices might be carried further with the help of the non-dual perspective held to be crucial by many voices within Buddhist psychology. I briefly describe these different perspectives below, and consider them in greater detail in the following sections.

Over the last two decades, the increasing influence of secularized Buddhist meditative practices on cognitive science, psychology and psychotherapy has dovetailed with the already existent, though often implicit, psychotherapeutic emphasis on present-moment awareness. With this so-called “Mindfulness Revolution” within the field of psychology, much attention has been paid to the impact of nonjudgmental, present-moment awareness on various components of well-being and psychological healing (Grossman et al., 2004). Mindfulness has been defined in a variety of ways - as a state, trait, or skill, as a practice or way of life (Grossman et al., 2004). Perhaps the most widely agreed upon definition of mindfulness comes from Jon Kabat-Zinn, one of the first researchers to apply a secular model of Buddhist meditation to the field of healthcare: he

defines mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). Kabat-Zinn created mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) with this definition at the core, intended initially for the treatment of chronic pain. The training includes body-scan, breath, and walking meditations, yoga exercises, and daily life practices in which the participant learns to be mindful of everyday activities (Grossman et al., 2004).

Kabat-Zinn’s view of mindfulness has served as a model for many of the mindfulness-based understandings and interventions that have proliferated within the field; indeed, some have gone so far as to suggest that mindfulness serves as an essential element of all effective psychotherapy, whether or not this is acknowledged by therapists or clients themselves (Martin, 1997). And yet, despite widespread agreement that such “mindful” awareness is associated with a considerable array of significant benefits in various domains (Grossman et al., 2004), the underlying means by which these are brought about remain unclear, along with their potential implications for psychotherapeutic theory and practice (Grossman et al., 2004).

Contributing to the confusion is the fact that Buddhism is not a unitary tradition, and mindfulness is not a unitary phenomenon or practice within Buddhism (Samuel, 2014). Indeed, the contemporary mindfulness movement has been critiqued for oversimplifying mindfulness practice and removing it from its original and much broader ethical, ontological, epistemological, and soteriological contexts (Samuel, 2014). Perhaps most significant for purposes of this project is the way in which contemporary approaches to mindfulness tend to consider it apart from Buddhism’s fundamental challenge to our typical understandings of subjectivity and reality itself, from the core

teachings of the Buddha onwards (Samuel, 2014). While the use of mindfulness practices as tools for stress-reduction and psychological insight has become commonplace, some have suggested that the deeper potentials of Buddhist psychology and contemplative practice have heretofore been largely overlooked (Samuel, 2014).

In particular, the meanings of “non-reactivity,” “the present moment,” and “awareness” tend to remain rather ambiguous theoretically and experientially, despite having been areas of profound inquiry for Buddhist philosophers and contemplatives for millennia. I am interested in what these deep understandings of temporality and awareness might offer the psychotherapeutic discourse around non-reactive present-moment awareness and its effects. To this end, the present study contains analysis of these contemplative explorations of experience, correlated with findings from contemporary psychotherapy research.

This project is an exploration of just what it is that is healing and transformative about non-reactive present-moment awareness. How do therapies of varying kinds, when effective, already take advantage of this healing potential? And how might this phenomenon inform our understandings of awareness suffering, and well-being? As I attempt to show, the current focus on mindfulness and acceptance in psychotherapy, while interesting and in many ways a helpful development, often seems to miss or water down the soteriological- and specifically non-dualistic- core of Buddhist contemplative practice. In what follows, I explore the relevance of these profound wisdom traditions for psychotherapeutic theory and practice in light of contemporary empirical research. I draw upon Buddhist contemplatives’ understandings of self, time, suffering, and liberation in order to think psychological healing in terms of temporality and the subject-object

relationship. In particular, I consider these aforementioned themes from a non-dualistic perspective, which has heretofore been implicit yet unacknowledged in discussions of Buddhist psychology's relevance for psychotherapy.

The Non-Duality of Dzogchen

Non-duality is a term with diverse meanings within Buddhism as well as other contemplative traditions. For purposes of this study, the most significant are the interconnectedness of all phenomena, the inseparability of subject and object, and the non-difference between relative phenomena and their absolute nature - in Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, between form and emptiness, *samsara* and *nirvana* (Loy, 2012).

While a full review of non-duality in Buddhism is beyond the scope of this project, I herein consider its relevance for the burgeoning conversation around mindfulness and psychology. As I describe below, mindfulness as a phenomenon is typically discussed and understood dualistically: a subject attending to an object, in or for a fleeting moment of time called the present - which is also something separate from the self - in order to go from a state characterized by suffering to one that is free from suffering. However, in many Buddhist teachings, subject, object, and connecting action are known as “the three spheres” (Tib. *khor-gsum*), and living in terms of this conceptual structure of separation, with the resultant attraction and aversion to reified phenomena, is considered to be the elemental form of ignorance or misperception underlying all suffering. Indeed, the separate subject-object mode of perception is precisely what drops away or is seen through in awakening (Loy, 2012; Welwood, 2014).

The non-dual contemplative traditions are unique in suggesting that such a state is present as the very nature of this moment, indeed, calling it “the natural state” (Van

Schaik, 2004). In contrast to graduated, progressive paths, which view liberation as a future goal to be attained or constructed anew through effortful practice, the non-dual perspective holds that the awakened mind is already ever-present yet overlooked, “our essential nature” which need only be pointed out, recognized, and grown increasingly familiar with (Van Schaik, 2004).

This project explores one distinctive and radically non-dualistic tradition whose understandings of self, time, and suffering seem to have special relevance to the study of present-moment awareness in psychotherapy. Dzogchen (Tibetan for “the Great Perfection”), most commonly known as a branch of Tibetan Buddhism, is a “direct path” which cuts across religious, economic, and gender divisions due to its emphasis on integrating a state of realization into everyday life. Dzogchen has taken on many forms for at least the last 2,000 years, having been practiced by wandering contemplatives as well as within monastic hierarchies. The highest teaching of the Nyingma and Kagyu lineages of Tibetan Buddhism, Dzogchen has close historical links with Buddhism, but it has also existed outside of Buddhism, sharing historical and philosophical affinities with the indigenous Tibetan religion of Bön (Reynolds, 1996). Dzogchen has traditionally been considered esoteric and secret, though it is primarily “self-secret,” in that its meaning must be experientially tasted and lived to be understood (Reynolds, 1996).

Dzogchen has over the millennia evolved into an intricate and multifaceted system, replete with a rich symbolic vocabulary of deities and ritualistic practices, oriented around a detailed mythic cosmology. It has been the topic of exhaustive philosophical analyses and scholarly exegesis, particularly within the Prajnaparamita tradition of Mahayana Buddhism. Dzogchen has also developed unique tantric practices

of visionary experience (Tib. *Tögal*) involving the subtle energies of the body (Van Schaik, 2004); these are all beyond the scope of the current project. However, the core meaning of Dzogchen has recurrently been described in exultant terms as utterly simple, ever-present, and available to all. Indeed, an essential notion within Dzogchen is that striving for a future state of liberation merely perpetuates the delusion that things are not complete as they are (Dowman et al., 2010; Van Schaik, 2004).

To this end, Dzogchen has developed distinctive modes of contemplation, inquiry, and expression of the non-dual nature of experience, which “take the goal as the path,” and begin with “pointing-out the nature of mind,” a form of intimate instruction whereby a teacher guides a student through words or symbols to the direct experience of *rigpa* (Tib.), innate non-dual and non-conceptual awareness. The Dzogchen lineage is predicated upon such instructions, and its literature is replete with examples of teachers drawing upon their deepest meditative experience to offer their students a glimpse of the already awakened nature of their own awareness. In this way, Dzogchen pointing-out instructions, meditation instructions, and descriptions of awakening are interrelated in their shared intention of allowing the student or reader to experientially recognize the liberated/liberating nature of their own mind. These instructions and descriptions of contemplative experience are the sources I worked with and analyzed in my research.

A core distinction in Dzogchen, which I discuss in greater detail below, is the difference between the mind as the ordinary mental activity of thinking, feeling, and perceiving, and the nature of mind as “empty,” ungraspable awareness which simply shows these processes and hosts their unfolding with complete intimacy. The former, which operates within the subject-object binary, is an understanding of mind that is much

more familiar to the field of Psychology, but I suggest that the latter view of mind as awareness itself can clarify and deepen contemporary understandings of mindfulness and the psychotherapy process.

In order to evoke and share the liberating experience of *rigpa*, the Dzogchen tradition has relied upon various metaphors for this state - the nature of mind has often been compared to a mirror or the sky, an ungraspable space which naturally hosts the flow of experience with complete openness and intimacy, while remaining unaffected by whatever arises within it. Just as clouds float naturally through the open space of the sky and leave no trace, thoughts, feelings, and perceptions move within awareness, yet awareness itself remains, unsullied and open. The nature of mind, like a mirror, simply shows all experiences as an expression of its infinite potential to manifest appearances, while the dualistic mind gets caught up in the reflections - judging what it likes and dislikes - and through this charge of emotional investment, imbues insubstantial phenomena with the illusion that they possess intrinsic substance or meaning (Norbu, 2006). When presencing or resting in the nature of mind, mental events are said to effortlessly “self-liberate” and spontaneously dissolve on their own, no longer held in place through movements of attraction or aversion based on reification; this is described as the “method” of Dzogchen (Norbu, 2006).

Again, Dzogchen posits that the state beyond suffering is not something apart from us to be attained, but rather the enduring condition of our own being, obscured by investment in the subject-object mode of perception and the resultant attempts to manipulate experience. As an expression of this view, its contemplative practices emphasize relaxation, non-doing, and letting be, oriented towards deconstructing the

illusion of un-enlightenment rather than cultivating a detached observer or elaborating structures of beliefs.

Following from its contention that the nature of mind is our own ever-present awareness, Dzogchen practice collapses the distinction between the meditator and the meditation, and between meditative and non-meditative experience; indeed, the primary form of contemplation in Dzogchen is called *Trekchö* (Tib.), or “cutting through solidity,” a kind of “non-meditation” which consists of an uncontrived resting in and as the “self-luminous” space of experience itself, appreciating that thoughts and other experiences effortlessly dissolve “like writing on water” so long as they are not clung to and elaborated upon (Norbu, 2006; Reynolds, 1996). Insofar as Dzogchen does prescribe deliberate attentiveness or mindfulness, it is in order to remember and recognize the “primordial mindfulness” of awareness itself (Dowman et al, 2010; Van Schaik, 2004). As I describe below, the Dzogchen view and its practice suggest different understandings of mindfulness, awareness, and the present moment.

Non-Duality and Temporality

The non-dual view and contemplation of Dzogchen implies a particular appreciation of temporality - specifically, they point to two apparently divergent ways that “the present moment” can be lived. From a certain perspective, the present moment contains our conscious experience as merely one phase of an ongoing and overarching story of the person we are, as well as the world in which we find ourselves - it is the instantiation of past conditioning and an attempt to fulfill some fantasy of the future. This fleeting moment is something separate from us; we endure as separate entities that evolve

through time, who can relate to and influence the moment, and the world it reveals, in various ways that express our personal styles and life histories.

This perspective is that of the aforementioned “ordinary dualistic mind” or *sems* (Tib.) pervasive in most contemporary cultures as well as many approaches to psychotherapy and mindfulness. It is based upon the primary separation between subject and object, with each developing across time though generally being seen as maintaining some sort of static essence. In this way of living time, the present is a moment sandwiched between the infinite past and future, a means to an end, and a slim window through which we as persons can glimpse and manipulate the world outside of ourselves. It is akin to a single word whose meaning is determined by the story in which it is placed, and is thus inextricable from various narrative constructions of our situation that account for who we are, what is happening, and why. Indeed, believing in these stories about ourselves and life, we continually act in such a way as to reinforce their apparent reality; typically, this mode of temporality is not even recognized as just one possible perspective, but rather is simply taken for granted as the way things are.

However, Dzogchen recognizes non-dual presence itself as “the timeless time” of nowness or immediacy, “the fourth time” (Tib. *shicha*) which transcends yet includes past, future, and even the present, all of which are artifacts of conceptualization. We can notice that the past is gone, the future is not yet, and what is always here now is the instantaneous and ever-fresh spontaneity of being, experiencing, and participating - each moment, by itself and in total immediacy, simultaneously arises from nothing, abides nowhere, and instantly disappears into nothing, leaving no trace. Upon closer examination, the moment can neither be found to arise, abide, or cease at all. We are not

apart from the moment and looking in, for there is no time in which such a relationship could occur, and the world as we know it is precisely the world as known, inseparable from awareness. The continuum of ungraspable experiences - including those thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and interactions which tend to cohere as the impression of a separate self - are like reflections inseparable from the wide-open mirror of lucid presence, which is totally stable yet groundless, never stained by what occurs.

From this perspective, all experience occurs vividly yet insubstantially right now, in a manner beyond ideas of duration, separation, or substantiality. “This moment” as presence neither comes nor goes, and is not between or separate from anything. Rather, this moment is all that is here - unbound, undivided, and lacking nothing - yet it vanishes as soon as it seems to appear, “moment” by “moment,” while presence “remains.” In fact, in its essential formlessness, presence is not graspable as a substantial thing at all. And yet it is not a mere nothingness, for it “continuously” unfolds as this infinite array of experiential qualities, a sole field whose indeterminate richness dynamically presents as inherently meaningful yet ineffable textures of participation, while never departing from itself. The ever-fresh, ever-present luminosity of the mind that reads these very words *is* nowness - it’s always right now, and yet, the now cannot be grasped, for we are not separate from it, it has no form of its own, and it is too alive to be captured in any concept or fleeting experience.

In the conventional way of moving through life, characterized by ignorance of the empty and aware nature of mind, we tend to be identified with the person we have been or may become, referencing seemingly discrete experiences against constructions of memory, anticipation, fear and desire and attempting to manipulate “our” experience

based upon judgments, projects and preferences. Insofar as the world is experienced and reacted to in terms of these projections, the sense of the world and the self as inherently real and separate is reified in a self-perpetuating and scarcely noticed cycle. This reflexive resistance is not something done *by* a separate self, but rather is the very *nature* of the seemingly separate self, which keeps it in apparent existence.

However, it is possible to relax deeply into the latter mode of temporality. In this way of being, identifications of self and world based upon thought either fade into the background or can cease entirely, leaving simply experiencing without a separate experiencer or thing experienced - just the groundless suchness of whatever is happening, spontaneously unfolding without separation, resistance, or grasping for knowledge or outcomes. In the absence of the struggle which is separation, each “moment” is totally complete and sufficient in and of itself.

Such intimacy with life provides a stark contrast to the habitual narrative of deficit, defensiveness, and hunger for satisfaction that characterizes the “lack project” of the separate self (Loy, 1996). As I describe later in the project, our conventional identification as a separate self which must manage its experience engenders in us a fundamental sense of lack, which tends to be perpetuated by the very efforts to ameliorate it; attempts to manipulate the world or our experience maintain the sense of separation between us and it, which only incites more efforts to manage experience, and so on. Thus, experiencing the innate wholeness that Dzogchen points out as the nature of mind can be profoundly healing and transformative. Buddhism in general, and Dzogchen in particular, have deeply explored the relationship between the subject-object duality and the resistance to the moment which lies at the heart of suffering, and I draw upon these

understandings in thinking through how non-reactive present-moment awareness can allow for healing and transformation.

Dzogchen would agree with the general Buddhist notion that close and non-reactive present-moment awareness has the inherent capacity to liberate us from confusion and suffering, and to re-connect us with what is essential and nourishing in life. But its radical suggestion seems to be that this is so because totally open and unconditional awareness, inseparable from the moment-to-moment flow of experiencing, is what we actually already *are*. Limited identity is based upon ignorance of this situation, and along with the resultant aversion and attachment to experiences as if they were separate and substantial things happening to a separate and substantial self, serves as the root cause for psychological suffering and dissatisfaction. Suffering is inseparable from the clinging to or pushing away of this moment based upon investment in the conceptual, yet viscerally felt structure of subject and object persisting in time. The more intimate we are with our moment-to-moment experiencing, the more it is allowed to self-liberate on its own. It would seem, however, that the tendency is to lose touch with this other way of being - the context of immediacy in which suffering has no hold - instead inhabiting the more conventional narrative about time and our relationship to it.

The primary goal of this dissertation is to consider the healing capacities of “non-reactive present-moment awareness” in terms of the nature of mind, rather than the typically dualistic forms of mindfulness that have up to this point predominated within psychology. Whereas mindfulness is typically discussed in terms of non-reactive present-moment *attention*, herein I consider the nature of non-reactive present-moment

awareness, in light of the distinction mentioned above between the mind and the nature of mind.

As a preliminary sketch of this core distinction, attention can be recognized as a limited and dualistic structure - “I” “attend to” “some particular thing separate from myself and other things.” In contrast, awareness, or the cognizant quality of the mind, is described (and experienced) in Dzogchen as being without form. Thus, at least phenomenologically, awareness does not inherently possess any limits or boundaries; this includes the separation between subject and object that is typically taken to be inherent to experience. Whereas attention can be likened to a flashlight beam illuminating objects at a distance, awareness might be compared to a screen or mirror that shows diverse appearances without being separate or separable from them. Attention seems to occur within awareness through contraction and reification, which also relates to the distinct modes of temporality discussed in the project. Much of the contemporary conversation around “present-moment awareness” is referring to the experience of holding the flashlight. In contrast, Dzogchen invites the practitioner to recognize themselves as the abiding screen, which, in a sense, holds whatever appears within it.

It is important to acknowledge that attention is not in itself inferior to awareness per se. This work simply investigates the aforementioned distinction as it might relate to experiences of suffering and healing. To this end, I worked with a teacher exploring canonical Dzogchen pointing-out instructions and accounts of contemplative realization, in order to articulate fundamental features of lived experience in terms of temporality and the subject-object relationship. These were then constellated with a consideration of

psychotherapy - and psychological distress and well-being in general - so that each could flesh out and deepen the understandings of the other.

Specifically, this dissertation considers the role of the so-called present-moment in suffering and healing, working with the Buddhist teaching that ever-present open awareness is the nature of the mind itself, our deepest being, which shines throughout all experience. Buddhist psychology in general makes the claim that as long as we hold particular experiences to be a threat to our conceptual self, we suffer. This involves assuming that we are something discrete and limited, and that experience, which unfolds freshly and inseparably from the openness of our nature, is something we already know. On this basis, we push away the experiencing of the moment in favor of some other moment, without realizing this is what we are doing. When we collapse the illusory distance between the knower and the known held in place by reification and resistance, our suffering dissolves and we are able to participate more fully and spontaneously in the world, as part of the world. The current project considers whether and how effective psychotherapy might already take advantage of this fact; through clearer understandings of awareness and temporality, we can better understand and put into practice what heals in therapy.

In what follows, I review some of the literature on psychotherapy and the present moment, and consider how mindfulness has been taken up in this context thus far, including critiques of its limitations. Throughout the next several sections, I suggest that the conversation around psychotherapy and mindfulness - and present-moment awareness in general - can be carried further by exploring these themes from the non-dualistic perspective of Dzogchen. Subsequently, I outline my method for doing so.

Literature Review

Psychoanalysis and the Present Moment

As described above, non-reactive present-moment awareness has become a topic of explicit interest for psychotherapists in recent decades, and yet, from Freud's earliest injunction to attend with "evenly hovering attention" to the emergent contents of one's mind, it has been an essential element of the therapy process. Indeed, as Freud (1913) wrote, "the treatment is begun by the patient being required to put himself in the position of an attentive and dispassionate self-observer," instructing his clients to "act as though, for instance, you were a traveler sitting next to the window of a railway carriage and describing to someone inside the carriage the changing views which you see outside" (Freud, 1913, p. 135). This matter of technique was grounded in Freud's view of the present-moment as an instance of past and future patterns: partially and unconsciously determined by past conditioning, as evidenced by its particular contents and defensive structure, and yet crucially bearing the potential for recognition and relinquishment of such limited ways of being through equanimous self-observation, which could change the structure of one's inner world (Jacobs, 2012).

For Freud, the analytic procedure cured through the facilitation of insight into repressed past meanings that pathologically limit one's present. With awareness, the contents of the infantile, animalistic id could be recognized, neutralized, and incorporated into the analysand's ego, which was thereby freed of the attacks of the superego; this intriguingly parallels more contemporary notions of exposure and acceptance as healing. As he felt that the tendency of these past meanings is to remain outside of awareness, Freud held that the analyst must be something of a detective or archaeologist, exploring

the unconscious of the analysand for repressed contents in each session's emergent associations. Correspondingly, Freud encouraged the analyst as well to relate to the patient's experience and their own with non-reactive, moment-to-moment attention, not focusing on or searching for anything in particular, but rather opening to the flow of associations and offering interpretations of these to the analysand, to spur liberating awareness of how their past was impacting their present.

Despite paying an unprecedented kind of attention to the dynamics of present experience, Freud was critiqued even by his contemporaries for reducing the present moment to the past with his claim that the patient's "current conflict becomes comprehensible and admits of solution only when it is traced back to his pre-history" (Freud et al., 1993, p. 284). Otto Rank was perhaps the first psychotherapist to highlight the inherent dynamism of the present moment as a source of healing and transformation, arguing against Freud that "even if the patient repeats...he cannot do it without changing at the same time," and that "whether one emphasizes the repetition or the change has a determinative difference for the therapy" (Rank, 1929-1931, p. 104). In this way, the curiosity and openness of the analytic stance was not viewed as a means to an end, but an end in and of itself; contrary to Freud's method of conjuring associations and memories in order to access the unconscious, Rank focused on conscious emotional life in "the here and now," which he also called the "therapeutic moment of experience," in an effort to engage the patient's creativity and fuller participation in life. Rank wrote: "here in actual experience...is contained not only the whole present but also the whole past, and only here in the present are psychological understanding and therapeutic effect to be attained" (Rank, 1929-1931, p. 28).

Viewing the client as a constructive agent and the present moment as an ever-available opportunity for change, Sandor Ferenczi and Rank proposed an “active” therapy which emphasized the importance of fresh and “free” emotional experience over intellectual insight. They distinguished between “making conscious” through explaining and interpreting and “becoming conscious” through newly emergent lived experiencing. To this end, they prioritized a method that was individualized, highly situational, and attuned to the present moment such that unexpected, spontaneous experiences could occur in the real relationship (Wadlington, 2012). This would set the stage for later notions of therapeutic action as disparate as the “corrective emotional experience” (Alexander & French, 1946, p. 66), “disconfirmation of pathogenic beliefs” (Weiss, 1990, p. 106), the “experiencing of feared affects” (Fosha, 2000, p. 16), or the “allowing of novel, unbidden experience” (Stern, 2013, p. 227), which each in their own way suggest that the client heals through being with their experience differently, actually opening in the moment to what had previously been avoided or taken for granted as simply true.

Perhaps the psychodynamic theorist who has contributed the most to contemporary clinical understandings of the present moment is Daniel Stern, who, in his work with the Boston Change Process Study Group (BCPSG), explored the process of psychotherapy with a nuanced attention to what he called *kairos*, “the passing moment in which something happens as the time unfolds...the coming into being of a new state of things,” which “happens in a moment of awareness” and may “alter one’s destiny, be it for the next minute or a lifetime” (Stern, 2004, p. 7). Stern held that the present moment as actually lived has an objective length of one to ten seconds, with an average of around

three to four seconds - it is “the process unit of subjective experience” that we experience as an “uninterrupted now,” and which allows us to “chunk and make sense of experience while it is happening...directly lived through in real time” (Stern, 2004, p. 219).

Throughout his career, Stern investigated the psychological work done by “the micro-drama” of momentary experience (Stern, 2004, p. 22).

In particular, Stern considered how present moments factor in to the process of what he called “moving along,” in which therapist and client establish intersubjective contact, articulate experiences, and co-create meaning through “relational moves” from moment-to-moment. Moving along tends to be punctuated by “now moments,” present moments that “suddenly pop up and are highly charged with immediately impeding consequences...heavy with presentness and the need to act” (Stern, 2004, p. 151). By pulling both client and therapist into “the presentness of the moment they are now living,” now moments bear the potential for a “moment of meeting,” an unexpected present moment in which therapist and client achieve a spontaneous and authentic intersubjective meeting - “the two become aware of what each other is experiencing,” expanding the relational field and allowing for new possibilities (Stern, 2004, p. 151).

Stern held that these moments of meeting are the nodal events of therapeutic change, which revise the way that the past is lived and can thereby dramatically change a life, a relationship, or the course of a therapy (Stern, 2004). In light of the Dzogchen view, it is interesting to note that such moments - in their immediacy - typically have a timeless, selfless quality, such that their meaning and import is not thought out and added on from without, but rather are immanent within the moment itself.

Though the analysts above each appreciated the healing importance of allowing and living through new experiences of oneself, others, and the world, they all tended to emphasize the unfolding contents of discrete present moments without acknowledging the unchanging context of contentless awareness - presence itself - from which these contents are inseparable. In so doing, the nature of the experiencer has generally been taken for granted, usually assumed to be the bodily organism or a mental representation, which overlooks the fact that these are themselves contents of awareness as well. The question remains of how the curiosity and growing intimacy with present experience described above actually allows for it to change, and my contention is that the phenomenon implies a view and experience of the mind that is radically different from those that assume a duality between subject and object.

In the view of Dzogchen, the crucial openness to new experience is the ever-present openness of the mind itself, rather than a person opening *something* that we call a mind; the ever-present openness of the moment itself, rather than a person opening *to something* called a moment. Within and inseparable from this openness that cannot be closed, the experiences that we call the person interact with the experiences that we call thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, their mutual transformation allowed by the welcoming space of presence which is neither subject nor object. By “opening to their experience” beyond familiar labels and understandings, it may be that the client is moment-by-moment shifting from a limited identity which holds their life in place to the aliveness which imperturbably hosts their living and serves as the freedom for it to change - not a freedom which they have, but which they *are*.

Humanistic Psychotherapy and the Present Moment

This perspective is in some ways closer to that of the humanistic and existential therapies, which have explicitly sought to understand the client as the source and center of a world of experience which unfolds in the moment. The present moment became a central area of theoretical and practical concern for many humanistic psychologists. These theorists felt that psychoanalysis' general emphasis on understanding clients in terms of their past experience and through an abstract conceptual framework was a reductive foreclosure of their inherent creative potential. To this end, their methods have tended to entail moment-to-moment awareness and acceptance of the client's emergent and visceral experience, which was viewed as intrinsically meaningful as lived, without recourse to other concepts or even to other moments.

Below I describe the work of Rogers and subsequent theorists in the Focusing-Oriented approach, which, grounded in a consistent exploration the inner workings of the psychotherapy process in terms of the relationship between moment-to-moment experiencing, acceptance, and transformation, have produced a perspective with a number of intriguing similarities to that of Dzogchen. In particular, the work of Eugene Gendlin and others within the Focusing-Oriented approach has highlighted the transformative power of spaciouly and intimately hosting one's present experience without attempting to change it in any way.

The work of Rank was an influence on Carl Rogers, who connected his emphasis on emergent experience with phenomenological notions of the self as inseparable from an "ever-changing perceptual field," a sort of eddy within a stream that he described as "an organized, fluid, but consistent conceptual pattern...together with values attached to these

concepts” (Rogers, 1951, p. 498). Rogers held that the essence of “psychological maladjustment” lay in the self misunderstanding and reacting against its own experience out of rigid adherence to these values and concepts (Rogers, 1959). To this end, he sought to understand and establish the conditions under which the self-structure could perceive and examine its experiencing, assimilating and including parts of itself which had heretofore been resisted. Again, this perspective would seem to resonate with the Dzogchen view of all phenomena - including those we take to be the self - as dynamic expressions of the field of awareness, apparently held in place by our investment in conceptual structures.

Rogers’ studies of the psychotherapy process led him to develop his well-known core conditions for effective psychotherapy: congruence, accurate empathy, and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1957). According to Rogers and subsequent theorists, a therapist embodying these qualities would naturally create a situation of acceptance and curiosity in which the client could feel free to explore their present-moment experience, and in so doing, could move away from rigid ways of holding it and towards what Abraham Maslow had called “self-actualization,” greater openness and intimacy with the fresh vitality of their lived experience (Maslow, 1971).

Towards the end of his life, Rogers speculated about a further significant variable which he called “presence” and thought to be the foundation of his basic conditions, the overarching factor that allows for them to be expressed. As he put in a 1987 interview with Michael Baldwin,

I am inclined to think that, in my writing, I have stressed too much the three basic conditions (congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathic understanding).

Perhaps it is something around the edges of those conditions that is really the most important element of therapy - when my self is very clearly, obviously present. (p. 48)

As is clear from his subsequent descriptions of this phenomenon, Rogers did not mean the rigidly separate sense of self, but rather something closer to the intimate “selflessness” of non-dual awareness. Rogers (1980) writes:

When I am somehow in touch with the unknown in me, when I am perhaps in a slightly altered state of consciousness, then whatever I do seems to be full of healing. Then, simply my presence is releasing and helpful to the other. There is nothing I can do to force this experience, but when I can relax and be close to the transcendental core of me... it seems that my inner spirit has reached out and touched the inner spirit of the other. Our relationship transcends itself and becomes a part of something larger. Profound growth and healing and energy are present. (p. 129)

Undoubtedly, Rogers would have looked approvingly upon Stern’s later analysis of “moments of meeting,” though in highlighting the transcendent yet immanent aspect of such shared experiences, his description is closer to the phenomenon explored in the current work.

Rogers’ observations about the therapy process, particularly those regarding accurate empathy, acceptance, and visceral experience were taken further by his colleague Eugene Gendlin. Gendlin is a philosopher and therapist whose research on the lived experience and inner workings of psychotherapy culminated in the development of Experiential or Focusing-Oriented therapy, a thoroughly phenomenological perspective that prioritizes the client’s relationship to their direct experiencing. In a sense, Gendlin

examined the inner workings of Rogerian therapy as performed not only between but *within* individuals, and thereby came to new understandings of the aforementioned relationship between the experiencing and observing self. His analysis of therapeutic change moves closer than most to the territory of Dzogchen self-liberation, although it has been framed primarily in terms of the personal rather than appreciating its inherently transpersonal component.

In an attempt to understand therapeutic change, Gendlin conducted some of the first detailed studies of psychotherapy sessions. He found that it was possible from the first three sessions to make a prognosis of whether or not the therapy would be successful in effecting change, and that the crucial difference typically pertained to whether or not clients would notice, stay with, and eventually articulate a vague bodily sensed feeling of a situation for which no words or images were initially present (Klein et al. 1986). Gendlin consequently developed the Experiencing Scale, which allows this behavior to be measured.

Low levels of client Experiencing (Low Exp) are characterized by speech which is externalized, impersonal, abstract, emotionally flat, and spoken as though the content is self-evident and obvious (Klein et al. 1986). Such speech is primarily in the past tense, and with little to no referencing of the client's relationship to the material. Low Experiencing levels have been correlated with unsuccessful therapy, which is especially intriguing in this context, considering that Low Experiencing scores would seem to be an expression of the tendency of "the ordinary mind" to reify and react against experiences as though possessing an inherent essence. At the other end of the spectrum, the client reaches high marks on the Experiencing Scale if they "dispose of a clear image of their

immediate experiencing” and “understand the meaning of their experiencing for themselves” through “tentative” yet “direct” contact with its implicit meaning in the moment (Lietaer, 2016).

This process of “articulating” the ever-changing viscerally felt sense of a situation, “listening” to one’s own experiencing and trying again and again to find words that “fit,” can facilitate a “felt shift,” a palpably different way of experiencing oneself and one’s situation (Lietaer, 2016). From this initial research, Gendlin developed the therapeutic process of Focusing, a method by which one could practice what these effective therapy clients were already doing. Focusing involves being with (rather than merged into) one’s immediate “unclear bodily felt sense” of a situation in an open, curious, and intimate way, sensing it from moment-to-moment and allowing for a new and appropriate word, image, or other “handle” to emerge and symbolize the felt sense, the entire process leading to a felt shift in how the situation is lived.

The felt shift seems to be something like a transformative “moment of meeting” with *oneself*, a phenomenon which has led Focusing-Oriented theorists to revise their understanding of the person and the task of so-called person-centered therapy. Gendlin re-oriented person-centered psychotherapy such that the focus was not simply on the client and their feelings and opinions, but rather on what he called “the client’s client” - their emergent, bodily sensed inner experiencing - and how both client and therapist are relating to that (Bundschuh-Müller, 2004).

In particular, Focusing-Oriented theorists have explored the movement of “dis-identification” in Focusing, in which a client goes from “being” to “having” a felt situation. As Gendlin writes - echoing Rogers’ discussion of presence, but in terms of

one's relationship with oneself - "when one has a felt sense, one becomes more deeply oneself...when a person's central core or inward self expands...strengthens and develops... The person - I mean that which looks out from behind the eyes - comes more into its own" (Gendlin, 1989, p. 20).

In this way, Focusing as a healing method is predicated on relating to oneself in terms of Rogers' core conditions. The state which theorists of Focusing call "self-in-presence" is "non-judgmental awareness which can accompany every part in us... we reserve the word 'I' for presence" (Bundschuh-Müller, 2004, p. 16). Focusing thus implies a view of the self as awareness itself, which is "not any of the content" of experience, yet is inextricable from its experiencing. Gendlin calls this "the gazer" and "the one who looks," and holds that Focusing is possible because of the way in which awareness intrinsically transcends the "bodily-environmental situational mesh" of the life process while being ever-intimate with it (Gendlin 1989). This non-duality between organism and environment, and between this intricate interaction and the openness of awareness, is akin to the Dzogchen view.

Gendlin has perhaps more than any other theorist explored the phenomenology and inner movements of therapeutic transformation. He has tended to do so in terms of the relationship between "direct experiencing" and "symbolization," though it seems that what is healing about "higher levels of experiencing" is what happens *between* the words: the moment-to-moment changes in the inner relationship between subject and object which allows experience to change. Focusing can be seen as a means for finding new ways to describe experience, but it can equally be appreciated as a means for letting go of rigid ways of holding experience and collapsing the distance between knower and known

such that each are transformed. In the Discussion, I expand upon this theme and consider the connections between the felt shift of Focusing and the self-liberation of Dzogchen.

Having outlined existing perspectives on psychotherapy and the present moment, I will now discuss the more recent connection between psychotherapy and mindfulness proper, and then suggest how this trend can be taken further through a non-dual perspective.

Psychotherapy and Mindfulness

As mentioned, many of the themes described above have been synthesized under the common label of mindfulness as it has come to be considered an important component of psychotherapy in the last several decades. In particular, the movement towards dis-identification, acceptance, and moment-to-moment intimacy with experience, which had heretofore been largely implicit in discussions of the therapy process, has been highlighted and codified as a technique in its own right. In keeping with the growing tendency to focus on the quality of experiencing rather than on the symbolic meanings of psychological material, Mindfulness-Based approaches to psychotherapy tend to be less concerned with the particular contents of the client's mind than the manner in which they relate to them, paying particular attention to whether the client is grasping at or resisting certain experiences or rather appreciating their impermanent and insubstantial nature. In this respect, such approaches have moved closer to the Dzogchen notion of the "one taste" of all experiences: the fact that they all share the same basic nature as expressions of wide-open awareness. However, as I discuss below, there are still limiting contradictions inherent to dualistic conceptualizations of mindfulness.

It was theorists in the Cognitive-Behavioral tradition who brought mindfulness practices into the psychotherapy mainstream. These therapies have tended to implement mindfulness in a didactic or psycho-educational form distinctly different from the background *attitude* of mindfulness that typifies the non-directive psychodynamic and humanistic therapies (Ryan et al. 2012). While this more top-down approach is not without its critics, it also bears some interesting resemblances to the pointing-out instructions of Dzogchen, which are a sort of visceral education regarding the nature of mind and mental events. Below, I will describe some of the more popular Mindfulness-Based approaches to CBT.

In the 1980's Marsha Linehan began to incorporate Kabat-Zinn's research on mindfulness, which was just then beginning, into her Dialectical Behavior Therapy, or DBT (Linehan, 1987). She found that mindfulness meditation allowed for what she called "de-centering," the ability to perceive thoughts and feelings as both impermanent and objective occurrences in the mind, rather than being identified with and "swept away" by them (Lynch et al. 2006). The teaching of mindfulness meditation and related skills have since become core components of DBT, which is today considered a treatment of choice for individuals with Borderline Personality Disorder, typically characterized by powerful and volatile emotional experience and reduced agency and insight (Lynch et al. 2006). Linehan and other theorists of DBT call the state of mindful awareness "Wise Mind," and they portray it as the means as well as the desired end of the therapy process, often describing it with language reminiscent of the aforementioned discussion of self-in-presence (Lynch et al. 2006).

From the 1980's onwards, other writers in the CBT tradition were converging on mindfulness practice as an aid to therapy, some drawing more explicitly upon Buddhist understandings of suffering and the mind. Steven Hayes, who researched language and cognition through a behaviorist lens, developed Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) around a core Buddhist insight: painful and difficult experiences are an inevitable part of life, but suffering is the unnecessary result of reacting against such experiences out of the mistaken belief that they are substantial or somehow define the self (Hayes et al. 1999). In light of this understanding, the ACT therapist explicitly teaches clients to simply notice, accept, and embrace their experiences, especially previously unwanted ones, and to act in accord with their "core values," rather than reacting out of momentary attractions and aversions based upon rampant conceptualization (Hayes et al. 1999).

ACT theorists posit that suffering is the result of what they call "psychological rigidity," a way of being that entails cycles of "cognitive entanglement" and "experiential avoidance," resulting in failure to live in alignment with one's core values. Psychological rigidity tends to entail a view of "self as content," in which a person is unreflectively identified with their thoughts and feelings. This would seem to correspond to the Low Exp level described by humanistic psychology. ACT theorists make use of mindfulness practices to facilitate what they call "self as process," which they describe as "the defused, nonjudgmental, flexible, and ongoing noting of thoughts, feelings, and other private events" (Hayes et al. 1999, p. 12). Appreciation of the fact that experiences are impermanent and dissolve on their own if not reacted to can culminate in what ACT calls "self as context," which they describe as "'I/here/nowness" of conscious

experience....consciousness as such, distinct from experiences, whose limits cannot be consciously known” (Hayes et al. 1999 p. 13).

Self as context is reminiscent of the self-as-presence of Focusing-Oriented Therapy, while placing even more emphasis on the transcendent nature of awareness. However, as in DBT and MBCT, the view of ACT remains dualistic, separating the content from the context, and using this reified witness as an antidote to thoughts and feelings. Psychotherapy might evolve further through the perspective of Dzogchen, which closes the dualistic gap between the mirror like mind and its passing reflections; the aim in Dzogchen is not to diminish or deny the reflections, but rather to recognize them as expressions of the mind’s own luminosity and creativity, inseparable from its unconditioned freedom. Self liberation is not a possibility as long as the subject-object binary is maintained, but occurs effortlessly and inevitably whenever there is no distance between awareness and its “objects.”

In what follows, I draw upon some core notions within Buddhism in order to critique the recent turn to mindfulness in psychotherapy and to lay the ground for an appreciation of mindfulness’ deeper potentials.

Critiques and Potentials of Contemporary Mindfulness

Despite its sweeping popularity, the mindfulness movement within psychology has not been without its critics. Typically, these criticisms have fallen into two camps: those who hold that contemporary understandings of mindfulness are problematically divorced from their broader and deeper Buddhist context, and those who critique mindfulness-based approaches for lacking a clear theoretical account of their effects. However, I contend that these two criticisms are connected: the liberating capacity of

mindfulness makes sense in terms of Buddhist understandings of subjectivity, and vice versa.

Some of the theoretical confusion around contemporary mindfulness likely stems from the fact that it is often thought about and applied in ways for which it was not originally intended. The term mindfulness, as used in mindfulness meditation, is a translation of the term *sati* from the Indo-Aryan language of Pali, although it has not always been the preferred translation into English (Harvey, 2012). *Sati* is the Pali equivalent of the Sanskrit *smṛti*, which is usually translated as “memory,” but also carries the connotation of heedfulness and self-possession. As mentioned, there are many forms of mindfulness practice within the diverse traditions of Buddhism, but all view mindfulness as entailing remembrance of the object or focus of meditation - not as an end in itself, a “just being present to the moment,” but rather a component of an overarching contemplative process.

Within Buddhism, mindfulness is one part of an eight-fold path to the cessation of suffering through realization of the true nature of reality. The eight-fold path can be divided into three interdependent components: ethical conduct (Skt. *śīla*), wisdom (*prajñā*), and concentration (*samādhi*). Mindfulness as currently practiced typically leaves out the ethical components of right speech, right action, and right livelihood, and pays a kind of lip service to the most profound implications of Buddhist wisdom, if acknowledging these teachings at all. This dissertation primarily focuses on the latter fact, although trenchant criticisms of so-called “McMindfulness” have been made which highlight the inseparability of Buddhist contemplation and ethics (Purser & Loy. 2013). Indeed, insofar as Buddhism views the self as empty and interdependent, attempts to

meditate solely in order to improve one's own life are likely to backfire eventually, as they lack the proper altruistic motivation (Tib. *Bodhichitta*). This is not intended simply as a moral judgment, but rather follows naturally from the Buddhist view of reality.

The earliest teachings of the Buddha were those of the Four Noble Truths and the Three Marks of conditioned existence, considered foundational for all of Buddhism. The Four Noble Truths are as follows: 1.) all so-called conditioned phenomena and experiences - all of that which is compounded and constructed - are not ultimately satisfying and are liable to cause suffering (*dukkha*), 2.) holding these phenomena as inherently real, and reacting to them in terms of attraction and aversion results in suffering, 3.) ending this reactivity ends suffering, and 4.) through behaving ethically, practicing certain forms of meditation, and cultivating liberating understanding, one can awaken to the nature of conditioned reality, end their reactivity, and thereby end suffering (Harvey, 2012).

The understanding in question, which facilitates the dispassion crucial to the liberation from suffering (*nirvāṇa*) that is the goal of Buddhism, pertains to overcoming ignorance (*avidyā*) regarding the nature conditioned reality (*saṅkhāra*). According to Buddhism, conditioned reality is constructed in both a passive and an active sense - the passive refers to the compounded nature of any form, ranging from clouds, to nations, to human beings, thoughts, etc. The Buddha taught that all such phenomena are utterly impermanent (*anicca*), without an inherent self-nature (*anatta*), and are sources of suffering (*dukkha*) if reacted to as though solidly real. These are the aforementioned Three Marks of Existence. The active sense of construction refers to the form-creating faculty of mind, often described as “volition” or “intention,” which is closely connected

with *sems*, the ordinary dualistic mind. This is the function of mind which “constructs” reality through fixated ways of holding the impermanent and open-ended flux of experience, reifying insubstantial appearances through conceptual labeling and emotional investment (Harvey, 2012).

The radicality of these this view should not be underestimated. The popular discourse around mindfulness typically explores impermanence in terms of gross change such as aging and loss, or somewhat more subtle change such as the apparent movements of the breath or thoughts. Unsatisfactoriness is usually depicted in terms of major suffering such as physical or mental illness, and selflessness in terms of the shifting nature of identity and dualistic distinctions between “the self” and its experiences (Harvey, 2012). However, truly reckoning with the Buddhist understanding of reality undermines and goes far beyond mindfulness as currently practiced and described.

In this view, both time and the self are conditioned phenomena. They are relative, contingent, and lack inherent existence. How, then, could *nirvana* - the “unconditioned,” timeless and selfless reality beyond suffering - possibly be reached through the time-bound efforts of an individual self, putting in effort to change their state of affairs? My analysis of the Dzogchen texts explores how contemplative practitioners within Buddhism have not only articulated but resolved this question through their own deep experience. Dzogchen would seem to suggest that the “solution” is to recognize that the “problem” is just another conceptual construct. Upon being recognized as such, it is seen through; simultaneously, the resistance to this moment, or any attempt to get elsewhere, is surrendered. To get in touch with the liberating truths of Buddhist psychology is thus to appreciate that there is neither a self that suffers nor a self that can be freed from

suffering, and neither is there a path to the end of suffering (Hixon, 1993). In this way, Buddhist psychology radically deconstructs itself as a conceptual structure - this paradoxical wisdom is characteristic of the Prajnaparamita tradition as well as Dzogchen. In its appreciation of the ever-available and non-dualistic nature of reality, Dzogchen would seem to offer a distinctive reformulation of mindfulness that can move through the aporias inherent in goal-oriented contemplative practice while remaining grounded in the deepest understandings within Buddhist psychology.

The work of Kabat-Zinn and others in the Mindfulness Movement has undoubtedly helped thousands of people to reduce their suffering and experience greater levels of well-being and insight; this has likely been made possible in part by their attempts to secularize mindfulness and extricate it from its Buddhist context. As I hope to have shown, however, this move has disconnected the practice and understanding of mindfulness from an incredibly rich source of liberating wisdom. The time would seem to be ripe for this wisdom to enrich notions of mindfulness and its relevance for psychotherapy. To this end, the present study is an exploration of the pith-instructions of Dzogchen masters, as well as experiential accounts of non-dual recognition, with an eye towards what these texts suggest about self, time, suffering, and the transformation of suffering. In the next section, I describe my method and its rationale in greater detail.

Method

Research Questions and Goals

This study involves two interwoven areas of inquiry:

1. How is “non-reactive present-moment awareness” understood in the broader context of Buddhist soteriology, specifically the non-dual perspective of Dzogchen? What do Dzogchen adepts have to say about “the present-moment,” “awareness,” “reactivity,” “suffering,” and “liberation”? More broadly, what is the particular view of mind and reality in which these different themes cohere? How is the recognition of this view evoked in dialogue, and how is it that this recognition can liberate suffering?
2. How might non-dualistic contemplative views and practices connect with the phenomenon of psychotherapeutic change? What is it that is healing and transformative about non-reactive present-moment awareness? How does relating to experience differently allow for it to transform, and how might therapies of varying kinds, when effective, already take advantage of this healing potential? How might this phenomenon inform our understandings of psychotherapy, as well as the ongoing integration of psychotherapy with mindfulness and acceptance practices?

To address the first set of questions, I phenomenologically analyzed Dzogchen pointing-out instructions as well as my own written accounts of receiving such instruction from a teacher. The second set of questions is addressed in my Discussion, which constellates the themes and understandings that emerged from the aforementioned analysis with a consideration of different components of effective psychotherapy. Below,

I further elaborate upon the goals of the project, the details of my method, and its rationale.

The aspiration of the current work is to draw upon Buddhist contemplatives' understandings of self, time, suffering, and liberation in order to think psychological healing in terms of temporality and the subject-object relationship. In so doing, I aim to carry forward the conversation around mindfulness and acceptance in psychotherapy, and more generally, the meeting between therapy and contemplative practice. Does the shared emphasis on non-reactive present-moment awareness in psychotherapy and contemplative practice suggest an underlying correspondence between the two as transformative dialogical practices? If so, what might such a convergence imply about the mind, suffering, and healing, or about new directions for the theory and practice of psychotherapy?

Certainly, definitive answers to the questions above are beyond the scope of this study, if they exist at all; as bodies of theory and practice, both Buddhist psychology and psychotherapy are vast, complex, and open to innumerable interpretations, and my own belief is that we simplify or otherwise diminish this multifaceted richness at our own peril. Indeed, one goal of mine in undertaking this research is to challenge certain limiting assumptions about present-moment awareness that I believe have been drawn prematurely within the field. Rather than arriving at a new conclusion, however, my aim in this project is to freshly approach a widely acknowledged phenomenon - that "being present" with experience in a non-reactive way allows for it to transform and for suffering to dissipate. This shift and its implications are the focus of my analysis, through

which I hope to approach the broader themes of temporality, subjectivity, and healing from a relatively unexplored angle.

My sense is that three aspects in particular of the current project differentiate it from much of the existing literature on the topic of present-moment awareness as a healing agent: its hermeneutic-phenomenological method, its non-dualistic perspective, and its analysis of healing in general and psychotherapeutic change in particular in terms of temporality and the subject-object relationship. Perhaps this different tack can enable hitherto implicit aspects of the phenomenon to emerge and be studied, allowing for conceptual innovation and vitalizing connection with the deeper wellspring of Buddhist psychology, which has only just been tapped by the field of psychotherapy.

It should be acknowledged from the outset that this project attempts to illuminate certain features of psychotherapy and non-dual contemplative practice through the lens of my own personal historico-cultural background, prior understandings, and experience with the phenomenon in question. This is inevitable, and as I intend to show below, need not detract from the validity of the project. Indeed, hermeneutic phenomenology as a method has since its inception sought to work with such concerns in a rigorous and reflective manner, and is well-suited to the navigation of lived experience in pursuit of understandings that can be extrapolated and corroborated.

In order to adequately address the research questions through this method, I required data that clearly express the Dzogchen view of subjectivity, temporality, subjectivity, and liberation in a manner that is descriptive enough to be amenable to phenomenological analysis. As mentioned, the Dzogchen path is perhaps ideal for such inquiry, as it is predicated upon transmission of understanding between teacher and

student, and the Dzogchen literature is replete with instances in which an adept articulates their experience of the nature of mind in language with the express intent of evoking experiential recognition in the listener or reader. In this respect, Dzogchen pointing-out events are not only amenable to, but actually parallel, the method of hermeneutic phenomenology.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology as Theory

I analyzed the Dzogchen texts using a method inspired by the hermeneutic phenomenologist Max van Manen. In this section, I introduce the hermeneutic phenomenological approach to researching lived experience and explain the rationale for the selection of this method. In the following section, I provide a more detailed account in the form of a step-by-step summary of the method and its application to my specific research questions and the texts.

The fundamental tenet of hermeneutic phenomenology is that by merit of being in the world and engaging directly with it as part of it, our basic experience of life is always already full of meaning and coherence. However, as the fact of this engagement precedes and exceeds any deliberate attempts to apprehend or explain it, and since such second-order understandings can in fact contradict or conceal aspects of our situation, the meanings of lived experience tend to remain implicit - experience is thus pregnant with the possibility of insights that can bring us to appreciate our being in the world more vividly and precisely. The purpose of hermeneutic phenomenological research, then, is to investigate, bring to light, and reflect upon the qualities and structures of lived experience, and to explicate these in a holistic and poetic manner so as to challenge

inaccurate renderings of our lives and evoke recognition of truer meanings for participants, researchers, and readers (Van Manen, 2007).

It could be said that hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to disclose the given - to describe and understand phenomena on their own terms, as they appear in the immediacy of life before any deliberate attempts to theorize, interpret, or abstract them into another context. However, this task and its results are more complex than a casual, linear description, or even a concerted effort to see things as they are apart from our ideas about them. As mentioned, we not only can, but certainly do, unconsciously inhabit previously established views of reality, which in a somewhat procrustean fashion conceal or reveal to us different features of the world. The question of how phenomenological inquiry should relate to this situation was central to Heidegger's development of hermeneutic phenomenology as distinct from Husserl's original wish to establish phenomenology as the bedrock of certainty, the epistemic foundation for mathematics and the sciences (Heidegger, 1962). I briefly expand upon this distinction below, as it proves directly relevant to the method of this project.

Whereas Husserl generally believed that it was possible for the researcher to fully bracket or suspend their suppositions and prior experiences of a given phenomenon to arrive at eidetic knowledge of its true essence, Heidegger, also wishing to clarify lived experience, emphasized the embeddedness of consciousness and knowledge in the everyday world of human existence. He argued further that we inhabit this world not as dispassionate knowers, but primarily as creatures concerned with our fate, relying upon tacit understandings to navigate and participate in an ever-unfolding, historically patterned and affectively textured world (Heidegger, 1962). For Heidegger, this context

of engagement, which he called being-in-the-world, serves as the inextricable background for any more explicit knowledge of the world and can neither be made completely explicit nor entirely put aside to arrive at “true” knowledge, as it is the very condition for all understanding. Thus, in Heidegger’s view, to be human is to interpret; all experience is lived/understood on the basis of an individual’s being-in-the-world, inextricable from a given set of fore-structures and pre-understandings that cannot be eliminated (Lavery, 2003).

The phenomenological task thus shifted with Heidegger from arriving at the pure, unshrouded essence of a phenomenon in transcendental consciousness, to articulating the understandings that are necessary and implicit for a given phenomenon to be experienced as it is in our everyday living; we cannot arrive at a reality apart from interpretations, but can unearth and expand upon the meanings that are embedded in our experiences, and the ways in which a given experience unfolds against the backdrop of the basic “existential” conditions of our being, such as temporality, spatiality, embodiment, and relatedness (Lavery, 2003).

Hermeneutic phenomenology thus deals with the continuous articulation of perspectives in an attempt to find the essence of a phenomenon - without which it would not be what it is - and to adequately describe this in language such that it reawakens or shows its lived meaning in a fuller or deeper manner (Van Manen 1990, 2007). For any such study to be successful, researchers must hone their “phenomenological eye,” through which the phenomenon can be appreciated in all of its complexity and uniqueness, as well as their “phenomenological pen,” with which to make the phenomenon come alive in their writing (Van Manen, 2007).

Van Manen in particular has advocated a “poetizing” approach to hermeneutic phenomenology, which “evokes experience rather than speaking of it, so that *in* the words, or maybe better, *in spite of* the words, we find ‘memories’ which paradoxically we never thought or felt before” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 13). He holds that the project of hermeneutic phenomenology is inherently transformative - that if, as Heidegger argued, our understanding of being-in-the-world is part and parcel of our being-in-the-world, to questioningly explore our experience is to “live or become the question” (Van Manen 2007), and likewise, that to arrive at a new understanding is to be changed. The possibility of transformation through exploration is central to the questions of the current project - indeed, there is a certain parity in the three methods and views that comprise the dissertation; phenomenology, psychotherapy, and contemplative practice all undertake their careful examinations of lived experience with the promise that contacting its overlooked truths simultaneously changes how it is experienced and also transforms the experiencer themselves.

Of particular relevance for this dissertation is Van Manen’s suggestion that hermeneutic phenomenological research can be richly informed by analysis of novels, poems, or other written works. Through encountering such descriptions of experience, Van Manen (1990) writes,

“The reader finds their experience of everyday life irresistibly shifted to the world of the novel, where fundamental life experiences are lived through vicariously. As I identify myself with the protagonist of a story, I *live* his feelings and actions without having to act myself. Thus I may be able to experience life situations, events, and emotions that I would not normally have. Through a good novel, then, we are given the

chance of living through an experience that provides us with the opportunity of gaining insight into certain aspects of the human condition.” (p. 70)

This potential to evoke experience through description is at the core not only of literature and phenomenology, but of the Dzogchen pointing-out tradition as well.

One of the more compelling features of the Dzogchen tradition is the radically non-dual nature of its teaching, in terms of the message, the medium, and the practice. As described above, according to Dzogchen, the non-dual awareness that is the nature of mind is not something to be constructed anew, but rather is already fully present and able to be recognized in this moment. In their attempts to point out this liberating truth, masters of Dzogchen were keenly attuned to the evocative and transformative power of language - the capacity of words, symbols, and instructions to not only articulate their own deep contemplative understanding, but to actually bring forth this same understanding in the minds of their students, such that they could rest as the open awareness that is itself non-meditation. In this respect, pointing-out instructions and accounts of realization are uniquely phenomenological texts already.

As mentioned, I addressed my first set of research questions through hermeneutic phenomenological analysis of Dzogchen texts and the pointing-out experience, which have been designed precisely to allow the reader/listener to live through an experience which serves as an opportunity for “gaining insight into certain aspects of the human condition” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 70). In so doing, I sought to explicate the view of self, time, suffering and liberation embedded in Dzogchen and to utilize the findings of these inquiries to better understand the healing effects of non-reactive present-moment

awareness in psychotherapy and in general. Below, I lay out the method I used for the project.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology as Procedure

Hermeneutic phenomenology has no set method - rather, the “how” must be found anew with each study, making phenomenological researchers “perpetual beginners” (Van Manen, 1990, 2007). This is not to say that phenomenology is not a rigorous or particular approach. Rather, it acknowledges that no single approach is suitable for all phenomena - what *is* common to all research under the umbrella of hermeneutic phenomenology is the sensibility and manner of engagement described above.

That being said, the elemental methodological structure of hermeneutic phenomenology involves an interplay between four activities, which Van Manen (1990) articulates: “a) turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world; b) investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it; c) reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon; d) describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting” (p. 70). The diverse forms that these activities can take speak to the complexity and richness of lived experience itself, as well as to the contingent nature of a given project of research.

To recapitulate the thrust of my research, the phenomenon in question is non-reactive present-moment awareness, specifically as an agent of transformation and liberation, and as non-dual presence, the nature of mind. This project also explores the process of sharing this liberating dimension of experience via language, which has been elevated to an art form in Dzogchen. Lastly, I consider how the views and methods of

non-dual contemplative practice might intersect with the phenomenon of non-reactive present-moment awareness leading to change in psychotherapy. Each of these phenomena call for its own exploration, though the findings are intended to meet and play off one another.

For this particular project, given the inherently relational nature of the pointing-out experience, I felt called to go beyond solely analyzing Dzogchen texts, and to work one-on-one with a teacher who is thoroughly familiar with the Dzogchen tradition, the non-dual dimension, and its transmission. Despite their inherently evocative nature, my sense was that the texts would lose an aspect of their potency and intended purpose if they were related to only as texts, rather than as instructions shared in dialogue. This also allowed for the possibility of exploring convergence between psychotherapeutic and contemplative conversations as dialogical practices.

To this end, I arranged to receive the pointing-out instructions from Dr. Peter Fenner, Ph.D., an Australian non-dual teacher. Dr. Fenner studied as a monk for nine years in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and has a Ph.D. in the philosophical psychology of Mahayana Buddhism, in addition to having been a student of a number of noted Dzogchen masters, such as Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche and Sogyal Rinpoche (Fenner, n.d.). Over a period of 40 years, he has worked to distill the essence of non-dual traditions such as Zen, Dzogchen, and Madhyamika Buddhism and to adapt them to suit post-modern, psychologically informed contemporary culture (Fenner, n.d.). He currently offers trainings that adapt non-dual contemplative wisdom to mental health professionals, teaching the principles and practices for a non-dual psychotherapy. I have worked with Peter over the last four years, most recently participating in his 10-month Natural

Awakening course, which is designed for people who wish to share non-dual awareness as a teacher, coach, or psychotherapist with individuals or groups (Fenner, n.d.).

As the nature of mind is considered the same for all, and attempts to point it out emphasize direct experience of one's own nature, I complemented my analysis of the Dzogchen pointing-out instructions with my own emergent understanding and experience of these instructions and Peter's commentary upon them. I then considered in detail what these texts (the Dzogchen instructions, Peter's commentary, and my own account) might suggest about subjectivity, temporality, suffering, and healing.

My method, then, was as follows:

I set aside 30 minutes to rest in present experience, free from distraction. I began by following my breathing and then released the focus of my attention from pre-occupation with objects or goal-oriented concerns. This is a common preliminary step in many Dzogchen introductions to non-dual awareness, intended to help students settle their attention and ready themselves for intimation of the nature of mind.

After this period of sitting meditation, I connected with Peter Fenner over Skype. He read and expanded upon canonical pointing-out instructions, non-meditation instructions, and descriptions of the nature of mind from the Dzogchen tradition while resting in "the natural state" himself, consciously presencing pure awareness and articulating it from within so that I might recognize it in my own experience. As sources for this stage of the method, I drew upon established works from seminal figures in the Dzogchen tradition - Padmasambhava, Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche, Ngedön Tendzin

Zangpo, Chetsangpa Ratna Sri Buddhi, and Mipham Rinpoche. Over the course of 11 sessions, Peter and I explored one pointing-out instruction from each of these five teachers. He commented upon these texts from his own experience, and engaged with me in dialogue to help bring these instructions to life.

Afterwards, I set aside 20 – 30 minutes to contemplatively explore how these descriptions might apply to my own experience or transform it in any way - that is to say, I treated these descriptions as spurs for meditative and phenomenological inquiry, attempts to evoke or show something essential yet overlooked about my own awareness. This entailed contacting my intuitive appreciation of “the essence” of the text and how it pertained to my own moment-to-moment experience, and articulating this in open, unedited, and experience-near writing. I also described any confusion regarding the passages, or divergence between the instructions and my experience. This corresponds to the student’s typical role in the method of Dzogchen instruction, as well as to Van Manen’s phenomenological analysis of texts.

Subsequently, I read through all three sets of texts - the instructions, Peter’s commentary, and my experience of these – to gain a sense of the material as a whole. I then re-read them, specifically examining each session for passages with terms pertaining to subjectivity, temporality, suffering, and the liberation from or transformation of suffering; words such as self, I, me, you, mind, time, past, present, future, suffering, freedom, etc. When I encountered such terms, I highlighted these passages. Next, I looked for recurrent or interwoven themes from such passages across the different texts,

and drew upon these to articulate what these descriptions might be saying about subjectivity and temporality. Specifically, what do they suggest about non-reactive present-moment awareness? The findings of this analysis took the form of a description of four key themes, with illustrative quotes, and with some interpretation/description of each theme as well as how the various themes are interrelated with each other. My goal was to arrive at an understanding of non-dual awareness and temporality grounded in contemplative experience and articulated in evocative, experience-near language.

In the final, Discussion section of the dissertation, I consolidated my findings and considered their potential relevance to the theory and practice of psychotherapy. In order to do so, I related the different themes which emerged from my analysis to diverse proposed components of effective psychotherapy. I explored the therapeutic relationship, the client's relationship to experiencing, and the client's shifts in understanding in terms of the process of pointing-out instruction and the reality revealed therein. In so doing, I sought to highlight the different ways in which effective psychotherapy might already implicitly draw upon a non-dualistic understanding of subjectivity and temporality. The Discussion, then, is an attempt to apply the aforementioned contemplative and phenomenological analysis of the Dzogchen texts to the continuing conversation around mindfulness within psychotherapy. In my Conclusion, I briefly and in broad strokes consider what an explicitly non-dual psychotherapy might entail, although a fuller consideration of this topic is a matter for a future project.

The main aim of the current work, then, is to develop a deeper understanding of present-moment awareness and its healing capacity which is both experience-near and

grounded in the non-dual view of Buddhist psychology. Additionally, I consider how this understanding might clarify the phenomenon of psychotherapeutic change. In order to fulfill these aims, I worked closely with a non-dual teacher in a pointing-out capacity, phenomenologically analyzing non-dual contemplative texts, his commentary upon them, and my own descriptions of the experience. Subsequently, I applied the themes that emerged from my analysis to a consideration of different components of effective psychotherapy, suggesting different ways of conceptualizing the change process, as well as further lines of inquiry and practice. The next section introduces the Results of my analysis.

Results

Introducing the Results

In what follows, I present the results of my study. As discussed in the Methods section, the analysis explored the pointing-out texts, their explication by Peter, and my own phenomenological descriptions of working with Peter in a pointing-out capacity, considering what these might collectively suggest about subjectivity, temporality, suffering, and liberation. Four interwoven themes emerged from this inquiry, which articulate the view and practice of Dzogchen in terms of the aforementioned areas. In this chapter, I present these four themes in depth, articulating the experience of pointing-out instruction and non-dual contemplation along the lines of Van Manen's (1984) suggestions for structuring phenomenological writing: doing so thematically, analytically, existentially, and through example. These different modes will, hopefully, cohere for the reader in an evocative and elucidative manner.

While unfamiliar and even radically challenging in several respects, my Results suggest that the way of being indicated by pointing-out instruction speaks to the question of what is healing about "being present with experience" at a fundamental level, and in so doing can cast the notion of present-moment awareness in a new light. In the Discussion chapter, I consider the implications of this distinctive understanding for the practice of psychotherapy.

In the interest of orienting to the Results, there are three main points that might be helpful to keep in mind while reading. The first is that the different themes and their components are essentially descriptions of experience and invitations to appreciate its features, not ontological claims. The themes are sourced from contemplative experience,

and so their truth value has less to do with establishing a framework of conceptual absolutes than with their ability to convey and facilitate recognition of liberating aspects of subjectivity. While countless pages have been written by Buddhist philosophers developing nuanced proofs regarding the very topics I explored in this project, my own writing is primarily intended to exclaim rather than proclaim. If certain statements seem to speak in such a definitive manner, this might be seen as an attempt to express the sense of authenticity and clarity that tends to accompany the non-dual recognition. In each case, however, these words are pointing to lived and living “truths,” not objective or static ones.

This chapter presents the experiential findings of the research as results, not conclusions. The point to bear in mind here is that, at least in the exposition of the Results, I am neither seeking to challenge nor dialogue with a philosophical tradition *per se*, but rather to highlight possibilities for experience. Philosophical objections to or convergences with the different themes are thus secondary from the point of view of the themes themselves. Indeed, these could only arise from the conceptual mind, which is relaxed and seen through in non-dual contemplation. This is not to denigrate the critical intellect, which is, of course, a crucially important tool for purposes of this work and in general; rather, it is to suggest a way of reading and relating to this section of the text which is perhaps unfamiliar, particularly in an academic work.

Although some of what follows may seem like a claim to be doubted or agreed with, the Results, like pointing-out instructions themselves, are offered in a spirit of invitation and exploration. With respect to actually tasting non-dual awareness, rather than theorizing about it, it may be useful to gently notice any such comparative, dubious,

or approving reactions to the material, recognizing these as thoughts and allowing them to relax into the silence within which they appear. What does this silence actually have to say about ontology, epistemology, or anything else? While much has been written about this silence in the current project and many others, in itself it says nothing; as far as the Results are concerned, that says it all. While the aforementioned reactions of agreement and disagreement are important for the work of thinking through the project's findings, the silence around them, while often overlooked, is actually more significant for experiencing them.

Secondly, and following as well from the contemplative context of pointing-out instruction, it is important to bear in mind that the Results emerged from and describe an experience of working in a deliberate, specific, and rather uncommon way with subjectivity. This is not to say that they do not apply to the more familiar basics of daily life such as romantic relationships, work, and friendships, the challenges of being human such as loss and mortality, or the various sociopolitical, economic, and ecological injustices which call for the attention and care of each one of us – far from it. The Dzogchen tradition is steadfast in its insistence that the fruits of practice are intended to transform our day-to-day lives and our ability to be of benefit to the world. Nevertheless, even as it is in no way separate from the rest of life, pointing, indeed, to its very essence, contemplative practice is typically expressed in a form which seems distinct from other, more habitual activities. This is all the more true of Dzogchen, which suggests a view of self and world that is truly radical in its distinction from the commonly held understanding of what comprises a life.

In this sense, working with Peter, like contemplative practice in general, was an opportunity to explore experience in a more refined and deliberate way, something like an experiment in a laboratory, a workout at the gym, or, indeed, a psychotherapy session. In our meetings and the texts, the mind itself - which is present throughout all of our experience - was related to in relative isolation, such that some new and different appreciation of it could come into the picture. In the course of reading the results, then, it might be helpful to bracket or put aside questions of how the material does or does not relate to other areas of life. In this way, you yourself can experiment with the pointing-out instructions. Just for the moment, you are here, with this text and your own awareness; the insights that emerged from this study have a better chance of resonating within you and actually making a difference in these other areas if allowed to touch you where you are, rather than where you have been or might be.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, these Results are not intended to relay information in the ordinary sense. While the findings of my analysis are articulated through examples, logical reasoning, and analogies, what they point towards is not something to be figured out, gotten, or retained. Instead, the Results might be opened to, settled in, or received as a catalyst for release. I have tried to have the text be cohesive and coherent within itself, but the fact is that its subject matter cannot be captured with words; the words are not the point, only what the words may allow. As I hope to show, non-dual contemplative texts are less about purveying new knowledge than pointing to the openness, presence, and silence that is already here, typically overlooked in our thought-fueled quest to arrive at understanding.

Thus, I encourage you to read meditatively and at a pace to allow for percolation of insight. If you notice yourself getting bored, glazing over, or breezing through the words, you might take a break from reading to refresh your energy and return to the text freshly. The sense of feeling like we already know what is being indicated can obscure such freshness, and may call for a release of this stance, if only momentarily, into the keenly attentive and vulnerable presence of mind necessary to experience something new. If you find yourself reacting against the material, it could be useful to pause and reflect upon what is being stirred, what is speaking within you, and to allow this to dialogue with the text rather than remaining stuck in a stalemate of disagreement or resistance. Likewise, if you find that something touches, relaxes, or awakens you in some way, please take some time to be with whatever so moved you, to attentively allow this shift to blossom and deepen. Feel free to make the experience of reading your own, and to weave back and forth between your own experience and the text, with an eye towards your own, perhaps subtle, responses.

Again, this is not to disqualify the role of intellectual understanding, but rather to highlight and allow for a different kind of understanding, often obscured by our habitual tendency to narrowly focus on and unquestioningly believe in the thinking process. In the subsequent chapters, there is ample theoretical consideration of the possible implications of the Results, but pointing-out instruction itself is not essentially intended as food for thought.

Much of this chapter may seem repetitive, but such repetition is ideally in the service of highlighting, organizing, and communicating a radically different way of being and knowing ourselves. Indeed, we may appreciate just how many times in the course of

a single day the dualistic point of view is massaged into us through numerous interactions – in comparison, these Results are like a crack in a dense wall, offering a glimpse into another world (which turns out to be a mirror, showing us ourselves!). That being said, however, all that is needed to facilitate recognition and relaxation into the nature of mind may be a single sentence; whichever words speak to you are your own to discover.

I will next provide a brief overview of the structure of the themes, before moving on to the themes themselves.

Prelude to the Themes

In this section I detail the structure of my findings, describing the relationship between the themes, Peter, the texts and I. One of the more basic findings of my analysis was that altogether, the themes expressed distinguishable yet seamlessly integrated facets of a single way of being. Rather than being discrete, static entities that Peter explicitly designated, joined together, and verbally presented, I encountered the emergent themes first and foremost as interconnected aspects of a living and dynamic process, which Peter simultaneously embodied, modeled, and evoked in relation to my own experience. There is something of a paradox in referring to the themes as expressions of a process; a crucial feature of Peter's presence and Dzogchen contemplation involves relaxing investment in temporal distinctions, cause-effect relationships, and the related goal-oriented efforts to change or maintain experiences over time. Even more to the point, there can be no process to arrive at what is already the case.

Thus, it might be more precise to speak of the themes as belonging to a mode or style, which itself expresses an abiding condition or fundamental feature of experiencing. At this point, however, it will suffice to say that the themes not only link up with or bleed

into each other, but mutually imply one another - each theme was complete, yet holistically connected with the others in a manner which itself functioned as a transmission or introduction to “the natural state.”

Insofar as the themes cohere in a mode of experiencing from which subject and object are conceptually derived - the pure activity of knowing/being, which is lively, dynamic, and cannot be grasped - I found it most appropriate to conceive of and render the emergent themes as verbs. As this mode is often described in Dzogchen as “fundamental,” “innate,” and “original,” and is also intuited as such experientially, these verbs could be construed as dynamic movements of relating to basic features of lived experience. This is in keeping with the basic phenomenological shift from the “what” to the “how” of appearance - from the perceived object to the act of perceiving - as well as with the long tradition of inquiry into what Van Manen calls lifeworld existentials or fundamental existential themes, the open-ended yet universal structural components of “the intricate unity we call the lifeworld” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 105). While different theorists have proposed varying lists of such existentials, the current study is oriented around and investigates the relationship between the basic themes of time, self, knowing, doing, suffering and liberation, elemental facets of experience that are particularly relevant to the question of what role present-moment awareness plays in psychological healing.

Most generally, the movement underlying the different themes could be described as one of shifting to and operating from a different ground than that of the typically taken for granted mode of subject-object relationship across time. In contrast to this foundational conceptual structure, which perpetuates itself through self-referential

reification, effort and contrivance, non-dual presence rests upon the groundless ground of unstructured awareness, which is radically distinct yet inseparable from the field of manifestation. The natural expressions of this formlessness and immediacy - not-knowing, non-doing, profound intimacy and simplicity - can, to an extent, be appreciated as deconstructive of the more fabricated way of being. This is reflected in the fact that many of the themes are phrased in the negative, as is the very term “non-dual.”

Looking more penetratingly, however, it might be recognized that in the realm of the non-dual there is neither knowing nor not knowing, doing nor not doing, neither relationship nor individuality, neither simplicity nor complexity - from the non-dual point of view, there is no different ground; the journey is one of no distance at all. Indeed, the verbs should not be taken as extended in time at all or as leading from one position to another, but rather as expressions of the ineffable intersection of time and timelessness that we call “this moment.” From the perspective of there being a journey, though, my decision to articulate the themes as verbs was intended to better reflect its contours, transitions, and overall flow, giving a sense of the relationship between one state and another, between Peter and I, between subject and object, and so on. In addition, I felt that this form would be more amenable to analysis of the therapeutic process.

As touched upon above, another essential component underlying the unity of the themes was the way in which Peter, and to a lesser extent the texts themselves, embodied and effortlessly evoked this way of being for me; it was as if Peter’s very presence was an invitation to recognize the non-dual, not as an intellectual insight, but rather by finding myself in that same state. In this respect, there was no division between Peter’s presencing of the non-dual, his transmission or introduction to the nature of mind, and the

spontaneous shifting of my own experience as I “caught” what he was describing and expressing. This speaking from, as, and to non-dual presence was palpably spontaneous and without intention or contrivance, without any lag-time between being, knowing, and doing; indeed without being, knowing, or doing anything in particular. In this way, what I describe below as transmission could be seen as an effortless expression of non-dual presence itself.

In addition to this more fundamental point about non-dual presence - the fact that it can be shared simply through being - it is worth emphasizing the extent to which working with Peter brought the written pointing-out instructions to life. The texts took on much greater evocative power and experiential depth within the medium of relationship, to the point where my original sense of their meaning from simply reading them beforehand was, in hindsight, truly limited by comparison. I will discuss the significance of such relationships below, considering possible connections and resonances with psychotherapeutic relating.

The distinction is complex and I will discuss it in greater detail below, but I will say at this point that before working with Peter I generally engaged with the pointing-out texts as though they were exhortations encouraging me to notice certain features of my present experience and somehow – intentionally - focus on or delve into them, thus catalyzing some liberating transformation. In contrast, Peter *embodied* the non-dual in his way of being, his speaking, and his silence. Without urgency or intent, in intimately attuned shared presence, he simply related to me and the texts as though the non-dual nature of mind/reality was at once utterly immediate, evident, and incomprehensible. In this way, he released me from searching for anything, and my ideas about what I needed

to know or do naturally dissolved. In this non-referential relaxation, I found myself effortlessly riding along on the instructions, taken out of the mesh of my pre-conceived ideas and sharing Peter's state almost despite myself.

Peter's commentary on the texts was certainly illuminating, yet perhaps most evocative for me was the non-verbal transmission that occurred in our sessions. It was this relational, experiential modeling which most powerfully induced in me the ineffable taste of the non-dual, allowing me to familiarize myself with a way of being that I otherwise might never have discovered, and which was different than I could have imagined from working with the instructions on my own. Additionally, Peter's warm patience, sensitivity, and curiosity towards my own experience of the instructions, and his regular encouragement to articulate where I was finding myself, gave a whole other dimension to the process, allowing for me to clarify and further deepen my appreciation of the non-dual in real-time dialogue.

Having described the manner in which the themes cohered as dynamic, interwoven facets of a way of being that Peter embodied and evoked in our relationship, I will next delineate the specific themes, and then elaborate upon what they might suggest about awareness, temporality, suffering, and liberation. In the Discussion and Conclusion, I will address the themes' potential significance for psychotherapy as is currently practiced, and as might be practiced differently.

Theme I: Recognizing Immediacy, Being Immediate, Freefall without Motion

Being Present as Presence

A key theme to emerge from the texts involved being with experience in its immediacy - "being present" beyond any distinction between oneself and the present;

indeed, beyond oneself or the present in any ordinary sense of these words. The term immediacy is intended here to denote not only a lack of separation between oneself and time, but also between subject and object, and between conditioned, composite phenomena and the formless, unconditioned awareness pointed out in Dzogchen as the nature of mind. In a sense, all of the themes I will discuss follow from the coincidence of these three dimensions, habitually obscured by the conceptual boundaries between them which underlie suffering. Each theme explores a different facet or implication of this immediacy, often in contrast to the more familiar mode of separation. In what follows, however, I will explore the theme of *Immediacy* in its own right, considering its role in pointing-out instruction and non-meditation.

In keeping with the non-separation of immediacy, Dzogchen conveys the immediacy of non-separation; the inescapability of this sheer presence, always already the case. With no distance between the beginning and end of the path, between the seeker and the sought, the “going beyond” or “being present” mentioned above is not so much a doing as a simultaneous recognition of and relaxation into the way things are. Indeed, recognition of the so-called natural state, which is the intended function of pointing-out instruction, is facilitated through the cessation of effortful striving to arrive at a future state of realization, which could only reinforce the perceived separation between the domains articulated above. Ultimately, the immediacy of Dzogchen does not even entail a recognition *of* or relaxation *into* anything *by* anything; it just *is* the way things are. In this way, the immediacy described above is itself immediate, here and now.

The different iterations of *Immediacy* that will be discussed in this theme, are, therefore, expressions of the basic non-separation of this moment. This ordinary moment,

now: words on a page and some perception of a room; reading, breathing, warmth; thoughts percolating, sounds - all just here, effortless and obvious. Whatever is happening is intimately and simply present, just as it is. This that is happening now is, of course, neither the past nor the future. Nor is it even the present, as something wedged in-between these. This does not arrive from elsewhere; it is already present, already here, as what simply *is*. It is ongoing, unfolding, yet abiding as just this. An easy glance might highlight that it is all inseparable - one seamless, alive appearance, just here, now. The sounds are distinct but not separate from the words, which are not separate from the sensation of the body against its seat. We might inquire: is anything actually excluded from this here-now-ness? Even something seen in the distance is equally vivid and present here, in this moment. Trying to remove anything from *this* is futile, like trying to move our hand out of space. Finding nothing beyond, “the here and now” might settle in to its own inherent spaciousness.

In its natural seamlessness and boundlessness, this very moment is as though self-luminous - not known by something other than or outside of itself. In *this* moment, already here all at once, is there actually any division or otherness such that we could separate knower and known? To appreciate the lack of any such separation is to taste the way that this very experience gently yet fully saturates itself, right through the place where we had presumed there to be a boundary between us and it. There might then arise a simultaneous sense of vividness and relaxation, as what is collapses into what is, traversing no distance.

Is there really a gulf between this moment and ourselves, an apartness of two things to be bridged by a thin shaft of knowing? Or is this whole experience already

naturally radiant through and through, softly gleaming with its own light? In the directness of this experience, is a separate someone reading these words, or are the words simply here, fully a part of what is? Are the sounds heard from afar, or are they occurring as though right in your midst (or you in theirs...?), known without an intermediary? If there is some feeling of being centrally located in the head, looking out, is this sensation truly knowing everything else, somehow? Or might it just be known right where it is, another facet of this single indivisible wholeness? Is it possible invite this contracted sense of a knower to relax - in its own way and on its own time - into the naturally alert capacity to notice what is happening, present all throughout and around your body?

In lieu of “you” as the knower, then, there is only the innately wakeful presence of the moment itself, without an outside. Too close to itself – too immediate - to be known as an object, this presence has no structure, no limits, nothing in itself that can be grasped. It is like space, present only as openness, as no-thing, but nevertheless aware.

Despite the fact that “the knower” cannot be grasped or known, there is no need.

Knowing is undeniably present as the very reading of these words, glancing up to look at something, sitting in a seat, thinking about this; each disappearing fully into the next like a fist into an open hand.

The knowing with which this experience is illuminated is in itself dimensionless, yet full to the brim with aliveness. And there is no brim. Search as we might, “inside” and “outside,” we simply cannot find any place where knowing ends and some other thing called the moment begins; there is just the luminous, open presence of awareness, appearing precisely as the seamless tapestry of everything seen, touched, thought, without budging an iota from itself. Knower and known are like the sides of a coin; though they

may appear separate, tracing our way from one to the other, we find that they are not two. This expanse, the effortless completeness of present-moment awareness, is the territory explored in Dzogchen and described below.

This Awareness, Here Now

In indicating the inherently timeless, selfless, non-dual nature of what is usually called the present moment, the instructions typically begin by directing the listener towards the here and now, the only place they can ever actually be. As Padmasambhava points out, “past consciousness has disappeared without a trace; future realization is not yet arisen; and in the freshness of its own present, unfabricated way of being, there is the ordinary consciousness of the present” later, he rhetorically asks, “when it is this very consciousness of the present, what do you mean ‘I do not recognize it [the nature of mind]?’” Commenting on these lines, Peter highlighted the relaxation implicit in appreciating the ever-present nature of awareness, saying: “don’t be trapped by thinking that this moment of awareness is different from awareness; awareness can never be other than present-moment awareness. We can never be aware of a moment of awareness that’s past. We can never be aware of a moment of awareness that’s still to come. So just relax around the whole notion of ‘present-moment awareness,’ just take that really lightly, don’t get into it with the philosophical mind.”

In his piece of instruction, Jamgon Kongtrul says: “Don’t look elsewhere for the Buddha. It is nothing other than the nature of this present awareness.” The recognition that awareness - “that which knows” experience - is ever-present initiates the disintegration of any separation between past, present, and future, between oneself and some other entity known as a moment, and between one’s current state of mind and some

future goal to be attained. In this way, present-moment awareness is not only the gateway to, but part and parcel of non-dual experience; awareness is innately present, the present is innately aware, without an intermediary. Commenting on the experience of sharing this ever-present awareness with Peter, I wrote “here and now (but with no there and then...),” “this moment is all that is... there’s nothing outside the moment,” and finally “this moment is aware of itself.”

Not Finding: the Supreme Finding

Once the intrinsically present nature of awareness has been indicated- the fact that the present moment and awareness are not two different things, and awareness must “always” be here now- the instructions generally exhort the listener to turn awareness back on itself, so to speak, and thereby notice that awareness is at once immediately evident and yet cannot be found. In this looking and not finding, there is a collapse of any distinction between looker and looked at; awareness thereby appreciates its own totally open essence.

Tendzin Ngedon Rinpoche instructs the listener to “look without distraction at the naked self-clarity of this present moment of awareness... It is clear, yet ungraspable...It is inherently radiant, yet cannot be identified.” Similarly, Jamgon Kongtrul says to “look directly into the naked, empty nature of thoughts; then there is no duality, no observer, and nothing observed.” In the words of Padmasambhava, “when it stares at itself, with this observation, there is a vividness in which nothing is seen.” Peter described this observation as “a non-observation,” elaborating that “to say ‘it stares at itself’ is an impossibility; there is no separation, there aren’t two different types of awareness such that awareness can see itself. There is a looking, but there is no duality. There is no

subject and no object. There's nothing to be cognized - nothing to be known - and also there's no knower. So we are in a way using awareness recursively or reflexively to recognize itself, but that's not a dualistic process. It's more like a self-recognition, a recognition of this that we can call awareness. We're aware of awareness, even though we can't point to who is aware, what we're aware of, or what that cognizance is. We know, even though we can't find the knower."

Anything we would land upon in the search for that which knows, any *thing* we could find at all, would simply be another thing that is known - "a superficial ripple of present awareness," as Jamgon Kongtrul puts it. Awareness itself - our own essential being - has no form of its own; it never appears as an object to a subject, for that would simply push back the question of the knower indefinitely. Nevertheless, there is a vivid quality of knowing present even in the absence of a knower; it then is as though we know ourselves as knowing itself. Peter explicitly used the term "immediacy" to refer to the fact that "there's nothing mediating, nothing lying between (us and) the reception of pure awareness...we have a sense of immediacy; it's right there."

This direct "looking" at the mind with the mind itself is characteristic of Dzogchen, and informs the view that is shared in pointing out instruction. Awareness, that which knows whatever is known, is undeniably, vividly present, yet can never be found. Indeed, as is often said in the tradition, "this not finding is the supreme finding" (Gyatso 2010); it is the threshold of the discovery that the mind is naturally and already limitless. As Padmasambhava exclaims, "Astonishing! The ongoing cognizance and luminosity called 'the mind' - exists! But it does not exist even as a single thing." Jamgon Kongtrul elaborates: "present awareness is empty, open, and luminous; not a concrete

substance, yet not nothing. Empty, yet it is perfectly cognizant, lucid, aware. As if magically - not by causing it to be aware, but innately aware - awareness continuously functions. These two sides of present awareness or rigpa - its emptiness and its cognizance - are inseparable. Emptiness and luminosity are inseparable.”

Chetsangpa approaches the mind’s unfindability from several angles - substance, form, source, location, and destination; however, he is careful to add that the mind is not simply non-existent, but rather radiantly and inexhaustibly aware. He says: “it is void, without inherent self-substance and is free of all conceptual elaboration. At the beginning, mind itself is without source and so is void. In the middle, it is without resting place and so is void. At the end, it has no destination and so is void. Mind’s essence cannot be grasped as this or that, and so it is void. It is without form and color, and so is void. This voidness is not an empty annihilation, for mind’s natural clarity is pure and all-pervading.” Mipham Rinpoche articulates this non-duality of knowing and emptiness poetically, saying “without limit or center, it is like space; in its unlimited clarity, it is like sunlight flooding the sky.” From my first session with Peter, with respect to the unfindability of that which knows, I jotted down the simple note: “aware space, aware nothing.”

The Implications of Formlessness

The intrinsic formlessness of awareness - of you yourself - has profound implications. Being without shape, size, or substance, “the knower” of experience transcends any and all qualities by which we usually identify ourselves - age, gender, nationality, the form of our embodiment or the contents of our mind. Typically, we identify with these various appearances, whether they are outwardly recognizable or

inwardly felt as mental states, and yet awareness itself cannot be identified with any form. That which is without form cannot be limited, damaged, or obstructed in any way - neither can it be created, grasped, or enhanced. What would be lost or attained? Only some form, some appearance. With nothing in it to be improved, awareness is complete, and with nothing in it that can be harmed, it is indestructible. In several of the instructions, the innate awareness that is pointed out is described as “unborn,” “ungraspable,” and “undying.” In its formlessness, awareness cannot be located either in space or in time, for what is it that would be “in” one place, one time, or any other? Thus, Dzogchen emphasizes that the awareness that is the nature of mind completely transcends the realm of causally conditioned appearances; it does not stand in relationship to anything whatsoever, as there *is* no “it” to connect or compare with anything else.

Ultimately, however, this transcendence arrives at a paradox: some “thing” that is utterly without form or substance cannot be separate or different from anything at all, for what is it that would be different? The no-thing-ness of that which knows is not something standing apart from or in opposition to whatever is known; no such distinction is possible, because there is nothing in awareness itself to be distinct from this very experience. Having no limits, there is no place where “you” end and experience begins, or vice versa; there is no inside or outside to awareness. Indeed, as experiences have no existence apart from awareness, awareness is an essential quality of experiences themselves, rather than being something separate from experiences that would know them from the outside. As Peter put it, “we have a field of appearances manifesting...coextensive with awareness; there’s nothing where there are no appearances manifesting, there’s nothing where there is no awareness. So it’s a totalizing

experience; it consumes all our experience- it touches or covers the experiential field, the phenomenological field...Awareness and appearances are indivisible. They seem to be radically different, yet the field of appearance, that is multiple and divisible, is inseparable from *this* [pure awareness], in which there are no defining characteristics and nothing that can differentiate this from anything else.”

Still, it cannot be said that the knower and the known are simply the same, because there is nothing in or about awareness itself that would be the same as anything; in my notes, I often described awareness as “nothing” or “a black hole,” writing after my second session with Peter: “thoughts and perceptions are happening, but nothing is also happening.” One may think, then, that the emptiness of awareness is a sort of empty space through which experiences move- indeed, Dzogchen contemplative texts often describe awareness in such a way. This notion of awareness as a boundless space which hosts experience features in a number of my session write-ups. I described the experience as “skylike - rock solid, immutable, unmoving space, all-inclusive but in itself including nothing,” and “vastness - imperturbable, everywhere and nowhere, resting in itself. Can’t budge it, everything is equally contained within it.” I wrote that “thoughts and senses float through space,” and also described the experience of working with Peter as “like falling through space.”

Additionally, I often spoke of awareness as being akin to silence - “a vast, limitless silence,” “a vibrant silence,” “the silence behind sound,” “the silence around thoughts...into which thoughts dissolve.” Thus, it may seem as if awareness is the unmoving background that is inseparable from yet somehow “behind” experiences. In my sessions with Peter I often had the sense of expanding into a limitless openness, which I

described as “sinking into openness; relaxing out of self,” “floating in space, everywhere and nowhere,” and “falling back/open.” After our sixth session, I wrote that “the limited ‘I’ thought is consumed in vibrant silence.”

However, this distinction disintegrates as well; it cannot be said that experiences are within awareness, as there is nothing there for them to be in. Again, there is no possibility of separating awareness from experiencing. Indeed, resting in the spaciousness and silence that Peter was sharing, it was as if the boundary between myself and the world was dissolving; there was not space-like awareness on the one hand and experiencing on the other, rather, as I wrote: “behind and in front of my face are the same nothing/space” and in another session, “same as behind and in front of eyes, just one seamless whole.” Groping, perhaps, for some way of rendering the ineffable, it might then be said that everything is suffused by awareness; in several of my session write-ups, I noted the “paradox where everything is permeated by nothingness,” describing it as “a depth to everything; everything shines with suchness,” adding that “ease permeates life as one whole,” “stillness permeates things,” and awareness is like “peace seeping in to everything.”

Going even further into this collapse of distinction, one could say that experience is made of awareness, that awareness naturally and effortlessly knows experiences by being them, or that experience is nothing other than awareness. Just as light does not need a separate source of illumination, but simply and naturally *is* illumination, it could be said that experiencing *is* the knowing of experience, awareness itself; life becomes or is revealed as a vivid play of appearances lacking solidity or substance. In my notes, I often spoke of experience as being “lit up innately, from within” to try describing the

recognition of awareness. In this vein, I commented on the “heightened presence of things in the environment,” which at the same time was a recognition of the insubstantiality of experience itself - as I put it, “perception becomes like hollow light forms;” “experience is like a light show... light and space at the same time,” and simply: “appearances of light.”

Attempting to articulate this deeper recognition of inseparability or immediacy, I described awareness as “just (the) isness of life,” and wrote that “this moment *is* awareness of awareness.” During our third session, I shared with Peter that the single, all-inclusive field of awareness/experience was like “one boundless ocean...the wetness isn’t in any one part.” In my sessions with Peter, the experience of life would often gradually collapse down to shining, intimate appearances within a vast spaciousness. I also described this boundless experiential field as a “matrix” or “dream,” intending to connote the seamless “between” awareness and its contents, and the way in which this renders our reality a virtuality, an appearance without substance - or one whose substance is only itself.

The metaphor of dreaming and related practices of “Dream Yoga” are frequently used in the Dzogchen tradition, as dreams (at least as lived) are an apt example of a seamless world of experience with no outside. In a dream, every character and event is a spontaneous appearance of the mind, occurring only “within” the mind, and known intimately by the mind itself without separation - no part of the dream world possesses any objective existence, and no part or character is closer to or farther from the mind of the mind of the dreamer than any other. In fact, within the dream itself, there is no separate dreamer, there is just the luminosity of dreaming; as I wrote: “there’s nothing

outside or behind just this - no perceiver, just perceiving,” or, it might be said, no dreamer, just dreaming. With no subjects or objects, this dreaming “occurs” groundlessly, in free-fall - a dream *is* the knowing of it. Beyond any interpretations we may superimpose upon it, experience - whether waking or dreaming - is essentially a holistic, boundariless play of ungraspable, self-luminous energy.

Speaking to, or from, this baseless, mirage-like, and yet vivid nature of perception, the Dzogchen tradition often refers to all experiencing as “vision” or “apparition,” indicating as well the inseparability between experience and the mind that experiences. As I will elaborate upon in another theme, this immediacy of subject and object revealed the intense but diaphanous directness of experience which is usually cloaked in concepts; for example, rather than an object called “I” relating to the idea of a “book,” a “chair,” or a “floor” through something called “seeing,” the direct experience of sight is simply incandescent color with no inside or outside, like a self-aware painting made of space. This intimate glow was appreciated as being much like taste or touch, occurring “in me”... but with no me! It was as though in seeing something, I became that thing looking at myself, without a separate substance to either the thing or myself.

It perhaps bears repeating, after these multiple iterations of the nature of mind and experience, that the awareness in question is one’s own essential being - whatever is reading these very words - and that such re-formulations of the relationship between awareness and experience are different ways of experiencing one’s self and world. After one session with Peter, I took down the notes: “being nothing, being everything, being ordinary,” and “there’s no you, and this is all you.” At this point my writing proceeds with a sort of enthusiastic stammering, attempting to express the impossible. I wrote:

“everything = nothing;” “presence = nothing;” “this is nothing/everything aware of itself;” and “everything and nothing are one whole... one field, naturally aware of itself- ‘your’ awareness/presence *is* the awareness/presence of every ‘thing’ - no center or periphery, boundless, just this, aware of itself, here and now.” And yet, even this final formulation cannot resolve the paradox, for how is it that nothing can be the substance of anything at all, let alone everything? If we are true to the formless nature of the knower, it is neither the same as nor different from anything.

Expressions of Non-Duality

At last, then, any relationship between awareness and experience breaks down into ineffability; the formless knower and the vividly appearing known are neither one nor two, leading me to exclaim after one session: “*this* is it- but we can’t say what this is.” This being unable to make a distinction is characteristic of the non-dual. In my notes, I wrote many times of being left speechless and thoughtless, unable to articulate the situation, but with no need whatsoever to do so. As Mipham Rinpoche proclaims: “in the end, it is beyond all expressions, such as: it is all and everything, it is not all, everything lies within it, or does not, and so on.” In the face of the unfathomable, falling silent is perhaps the most we can say.

Though they may erroneously connote spatiality, materiality, or containment, Dzogchen instruction often makes use of the analogies of a mirror and its reflections, the sky and its phenomena, and a crystal ball and the images appearing within it to indicate the non-duality of formless awareness and experience. The cognizant emptiness that “we” are is simultaneously transcendent yet inseparable from the seamless and all-inclusive experiential manifold. The terms “display,” “manifestation,” “radiance” and

“appearance” are likewise intended to evoke recognition of this situation; experiences are recognized as dynamic expressions of awareness, which itself is not experienced.

As Jamgon Kongtrul exclaims: “nothing whatsoever, yet Emaho! (amazing), everything is magically experienced. Simply recognize this. Look into the magical mirror of mind and appreciate this infinite magical display.” Padmasambhava’s instruction also draws upon the analogy of a mirror and its reflections to point to the intimacy between awareness and experience. He says: “it (the nature of mind) manifests as both samsara and nirvana and as a myriad of joys and sorrows... Clear radiant emptiness appearing everywhere without impediment... Recognize all appearances as self-appearing. Self-appearing phenomena are like reflections in a mirror.” Experience, like an image in a mirror, is a single seamless whole that cannot be broken apart into disconnected components. Furthermore, just like a reflection cannot be separated from a mirror, appearances cannot be separated from their “container” and “substance”: the knowing awareness that is our nature. As appearances are expressions of awareness, experiencing the world is like seeing our own reflection in the mirror, except in this case we *are* the mirror.

Ngedon Tendzin Rinpoche’s instruction evokes the non-dual by describing awareness as “lucid, yet without inside or out;” that which is without inside or outside can neither be the same as nor different from anything else. Highlighting the inseparability of awareness and experiences- the manner in which the world of experience is the display of our own mind, he adds: “however your mind may manifest, rest in that as the radiance of awareness... the self-clarity of phenomena which never waver from the state of awareness, just as birds can never escape space, wherever they

may fly.” Chetsangpa’s instruction also collapses the distinction between awareness and experience, between nothing and everything, exhorting the listener to “take whatever arises as the object of meditation. Don’t put appearance outside, don’t keep awareness inside. Appearances and awareness are inseparable, so maintain the direct clarity that is free of inside and outside.” As Mipham Rinpoche says, “this rigpa, which has no concrete existence as anything at all, is completely unobstructed in the arising of its self-appearances...without clear inside and outside, it is like a crystal ball.”

Similarly, Peter said that in awareness “there’s no filter...including the filter that creates self and other, inside and outside, in here and over there.” In another session, he said “a limit creates an inside, but it also creates an outside, so the limit is not a limit; whatever we’d call a limit (to awareness) is utterly, totally arbitrary and meaningless...it does nothing. It’s like imagining drawing a line in space and thinking that it means something in terms of inside and outside. It means nothing whatsoever...and similarly, there’s no center, because a center implies a point that’s equidistant from a limit; there is no limit, so there is no center. There is no point that’s equidistant from anything in the vast expanse of awareness.” With no inside, outside, boundaries or center, awareness abides in non-dual relationship with all experience. Insofar as the presence of awareness is what we call “the now,” this boundlessness radically challenges our ordinary conceptions of temporality.

The Nature of Mind as the Nature of Phenomena

This inherent lack of separation or difference means that the qualities of formless awareness described above- unborn, ungraspable, and undying- paradoxically apply to the precise display of appearances as well. Thus, it is often said in Dzogchen that “the

nature of mind is the nature of everything” (Sogyal Rinpoche, 1992); indeed, the natural state pointed out in Dzogchen is not only the unconditioned nature of the mind as such, as though it were other than the realm of manifestation. Rather, the direct introduction of Dzogchen shares and *is* this holistic co-arising of subject and object, absolute and relative, everything and nothing.

The shared emptiness of mind and phenomena can be understood in several ways. In keeping with the broader tradition of Buddhism, Dzogchen acknowledges that all appearances are conceptually designated, contingent, and composed of infinitely divisible parts; therefore, just as with the mind itself, no substantial essence can be found within the realm of manifestation. To quote Peter, “there is nothing happening- not one element of the play of appearances- that’s not governed by pratityasamutpada, by causes and conditions. So it *is* just precision, meticulously precise, exquisitely co-ordinated.” In other sessions, he phrased the same fact as follows: “nothing can be found as one with its parts or separate from its parts;” “you can make infinite distinctions, but none are substantial or real;” and “if we look for anything, we can’t find it.” As Chetsangpa puts it: “everything possible appears, but without inherent self-substance.” Though it may appear otherwise through lack of examination, phenomena such as chairs, mountains, songs, countries and the like are just as unfindable and empty as awareness itself (Dalai Lama, 2004); the search for an essence to phenomena arrives at the same openness as when the mind searches for the mind, which I experienced as a “transparency to everything.”

Another aspect of the ungraspable nature of appearance has to do with the aforementioned fact of subject-object non-duality, which was discussed at length above. We can never know things objectively, as they are in themselves; all that can ever be

known is thinking, feeling, and perceiving- experiencing- which is the expression, the “self-appearance,” of empty awareness. As Peter said in one session, “the manifold universe has no foundation or root because it is the display of awareness.” Chetsangpa puts it thus: “mind itself is the maker of all samsara and nirvana...(it) shows many illusory forms.” Regarding the inescapability of experience, I wrote “everything is sensation, perception; the world is reduced to appearances in awareness and then just awareness.” In other sessions, I wrote “life is just sensory experience in infinite space,” “the experiential field is like endless ocean,” and, simply, “experience is everything.” Insofar as this is the case, we never encounter an independent reality of solid, separate, material things; we inhabit a seamless and insubstantial world of experience.

The Fourth Time of Timelessness

Crucially, the illusory or empty nature of experience also has to do with its atemporality. Again, past experiences are gone, alive only in present memory; future experiences have not yet arrived, existing only in anticipation and imagination; accordingly, experiences can *only* be present- the only time anything can ever happen is in the present moment. Thus, present experience intrinsically contains and is in a sense cut off from the past and future that thought typically imagines to surround it; being totally on its own, it is boundless and all inclusive. There is no experience that does not occur “now,” and no point in time when “now” begins or ends - it is “always” now. This timeless presence is awareness itself. This is to say, this timelessness is what “we” are, and “what is;” we cannot find a boundary between “us” and “this moment,” neither can we find any boundary between “this moment” and “this moment.”

However, possessing no boundaries is equivalent to possessing no duration; we might recognize that “present” experience, despite vividly appearing, is itself ungraspable - being ever-present, “the present” is at once ever-vanishing and ever-fresh, to the degree that the utterly spontaneous arising of an experience is totally inseparable from its disappearing without a trace. Although they vividly manifest, upon examination the experiences that we call “present” are themselves unfindable, something like a mirage; this experience is already gone, and a new experience is already dissolving in its place.

This dimension of experience became palpable during my sessions with Peter. I described it as “floating in timelessness,” saying that “time appears to pass in timelessness,” eventually collapsing this distinction to “timeless, strobelike flashes of present moments with no depth or duration;” “moments strobing, arising-dissolving simultaneously resulting in nothing, no movement.” In another session, I wrote: “the moment dissolves instantly, it *is* dissolving,” and in another, radically: “there is no present moment.” I likened this ineffable non-separation between the apparent passage of time and the boundlessness of the moment to “motionless freefall;” “always already here, already gone - always just this.”

This union of timelessness and time, encapsulated in the perpetual simultaneity of appearing and vanishing, is pointed out in several of the instructions. Padmasambhava uses the images of a river’s flow and the movement of clouds through the sky to illustrate the spontaneous atemporality of non-dual reality. He says: “the arising and release of thoughts are simultaneous... Uninterrupted awareness is like the current of a river.... All signs, or objects of mind, are certainly released in their own state, right where they are. Self-arising and self-releasing, like clouds in the sky.” Mipham Rinpoche makes use of a

common Dzogchen image to describe non-dual experiencing, that of the flight path of a bird in the sky, which has neither past, present, nor future: “in its freedom from clinging and attachment, it is like the traces of a bird in flight.” Chetsangpa encourages the listener to “maintain the self-arising, self-liberating directness free of grasping. Maintain the simultaneity of arising and liberating. Without grasping, stay loose and free. Without fixing on any object, keep flowing. Unborn, flowing, flowing. Unceasing, flowing, flowing.” Another analogy frequently used in Dzogchen to describe the uncrystallizing nature of experiencing is that of “writing on water,” which dissolves no sooner than it appears (Dalai Lama, 2004). This natural and ongoing dissolution of experience is profoundly liberating; it means that problems dissolve on their own, and each moment takes care of itself. As I repeatedly acknowledged in different ways throughout my work with Peter, everything “goes on on its own, no problem.”

The diaphaneity of experiencing is ordinarily interpreted as impermanence, rapid movement along a linear continuum of past, present, and future; however, to do so would be to miss the boundless, durationless nature of presence. Just as it is baselessly assumed that the knower is some sort of thing separate from experiencing, the apparent flow of time is, upon examination, another presumption. As Peter put it: “the magic of it [experience], the mystery of it, is that it’s constantly changing, but we can’t find arising in the moment- arising is something that’s happening in time and we don’t have access to the past or future.” Indeed, the atemporal nature of the non-dual confounds such basic notions as experiences changing, remaining the same, appearing or disappearing.

To quote Peter at length: “it’s clear at the level of awareness that it’s unborn and undying, because there’s nothing to be born, nothing to die. But when we look at

appearances, we can see that it equally applies, the characteristic of being unborn and undying....we cannot see any moments being born, it's like an inference that we make, it's always an inference; we can't directly experience it. We infer that because there is a difference between this moment and our memory of something that preceded it, we infer...that things are changing and something new is coming into being, and something that was here has gone out of being. But moment by moment, there's no time for this moment to come into existence. There's no time for this moment to go out of existence and be replaced by anything else. In fact, there is no time for this moment - it has no endurance as well." As I put it in one session: "time passing is just a timeless sensation." The timeless openness and "stillness" of awareness, then, the fact that "nothing is happening," equally applies to the vivid experiences which are its display; this ever-present, atemporal dimension is the so-called fourth time, beyond past, present, and future.

In summation, the immediacy pointed out in Dzogchen is simultaneously an immediacy of subject and object, formlessness and form, timelessness and time, all intrinsic to the nature of what we call the present moment. In the other themes and Discussion section, I expand upon how the structure and mood of Dzogchen practice express the liberating impact of discovering that this reality is always and immediately present. With respect to this theme, however, the immediacy of "taking the goal as the path" (Dalai Lama, 2004) involves a relaxation of investment in temporal distinctions and the structure of past-present-future; as we are already here, spontaneously present, there is no work to be done - no anticipation, seeking, or if-then causal action over time. What is pointed out in Dzogchen is just this, not even one moment in the future, so no mind is

given to duration. Peter referred to this as the “futility of trying to create something beyond what’s manifesting in the moment.”

Indeed, a core feature of the work with Peter was the sense that we were not going anywhere, not in any hurry whatsoever. There was no lag time between where we were and where we wanted to be, because we were precisely nowhere, and with nowhere to go. His tone was often leisurely, at ease, as though on a permanent vacation- he described it as “working in eternity.” Without struggling to get into the moment, into awareness or non-duality, we simply rested in what is, spontaneously and intimately sharing, or rather, *being* this all-inclusive and ungraspable moment. He spoke from immediacy, with immediacy, to the immediacy of what was happening, indicating the nature of mind and reality as though it were effortlessly already present. Our conversations were in this sense traceless; I often had the sense that Peter’s words, and even Peter himself, were dissolving into silence even as they were being spoken, inviting me to do the same. This silence was simply present as the nature of this moment, with no way to enter it, no possibility of leaving it, and no effort to remain in it. It was as though on the course of a long journey, one were to gently come to a stop and look back, only to find that all of their tracks had disappeared. With no path, there is just the utter completeness of this here and now - the home we’ve never left.

Theme II: Letting Go, Letting Be, Being Complete

Unwinding the Mechanism of Suffering

Another central theme to emerge from the analysis revolved around surrender, acceptance, and the dissipation of suffering. Perhaps due to the seemingly infinite diversity of its manifestations, or maybe because it is so familiar and visceral that it

seems an irreducible given, we often overlook the fact that all suffering arises as the expression of a single condition, namely, resistance to things as they are. While it often seems that the causes of our suffering lie in situations outside of ourselves, this perception misses the basic fact that whenever our experience falls outside of our own self-defined parameters, we suffer; we suffer because we have preferences and needs, and automatically struggle when these are thwarted in even a minor way. This resistance necessitates - both creates and follows from - a rift, a gap, which is twofold; it involves separation between ourselves and this moment, and between this moment and another moment. The experience of suffering *is* simultaneously feeling and acting as though what is happening is happening *to* us, that we don't want it to be happening, and that we want something else to be happening.

Part and parcel of this gap are our efforts to get somewhere else; as long as we are not there, there is effort to get there, and as long as there is effort to get there, we are not there. There is therefore a self-fulfilling - or rather, self-unfulfilling - quality to all of our varied attempts at relieving suffering - convinced that we/things are somehow incomplete in this moment, we invest our energy in projects large and small, managing experience so as to arrive at a future state of satisfaction, typically without recognizing that this itself is the very definition of suffering. There is, then, a vicious circularity in the way that we tend to relate to experience - the notion that it needs to be improved affirms that it is not complete, and demands that we make further effort to improve our situation, with the resultant struggle and strain keeping us from being with things as they are. In this way, we continually create a path for ourselves which can only grow longer with each step. Like a carrot dangled before a horse, the goal is always at least one moment away.

However, the radical claim of non-dual contemplatives is that the whole dilemma is like an illusion, based upon the conceptual constructions of subject and object, past, present, and future. Dzogchen contemplation is, in a sense, predicated upon seeing and being beyond these constructions and the resultant struggle with what is.

The Dzogchen tradition suggests that we suffer, fundamentally, as a result of experiencing ourselves as separate, as some vague yet distinctly limited thing, not synonymous with but rather somehow “behind” the utter seamlessness of experiencing. The certainty that we are separate reinforces the feeling of separation, usually held in the head, face, throat and chest, which in turn reinforces the certainty - another loop. Undoubtedly, this expresses an old habit of contracting and reacting against life as something other than ourselves, which we innocently learned to do from our youth to the present. The feeling of being separate is simultaneously a sensation of something missing, something wrong, something needed, and our effort to find it or fix it somehow; it is a full-bodied attempt to do the impossible – to get out of this moment and into another one. Separation, then, is not a noun, but a verb. It is an activity of seeking, resisting, and possessing experiences, which, as we have seen, can relax, uncoil, and dissolve into the ever-present peaceful openness of the moment. Struggling against the feeling only exacerbates it; furthermore, this sensation (or sensing) need not be interpreted as either a self or a problem - it is just another feature of this vast, self-luminous field, already gently held within total fullness and rest. If it may seem to be a center, where is the circumference to which it refers? Does experience have an edge, an outside?

Indeed, logically as well as phenomenologically, we can appreciate that there is no separate behind, within, or beyond experience; no limits to space and no separate knower apart from a known. There is simply this seamless, boundless space of knowing, inseparable from the vivid display of life. Resting in effortlessness, in not finding and not seeking, we settle in to the full, integrated experience of the body at peace, which in turn naturally clicks into place with the rest of the environment (the place it has never left). The certainty as well as the sense that anything is separate relaxes into sheer intimacy with the moment, which is revealed as the wholeness and simplicity of presence itself. The tightness of self-contraction mingles with a soothing and utterly benign openness: our own, which is already here and inseparable from this immediacy. We naturally fall silent, and this silence joins into the encompassing and vibrant silence of what is.

In this quietness, in the fullness and presence of this moment, we may wonder: apart from our thoughts about it, is anything actually wrong or missing? Is there anywhere to go? The simplicity of this experience being just as it is expresses an abiding acceptance, not of this moment by a separate self, but rather of life by itself, naturally and already. The total reception and allowance of experience is always already done for us, so to speak; this moment is already accepted – here it is. The ceaseless struggle to get ourselves elsewhere simply has no traction when there is no separate self and no elsewhere; there is just the innate completion of what is: luminous and intimate. This fundamental openness, fullness, and rest, intrinsically present without effort, is in a sense synonymous with the nature of mind that is pointed out in Dzogchen. It is one reason why the tradition and the reality it shares is known as “the great perfection” or “complete fulfillment” (Fenner, 1994). Recognizing and relaxing into our inseparability from this

ever-present wholeness can gently eclipse any sense of need, and without striving for or getting anything at all, we are complete.

As there is no work at all to be done in recognizing the nature of mind, our various efforts to escape suffering and secure fulfillment can naturally unwind. With this relaxation comes a softening of the usually rigid sense of separation between subject and object, past, present, and future. An imperturbable background of aware openness may seem to come to the fore, permeating everything. In this way, introducing the nature of mind can also be understood as sharing a pressureless and problem-free way of being – as each of the texts suggest in their own way, there is nothing to do or undo when it comes to accessing the fulfillment of the non-dual. Thus, the recognition of immediacy is also the recognition of a profound non-doing, non-interference, and plenitude that is “always” here, but overlooked in our efforts to arrive.

Resting in the Ever-Present Nature of Mind

In order to undercut the “disease of striving” (Norbu, 1990), the texts often explicitly declare the futility of attempts to create or attain that which is already effortlessly present. They highlight the fact that there is no distance to travel in order to arrive at mind itself, and point out that it is inseparable from this very experience. In this section, I will elaborate upon the theme of rest as a letting go of contrivance and effort, and a letting go *into* an acausal and non-dual condition of contentment and freedom. I will begin with quotations from the Dzogchen instructions, and then include portions from my own experiential writings.

Jamgon Kongtrul’s text deliberately collapses the distance between the beginning and the end of the spiritual quest, so as to facilitate the cessation of effortful seeking. As

he puts it, “your mind won't be found elsewhere, it is the very nature of this moment-to-moment thinking... you find present awareness, right where you are.” He goes on to assert that the ultimate state is “nothing other than the very nature of this uncontrived, ordinary mind;” he says: “don't look elsewhere for the Buddha. It is nothing other than the nature of this present awareness.” Throughout his instruction, Padmasambhava also repeatedly points out that the essence of Dzogchen, “the primordial nature of being,” “is your very own present consciousness.” As he says at various points in his text, “it is just this direct awareness,” “it is just this uninterrupted clear awareness,” and “it is this very consciousness of the present.” In this same vein, Ngedon Tendzin Rinpoche points to “the naked self-clarity of this present moment of awareness,” and Mipham Rinpoche affirms that one’s own mind is “cognizant by nature, spontaneously present, and all-pervasive and unobstructed.” Insofar as non-dual awareness is already present at no distance as the very nature of this experience, introduction to the nature of mind deconstructs the core mechanism of suffering - the tendency to grasp at objects imagined to be separate from ourselves and the moment.

Another aspect of this dismantling has to do with the inessentiality of effort, indeed, of any activity at all, with respect to being aware (or rather, being awareness). The instructions repeatedly speak to the way in which awareness, being without boundaries in terms of space and time, is naturally and primordially present. Awareness is not constructed; in fact, it does not come into being at all, but rather is always fully “here” regardless of what is happening, inseparable from whatever appears. Neither can awareness be lost, as there is nothing in it or to it that would go out of existence; only forms can seem to change or disappear. Furthermore, awareness demands nothing from

us in order to be so - this is just how it is. Thus, from the point of view of Dzogchen, we need not concern ourselves with the usual attempts to manage or struggle against reality; experientially, reality itself is aware, and this intrinsic awareness - the natural luminosity of everything - is what “we” are.

The metaphor of the sky is often used to indicate the timeless presence of awareness, this “something” that is not a thing; the sky is undoubtedly and vividly “there,” abiding without coming or going, and yet it is a sheer absence - invisible, ungraspable, and without substance or location. Mipham Rinpoche says of the nature of mind that “neither arising nor ceasing, it is like the sky;” and likewise Ngedon Tendzin Rinpoche points to mind as “naturally luminous and unchanging...self-awareness...vivid, vibrant, and clear, like a cloudless autumn sky.” Padmasambhava is explicit in saying that this sky-like awareness has nothing to do with what we do, and is not generated or caused to appear by anything whatsoever. He says: “it is spontaneously self-arisen, without causes or conditions...self-arisen...self-illuminating.” Likewise, Chetsangpa unequivocally states from his deep experience that “the natural condition of one’s own mind is primordial, uncontrived and effortlessly arising. It is not made by the meditation of the Buddhas and it is not affected by the stupidity of sentient beings. Mind’s original nature does not depend on causes and conditions.”

That the aware nature of our mind does not depend upon causes or conditions means that in a fundamental sense, there is no work for us to do; we cannot help but be this immanent awareness. In Jamgon Kongtrul’s words, since mind itself is already aware “as if magically, not by causing it to be aware, but innately aware,” and it “continuously

functions” such that “everything is magically experienced,” there is thus “nothing else to do or undo” other than to just “let it remain naturally.”

Indeed, as the goal is the very nature of what is, each of the instructions advocate relaxing involvement in imaginary journeys across time and settling with utter simplicity into this moment as it is. With nothing needed, nothing to do, and nowhere to go, we can simply rest. Jamgon Kongtrul asks rhetorically: “why chase after thoughts, which are superficial ripples of present awareness?” and encourages the listener to instead “simply rest in this transparent, non-dual present awareness. Make yourself at home in the natural state of pure presence, just being, not doing anything in particular.” He contrasts this non-doing with the ordinary mode of striving and struggling with appearances, which only leaves one exhausted, confused, and “chained, entangled in the barbed wire of hope and fear;” conveying the total uncomplicatedness of resting in the moment, he continues: “don’t spoil it by manipulating, by controlling, by tampering with it, and worrying about whether you are right or wrong, or having a good meditation or a bad meditation. Leave it as it is, and rest your weary heart and mind.” Anything that we could think to do with respect to awareness is superfluous, merely an expression of the awareness that is already shining as this moment. In inviting the listener to make themselves at home in the state of pure presence, Jamgon Kongtrul indicates the naturalness, ease, and comfort implicit in Dzogchen contemplation; being “at home” is a seamless condition of easy, contented resting into ourselves and our surroundings just as they are.

In his instruction, Ngedon Tendzin also explicitly invites the listener to rest. He draws upon images of phenomena that are, like the mind itself, naturally and already in a state of repose. He clarifies that in order to presence the nature of mind, we need do

nothing more than “rest like a mountain, steady and immutable. Rest like the ocean, still and clear. Rest like space, infinite in breadth.” Like Jamgon Kongtrul, Ngedon Tendzin also contrasts this state of rest with the ordinary mode of grasping at or resisting what is, engaging with the content of our minds in an active attempt at control; he advocates instead just leaving the mind alone, saying: “do not indulge your thoughts or try to rein them in.” In another theme, I will elaborate upon the implications of this radical non-doing for the process of cognition, but the significant point here is that Dzogchen contemplation appreciates a fundamental relationship between non-duality, relaxation, and allowing mental activity to be as it is.

Typically, we relate to thoughts in terms of an ongoing effort to grasp problems and solutions; even more basic than the content of our thoughts is this process of trying to control our thinking in order to secure satisfaction and avoid suffering, thereby enacting the self-perpetuating dilemma described in the section above. Fundamentally, however, the satisfaction, suffering, and related efforts just mentioned are predicated upon and perpetuate the belief that we exist as a thinker separate from thought, or an experiencer separate from experience. Dzogchen contemplation entails the natural unwinding of this vicious circle. The confidence that there is nothing we need to do in order to presence awareness unifies and settles the mind, ordinarily scattered in its quest for relief and fulfillment, and we rest naturally, without second thought. There is thus a deepening recognition that the familiar approach to thinking cannot yield liberation - that in fact, there are no problems to solve in this moment. Moving further into stillness, towards the core of this unraveling, it is realized that there is not actually a separate self to solve problems or have them. This is perhaps to say too much, as the movement is only

apparent, and the insight is an appreciation of what is already the case; insofar as non-duality is this immediacy, it is completely present here and now, without activity or process.

This cognitive non-doing is found in each of the instructions. As in the lines of Ngedon Tendzin above, Chetsangpa similarly encourages the listener to “stop the activities of your body, voice, and mind;” again, this stopping is at once a simple abiding in and as the presence of awareness, and a relaxation of investment in temporal and subject-object divisions. He says: “do not pursue past ideas. Do not wait for future ideas. Keep your present awareness free of all artifice, letting it flow easily in its own fashion. Do not modify it with good thoughts. Do not mix it with bad thoughts. However it presents itself, do not modify it in any way.” This instruction removes the core building blocks of separation, thereby dismantling the mechanism of suffering. Perhaps more accurately, it could be said that Chetsangpa is simply evoking the innately liberated nature of mind and experience. His instruction should not be taken as a chastising list of “do’s and don’ts;” as he says clearly, no artifice or modification is involved. All that is needed is to relax and let things happen just as they do, which is what’s happening already. The non-referential resting of Dzogchen contemplation thus points to a crucial connection between letting go and letting be; letting go of our usual more or less frantic efforts to secure fulfillment means letting this moment be as it is, and vice versa.

Throughout his instruction, Padmasambhava is also explicit that the mind’s lucid, spacious, non-dual awareness is already totally available without mediation, or, for that matter, meditation. In keeping with the other instructions and the Dzogchen tradition in general, he advocates an uncontrived abiding in and as non-dual awareness, rather than

any deliberate form of meditation. I will discuss the nuances of this unique approach to meditation in greater detail below, but first I will share Padmasambhava's comments on resting in the nature of mind. As he says at different points in the text: "there is nothing here to meditate on," "there is nothing at all to do," "it is enough to leave it in its own unstructured state," and "it is enough to let it be, without doing anything." These statements function as an incitement to let go and let be, as well as a spur to insight into the nature of mind - they point out the effortless, unfindable awareness that precedes, subsumes, and outshines all activities of the apparently separate self; in this way, they also express the simultaneity of "practice" and "realization" in Dzogchen. Again, this all follows naturally from the aforementioned theme of immediacy, the fact that our ordinary mind and experience is already Buddha-mind, therefore we need not try to get anywhere or produce anything other than what is already here. We can just give ourselves over to this moment and, as I put it in one of my write-ups, "rest in space."

Certainly, rest was a recurrent and important theme throughout my own experiential writings. Working with Peter, much of the time my eyes were closed in a state of contented ease, and some of my written comments were as simple as "mm" or the single word "rest." I described the experience of presencing the non-dual as "marinating," "basking," "luxuriating in silence," and "resting like a piece of meat." As I will elaborate upon in a subsequent theme, cognitive non-doing featured into my own writings as well, which I spoke of as "resting - relaxing back from any point of view or thought." I affirmed that from within the space indicated by Peter and the texts, it became clear that I "don't need to think so much." This relaxation of the mind was also a "relaxing of [conceptual] boundaries, relaxing into boundlessness," a process I described as "resting

in naked awareness, deconstructing being someone going somewhere.” In my write ups, I referred to what Peter was sharing as the “uncontrived natural state: no self, no problem,” available simply through “relaxing from the default state/tension of trying to get somewhere/being ready to do something.” Thus, this resting was non-referential, not simply a relaxation of the body, but a relaxation of the mind and world as well; ultimately, it was a relaxation of the (non-existent) subject-object relationship, as everything rested into itself.

Fundamentally, this resting back from frantic activity or into deep ease followed naturally from the fact that Peter and I were concerning ourselves with awareness itself. Awareness cannot be made or revealed, because it does not have any substance or components in it. Neither can it be lost, because there is nothing within awareness itself to lose, or even to obscure. We can think that it is lost, but that is simply a thought occurring within awareness, a display of the very “thing” that we think is missing. Certainly, we can feel as though we are not in a space of completion, but this is not necessarily evidence of reality. It is just a feeling of frustration or lack, itself a manifestation of the field of awareness, which has no boundaries and no objective qualities that would indicate its presence or absence; if we are true to the nature of the non-dual, there is no one to be “in” such a space anyway - there are only appearances which can be reified as a self or seen through as expressions of the basic luminosity of “this moment.”

Thus, our conversations unfolded within a context of supreme ease, relieved of all struggle by the recognition that there is “nothing I have to do or can do in order to generate this,” the “this” in question being pure awareness, which Peter shared as the

immanent and unfindable nature of this moment and my own being. I described this aspect of non-dual awareness as a condition of “no impulses, no needs, no incompleteness,” not a matter of creating anything anew or constraining what is present, but rather a totally spacious, unconstructed, and ever-available space of “not doing, not needing to do, being without pressure” within which everything effortlessly unfolds.

Crucially, non-dual awareness does not become manifest simply through restraining activity, or “doing nothing” (as if that were even possible). Rather, it is beyond the dichotomy of activity and inactivity, and requires nothing in order to be fully available; if it did, it would not be unconditioned, but rather an objective phenomenon or state. Thus, even the dualistic mind’s contrived attempts to obtain pure awareness by *not* doing anything are rendered unnecessary. In sharing this condition of “not having any work to do,” Peter’s transmission (and that of the other Dzogchen contemplatives) indicates the “acausality” of awareness, the fact that it is timelessly “here” - everywhere and nowhere - regardless of what appears to be happening or not happening.

Indeed, a core component of Peter’s work is what he calls “deconstructing the path.” From one perspective, this entails heightened sensitivity to and suspension of the tendency to get caught up in reified causal frameworks - stories about where we are, where we want/need to be, and what we need to do in order to get there. These notions underlie our limited identities and Sisyphean pursuit of fulfillment. Typically, such frameworks are taken for granted and thus rendered invisible as well as opaque - they can be as complicated as an entire religious system or as simple as disliking a sensation and wanting to be rid of it. In any case, however, suffering, resistance to what is, and attempts to get elsewhere in the future are simultaneous/inseparable, and perpetuate the cycle of

separation described above. Inasmuch as, to quote Peter, “presencing the nature of mind has nothing to do with what we do,” this usual mode of seeking fulfillment in terms of cause and effect relationships is naturally cast in relief when abiding as the total spaciousness of “our” nature, which requires nothing and can neither be gained nor lost. From the perspective of non-dual awareness, then, such deconstruction doesn’t involve doing anything in particular - neither paths nor their deconstruction can be found except as ungraspable ideas, expressions of presence. The experiential fact that this moment, just as it is, is all there is, and is “already aware from within” without a separation between us and it, cuts through the convoluted cycle of seeking and dissatisfaction. There is nothing to get and no one to get it - as I exclaimed several times in my write-ups: “*this is it!*”

The experience of this recognition was one of “going nowhere, nowhere you need to go. Just being with this;” I spoke of it as “not getting involved with cause and effect,” “not seeking,” and “needing nothing” - the acausal essence of natural presence liberated me from “needing to do anything/figure anything out/go anywhere/attain anything,” leaving me in a state of “no struggle,” just “being simple” and not looking for anything beyond just this.” After one session, I described the experiential introduction as “resting in simplicity, ordinariness, obviousness - life is already aware from within.” The basic fact that this state of completeness and ease is effortlessly ever-available led me to wonder after some of the sessions: “how do I miss this?!” Of course, Peter and the Dzogchen tradition would reply that the Great Perfection is an open secret, concealed precisely by our agitated efforts to attain it, made under the false assumption that it is missing. Indeed, I noted that “the less you care and struggle, the more normal and ordinary you are in this moment, the deeper the bliss and resting.”

The Meditation of Non-Meditation

Presencing the non-dual, then, unfolds at the razor's edge between "practicing" and "not practicing," while transcending both. The Dzogchen tradition uses the language of non-meditation in an effort to stay true to the effortless, innate, and spontaneous nature of mind itself, which "abides" beyond subject and object, and is apparently shrouded by "our" causal-temporal attempts to meditate on "it" as a thing. While clearly distinct from the ordinary dualistic mind, which is distracted by its own projections and reacts to them with attraction and aversion, non-dual awareness is not a product of practice, and is not synonymous with the effortful mindfulness of a subject attending to separate and transient objects. If there is any practice involved with presencing the nature of mind, it is one of naturally recognizing and familiarizing oneself with the ever-present dimension of total openness, which displays itself as this seamless, spontaneous play of appearances - less about making anything happen than settling in to what is already here, being with what is already happening. This fundamental letting go and letting be has implications for how meditation and spiritual practice itself is understood in Dzogchen, which I will elaborate upon below.

Throughout the instructions, the different teachers presented Dzogchen "meditation" as nothing more than abiding within the recognition of the non-dual awareness that has been pointed out as the mind's nature. Chetsangpa explicitly states that "the maintenance of this view is known as meditation;" elaborating, he exhorts the listener to "maintain the direct clarity that is free of inside and outside....Maintain the self-arising, self-liberating directness free of grasping. Maintain the simultaneity of arising and liberating." As Ngedon Tendzin puts it, "simply maintain recognition of this

ungraspable self-radiance.” Again, Dzogchen practice is a matter of familiarizing oneself with one’s own awareness, which is already here as presence itself, and already inseparable - indeed, indistinguishable - from this ungraspable display of seeing, hearing, sensing, and thinking which comprises our experience of life. What we ordinarily think of and relate to as the flow of time is the dynamic expression of our being, ever-present awareness. Insofar as this state of affairs is naturally already the case, non-meditation is, in the words of Jamgon Kongtrul, “simply sustaining the luminous nature of this present awareness...simply sustain[ing] present wakefulness, moment after moment.” This emphasis on simplicity and directness is an expression of the aforementioned immediacy of the non-dual, which maintains itself.

In several of our sessions, Peter highlighted both the subtlety and the effortlessness of this “meditation of no-meditation, or natural meditation, uncontrived meditation,” in which “meditation is just happening of its own accord.” He pointed out that the state we were sharing, being formless and acausal, transcended the conceptual structure of meditating vs. not meditating - “the belief that there must be something to do, or wondering if this is meditation, or am I doing it right, etc.,” indeed, that it went beyond “thinking that we can start it and we can stop it.” In this way, it is “an unfindable practice.” And yet, he said, non-meditation is distinct from being “totally engaged and involved in our everyday reality - attraction and aversion, likes and dislikes, [in which] our actions are being shaped by our preferences.” Peter described this state as being “distracted” and “caught up in the complexities of samsara,” while acknowledging that in fact, “we can never be distracted from [non-dual awareness], because there is nothing in

this to be distracted from.” In one session, he described this paradox as “not being distracted by the impossibility of being distracted from this.”

Thus, Peter affirmed that sustaining the recognition of the nature of mind entails “an effortless discipline which isn’t a discipline,” and “a mindfulness that’s not being attentive to anything, that’s not mindfulness in contrast to anything else; it’s a mindfulness that can’t be found, yes, but maintaining that mindfulness.” Ultimately, he said, “there’s nothing more required than to be ‘here’ and to recognize that this is a type of mindfulness that comes into the picture, but it’s a mindfulness in which there’s nothing to be mindful of, which has no intentionality or focus in it.” This is clearly a radically different notion of mindfulness than that which is currently being implemented in psychotherapeutic practice. Rather than attending to separate objects for a fleeting present moment in order to arrive at a state of calm focus, it involves the dissolution of attention itself into an objectless, abiding presence, which effortlessly shines as the boundlessness of life living itself. I described this “unconcentrated, nonintentional mindfulness” as “stark presence, maintaining nothing.” This maintenance of nothing is, more accurately, non-dual awareness’ maintenance of itself, which I simply found myself *being* during my conversations with Peter.

From within this ever-available space in which “meditation is just happening,” I wrote that “whatever is happening is meditation.” From the point of view of Dzogchen, meditation is just reality appearing as it appears, experience unfolding however it unfolds; indeed, all there is is meditation, without beginning or end, without a meditator or object of meditation. Insofar as it is already occurring, non-meditation makes any and all doing, and even the do-er itself, redundant. There is nothing more to do than “just ride

along on the natural state,” which ultimately cannot be done, and which does not look like anything in particular. Without a reference point for the meditation - without a concept of doing it right or wrong - there cannot be an obstacle, and apparent experiences of bliss or displeasure are neither successes nor failures. In the absence of any state to attain, wherever we are is complete. Ultimately, life is always living itself, and Dzogchen contemplation is a matter of recognizing and familiarizing oneself with this fact.

Ending the War with What Is

The “practice” of non-meditation thus points to a radically different relationship to reality, indeed, to a radically different reality than the one we typically believe ourselves to inhabit. At the same time, however, it does not oppose ordinary life; in its natural openness, it eclipses “the ordinary” so fully, yet so gently, that a distinction between ordinary life and perfection cannot actually be found. Within this paradox lies a precious possibility - that of deep, unassailable peace. Peace not as a product or attainment, but as a dimension of - as the very nature of - what is. The discovery made in direct introduction and non-meditation that we do not need to make a problem out of anything, that we do not in fact need anything, can revolutionize the way that we engage with “our” life; this insight, this way of being, can ripple outwards, touching everything. Non-meditation has no boundary, such that it blends seamlessly into life itself, foregrounding the fact that neither possesses any obstacles or incompleteness, and that wholeness is spontaneously ever-present. In this way, it is as though life motionlessly clicks into place, revealing itself as never having been any other way. This insubstantial shift makes all the difference; it is the surrendering of our habitual opposition to life as it is.

Although the very notion of deepening into immediacy is a contradiction, we might go further into impossibility and attempt to construe this shift in terms of three distinct elements, or simultaneous phases. The realm of the unconditioned, awareness itself, is formless and acausal; thus, it requires nothing in order to be established or maintained, and transcends any attempts to do so. Unstructured awareness is already here as no-thing, like boundless space. The realm of the conditioned - the “contents” of awareness - in being seamlessly interconnected, co-determined, and transient, need not and cannot be managed, and includes any attempts made to do so; whatever is appearing has, in a sense, already happened - it just is as it is, and its form inevitably takes care of itself completely by itself. Lastly, the realm of the non-dual, in which the conditioned and the unconditioned are inherently undivided, is already present as “this moment,” and therefore belies any need for integration or access, while expressing itself in the very search for such access; there is no need to combine cognizant openness and the infinitely precise display of forms, because there is no boundary between them, like a rainbow and the sky. Life is already a self-luminous, ungraspable play of appearance, which lacks nothing, but readily accommodates ideas of lack or imperfection. Again, while the aforementioned may seem abstract or merely paradoxical, these realities - this reality - call for a subtle mode of practice beyond obstacles or attainment, which was indicated in each of the instructions and evoked by Peter’s words and presence.

From within the space of non-duality, Ngedon Tendzin Rinpoche encourages the listener to make the distanceless leap into what is. He instructs: “However still your mind may be, rest in that as the state of awareness. However your mind may manifest, rest in that as the radiance of awareness...Rest in the self-clarity of phenomena, which never

waver from the state of awareness, just as birds can never escape space, wherever they may fly.” In collapsing the distinction between awareness and phenomena, and disabusing the listener of the notion that it is possible to exit or enter this non-dual awareness, he points to non-referential non-meditation as the very nature of experience, dissolving seeker, search, and sought into whatever appears as this moment. As Padmasambhava affirms, the natural state is “clear radiant emptiness appearing everywhere without impediment... Simple, singular, complete.” In being all inclusive, presencing as whatever is happening regardless of what is happening, knowing the nature of mind itself unravels the usual mode of experiencing some phenomena as barriers to fulfillment and others as desirable or necessary - we no longer concern ourselves with the endless project of manipulating our experiences, because we are no longer separate from them, and there is nowhere to get to through such efforts.

Chetsangpa concurs. In his instruction, he directs the listener to “keep your present awareness free of all artifice, letting it flow easily in its own fashion... However it presents itself, do not modify it in any way.” This is not simply a letting go of effort and contrivance, but a deep letting be, borne of or interwoven with the appreciation of non-duality. In his advice on non - meditation, he goes on to indicate the inseparability of awareness and phenomena: “whatever arises from that state, be it bliss, clarity, absence of thoughts, or sinking and excitement with good and bad thoughts, or thoughts of the afflictions, or the thoughts that arise due to grasping the objects of the six senses, *take whatever arises as the object of meditation* [emphasis added]... Without accepting or rejecting, inhibiting or encouraging in any way, stay clear and relaxed with whatever

appearances or thoughts arise. Thoughts need not be rejected. Mind itself is not mere emptiness, for its innate clarity arises naturally as the natural mode.”

Again, Dzogchen understands mind itself as the unfindable space “in” which everything happens exactly as it does. This spaceless space is intrinsically cognizant, and its luminous clarity looks like this. This present appearance is already “here,” “in” awareness, just as it is, inherently complete and whole; if it is resisted, judged, or experienced as separate, these are themselves appearances inseparable from dimensionless awareness. Thus, Chetsangpa says, your own mind “abides in great equanimity towards everything within samsara and nirvana,” which is to say, true equanimity abides as “your” very nature regardless of whether experience appears agitated or liberated, and even whether it appears to be rejected or accepted by a separate self. Each of the instructions affirm this fact, using it as a pivot of sorts to release us “from” identification and “into” positionlessness.

Mindful that any description, indeed, any experience of this release is itself a conditioned phenomenon, it might be said to consist of letting go of the ordinary mode of investment in conceptual projects and letting be whatever appears from within the recognition of the unstructured and ultimately problem-free nature of awareness. As I will discuss in greater depth in another theme, I experienced Peter’s sheer presence as a potent invitation to this way of being. Peter modeled the possibility of simply “leaving things alone, leaving the mind alone,” and thereby evoked recognition of the counter-intuitive fact that “doing nothing” could allow apparent problems to simply dissolve, effortlessly revealing a natural state of fulfillment.

This reversal of the mechanism of suffering was salient in a number of our sessions. I experienced it not only as an introduction to the inherent peace of awareness, but also as a sort of education in the inner workings of what he called “the trap of samsara,” the struggle with life which had long ago become practically unconscious for me in its normality. As the unstructured vastness of awareness - “quieter than quiet, softer than soft, more stable than stable” - became palpably evident, I found that I was simultaneously “relaxed out of bodily tensions like a husk;” as soon as I “let go and let be, remember [awareness] and freefall,” I found that “burdens I’ve been carrying float away, like an elevator drop - problems that I think are real aren’t.” Thus, in being introduced to a dimension of experience in which there are no problems and no selves to have them, I was also learning a new and different way of working with apparent obstacles to peace and fulfillment, namely, through simply letting go. At the same time, I was viscerally appreciating the way in which suffering depends upon grasping, manipulating, and contracting around experiencing as a subject in conflict with objects.

As I will elaborate upon in the Discussion section, the fact that problems can dissolve simply through releasing the resistance to them or by deconstructing their conceptualization as problems is highly significant for how we understand the psychotherapeutic endeavor and suffering in general. For now, however, I will share that Peter’s introduction to awareness was an invitation to relax into non-doing, and that this relaxation “turns my problem into an underlying skeletal structure in space, and effortlessly dissolves it like a tissue or snowflake on water.”

While the body is itself an appearance, inseparable from the seamless, boundless, self-luminous experiential field, I found in my sessions with Peter that opening to non-

duality does, in a sense, involve bodily relaxation out of self-contraction. Although the deeper recognition is that non-duality can neither be entered nor exited, and has nothing to do with what we do or how we feel, resting into silence allowed for the typical feeling of being a separate thing somewhere inside the body - perhaps in the head, chest, or stomach - to peacefully release. This is not just a relaxation of activity, contraction, and resistance, but a relaxation of the self, and an appreciation that what had been taken for a self is in fact nothing more than an unnecessary, painful activity of contracting and resisting. In this unwinding into the acceptance that is already present, it is as though the whole rigid system of strategies and defenses naturally softens, and we allow the moment to catch up to us, to embrace us, and ultimately to become us, leaving only itself.

I described this letting be as a “total welcoming of everything,” adding that “everything is allowed to be here. There is no resistance. All experience is fine.” In another session, I spoke of it as “trust” and “opening.” I went on to describe the experience of connecting with Peter as one of: “not interfering/holding everything tenderly/including everything and not separating out anything/saying yes to whatever is/just being whatever is.” The last two parts of this note demonstrate the manner in which the apparently separate self *is* its resistance to experiences; in relaxing this resistance and “riding along with things/letting come and go/not making problems,” including not resisting or struggling against sensations taken to be a separate self, there is a correlative relaxation of the separation between subject and object. It is then as though I recognized myself as the presence of aliveness in everything, and formerly alien or even threatening experiences were appreciated as friendly and intimate.

From within this space, I appreciated that “not resisting any experience relieves pressure,” such that “everything settles into itself - the deep acceptance and stillness is not different from all the appearances of life; things are at rest in themselves, everything is as it is.” As soon as I eased my conceptual struggle against what was occurring, it revealed its wholeness - a quality that was shared by all appearances equally. As Peter put it, within the non-dual, “nothing is forcing its way into attention that we need to do something with; there’s nothing that’s saying ‘hey, I should have more attention’... awareness isn’t giving more or less attention to anything within the manifestation.” He went on to say that “nothing’s arising that we feel ‘ah, I’ve got to try and remove that, do what’s necessary to not have that arising in my experience. Nothing is producing a perturbation in the field. It’s all smooth. Everything is equalized - there is no notion of better and worse, so things are not triggers, things are not a stimulus for any activity.” In another session, Peter pointed to the way in which “experiences are arising within the field of awareness for us without any complication - without any secondary process of attachment or aversion arising.” This “secondary process” is the activity of the separate self, which seeks fulfillment as an object in time, thereby living out of sync with the seamless fullness of this moment. However, as this moment includes everything equally and possesses no outside, the separate self and all of its activities are a kind of mirage.

Crucially, then, the letting be of non-meditation, the peace of life as it is, follows from a different temporality than that upon which dualistic mindfulness practice is predicated. To again parse the undivided, we might articulate different aspects of this moment’s total coincidence with itself in an attempt to convey this non-dual mode. One such facet, described above, is the fact that since this moment/awareness is naturally

already here in no time, since “we can’t be more or less present, more or less aware,” our efforts to do so are unnecessary. Indeed, there isn’t a distinction between the present and awareness; as I wrote in my notes, “whatever is happening is it!” and so we can be assured that “nothing can obscure this, nothing can affect it, it is one with everything, it is free from partiality.” In Peter’s words, “everything is the manifestation of non-duality,” and so we do not need to get rid of or acquire anything to arrive at completion; there is no enemy, there is no threat, there is just what I called “this gently alive seamless fullness.”

Taking this in can allow for a feedback loop of relaxation in which such completeness becomes self-evident, but no more present than when it is apparently obscured. We might cite the presence of uncomfortable thoughts or feelings as evidence of incompleteness, but as I wrote in my notes after a session with Peter, “thoughts are just thoughts, sensations are just sensations,” and when we appreciate that this moment is already as it is and does not need to look like anything in particular, they are “just light.” Light, here, was meant in both senses of the word, to connote a lack of heaviness or substantiality - “grip,” in Peter’s words - as well as the self-luminous quality described earlier, the way that all experience shines of itself.

Non-dual temporality - the fact that formless awareness manifests as this all-inclusive yet durationless moment - is also expressed in the way that present experience is vividly, freshly apparent, even as it is ungraspable. “Each” moment appears instantaneously, all at once, and includes everything. At the same time, it dissolves instantly, and another completely fresh moment appears and disappears in its place. No separation or boundary between these apparent moments can ever be found; there is just this moment, which is simply and obviously present. In Peter’s words, when abiding in

the recognition of non-duality, “nothing’s being taken out of the picture - it’s not a mystery; there’s nothing behind this, there’s nothing hidden, nothing embedded in it... it’s just a manifestation that’s sourceless, we can’t say where it’s coming from or what’s behind it.” This sourcelessness equally implies tracelessness; Peter added that when presencing the nature of mind, “we’re in a space of not needing anything. So there’s nothing arising that needs to be removed or changed or displaced or reconfigured in any way. And consequently, there are no traces being created, because in awareness there is nothing, no imprint can be created. It’s impossible. There’s no fabric, no material, no medium that allows for any kind of imprinting, any type of trace to be made. So when we’re here, we’re not producing, creating imprints.”

One moment cannot truly affect or condition another, because there is only the moment, with nothing outside of it to impact or interfere with it. This moment, however limited or constrained it may seem by merit of what we imagine came before or will happen afterwards, is actually totally fresh and open, even as it is completely determined and already over.

I described my own experience of this insight as follows: “things happen by themselves - there is nothing other than just this precise, intensely detailed field of appearances, which can’t be pinned down in any way.” In another session, I wrote that “the suchness, rightness, fullness of this moment couldn’t be any different - it’s already gone and takes care of itself; what’s happening is just what’s happening by itself, complete and always new - beyond even new, just here.” With no need or possibility of changing what is, and no separate self to do so, the attachment and aversion that produce suffering can dissipate into the abiding openness of experience.

This abiding openness can also be appreciated as an expression of non-dual temporality. In the prior theme, I described a sort of figure-ground reversal in which the “goneness” of each moment is recognized as enduring, as being the intimacy of awareness itself, the changeless, cognizant space through which life moves. Such changelessness is total rest, total allowing; being dimensionless and timeless, however, this “space” is not separable from the totally dynamic play of experiencing. This self-aware simultaneity of arising and dissolving only appears to move in a linear progression due to memories and concepts, which are themselves glimmering sensations, components of life in its suchness. Realizing that aliveness itself includes and transcends all stories, and that no story about life can capture it, allows the mind - usually preoccupied with its questions, struggles, dilemmas and goals - to come to rest deeply in a state of pure ineffability and total simplicity. There is nothing to fight and nothing to defend, nowhere to go and no one to get there; there is just what is. This is the life that for no matter how long we have feverishly avoided it, still welcomes us without second thought as soon as we relinquish our arguments against it.

Needing Nothing Is Complete Fulfillment

Again, breaking up the non-dual into components is something like attempting to divide zero - we always end up with the same nothing, just leaving the presence of everything. Still, it seems that we have arrived at the culmination of a process without parts. In letting go of trying to solve things or get somewhere, we naturally find ourselves in a “place” of no resistance and total acceptance. With no struggle against what is, we cannot help but arrive at completion, rightness, and perfection. Ultimately, this state is without content, and so it is indestructible; it cannot be contrasted with anything, and we

cannot leave it - as soon as we seem to enter it, we recognize the impossibility of ever having done so, and appreciating this inconceivability, our mind relaxes beyond stories of attainment or devolution. It is in this relaxation that the Dzogchen view is palpably lived - not as an intellectual insight, but as an experiential reality, albeit one which ultimately transcends any particular experience. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, it is often described as being “like a mute tasting sugar,” a sweetness that simply cannot be described. Nevertheless, in what follows, I might gesture towards the experience of non-dual fulfillment with notes from my sessions with Peter.

In describing the non-dual state, again referencing the way in which there is nothing beyond the moment, Peter highlighted that “the energy of hope or fear have no place when we’re here. We’re not projecting into the future - there is nothing to hope for, there’s nothing we need; nothing needs to be different, nothing needs to change in the slightest...any projection of the future could arise when we’re in this space, an image could arise, but there’s no fear accompanying it. ‘I would like’ doesn’t have any traction when we’re in this state. There’s no fear... it’s like it’s inaccessible to us. Hope and fear are inaccessible.” To point out the non-dual in terms of the absence of hope or fear is another way of indicating that presence is beyond the cycle of pursuing and avoiding experiences in time.

Similarly, Peter said, “the thoughts that arise through there being a gap between where we think we are and a more ideal state are not arising; they’re not in the picture.” With no such gap, there can be no suffering. Therefore, to quote Peter again, “what we discover by entering the Dzogchen view is the ultimate state.... When we’re here, there’s no better state than this....because it has no structure to it, we can’t refine it further.

Because there's nothing in this, nothing can degrade. It's not possible to do more or less of this because there's nothing here that's being done...there's no one here who could do that, and nothing we could metaphorically get our hands on to try and make it more robust." The paradoxical solution to the otherwise never-ending quest for more and better is in fact nothing whatsoever. While we can perhaps sketchily envision a future, practically unattainable state of sheer satisfaction as one in which we need nothing, in this very moment there is the liberating possibility of recognizing that we need nothing more or less than what is happening, because it is all that is happening, and there is no separation between us and the moment.

In a number of our conversations, Peter expanded upon this notion of non-dual awareness as "the ultimate state." He said: "when there's no grasping, no attachment or aversion, when we are satisfied and complete - perfectly complete - completed by resting in awareness, there is nothing else that we need. Nothing that we are looking for. Nothing that we want. Nothing that we don't want...we are autonomous. Self-satisfied...for me, it's like sometimes I pose the question: 'so if we had to be somewhere for eternity, where would you want to be? What space, what state, would you want to be in?' as a way of pointing to the priceless value of this state - that we could be here forever, not needing anything, never getting bored, because there's nothing to be bored with, to be bored about." In a sense, all of our activity is intended to arrive at the place where there is nothing more to do, where there is nothing more that we need; whereas from the perspective of samsaric experiencing, we must attain this state in the future, from the point of view of Dzogchen, we can't help but find ourselves here now. To describe the rest which is always available in the abiding presence of "the moment," the Dzogchen

tradition sometimes uses the metaphor of someone who has just completed a strenuous climb to the top of a mountain, finally arriving at the top and collapsing to the ground; with nowhere further to go, we naturally dissolve into non-referential relief, fulfillment, and ease.

Encountering the completeness and “sourceless bliss” of the unconditioned is, as Peter said, “the ultimate medicine. To arrive at the space where there’s no path, no goal, nothing more to do; it’s like a blessing, it blesses the mindstream.” Throughout our conversations, Peter highlighted the fact that pure awareness itself transcends the feelings of joy, relief, or gratitude that typically accompany its recognition, but that these experiences can still be appreciated along the way to contentlessness. Commenting on a line from Chetsangpa’s instruction - “without craving, it [mind itself] is happy” - Peter said that “it’s beyond happiness, but no problem...at a conditioned level, a lot of happiness happens within this; we’re in this rarefied state, a pretty contentless state of resting in awareness, and these really sweet, beautiful experiences can come through like a blessing, like awareness is being blessed.” Each of the texts highlighted the fact that the recipient is truly fortunate to have encountered such instruction, and moreover that we are innately fortunate to have indestructible, wide-open awareness as our very nature.

I recurrently experienced gratitude in working with Peter and the instructions, arising naturally with the experiences of healing, unity, and integration that occurred as separation and struggle effortlessly dissolved. While formless awareness is in itself beyond liberation or suffering, at a relative level, this profound rest is what the mind is always seeking and yearning to experience, and so it is natural to experience gratitude and relief as the mind settles in to non-duality. It is as though a war or a bad dream had

ended, and peace naturally emerges. Without grasping at it, we can simply bask in and soak up this peace.

Although they should not be taken as necessary, there were at least in my experience some lovely epiphenomena of abiding in the awareness pointed out by Peter and the texts. Re-reading my notes, in fact, brings a smile to my face as I recall the taste, sweet indeed, which I sought to put into words. I described resting in awareness as “comfy, steady, luminous, all inclusive, simple,” saying that there is nothing more to do than “rest, feel at home. Ease permeates life as one whole; happiness, immanence.” I said that when opening into the nature of mind, it is as though an “inner pressure lifts/dissolves, Like putting out a fire inside, or quenching thirst,” and compared it to being “on vacation.” In another note, I commented on the energetic dimension of this resting, writing “bliss/glow - a feeling tone of pleasure, tingling, contentment/fulfillment, a hum of aliveness - throughout body but also world, not located anywhere,” and described a “warm enjoyment in the body, basking.” From within this freely given contentment, I wrote that I “don’t need or want anything,” then, in a flowing stream-of-consciousness, praised the peace inherent to awareness as follows: “yes, blessing, gentle rain of light, smile, joy, rest, ‘grace’ - no source, floating in nothingness.” In another session, I expanded upon the “silencing of worry” as a state of “comfort, like sitting by a fire, cozy, ordinariness, path dissolved, majestic, completion; everyone wants this;” I wrote that when the mind rests in its nature, the experience is of “palpable contented silence, suffering tensions dissolve, problems fall away, whole and healed.” In another note I simply wrote “mmm” - what more is there to say?

Thus, it is possible to be with experience in a different way than the typical vicious circle of suffering through trying to escape suffering. In a leisurely, gentle way, as he put it, “with no hard edges - not going anywhere,” Peter indicated that we can at any time fall into a feedback loop of ease, relaxation, and goodness, revealing a benevolent reality brimming with aliveness. This is the natural peace which paradoxically exists in the absence of any attempts to produce or arrive at peace, indeed, in the absence of someone separate to feel peaceful. And yet, the felt sense of it, for me, was that this peace is the birthright of any conscious being, available as the very nature of this moment left as it is.

Theme III: Not Knowing, Not Needing to Know, Being without Reference Points

Pointing-Out as Unknowing

A third theme to emerge from the texts and from working with Peter directly had to do with the liberating dissolution of beliefs, conceptual constructions, and even the mind itself as a cognitive entity or process. Although it is spoken of as knowing the nature of mind, my analysis found pointing-out instruction to be more a matter of evoking *not knowing*, and relaxing out of limiting ideas into the unknowable space of suchness. Direct introduction in Dzogchen is not a matter of “knowing” in the ordinary sense of conceptually grasping, or even witnessing; rather, it is about moving beyond the bounds of our supposed knowledge to experientially taste the mystery of what is. This ineffability confounds us; in the face of this which cannot be comprehended, we fall silent - eventually, with no possibility or need for an answer, we might recognize this silent completeness, this complete silence, as our own being and the essence of whatever appears.

Each of the pointing-out instructions continually acknowledge that awareness itself, being without any content or structure, can neither be found nor expressed. Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche repeatedly points to the mind as “nothing whatsoever;” Ngedön Tendzin Zangpo says that it is “ungraspable” and “cannot be identified;” Mipham Rinpoche says in his instruction that “the actual nature of things is inconceivable and inexpressible...It is empty in essence, beyond conceptual reference... [and] cannot be conceptualized in any way by thinking ‘it is like this.’” Chetsangpa states unequivocally that “it is void, without inherent self-substance and is free of all conceptual elaboration...Mind’s essence cannot be grasped as this or that ...Mind’s original nature is beyond thought and it does not become an object of thought. It is impossible to say what it is like.” Padmasambhava says that the mind itself “does not exist even as single thing,” and describes it as “empty and without basis.” Clearly, the subject matter of pointing-out instruction is not a thing which can be pointed to in the usual sense of someone showing an object of some kind to another person; indeed, contemplating the mind itself short-circuits this very mode of knowledge, and the absence that is then revealed has always been, or rather, is always the case.

In pointing-out instruction, there is nothing to get, nothing to understand, and nothing for our minds to do. As Peter put it, “when there’s no take-away, that’s a pointing-out.” Since the dualistic mind is nothing other than the very activity of thinking, pursuing, constructing and grasping at mental forms, the relaxation or deconstruction of this process is part and parcel of sharing the empty nature of mind, which Peter described as “the transmission of no-thing, a transmission in which there is no content or information.” This no-thing is not a mere blankness or stupor, rather, in Peter’s words, it

is a “vast expanse of awareness without limit or center,” “the essence of mind beyond its cognitive capacity, beyond the capacity of the mind to understand, make sense, communicate or create symbolic meanings.” Indeed, as Peter said, elaborating upon Chetsangpa’s instructions, this primordial nature of mind “*can’t* be thought about; there’s nothing there to think about... it’s not an object of thought. Whatever we think about it, those thoughts are not about it.” In this sense, pointing-out is pointing to a dimension of reality which transcends all of our ideas, the world as we know it.

The freedom and wholeness that accompany successful pointing-out instruction have less to do with getting any new knowledge than with this transcendence of what we think we already know, with seeing through the concepts that, when believed, underlie suffering and separation. This seeing through is simultaneously a revelation and an undoing; it is the realization that something which had been taken as a reality is nothing more than a construction of thought, thereby hollowing out its sense of solidity and substantiality. Peter, through abiding in/as this space of unknowing, effortlessly facilitated the recognition and deconstruction of such trancelike virtual realities, which ranged from more superficial ideas and stories about the self, the world, and everyday problems, to core structures that would hardly have been recognized as assumptions had they not been met with the contentlessness of pure presence.

Ultimately, the non-dual presence evoked by Peter and the instructions, in being beyond subject, object, and time, highlights and undoes the foundational construction that fuels our ordinary way of being; namely, that we exist as a separate subject which must navigate a world of objects, moving from a determined past into an uncertain future by manipulating the present moment. Seeing through this belief is equivalent to finding

ourselves beyond the impenetrable barrier to fulfillment which thwarts the limited self at every turn, only to look back and realize it was never actually there. We then rest naturally as what we already are: the abiding, groundless presence of just this moment.

In my notes I tried to articulate the ways in which conversations with Peter “collapsed reference points” and continually undermined my capacity to construct thought-based stories about whatever was happening. I described working with Peter as an experience of “not trying to get somewhere or figure something out,” such that “thought-stories drop out of the picture;” as I wrote in one session: “you can’t think about this, so don’t even try.” This appreciation and relaxation of my typically unconscious attempts to maintain limited realities allowed for the recognition that “my own mind is silent space,” within which thinking and all other experience occurs and from which it is inseparable; however, as acknowledged in the earlier theme *Immediacy*, even this rendering of non-duality is just another limited idea. Referring to the way in which mind itself cannot be contained by any concept or experience, Peter good naturedly sympathized with the impossibility of the current project, given that “no phenomenology of this is possible;” nevertheless, in what follows, I will attempt to describe the experience of pointing-out instruction and the reality towards which it gestures in terms of this very impossibility.

Again, each of the themes expresses an aspect of a unified way of being; as I will articulate below, not-knowing and not-needing to know is another way of describing the immediacy, letting go, and peace described in the earlier sections - it is a way of indicating the non-dual relationship between the formlessness of mind itself and all that is experienced. While the discussion may at times seem theoretical or abstract, the aim of

this theme is to convey the manner in which it is in fact our dualistic reality and all of its imagined problems that are conceptual, existing as nothing more than a dense, continually produced network of assumptions and interpretations.

Seeing Through to the Nature of Mind

If this is the case, how then to unravel the cocoon of concepts; how to see through the opacity of the story? By pointing out that there is no cocoon, that the concepts are only concepts, that the situation is already entirely transparent. Through questioning, relaxation, and direct indication of the unstructured reality overlooked by fixation upon such notions, we recognize and relinquish the erroneous assumptions which comprise the illusory veil of separation. Non-dual contemplative practice applies this “method” to foundational ideas of self, time, and reality itself, like a controlled demolition of a building that everyone only pretends is there. Peter called it “cognitive surgery,” and I spoke of it as a “dissolving of structures I hadn’t realized were structures, leaving nothing in their place.”

As the Dzogchen instructions repeatedly indicate, the thinker, feeler, or perceiver can never actually be found; the only evidence that such an entity exists is itself a thought, feeling, or perception, which need not be interpreted as a separate self. Knowing is undeniably present, and yet all inquiries into the nature of the knower – Who? What? When? Where? - eventually dissolve into open space, into ringing silence. Finally appreciating that this lack of an answer is itself the answer, we might dissolve into the gentle yet unmovable wonder of not-knowing, “in” to everywhere and nowhere - “in” to right where we are.

Being inseparable from this intimate absence, the mind's dynamic expressions can themselves never be grasped. Just as we discover the possibility of not "knowing" what we are, we can notice that all of direct experience is beyond labels; a word or concept can never capture the vibrant, ineffable richness of this that we rather arbitrarily call taste, color, sound, emotion, and presume to be separate within itself and from ourselves. Recognizing this, stuffy assumptions fall like dried husks from the mutely radiant being of whatever appears. Life comes alive. As not-knowing spreads to reveal itself in every aspect of this seamless, luminous whole, it is as though the previously brittle and static world of separate, known things becomes engulfed in flames of living stillness; if "we" are anything, it is this empty fire, which becomes whatever it consumes. We notice - remember, really - that all of life has always been simultaneously "arising" and "dissolving" (for truly, neither can be found) as a mysterious play of unknowable presence, our own timeless being which is both heart and host of time's motionless passage.

Each apparent moment is a pulse of vast mystery, and mystery itself. Even to call it a mystery is perhaps too much, for the term implies some need or possibility of explanation, a puzzle to be solved. In the sheer, eternal absence of an answer, the needful energy of questioning dissipates. With nothing to know and no one to know it, everything can simply rest into the freedom of this answerless answer, into the "suchness" of its vivid appearance, inseparable from the whole display. Intimating that every question and every answer is superfluous at best, the mind relaxes into the innocent, direct simplicity of the natural condition. Edgeless, seamless, timeless, awake, neither awareness itself nor its infinite expression can be contained within any concept. The limits of our ideas are

thereby effortlessly revealed, and we no longer find ourselves trapped within them. Freed from referentiality, experience is complete just as it is, for lack, limitation, and suffering depend upon entities which cannot truly be found.

In this recognition, life pours out of the confines of the subject-object framework and into itself, “knowing” itself by *being* fully, unspeakably itself. We don’t “have” experience, we *are* this experience “having” itself, tasting itself from everywhere within itself, with no center or periphery, wholly suffused with - made of - its own radiant aliveness. As our preconceived knowledge *about* things burns off like morning fog, we discover a knowing from within, an immediacy of knower, knowing, and known. There are then neither things nor selves as separate objects, but just this self-luminous, intimate display of appearances, the vivid wonder of the ordinary.

It is not quite that our concepts disappear and are lost; neither are they replaced by new concepts. Rather, passing through a sort of trapdoor of the mind, they are situated within their proper context, seen for what they are, and in this way seen beyond. The idea of a separate self is like that of a national boundary - we can build walls along it, move to change it in any number of ways, even go to war for it, and yet, simply through looking closely at where we take it to be and even momentarily holding our ideas in abeyance, we might recognize that the boundary itself is only an idea, superimposed upon something without such a distinction. In the total openness of not-knowing, then, the very existence of a thing called the mind, as well as an objective external world, is revealed to be nothing more than a story. The supposedly substantial entity that knows a separate reality is itself an ungraspable thought, a wave shimmering within this unbounded ocean of wakefulness. And yet this construction, when invested with the energy of belief, serves as

the basis for a maze of fictions, continually branching out into thickets of discrimination and implication and entangling the imaginary agent of the mind in a landscape of its own limiting projections. It is like a thin yet durable membrane which apparently shrouds the obvious mystery of reality for as long as it is taken as truth – which, as we have seen, is indefinitely.

But unknowing is possible. In fact, it is here, waiting right on the lip of the known at all times, for time as we know it is precisely that, and nothing more; presence itself, beyond past, present, and future, is ever available. When the presumption of knowing, the defense against this immediate mystery, is somehow undone, the lens can be recognized as a lens and thereby truly seen through. Supposedly separate, substantial, and enduring entities are like mirages which fade upon investigation. Indeed, the very fact of experiencing seems to continually fade into itself, ever disappearing and appearing freshly in utter simplicity, yet infinitely intricate and open-ended; and even this cannot be found. Each statement dissolves into this omnipresent silence as it is being spoken. The awareness that is the nature of mind is thus “known” as a context of not-knowing, within which the cognitive process of judgment, labeling, identification, etc. is uprooted - or rather, in which the very ground dissolves. The imagined lines that make up a constellation fade into the darkness of the night sky, and in the absence of a form that was never there, the encompassing darkness shines as the stars themselves.

Not-Knowing as “Silence”

The goal in Dzogchen is not to negate everything and simply claim that nothing exists, which is itself just another belief; neither is the aim to be left unable to use concepts. Rather, the view and practice is one free of grasping - the mind abiding in its

own natural condition of total openness free from any reference point. Thus, working with Peter was an experience of undoing the visceral grasping and reification that served to maintain the sense that my problems – and the separation that underlay them - were real, present, and demanding resolution. Essentially, this involved relaxing the mind out of any fixed ideas about what was occurring and into a kind of silence beyond simply auditory quiet.

Throughout our meetings, Peter continually made use of the Dzogchen instructions and whatever was occurring in the moment to undermine my capacity for thinking and “knowing,” while introducing the possibility that there was, in fact, nothing that I needed to know or figure out in order to be serenely fulfilled. Again, the ever-present availability of this ineffable fulfillment *is* “our” being, or rather, it is simply “being” itself, typically obscured by what I called “the usual panic (typically taken to be normal)” of constructing problems and solutions for a separate self in time. After one meeting, trying to describe the relaxation or deconstruction of this typical mode, I wrote: “suffering and tensions dissolve into palpable contented silence.” This silence, an expression of what Peter called “not knowing and not needing to know,” is both the means and end of deconstructing the ordinary dualistic mind.

There were a number of ways that Peter facilitated this deconstruction. The most basic, serving as the context within which the others unfolded, had to do with Peter’s own presencing of the nature of mind. In the final theme, I will elaborate further upon the different ways that Peter’s sheer presence functioned as a non-linguistic transmission of this thought-free fulfillment. Most pertinent to the present theme, however, was the way in which Peter abided in and as a complete silence of mind that neither gave energy to

nor resisted any construction of thought. This silence is intrinsically beyond thought or other mental activity, being their still, spacious and limitless home ground; it is another way of describing the nature of mind, in contrast to the dualistic mind which constructs our projected realities and relates to them with attraction and aversion. In a sense, Peter simply didn't believe a word I said. He calls this suspension of reification "pure listening," and contrasts it with "positive listening," which essentially entails agreeing with or investing in constructions with interest, and "negative listening," which involves disagreeing with constructions or tuning them out (Fenner, 2016). This pure listening, or "listening from nothing," is not an active doing, it is the natural relationship between awareness itself and whatever arises, and so it is both an expression of abiding within the non-dual as well as a potential means to shift from being caught up within thoughts into the openness that is the nature of presence.

I spoke often of this profound quality of silence in my notes. Certainly, especially later in our conversations, a significant portion of the time was spent without speaking. I described this as "falling silent," "being silenced," "having nothing to say," and "being mute." However, this "intense silence" into which I fell was not only a cessation of verbal activity, but an absence of mental content and a lack of reactivity to whatever is occurring. As the limited self *is* an ongoing activity of grasping at mental content and reacting to appearances, at its deeper levels, this silence is also an absence of the basic constructions of self/other and past/present/future. Paradoxically, being nothing in itself, the vast, silent nature of mind is not separate from any of the aforementioned structures, and can neither be arrived at nor deepened; it "is" effortlessly already "here" "now," completely intimate. Indeed, it was clear that Peter was not buying-in to my own ideas, or

in fact any ideas, about what was happening as we spoke, which not only de-energized my own limiting constructions, but allowed me to do the same with “my own” stream of thinking. I described working with Peter as “introduction to the ever-present possibility of silence,” and “teaching me to be silent (silence?).” In my notes, I spoke of recognizing “the silence around thoughts,” and the way in which “thinking/speaking doesn’t go beyond the current word - silence is right here.” In this way, I experienced the relief of a silent mind, writing “no need to think: peace.” Insofar as all of our supposed problems are constructions of thought, the thought-free nature of mind is also problem-free, an experience I described in the second theme.

As this silence increasingly came to the fore, Peter and I were, in his words, “moving to more lightly structured states of consciousness” along the dimensions of abiding within awareness which he calls “depth” and “purity.” This followed a trajectory from the ease and relief that followed from the simple recognition that, as I wrote, “problems I think are real aren’t,” through to the transparency and luminosity mentioned in the earlier themes, to at one point jotting down the description that it “feels like I have no mind; like there is no mind.” Indeed, as mentioned above, the notion of a mind or separate agent of experience is itself an inference; the space of awareness itself is non-personal, possessing “no separation, no position, no reference point.” After our 4th session, I wrote, “the sense of a center or self is just a thought/feeling occurring within awareness, like everything else,” and “self-images, like all thoughts, are resting on/permeated by/inseparable from this swell of nothing.” Even further “in” to awareness itself than the dissolution of the center which I described as “having no mind,” were what I described as “lapses, time disappearing,” ineffable periods that I called “non-events,” in

which I would fall into a “swoon of silence” and “nothing happening....” During these “blips,” it would seem as if I had fallen asleep while remaining awake; this fading of perception points to the manner in which our experiences depend upon a certain level of grasping for their very appearance (Burbea, 2014).

Indicating the Unknowable, 1: Having Nothing to Think About

In addition to the deconstructive power of pure listening, the very nature of the reality indicated in pointing-out instruction inherently undermines the ability to think in the ordinary sense. My analysis found that this occurs in three main ways, with the first two being explicitly acknowledged by Peter in his own work: having nothing to think about, thinking about nothing, and encountering immediacy. As with most such distinctions in this project, all three of these are simply different aspects of a single, ineffable reality. Nevertheless, highlighting these different facets might allow for a clearer recognition of this reality and the pathless path to it.

The notion of having nothing to think about is directly related to the cognitive non-doing described in the second theme. With no goal, nowhere to arrive at or escape from with our thinking, the process of forming, grasping at, and elaborating upon thought-constructions naturally loses its direction and energy. In order to presence the nature of mind, there is simply no work for us to do. This is because, as I will elaborate upon in the following three facets, there is nothing in the nature of mind to produce, and therefore nothing in our experience that we need to get rid of. Furthermore, this nothing/everything is already fully, in fact, inescapably here as this very moment, and innately transcends any content of thought as well as the thought process itself; it can't be produced, impacted, or destroyed by our thinking, because it isn't anything at all. Again,

all of these feed into one another - in terms of this facet, however, we can recognize that the shift into not-knowing is facilitated by simply giving our minds nothing to think about.

Peter described this as “not feeding the interpretative process, not digging for problems, not offering ourselves anything additional to think about.” In his words, “there is nothing to get” and “there’s nothing to be obstructed; no thought, feeling or experience can get in the way of or interrupt this;” therefore, there is nothing that we need to apply our minds to achieving, escaping, or sustaining. Since “it can’t be found through doing, through acting” and “there’s no attention required,” in recognizing and presencing the nature of mind, “we’re not using the cognitive resource that we have in our mind for anything; we’re not trying to use our thinking to do anything, to accomplish anything; we’re just letting it be there in its natural mode of being.” Essentially, this involves “not following trains of thought,” allowing thoughts to “self-liberate” into the aforementioned silent space of pure awareness, and seeing through the belief that there is something that we need to do with our minds at deeper and deeper levels.

As described in the last theme, each of the instructions exhorts the listener to let go and let be without second thought, disengaging from the usual cognitive process and relaxing into simply being. Jamgon Kongtrul rhetorically asks “why chase after thoughts, which are superficial ripples of present awareness?” Since “there is nothing else to do, or to undo” with the recognition of awareness other than “let it remain naturally,” he says “don’t spoil it by manipulating, by controlling, by tampering with it, and worrying about whether you are right or wrong, or having a good meditation or a bad meditation. Leave it as it is, and rest your weary heart and mind.” Eventually, regarding the whole process of

seeking fulfillment and liberation with our thoughts, he simply says: “give it up!”

Likewise, Ngedon Tendzin Zangpo says “do not indulge your thoughts or try to rein them in,” relieving the duties of the self-as-thinker, which is the lynchpin and engine of cognition, and which continually obscures the ever-present being of awareness in its efforts to get somewhere in the future.

In this vein, Padmasambhava points out that since “there is nothing here to meditate on,” “there is nothing at all to do;” “it is enough to leave it [the mind/the moment] in its own unstructured state,” which is to say, “it is enough to let it be, without doing anything.” Chetsangpa points out that the awareness that is present here now, being formless, timeless, and acausal, “is not made by the meditation of the Buddhas and it is not affected by the stupidity of sentient beings.” Since “mind’s original nature does not depend on causes and conditions,” and “effortlessly arises,” his advice is: “however it presents itself, do not modify it in any way,” “remain relaxed and open. Remain loose and free.” Again, from the point of view of Dzogchen, the thinking mind has no work to do, nowhere to go, and no one to control or receive its activity.

This is a fundamentally different way of relating to experience, based upon insight into its fundamental nature. The invitation of the instructions stands in contrast to the dualistic mind’s tendency to believe in and react to descriptions of what is happening to a separate self who acts within an objective world in time. In Peter’s words, having nothing to think about initiates the process of “dissolving...the innate conceptions that we bring to our perception of ourselves and the universe...the ways that we construct solidity and our habitual realism.” Non-doing initiates the feedback loop of resting in and as awareness that has been described in the previous two themes. The fact that “having

nothing to think about” connects directly to “needing nothing” points to the way in which conceptual knowing is a form of doing, and conversely, all of our doing is guided by our conceptual knowledge about problems and their solutions. Insofar as knowing and doing are the fundamental activities of the ordinary dualistic mind, their relaxation can allow for the presencing of the formless non-dual awareness that is our nature.

In my own notes, I spoke of “leaving things alone, leaving the mind alone.” The recognition, encouraged by Peter, that contentment and freedom, let alone the nature of mind, were not to be found through seeking in the ordinary sense, was phrased in my notes as “can’t think about this, don’t even try” and “there’s no need to think,” at least in terms of the reality pointed to by Peter and the instructions. I experienced this as a great relief - it undid my questioning, doubting, and ultimately frustrating thought process, fostering a deeper appreciation of the way in which the abiding openness of awareness is distinct (yet ultimately inseparable) from the vacillations of the conditioned intellect.

In several of my notes, especially during the earlier meetings with Peter, I described trying to figure things out with my thinking mind, trying to grasp an answer, and eventually just letting go of the whole thing. I wrote: “do I know? I don’t need to know;” “is this it? – thoughts rise and fall, don’t matter;” “wondering what he means, then not needing to know,” and “wondering, are we on the same page? Then thought dissolves.” These meetings with Peter tended to take the form of “mind trying to find something, then relaxing,” allowing for the recognition and relinquishment of “the impulse/energy/need to create a reference point,” a form of rest that I had not previously encountered. I took down the notes “don’t need to think so much - realizing that as an option” and “the idea that there must be something to do is just an idea.”

I described the experience of “not struggling to analyze,” “not trying to get somewhere or figure something out,” and “not using the mind for anything” as “mind quieting down, body relaxing,” “resting - relaxing back from any point of view or thought,” and simply “mind is relaxed.” With this relaxation of the mind’s activity came an increased sense of immediacy, presence, and well-being, as the tendency to automatically engage with and pursue thoughts solidifies the sense of self and lack. Indeed, one of the major insights of the project, described in the previous theme, is that having “nothing to do” with the mind was akin to finding myself in a state in which I “don’t need or want anything,” a state of “simply being,” in which the distinction between myself as a thinker and the abiding ease of the moment dissolved.

Indicating the Unknowable, 2: Thinking About Nothing

In contrast to having nothing to think about, Peter uses the term “thinking about nothing” to refer to the contemplation of unconditioned awareness itself. Being without form or substance, the nature of being cannot be grasped by thoughts. Thoughts represent limited and separate objects, and are themselves limited and separate objects (although, as will be described in the next section, thinking is fundamentally not separate from or other than awareness). Therefore, the very act of turning our thinking towards the unconditioned short-circuits thought - the ineffable silence which results expresses that which cannot be thought about. As Peter wrote in his 2007 work *Radiant Mind*, “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...[thinking about nothing is] untenable - in fact, impossible - because it doesn't provide a basis for our conceptualization. We have nothing to think about. Of

course, we can think about nothing as a concept. People have written books about ‘nothing,’ but that’s not what we mean. When we think about nothing, we aren’t thinking about anything.”

Throughout our meetings, Peter repeatedly affirmed that he and I, the instructions, and the dissertation itself were attempting to refer to something that could never be captured in any way; not because awareness is too vast or profound for words, but simply because it is not a thing. As he put it during our conversations: “it’s impossible to say what it’s like because it’s not there as an object of knowledge,” and “mind’s original nature can’t be thought about, there’s nothing there to think about.” In the absence of something there to think about, our thoughts lose traction; when we direct them “towards” this absence, they inevitably contradict themselves and the ordinary mind is further dismantled. We thereby become intimately familiar with not knowing and not needing to know.

Awareness itself confounds our thinking in several respects. Being formless, atemporal, and acausal, the nature of mind lacks all of the basic building blocks of a story: who, what, when, where, why, and how are all unanswerable when we inquire into awareness. Even to say that we are referring to “whatever is aware” is an empty referent, as there is no “thing” that is aware, and nothing outside of awareness to compare or contrast it with; as Peter said at one point, “awareness has no opposite; we can’t contrast consciousness with anything.” In this sense, as I will expand upon in the next theme, in sharing awareness, Peter is fundamentally sharing a space of not-knowing, abiding in the sheer unknowability of what we call “awareness” or “the nature of mind,” without attempting to turn it in to anything at all. As he said, “this is not even awareness...if we

think we know what awareness is, that's not this. I mean, I have no idea what this is. We use the word awareness, but...[laughs].”

Indeed, “something” without form must in fact lack any and every quality we might attribute to it, even the most basic, such as “existence” or “non-existence.” Peter elaborated upon this point, highlighting the way in which the mind depends upon opposing concepts for its functioning: “it’d be easy to think there is a subject in this, there is something that’s being spoken about...it may seem like that, but the subject at hand, the subject matter, the nature of mind itself, the ground of being, primordial awareness, can’t be found - it is void. It may seem to exist, but it doesn’t. It may then seem *not* to exist, kind of flip-flopping to the opposite direction so that thinking can continue, as a function of conceptual proliferation, but we can’t find what it is that does not exist.”

In this way, talking about the nature of mind is talking about what cannot be talked about, and pointing to that which cannot be pointed to; it is as though all of our words, thoughts, and concepts simply slip off, or are left empty of true meaning as they encounter the nature of mind. As Peter said: “we can use any label to denote mind itself, knowing that the label itself doesn’t say anything about that which is being labeled...the label is signifying, is revealing that which *can’t* be signified. The label, the word that’s being used to denote it isn’t saying anything about the nature of mind itself... so if we use a label like Dzogchen, the Great Perfection, there’s nothing great about mind itself, there’s nothing perfect about it, it’s beyond those dualistic categories of perfection and imperfection, small and great. The label doesn’t describe what this is.”

The reason that this is significant or liberating is that, as described above, all suffering is based upon concepts, which we grasp, take for true, and weave into complex

stories (this being just another story...); insofar as the nature of mind cannot be captured in any concept, and thereby highlights and undermines the functioning of our conceptual minds, it is intrinsically free from the building blocks of suffering as well as the mind with which “we build samsara,” in Peter’s words. As he put it, elaborating upon Chetsangpa’s instruction: “the basic building blocks of the dualistic mind...we can see if we begin to reveal the nature of mind, that they don’t apply. That, with respect to mind itself, we can’t say that it’s bound or free; they just don’t apply. There is nothing within it that allows us to say it’s free, because there’s no contrast; there’s nothing happening within it by which we could say ‘ah, it or something connected with it is bound’... it dissolves the whole structure of being trapped and wanting to be free. If we can reference that dualistic structure back to the nature of mind and we say ‘ah, bound and free; is it really like that?...and we can see that it isn’t...the connection is made with mind itself: ‘no, it isn’t,’ and then it’s like that just liberates everything, that just frees all the structures built on that primary dualistic construction. That’s the beautiful thing about this.”

As each of the instructions indicate, the awareness that is the nature of mind has no form or substance; therefore, it cannot be an object of knowledge. Both Jamgon Kongtrul and Ngedon Tendzin Zangpo refer to the nature of mind as “ungraspable” and unable to be identified. Padmasambhava calls it “unestablished.” Chetsangpa goes on at some length about the way in which awareness “cannot be grasped as this or that;” he says that mind’s original nature is “beyond thought and it does not become an object of thought,” adding that “it is impossible to say what it is like...it is inexpressible...it is beyond being something that can be indicated by saying ‘it is this’.” Therefore, he says, it

is “free from all the limits of holding to dualities such as permanent or impermanent, hope and doubt, inhibiting and encouraging, rejecting and accepting, good and bad, large and small, top and bottom, bound and free, happy and sad, etc.” - it simply and naturally transcends whatever we can think about. Mipham Rinpoche concurs that “the actual nature of things is inconceivable and inexpressible,” that “beyond conceptual reference... it is not something to be apprehended.” He calls mind itself “the absence of any identifiable existence... it cannot be conceptualized in any way by thinking, ‘it is like this.’” He echoes Chetsangpa in saying “as it does not fall into any extreme, it is the great *freedom from elaboration*. In the end, it is beyond all expressions, such as: it is all and everything, it is not all, everything lies within it, or does not, and so on.” Again: not only do we not need to know anything in order to presence the nature of mind, but we cannot know anything when it comes to the nature of mind, and “knowing” this liberates us from the prison of our ideas.

Ultimately, the no-thingness of awareness means that it is entirely beyond the activities of thinking, feeling, and perceiving - these are all appearances that are neither the same as nor separate from the nature of mind, like a rainbow and the space of the sky. This non-dual relationship and its connection to temporality was explored in the first theme, and touched upon in the second theme’s discussion of non-meditation. For purposes of this theme, however, we can appreciate that, as Peter said, “thought has nothing to do with this [the nature of mind], so it doesn’t matter what we’re thinking.” This offers a profound release from the limiting constructions of thought.

Each of the instructions highlighted the way that the nature of mind cannot be an object of thought, and, further, cannot be affected by thoughts at all - it is as though

awareness were in another dimension than thought. Whereas thoughts are described as “without foundation or root” by Chetsangpa, “superficial ripples,” by Jamgon Kongtrul, and “self-arising and self-releasing, like clouds in the sky,” by Padmasambhava, vanishing, in Mipham Rinpoche’s words, “like the traces of a bird in flight,” awareness is pointed-out as “unborn, undying, yet spacious” by Jamgon Kongtrul, “naturally luminous and unchanging” by Ngedon Tendzin Zangpo, “uninterrupted” and “unceasing” by Padmasambhava, and “neither arising nor ceasing...like the sky” by Mipham Rinpoche. Therefore, as Tendzin Zangpo puts it, “awareness cannot be spoiled by moral judgments or tainted by hope and fear,” and Chetsangpa says that mind itself “is not mixed with anything, it is not touched by any faults or good qualities whatsoever. Mind’s original nature is not obscured by any good or bad karmic conditions. It is not stained by all the impurities of reliance on signs [thoughts].” Each of the instructions speak to this freedom in their guidance on non-meditation - there is no need to manage our experience, because fundamentally we cannot be harmed by what we experience; we can energize limiting constructions, enacting them and giving them apparent reality as long as we believe in them, but they are never anything more than thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, which cannot damage the no-thingness of the nature of mind, like a storm cannot harm the sky.

In my notes, I referred often to the way in which Peter was “sharing something - ‘it’ (the nature of mind), and yet ‘it’ is nothing.” I described this as “sharing Nothing: no structure,” and “being left with nothing.” After one session, I said that one “can’t say or do anything about/with that which is contentless - all concepts depend upon their opposite, but this neither is nor isn’t.” A number of my notes speak to this being unable to think about the nature of mind: I wrote that we “can’t think coherently and consistently

about what reality is;” “mind can’t go anywhere with the words, can’t reify;” “this is not a thing...there is no subject matter...No word or label applies, thought falls right through/off.” I denoted what Peter was indicating as “[],” “utter simplicity,” and “a black hole(?),” adding that with respect to the nature of mind, I had “no capacity to think and so no capacity to construct suffering or psychological problems... these arise from dualistic structures - hope, fear, happy, sad, but these don’t apply to mind itself.” In this way, I wrote, contemplating the nature of mind “turns my ‘problem’ into an underlying skeletal structure in space and dissolves it like tissue/snowflake on water.” After one meeting with Peter, I was moved to write: “problems I think are real aren’t!”

Indicating the Unknowable, 3: Encountering Immediacy

Paradoxically, the “no-thing” of the unconditioned mind is intrinsically inextricable from the realm of conditioned phenomena, and our experience just as it is in this moment. I described this in the earlier themes as *immediacy* between subject and object, time and timelessness, and the realms of the conditioned and the unconditioned. I have spoken already about how recognizing this immediacy shifts the sense of self and world, and also alleviates the mechanism of suffering - identification as a separate self trying to get out of one moment and into another. For purposes of this theme, however, we can appreciate that encountering immediacy confounds the conceptual mind. It does so in much the same way as the aforementioned formlessness of awareness, but with a somewhat different inflection: whereas we cannot think about pure awareness as “[]” because it is “nothing,” we cannot think about the immediacy of awareness and its contents because it is the inseparability of this “nothing” from what I called “everything,” as well as from “just this!” - whatever is appearing, just as it is appearing. Even to say

that we encounter immediacy is something of a contradiction: “we” don’t encounter “it;” there is *just* immediacy, and it’s already fully here “before” we can think about it. From the perspective of the pointing-out instructions, this moment is a seamless, ineffable whole which cannot truly be separated within itself or contrasted with anything outside, for there is nothing outside. Our thoughts cannot capture this reality, because in addition to its contradictory nature, it is too close to be pointed at! Just as a sword cannot cut itself or an eye cannot see itself, the immediacy of experience, of “being,” cannot stand apart from itself. With no possibility or need of thinking about *this*, the ordinary dualistic mind can relax into not-knowing.

As described above, the dualistic mind operates by making conceptual distinctions and reacting to things as inherently separate from one another and the whole. However, as Peter pointed out, the experience of this moment is “seamless, comprehensive, and total at a sensory level - it’s immediate.” At the level of the conditioned or manifest aspect of experience, Peter said, we can appreciate that “there are no gaps... manifestation is differentiated but seamless.” Peter elaborated that “you can create divisions, but none are substantial or real.” In our first meeting, Peter said that this “contradiction” - the fact that “this is infinitely divisible, yet indivisible, one taste” - “takes us beyond the mind, to the non-conceptual experience of the primordial reality of being.” This emptiness of conceptual designations is another way of indicating the inseparability of awareness and the contents of awareness. As Peter repeatedly pointed out, although “they seem to be radically different, the field of appearances - that’s multiple, that’s divisible - is inseparable from this - in which there are no defining characteristics and nothing that can differentiate this from anything else”

Peter shared that in pointing-out instruction, he is looking to thwart “any tendency of the mind to proliferate, to split and then begin to make comparisons to set up a relationship,” adding that “whatever words are coming into the picture, we need to be careful that ... we’re not offering the mind things that it can make contrasts with.” The fundamental contrast which is collapsed in Dzogchen is that between mind itself and appearances; speaking of this, Peter commented on “the inconceivability, the impossibility of what is happening - that this is nothing, that we can’t find anything, yet we have this display; [the instructions are] pointing to the nature of unconditioned, unstructured, unfabricated, uncaused, empty awareness, and then noting, noticing with equal importance how this includes the field of phenomena - the magical display includes every conceivable manifestation, the intricate, impeccable co-ordination of everything that’s arising.”

In relation to this collapse of conceptual distinctions, including that between awareness and appearances, the theme of immediacy also connects with that of having nothing to think about. In recognizing that, in Peter’s words, “nothing can obstruct this, everything is the manifestation of non-duality,” we can “appreciate the futility of trying to create something beyond what’s manifesting in the moment...[pointing-out] is not something that is created with the idea of producing something that can be used at another time in the future... then we are reifying this.” As awareness is not something we can gain or lose, Peter said, “there’s nothing mediating, nothing lying between the reception of pure awareness - no ideas,” and when resting in/as this non-separation between pure awareness and the manifestation of this moment, “experience isn’t being mediated by a lot of interpretation, there’s not...complex meaning-making happening.”

In the immediacy of the moment, “there’s no filter...including the filter that creates self and other, inside and outside, in here and over there.” Just as mind itself cannot be reified, neither can its dynamic expression, the world of experience.

Again, the instructions repeatedly evoke the immediacy described above. Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche undercuts the distinction between mind itself and this moment as he points out that “your mind won’t be found elsewhere; it is the very nature of this moment-to-moment thinking. Regard nakedly the essence of this thinking and you find present awareness, right where you are;” right in the midst of “this infinite magical display” of “the mirror of mind,” which is “nothing whatsoever, yet...everything is magically experienced.” Referring to the indivisibility of mind itself and its expressions, and the ever-present inescapability of awareness, Ngedon Tendzin Zangpo instructs: “however your mind may manifest, rest in that as the radiance of awareness... Rest in the self-clarity of phenomena, which never waver from the state of awareness, just as birds can never escape space, wherever they may fly.”

Padmasambhava points out that mind itself “manifests as both samsara and nirvana and as a myriad of joys and sorrows... appearing everywhere without impediment.” Therefore, he instructs the listener to “recognize all appearances as self-appearing. Self-appearing phenomena are like reflections in a mirror;” again, the analogy of the mirror indicates simultaneously the way in which appearances are illusory/lack intrinsic existence (like a reflection in comparison with a “real” object), cannot be separated from one another or their open, luminous medium of awareness, and are beyond the subject-object duality in the moment - in a sense, we are whatever we experience.

In his instruction, Chetsangpa also highlights the inseparability between the emptiness of mind and appearances, stating that: “mind itself is the maker of all samsara and nirvana....Everything possible appears, but without inherent self-substance...it shows many illusory forms...[yet] abides in great equanimity towards everything;” therefore, in presencing mind itself, Chetsangpa encourages the listener to “take whatever arises as the object of meditation.” He goes on: “appearances and awareness are inseparable, so maintain the direct clarity that is free of inside and outside. Don’t put appearance outside, don’t keep awareness inside;” again, this is not a doing, but rather the way that this moment naturally already is. Mipham Rinpoche says that mind itself, which has “no concrete existence as anything at all, is completely unobstructed in the arising of its self-appearances;” therefore, the union of “primordial purity” and “spontaneous presence” is “the single, all-encompassing sphere of naturally arising wisdom” - how can thought represent or point to this which is all-encompassing? Only through failure, through the collapse of its conceptual house of cards.

I commented on this theme a number of times in my notes. After our first session, I wrote that “this is everywhere and yet nowhere, seamless! No divisions, no possibility for separating any segment of this” referring simply to life as it is. After another conversation, commenting on the way in which direct experience confounds the mind, I wrote: “you can’t say anything about anything, but it’s ‘this,’ immediate, ever-present, vivid.” Speaking of “my” nature of pure awareness, and the “union” between this knowing awareness and its contents, I reminded myself that “it’s nowhere else - don’t go looking, it’s here, the thisness of this, whatever it is - there’s nothing outside the moment, nothing to compare this to.”

Another important way in which this immediacy confounds the functioning of the mind is that it is beyond the subject-object relationship; in several of my notes, I commented on the way in which “thoughts dissolve, tensions and feelings dissipate with no one to claim them.” Thinking in the ordinary sense typically involves a thinker who pursues or avoids certain lines of inquiry - with the dissolution or increasing transparency of the thinker as just another concept, the mind’s activity loses its momentum, further collapsing the imagined/enacted separation between self and experience. This might facilitate the realization that there never actually was a separate experiencer. The idea of a separate doer, knower, and feeler was always just an assumption within this ever-present intimacy of boundless, boundariless non-dual experiencing.

Explicit Deconstruction

In addition to the aforementioned ways in which the context of pointing-out instruction allows the grasping mind to come to rest, freeing “us” and “this moment” from its imagined limitations, working with Peter also involved what could be called a more explicit process of deconstruction. While he repeatedly described it as a spontaneous unfolding rather than a strategic doing, this took the form of a more active challenging, questioning, or seeing-through of different concepts that emerged in the shared field, rather than simply abiding in/as silence, or pointing-out different features of appearance and awareness. In a sense, deconstruction follows naturally from and works in concert with these other expressions of non-duality in order to release the dualistic mind, being rooted in the recognition of “unfindability”: the fact that we cannot see or grasp whatever we are looking for, discussing, or thinking about.

Again, conceptual distinctions and dilemmas are potentially endless, but they are all equally empty, interdependent, and inseparable from - yet unable to damage or capture - the openness of mind's nature. Their apparently intrinsic reality, value, and impact are precisely what Dzogchen and Buddhism in general consider illusory. We can only suffer when we feel that our circumstances are objectively real and happening to us, a taken-for-granted fallacy that involves overlooking the constructive capacity of thought and the way our experience is a matter of interpretation and perspective. Deconstruction is a form of conversation in which the apparent reality of the mind's constructions is examined and found absent. Often, this absence can serve as a sort of gateway to the primordial absence of "present-moment awareness;" it is as though the ground is pulled out from under the mind and we fall into not-knowing, leaving all of our faculties intact yet equanimous and somehow transparent.

Peter shared that he views deconstructive conversations as a way to "grab consciousness, get inside a stream of consciousness, molding people's usually fragmented cognition and bringing coherence to thought, so that it can be undone; interrupting the capacity for thinking, exploding and deconstructing it." Though utterly casual and at ease, the keenness of his listening and the pointed precision of his questions indeed heightened my own awareness of how I was constructing problems, situations, and theories in an ongoing way with little to no ground for them. He would hone my situation to what he calls the "core construction," which typically involves a person, a situation, a feeling tone of pleasure or pain, and some tensing in terms of past, present, or future: examples would be "I am anxious," or "I want to experience the nature of mind," or "I haven't figured this out yet." Peter would then gently and collaboratively inquire

into the reality of the “I” and its experiences, highlighting that in the moment, these could not be found, being unnecessary interpretations of “the clarity and vastness” of unconditioned awareness. I described this as “bringing together thoughts, but what you rest on gets pulled away - he keeps pulling the rug out, and I keep “doing” less and less.”

As Peter put it, in deconstructive conversations, “something that we thought existed, like the mind, we discover that it doesn’t.” After conceptual proliferation has settled somewhat through resting without seeking beyond the moment, this involves taking “whatever arises, seeing through it, so you can’t find the object of meditation...[asking] where exactly is that happening? Precisely what is it about what’s happening that makes this what it is? And not being able to find it; look for it and see that you can’t find, for example, grasping. You think grasping is happening; where exactly is the grasping happening? Who is grasping? How can I grasp anything? What do I grasp it with?” Commenting on Chetsangpa’s instruction, after one meeting Peter described deconstruction as follows: “we take a complex thing, wind it back, simplify it to a dualistic structure such as bound vs. free, and then connect with the nature of mind: is it really like that? No.” He acknowledged that deconstruction is an aspect of the “continually unfolding nature of pointing-out instruction,” which necessitates a relationship between the one giving and the one receiving instruction; “seeing where the student is, and the importance of the student’s own listening.” With this attentiveness, pointing-out occurs through “catching attempts to make it into anything and releasing them on the spot” and “correcting any extreme views.” What is left is the unsayable, unthinkable, unassailable peace of ever-present being.

Being Without Reference Points

After an early session with Peter, I described the experience as “like being in a floatation tank, but for your mind.” As I grew more familiar with abiding beyond thinking, I recognized this space as my own being, or rather, as being itself, which is not separate from this very experience. Deepening the not-knowing further, it is actually impossible to say that anything has changed, because this moment simply is as it is. My experience of not-knowing has been one of gaining a deeper experiential understanding of how the mind works, and also tasting the freedom of simply being without reference points. My sessions with Peter helped me recognize the illusory nature of thought, which purports to be real and necessary. More and more, rather than feeling a need to know what is happening, what to do about it, who I am, and how to navigate life, there is a sense of trust beyond trust - a skylike openness that is at once innocent and indestructible, mysterious and natural, non-personal and intimately myself. Loosening the grip of thinking has allowed for familiarization with the essence of mind beyond any particular thought. This presence, or absence, continually recognizes itself in whatever appears, even as it “recognizes” appearances less and instead marvels at and fully celebrates in their unique suchness. The din of ideas has been joined or replaced by a roaring silence that connects the core of experience with an indefinite vastness. And even this is only a story.

Theme IV: Relating Intimately, Effortlessly Transmitting, Being an Invitation

Pointing-Out as a Relational Event (or Non-Relational Non-Event)

The final theme to emerge from the sessions had to do with the unique relationship within which pointing-out instruction unfolds, and what this relational

dimension indicates about the nature of awareness. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, perhaps the most basic finding of my analysis was that the different themes express seamlessly integrated facets of a single way of being, which Peter simultaneously embodied, modeled, and evoked within my own experience. This was not essentially an intellectual experience; rather, what Peter was sharing was directly and non-verbally “felt,” borne on a certain quality of silence, and only secondarily related in words. Indeed, while the texts describe this mode and provide relevant instructions for recognizing and abiding within it, it was working with Peter which brought the teachings to life and helped me to taste “the natural state” for myself. Throughout our meetings, I felt that it was Peter’s own presence that was the most impactful aspect of his instruction, and the medium through which I was able to experience whatever I did of the Dzogchen teachings.

To call it his own presence, however, is not quite accurate; pointing-out instruction, being an expression of non-duality, is essentially beyond separation - beyond two beings interacting, or sharing a discrete thing. Rather, it gestures towards the timeless natural condition of selfless, unstructured awareness, the space within which everything happens. This boundless awareness is not “Peter’s,” as opposed to “Jeremy’s,” and yet, paradoxically, it was “Peter’s” recognition of this fact, and the manner in which he expressed it, that allowed “me” to recognize it for myself. Furthermore, the “it” in question is not a thing, and “recognition” is not an event - nothing new comes into the picture, and nothing needs to change, because awareness is already here, inseparable from this moment just as it is. In this way, although Peter acknowledged that “‘transmission’ is not an ideal word, because it sounds like someone is transmitting

something to someone else,” what is nevertheless referred to as transmission within various non-dual traditions is yet another instance of the inconceivable relationship between the conditioned and the unconditioned.

In what follows, I will describe the different ways that Peter shared non-dual awareness, ranging from implicit to explicit communication/teaching. Being largely non-verbal and spontaneous, happening in-between the lines of most of the texts except for my own notes (and even then, only sketched), this dimension of the non-dual is perhaps the least easily described and analyzed. This is somewhat ironic, as it was the vital essence of the other themes and the most palpable, the very means by which I was able to “experience” non-dual awareness. Despite the inadequacy of words, I will draw upon the texts, Peter’s commentary, and my notes to articulate an understanding of how the nature of mind can be shared, with an eye towards how this connects with the other themes and the notion of present-moment awareness as liberating.

The Pointing-Out Relationship

In ways large and small, other people have helped and continue to support our concept of ourselves as being fundamentally separate from others, the world, and our own experience. They do this innocently, having been recipients of the same kind of education. They share their version of reality with us verbally, non-verbally, explicitly and implicitly. We watch and learn as others move through life with varying degrees of reactivity and self-contraction, taking for granted that this is the natural state of affairs and our actual lived experience.

However, this is only part of the situation, only one possibility for how we experience life. The teacher-student relationship in Dzogchen is considered crucial for

revealing another possibility, the non-dual way of being. Much has already been written about the role of the *kalyanamitra* or guru in Tibetan Buddhism. Dzogchen is replete with tales of a student's powerful devotion to their teacher and the lineage, and guru yoga is held to be one of the tradition's core practices. Guru yoga as a formal practice consists of visualizing "mingling the guru's mind and your own mind," and then non-conceptually abiding in the recognition that "the awakened state the guru has realized and your own state of rigpa are not different in any way" (Binder Schmidt, 2004). Although I did not engage in guru yoga proper, I definitely experienced Peter's sheer presence as catalyzing my own contemplative process. Additionally, I felt throughout our work together, and still feel, a sense of profound gratitude for Peter's sharing, and what I called "faith" in him, both of which were inextricable from the experience. I will parse these into different aspects below. First, however, as it is central within Dzogchen, I will speak briefly about the notion of the guru as it emerged from the texts.

Several of the texts began with homage to the guru, or an exhortation for the listener to attend closely and connect with a sense of being fortunate to receive the instructions. Ngedon Tendzin Zangpo captures the sentiment well in his incitement: "now listen, fortunate one!" In so doing, I noted, the student is "brought into a state of gratitude and alertness and presence of mind," and doesn't "let the mind slip into these grooves of habitual stories and basically distraction from the state of simplicity that's being introduced." This alertness and gratitude helped the words "come alive" and ignite recognition of the openness of awareness as well as the relaxation of constructions in direct experience.

Certainly, gratitude featured prominently in my experiential write-ups. A feeling-tone of gratitude was actually inseparable from the bliss, comfort, and contentment described in the theme *Letting Go*, as well as the freedom from limiting concepts described in *Not Knowing*. In this way, it both emerged from and supported each of these processes. My notes are suffused with a feeling of gratitude and appreciation as I re-read them. In my write-ups, I used the word “gratitude” several times, and also “blessing, gentle rain of light, smile.” Peter also spoke of the recognition of non-dual awareness as a blessing. In response to a line from Mipham Rinpoche’s instructions in which he stated that the nature of mind is “recognized through receiving the guru’s blessings and instructions,” Peter commented at some length about the meaning of the guru, the notion that the guru is one’s own mind, and the sense of being blessed or graced while resting in the nature of mind.

He said that “Guru in this context has a really wide meaning because there’s the outer guru and the inner guru...when we recognize awareness, when we abide in the essence of the mind, our mindstream is being blessed by itself...the inner guru is the essence of mind; that’s the inner guru. So the guru in this case isn’t a physical embodiment outside of ourselves. When we’re resting in the essence of mind, it’s lovely to see that as a blessing, or sometimes even grace, because we can’t trace the cause - it’s arising and it really is mysterious. How is, why is this here, for me, in this moment? Just to arrive at the space where there’s no path, no goal, nothing more to do, it’s like a blessing, yeah. I often think of it as grace because the source is inexplicable. We can think ‘well this is a product of positive karma’ maybe, but then we are betraying, in a way, the acausal nature of the essence of mind, that it’s not produced by anything. It

seems it's related and also unrelated to any practice we may have done. It's just here, arising mysteriously. So a blessing, the guru's blessing, how a teacher comes into our orbit - you could say it's through the accumulation of lifetimes of practice, of guru yoga, and so on, but it really is inexplicable.

“So it's through receiving the guru's blessings, either their physical embodiment or being able to read a text and be blessed by the text, to have the blessing to receive something that we're reading - so many people have been blessed just by seeing photographs of Ramana Maharshi or the 16th Karmapa, blessed by reading, just coming across some of the pith instructions and dohas of the siddhas; [in such cases] we've been able to bring a mind to reading something that someone else would just flip over and wouldn't take in at all, but we're blessed to be able to receive something very simple, like just seeing a photo, and the mind stopping for people. And of course the instructions, the guru's blessings and instructions.”

Thus, while the figure of the guru has multiple layers of meaning within its traditional context, perhaps the most significant for purposes of this project is the way in which the figure of the guru can take many different forms in expressing and thereby introducing a liberating way of being with our own experience. The faith that we feel in a guru, from this point of view, is an expression of the way that they deeply embody a reality that is also our own; when their invitation into the peace and integrity of the non-dual state becomes a recognition on our part, the faith is only deepened. As this mode is acausal and non-conceptual, its power to free us from our suffering and imagined limitations is often experienced as a blessing or even as grace. In being freely given, the

gift of our naturally pristine awareness is received with a gratitude which, softening us out of reactivity and contraction, further enhances its capacity to heal us.

Resonance and Entrainment

In a sense, this process of softening and settling out of our arguments with life is the unifying crux of the different themes. As non-dual awareness abides in a timeless condition of total relaxation, simplicity, and non-conceptual fulfillment, when we embody this ourselves in the moment, it is as though we “mingle our minds” with the background of mind itself. The ongoing natural meditation of awareness then serves as wind beneath the sails of our contemplation; it is like the nature of mind takes over and does the meditation for us. Since this is not a contrived act of meditation but simply being, in Dzogchen contemplation our own being relaxes into, or makes itself available to being itself. We put less and less effort into our contrived movements away from the moment, until our conceptual obscurations dissolve and the boundlessness of our own nature recognizes itself. This releasing out of the limited self and into the basis of awareness applies to each of the previous three themes; it can also be seen as operating between teacher and student in the phenomenon of transmission.

As has been said, our minds are not separate and interior, but rather, are fundamentally inseparable at both the conditioned and unconditioned levels. In this way, the teacher’s own recognition of the non-dual is able to stand-in for the student’s, and serve as a conduit, pointer, and introduction to unconditioned awareness. It is as if they are an already flaming log which ignites the dry log of the student’s contemplation, or someone who is already awake, who can reach out and gently awaken someone having a bad dream. The teacher abides within the recognition of non-dual awareness, such that

they effortlessly dissolve the student's reactivity, dismantle their conceptual confusion, and introduce them to "their own" boundless awareness, as well as a different way of being that is always available, which they can continue to familiarize themselves with and develop stability within.

Peter describes this phenomenon as "energetic resonance" and "entrainment." In his words, "the Dzogchen tradition has a special term for the way that non-dual awareness percolates through the field and gently awakens others to their natural state. They talk about the energetic resonance (Tib. *thugs rje*) of a master, such that when we enter the field of someone who is deeply abiding as boundless awareness, there is a type of energy transference or induction that invites us to enter this very same space. When we are abiding in the non-dual, we naturally share this state with others. No effort is required. It's like two bells resonating together. We don't even need to speak. By sharing space with others when we're in unconditioned awareness, we give them the chance to energetically entrain or attune to this space themselves" (Fenner, 2016 p. 78). In one of our meetings, Peter said that *thugs rje* "refers to the resonant field that's created around, through, an individual that's resting in the essence of mind. That is vibrating in a field around the individual, and that's potentially unobstructed and unimpeded and universal," he added that "through resting in the nature of mind in an embodied form, we are creating a field that awakens people, not through agency or design, not through cognizing 'ah, there's someone in need so I will step in, come into the picture and within the sphere of emptiness help them at a relative or ultimate level,' but just through sharing" (Fenner, 2016 p. 77).

From the commonly held dualistic point of view, the term energetic entrainment may seem arcane or even superstitious. However, in our everyday language we often refer to the energy of a space, a person, a relationship, and so on, and this is not fundamentally different. As we have seen, other people radiate or naturally express their states of mind through their body, speech, and other aspects of behavior, calling forth responses within us and often affecting our own state of mind rather dramatically. This is in large part how we develop our personalities, which consist of implicit understandings of the world and strategies for navigating it that we picked up from others. Certainly, this mutual empathic attunement and its formative capacity serves as the medium and even the engine of the psychotherapy process. Without any unusual degree of sensitivity, though, most of the time we can experience some flavor of where another person is coming from and respond accordingly, especially if we are not lost in our own thoughts and judgments. Even over the phone, we have a sense of participating in the flow of interaction, which can happen without words.

Indeed, it was remarkable to experience the admittedly magical-seeming way in which, despite Peter's being in Australia while I was in the United States, within moments of picking up the phone I would find myself "resting in natural silence" and "opening out into space." I described this as being "captured/immersed in his field" and "catching his state." My sense is that this has to do with the way in which Peter was abiding in the non-doing and pure listening that were described in the earlier themes. Many of my notes comment on the sense of having entered or discovered "a vast space," similar to being in a huge cathedral or surrounded by the night sky; there was a natural settling of my body and quietening of my speech and mind which happened

spontaneously upon connecting with Peter. I described this space as “limitless,” “unlimited,” “buoyant,” “vastness - imperturbable, everywhere and nowhere, resting in itself. Can’t budge it, everything contained within it,” and “like a vast inner space, but dimensionless.” Just as the sky is infinite but is not itself a thing, the nature of mind is boundless while being no-thing. This dimensionlessness confounds the mind, and accounts for the silencing of speech and thought described in the theme *Not Knowing*; I wrote of the space that Peter was sharing: “no word or label applies, falls right through/off.”

The fact that we were *sharing* the space and silence - that, as I wrote, during pointing-out instruction “we’re both ‘in’ nothing, intimate” and “we’re hanging out here/nowhere” - was itself a powerful aspect of the experience. This took multiple forms, each of which served to further support the recognition of non-dual intimacy in a distinct way. At times, Peter himself seemed to disappear into the silence while speaking, such that he would seem to be the voice of life itself, everywhere and nowhere. I wrote during one meeting: “Peter has dissolved, like the cheshire cat” in an attempt to capture this uncanny sense of a voice whose speaker was not merely not visible, but had somehow become invisible like space. This was connected with the depth of Peter’s own silence, which was not opposed to speech, but rather permeated whatever he shared. There was a feeling that he could stop speaking and fall into complete silence at any moment - again, silence not simply as the absence of speech, but rather a dimension of reality which had hitherto been unrecognized, yet which was somehow familiar and deeply soothing. I wrote “his words are resting on a big buoyant sky of nothing, coming from, surrounded by, dissolving into nothing,” “he’s indicating a vast, limitless silence right nearby,” and

“playing at the edge [of silence].” It was this silence which served as the medium and content of the contentless transmission, and brought the texts to life. I had the feeling that speaking and sharing ideas was, in fact, largely secondary to sharing the silence. After one session, I described the experience as “transmitting peace beyond words, almost in spite of words.”

Indeed, this silence was vast enough to include and transcend all speech and concepts, including the notion of being a separate self; it was not only Peter who would seem to disappear during our meetings, but I would often relax out of my own sense of separation as well. I described this as “listening to his silence - somehow deeper than mine - till ‘his’ and ‘mine’ dissolve.” What initially seemed to be Peter’s silence would eventually become indistinguishable from my own. I wrote: “closer and closer to me? It’s my own mind” and “not ‘my’ experience, just this, which contains everything - both ‘him’ and ‘me’.” At times, my notes would ambiguously describe his speech and mine as expressions of a single happening. Referring to both of us simultaneously, I wrote: “thinking/speaking doesn’t go beyond current word - silence is right here” and, further illustrating this non-separation: “his voice like thoughts moving through one vast, intimate space.” This recognition of the empty nature of the self-construct and abidance as our shared nature of open awareness is in direct contrast to the ordinary mode in which people speak and relate to one another as separate and limited. I described this as “nothing talking to nothing.”

This intimacy also manifested in the way that Peter was able to pick up on my thoughts and experiences and respond to them sensitively, drawing them into emptiness or rather helping their emptiness be recognized, such that they would effortlessly self-

liberate. The experience was almost like having my thoughts, confusion, and struggling blown away, or melted like delicate frost in the bright sun. All the more remarkable was the way in which Peter would often speak incisively to the crux of whatever issue I was struggling with, opening it up like a key in a lock even without my having put it into words. Again, transmission is possible due to the way in which we are not actually separate, but rather are interwoven at the conditioned level and indistinguishable at the unconditioned level; in this respect, through being intimate with the immediacy of our experience, we are automatically sensitized to the experiences of those around us. Peter seemed able to not only detect, but to speak directly to my imagined obstructions to non-dual awareness, as though he was receiving my state of mind just as naturally as I did his, but with the liberating perspective of emptiness. In different sessions, I wrote “he is totally transparent, responding perfectly to my state,” “he’s telling me what I need to hear,” and “like he’s psychic?” This applied to his speaking as well as his listening. Due to the experience of there being “nothing behind his words...no interiority,” it was also as if Peter’s words were directly entering my consciousness; I wrote: “his words are hypnotic, almost taking the place of my thoughts.” I described this as “riding along on his words, inducting, guiding with words - a journey of consciousness, the words come alive.”

More impactful than the words, however, was the ease of being with which they were communicated. The silence that Peter was sharing was not neutral, but rather acts as a sort of delightful solvent, what I called “problem-free-ness” - it functioned as an antidote for all ideas of lack or need in the moment, and was accordingly inflected with Peter’s own enjoyment. In his words, his sharing involves creating “a type of field that

allows for a movement, that opens things up, so that there's a connection with awareness itself, with that place where we're complete, totally complete, and nothing needs to be different... that's the place where we're coming from: that nothing is missing, nothing more is needed in this moment.” Again, this is quite rare to encounter in others, instead coming across various states of reactivity and lack that evoke similar responses in us. This made Peter’s state of mind all the more evocative for me.

I commented in many of my notes on the palpable bliss, peace, and ease from which Peter spoke, which were also shared in the manner described above due to the nature of the non-dual. I wrote that Peter’s state of mind was “contagious” and served as a “catalyst” for my own novel experiences of the blissful nature of mind. Throughout all of our calls, as a foundation, Peter maintained a “warm, friendly tone,” a “kindness” which I said “puts me at ease.” Indeed, I described Peter’s tone and the mood of his sharing as “unhurried,” “welcoming,” “at ease,” and “leisurely” - while these might sound merely like ordinary expressions of who Peter is, (and in a sense, they were), my feeling was that they were attributed not to personality per se, nor to any sort of contrivance, but rather to the total fulfillment available whenever we rest in the nature of mind. In my notes I described a “high pitched silence,” which I called a “bliss vibration,” adding that Peter was “luxuriating in silence,” and emanating a “glow communicated in his whole way of being.” This glow found a way of “permeating every nook and cranny with gentle tenderness, like a healing balm.” Peter offered this “sourceless bliss” consistently and effortlessly, his speech and the spaces in between rich with a feeling tone of pure pleasure. At one point, a bit tongue-in-cheek, I wrote “he almost sounds drugged!” it was clear, however, and powerful to recognize, that Peter was not under the

influence of anything other than the nature of mind, which he was sharing out of the kindness of his heart as immediately available.

This immediacy was a core aspect of Peter's sharing and Dzogchen in general - the way in which, as I put it, during pointing-out instruction he was "speaking from this place, to this place, about this place." In "speaking from this state," "talking about it as though it's obvious and totally present," Peter dismantled the imagined obstacles to resting in the nature of mind and effortlessly invited me to join him in contentless contemplation. I noted that in the texts and Peter's commentary "what's being spoken about is where we are." Thus, the gap between ourselves and the moment, and between this moment and some imagined superior moment, disappears into seamlessness, dissipating its attendant suffering. Peter pointed out numerous times that as the nature of mind is without form or substance, it precludes both obstruction and attainment. Therefore, when sharing the nature of mind, he said "I begin without a beginning, because there is nothing to begin, so there is no notion of starting, so I never start. I don't start. I don't say 'okay let's begin,' because that actually betrays the nature of non-dual awareness, in which there is no beginning and no end. It gives people the wrong impression to say we'll start, because immediately you've got to start something, immediately you're feeding some content in. so I don't start. It's already started. Or it's completely arbitrary, so we're just here." In this way, the silence of no-mind and the bliss and resting described above follow naturally from recognition of the timelessness of this moment.

As you might have recognized at this point, Peter can occasionally speak in quite a definitive manner about the nature of mind. I noted what I called "conviction" several

times in my write-ups. This conviction was also rooted in his appreciation of non-dual awareness, and thereby facilitated my own experience. Just as we respond to the realities of others differently whether they are conveyed with doubt versus a sense of surety, Peter's confident articulation of the immediacy of awareness further helped dismantle my questioning mind and access the state to which he was pointing. Throughout our meetings, Peter would clearly check the lines from the texts against his own experience, which I called "authentic," "deliberate and thoughtful," "integrity" and "genuineness." In this sense, his aforementioned transparency manifested as what I called "honesty" and "a good heart," a trustworthy and self-aware straightforwardness which strengthened the transmission.

I wrote: "his confidence lets you drop seeking," such that the natural openness and completion of the moment could manifest. These qualities, usually overlooked in our rush to arrive elsewhere, then further supported my own confidence in awareness in a kind of feedback loop. I wrote that "he's reminding me/giving permission - it all seems so easy when he talks," and in another meeting "the nondual is so obvious (yet gets lost)." While resting as awareness is indeed supremely easy and always available, it is nearly impossible to have the all-important initial taste of the experience without encountering someone viscerally familiar with the non-dual. In a way, then, all of the aforementioned components of transmission cohere in what I called "natural modeling." By modeling, I mean an embodiment of the non-dual way of being, and the word natural is used to emphasize that Peter was not necessarily trying to convey the nature of mind, but simply could not help but do so while abiding within it. This natural modeling facilitated a sort of internalization of Peter's presence in the form of habits of *letting go* and *letting be*, as

well as realizations about the mind. For instance, I wrote that I “don’t need to think so much; realizing that as an option. Couldn’t have thought it, he *showed* me.”

In this way, transmission involves a familiarization with the teacher’s way of being - this brings us back to the earlier discussion of transmission as akin to sharing meditation, which in Dzogchen is referred to as familiarization with the nature of mind. In Peter’s work, he refers to this gradual familiarization with contentless awareness as “developing a homing instinct.” I noticed that throughout our meetings, I more and more readily found myself in the space of awareness automatically. I wrote of it as “trust,” “tuning in,” and “gently steadying in this/here, like riding a bike” - accordingly, I referred to working with Peter as “like training wheels - learning this is possible...gratitude.”

“I’m Basically a Vacuum Cleaner”

If one function of the teacher is to act as a set of training wheels for the student’s wobbly ability to appreciate and abide within awareness, another, in Peter’s words, is to act as a “vacuum cleaner” that “cleans up, clears up all of the limiting constructions in a space.” I have spoken of this in greater detail in the previous theme *Not Knowing*, but for purposes of this theme I will elaborate upon the relational component of deconstruction.

This mainly had to do with the aforementioned capacity for pure listening, which naturally sees through constructions. Again, pure listening is not a doing, but happens spontaneously when resting as non-dual awareness itself. Thoughts are recognized as thoughts, and nothing more, including thoughts of time, self, and an objective world. There is no energy to construct problems or identities, and no lack or limitation to be resolved through thought. Again, encountering a being in this state is a singular experience. What I noticed about Peter in this respect was “his total patience/acceptance,”

and at the same time the way that he “did not believe any of my constructions,” and “did not buy into any of my stories.” He remained connected with me while seeing through the reality of whatever I shared, and his responses often either stopped fueling or gently but totally challenged the core ideas within my constructions. Thereby, in sharing his reality, Peter helped me recognize that “I wasn’t *in* what I had thought I was in, don’t need to take so seriously - taking seriously *makes* it seem serious.” Although it sounds cryptic, this was a fundamental insight about the nature of mind and how our mistaken ideas can seem real and thereby appear to block us from an ever-available non-conceptual wholeness.

In addition to this deconstructive capacity in terms of content, Peter was continually aware of the sheer amount of thinking and construction going on at any given time. In his words, he was “tracking how much mental activity is happening; a primary thing you’re sensitive to in this work is whether whatever you’re doing is giving the person that you are in relationship with something to think about or not - that’s a key principle, it’s a sensitivity that grows in non-dual transmission, because you are transmitting the contentless dimension of awareness itself. Awareness itself has no content, no structure - in order to do that, you are being in a way that you are, not all of the time, but certainly some of the time, you’re not giving people anything to think about. You’re not giving them stuff, words and concepts, to think about, to work with, to figure out how it works with this or that.” Consider how often the exact opposite is the norm - an obliviousness to how much thought is filling up a space, and in fact often an urgent feeling of needing to think, to talk, to share and receive and elaborate upon ideas. Indeed, identification with the activity of thinking, speaking, problem-solving, seeking, and the

like a core means by which the separate self is maintained. In the absence of these, the ineffable openness of the mind - which cannot and need not be thought about - is revealed, then itself serving as a vacuum cleaner which clears the detritus of conceptual proliferation and grasping. In this way, the same principle applies: the teacher embodies and expresses pure awareness, drawing the student into their own,

As in the example above, in which the peace and ease modeled by Peter were internalized through our work together, I feel that I also received a visceral learning in the deconstruction of limiting ideas through experiencing this with him. I found myself imagining how Peter might respond to different conceptual struggles I was having, communicating with him in my thoughts and doing for “parts” of myself what Peter did for me - hone them to a core construct, gently question their reality, and hold them in utterly open spaciousness, allowing them to naturally self-liberate into that.

Verbal Pointing

A final aspect of transmission to be discussed has to do with the explicit pointing out of different features of experience. This has already been explored in the earlier themes, especially *immediacy*. Hopefully, the discussion of transmission has given a taste of how introduction to the nature of mind is actually beyond the specific words which are used, and beyond words in general. Nevertheless, as I wrote after one session, “there is power in the words, as well.”

Much of this power has to do with the use of evocative, often metaphoric language to indicate usually overlooked aspects of experience and to encourage the relaxation and open alertness which, again, are used in contemplation as a semblance/conduit to presence the nature of mind. As has been acknowledged earlier, the

Dzogchen tradition uses rich imagery sourced from nature and everyday objects in order to point to subtle features of the mind, such as “luminosity” and “spaciousness,” images of the ocean and waves, or clouds in the sky, etc. The point is less to prove a reasoned argument than to evoke a non-conceptual recognition of how experience is. Likewise, Peter would often playfully experiment with multiple meanings of a word during our conversations, modeling flexibility, openness, and curiosity more than an interest in getting it “right.”

Peter and I spoke several times about how the mood of Dzogchen is “best expressed in airy, light language,” evoked with “insubstantial words, light descriptions that dissolve upon pointing.” Although no words can apply to the nature of mind itself, he said that “certain words build up less of a structure,” and can indeed facilitate the dissolution of certain structures. Space, for instance, possesses a minimal structure, but is otherwise void of content - in this way, it can serve as a conceptual stepping-stone towards experiencing awareness. Indeed, we can appreciate that communication in general is an activity within this single, shared domain of reality, through which experience is structured and re-structured. As well as sharing experience, communication also changes experience - when someone communicates, experience is accumulated and shifted, and these changes then become built upon, even serving as foundational understandings. The same process of internalization and familiarization is at work. Insofar as Dzogchen gives us a vocabulary for relaxing the ordinary dualistic mind and recognizing the nature of mind, the texts themselves are transformative communications from the contemplative experiences of earlier masters. Thus, even at the conceptual level, they function as a liberating transmission.

Endless Offering

Fundamentally, the phenomenon of transmission points to a different understanding of our being in the world with others. Through encountering the potent transformative field of a teacher or guru in some other form, we recognize our own wholeness and inseparability from what is, as well as our own capacity for healing. Abiding within this recognition, the world and other people are experienced to be as intimate as my own life. The nature of mind that is transmitted is ultimately beyond feelings, ideas, or desires, and can manifest in any number of ways. Nevertheless, my own experience entailed learning that being gentler and more intimate with whatever appears can serve as the gateway to an inexhaustible source of well-being and freedom. Shifting into the nature of mind often felt like an act of unconditional self-love and forgiveness, echoing, again, Peter's unconditional presence.

After a conversation with Peter, I would sometimes meet with a friend or loved one; at such times, I never failed to notice the different quality of my presence and relationship with them. I was more open, more connected, gentler and more free; and they seemed to notice! Their comportment softened, they came into the moment, and their minds spontaneously released themselves from preoccupation with insecure thinking - it was as though I had become a transmitter or conduit, in a lesser form, for the same awakeness that Peter had shared.

Of course, if our minds are neither separate from one another, from the world, or from the boundlessness of mind itself, it makes sense that a sort of chain-reaction with respect to liberation as well as suffering is not only possible, but inevitable. It is not incidental that compassion is central within Tibetan Buddhism; if everything and

everyone is within you, then any parts of the whole that are lost, in pain, or struggling can be met and welcomed into the space you are/I am. We welcome them naturally - they are drawn into our orbit to be heard, seen, and accepted just as they are. The construction of who they or others think they are can be seen through. When we meet others beyond our own movements of reactivity, they can be released naturally from the constriction of their superimposed limited identity, dissolving and expanding into the presence that we share. With this, waves of freedom ripple outwards through our world.

Awakening to our own spaciousness, we are freed from bias and selectivity, from the urge to control others and identify them as friends or enemies. Without these conditions, if only for a moment, we are healed, and with it our world. This is “the ultimate medicine” offered in pointing-out instruction, for which I feel truly grateful to have received. My own process of familiarization is ongoing, as are all of ours. Many times during writing this, I closed my eyes and settled into easeful contemplation just from recalling a word, or Peter’s voice or presence. I would return to writing with a sense of appreciation and renewed purpose: wanting to do justice to the gift I had been given, wanting to convey to others what is surely our shared birthright. My wish is that some taste of this experience has been transmitted to you, whoever you are, wherever you are - it is here now!

Discussion

Prelude to the Discussion

Overall, my analysis of the pointing-out texts yielded a non-dualistic view of subjectivity and temporality which is radically distinct from the one presumed by most psychotherapies, including contemporary mindfulness-based approaches. This view is first and foremost an experiential recognition and a way of being, not a theoretical statement. Nevertheless, despite its non-conceptual nature, it opens a wide arena for re-thinking existing theoretical understandings of suffering and liberation and related practices. If, in the case of an individual, pointing-out instruction can catalyze a relaxation of unsupported and limiting ideas, and a return to an immediacy that was never really left, we might consider whether and how recognition of the nature of mind could do the same for the field of psychology.

In what follows, I first briefly summarize the Results and then expand upon their potential implications for psychotherapy. One of my aims in this section is to clarify certain aspects of psychotherapy as currently practiced, specifically, the healing capacity of non-reactive, present-moment awareness. I consider how this manifests in different components of the therapy process, and suggest that the phenomenon can be reframed non-dualistically, without the presumed distinction between subject, object, and time. In order to do so, I draw upon a review of the common factors literature (Tschascher, Junghan & Pfammatter, 2014) and explore diverse proposed mechanisms of action in psychotherapy in terms of the themes which emerged from my analysis. Specifically, I consider Rogers' core conditions, the practice of Focusing, and the conjoined notions of

insight and disconfirmation of pathogenic beliefs as they relate to *Immediacy*, *Letting Go*, *Not Knowing*, and *Relating Intimately*.

I also consider what might be some next steps for the integration of Buddhist psychology into psychotherapeutic theory and practice. In moving beyond a solely dualistic model of experience, novel possibilities for understanding and healing suffering can emerge. These are not altogether dissimilar from familiar components of various therapies, but cohere in a new way, with a distinct emphasis and tone. In this section, I speculate upon how psychotherapy might explicitly incorporate non-dual awareness through weaving together elements of psychoeducation, cognitive restructuring, exposure/acceptance, and experiential psychotherapy. Above all, I contend that there are considerable untapped depths in the notion, and, indeed, the experience, of present-moment awareness. First, however, I review the findings from the Results section.

The Findings in Summation

Collectively, the different teachings explored in my analysis challenge the widespread assumption that the knowing quality of the mind is located within the head, synonymous with thinking, and directed toward an external world. The instructions encourage a relaxed investigation of direct experience, in which awareness itself cannot be found to possess any boundaries, content, or structure. In this not-finding, whatever is aware is recognized as simply present like the sky - a total openness in all directions. At the same time, it is inseparable from, in fact appearing as, this ever-fresh and vivid display of life in its seamless immediacy: as colors, sounds, sensations and thoughts. Appreciating that awareness cannot be located as a separate thinker of thoughts, feeler of feelings, or perceiver of perceptions, “our own” mind might then be recognized as the

ungraspable, unencumbered, and utterly stable space of wakefulness within which these appear. Even more intimately, it can be known as the insubstantial yet cognizant “substance” of which they are made, like an ocean and its waves. From this point of view, awareness is simultaneously what we are and what experiencing is, yet without a separate self or thing experienced.

The present moment, from the point of view of the texts, is not other than awareness itself. It is as though the moment were groundless and aware of itself. Rather than being a limited something that we could enter, exit, or attend to as separate from ourselves, the texts point out that “the here and now” is, of course, always already here now, ever-present as the locus and essence of whatever occurs. Presence, from the point of view of Dzogchen, is not something which comes and goes, sandwiched between past and future. It is *this*, the timeless, empty field of awareness, vast without center or periphery, yet spontaneously appearing as the self-luminous particulars of life in all their precision. These ideas are conveyed particularly in the themes *Immediacy* and *Not Knowing*.

The instructions suggest that it is possible and liberating to abide consciously as this natural presence, which is effortlessly already the case, and only a matter of relaxation and recognition. Being timelessly present, with no structure of its own that can be confined or damaged, Dzogchen holds that the nature of our own mind is intrinsically complete and lacking nothing; as whatever we experience is not other than the mind, whatever phenomena we encounter are in the same condition of “perfection” beyond the duality of good or bad. Thus, there is neither a need nor a possibility of improving this moment, the only one that is available; relaxing easily into this impossibility, it can serve

as a gateway “into” the non-referential wholeness that the texts portray as the nature and expression of simply being.

However, this is not the typical experience of life. According to the texts, suffering arises as the mind reacts against its own energy, getting caught up in self-perpetuating beliefs about being a separate entity determined by its past, that needs to manage experiences in order to secure fulfillment in the future. These fixated ideas proliferate into a dense mesh that appears to further conceal the true nature of mind; a net of fragmentary concepts, judgments, and interpretations is cast over experience and taken to be reality. The mind’s innate openness, luminosity, and capacity to appear as a world is overlooked as attention becomes increasingly absorbed in the stories of thought; often, these stories are not even recognized as stories, but are believed and responded to as truths. These ideas are explored particularly in the themes *Letting Go* and *Not Knowing*.

However, despite their apparent solidity and complexity, these beliefs are in essence nothing more than ephemeral, cloudlike thoughts, which only obscure the sun of pure awareness for as long as they are clung to. Even then, thoughts themselves are an expression of the mind, which in its dimensionless nature is beyond the range of cognition. Thus, awareness is not obscured but only mistaken. It is as though a boundless, cognizant television screen were to confuse itself for a single character on a show playing within it. The screen itself cannot be found as a discrete object within the show, but it abides as the space within which the entirety of the show occurs and the luminous yet insubstantial essence of the different images it displays.

With respect to this metaphor, pointing-out instruction entails the interaction between two characters, one of whom rests as, describes, and clarifies for the “other”

their shared being as the aware screen. This process was explored in all of the themes, but particularly *Relating Intimately*. It is essentially deconstructive - as the wholeness of awareness is always already here and now as the nature of present experience, it is recognized through collapsing “past” and “future” into immediacy, relaxing effort and resistance into simply being, and revealing and undermining limiting assumptions about reality. The teacher, abiding as the screen, is intrinsically beyond but simultaneously intimate with whatever appears, including dialogue, monologues, and subtitles. From this unlocatable, positionless position, they see through the student’s constructions of lack and separation, and effortlessly invite them to do the same, modeling the non-conceptual, non-dual completion of the screen’s natural state.

The character, used to interacting with other characters who take the plotline as real and ignore the ever-present screen, is unmoored from their habitual reference points as well as introduced to a different possibility, one of acausal contentment and sheer openness. In this way, the character is inducted into a way of being that is in alignment not only with the character who serves as their teacher, but with the openness, intimacy, and imperturbability of the screen itself. As the mirage of separation is seen through, the character increasingly tastes the way in which the screen (“theirs” as well as “the teacher’s”) is always effortlessly in its own condition, regardless of what is appearing within it. This further facilitates relaxation of the dualistic mode and the shining forth of the screen within its different appearances. Indeed, with respect to the non-dual nature of experience, there is no screen apart from appearances; in fact, there is no screen at all – the display is without foundation or substance, an appearance of no-thing.

While this is not typically a once-and-for-all or all-at-once shift, it is a way of being with which one can become increasingly familiar. This shift in the relationship to experiencing facilitates the natural “self-liberation” of thoughts and feelings, which release on their own when not grasped, judged, or resisted. What had seemed to be external, intractable, and in opposition to the self turns out to have been the mind’s own energy, held in place through projection, reification, and reactivity. With no separate self to claim or label them, and no existence apart from the field of awareness within which they manifest, the texts suggest that any experience can be known as intrinsically integrated with the imperturbable open presence that is the nature of mind. Abiding within *Immediacy*, *Letting Go*, and *Not Knowing*, the felt reality of one’s thought-constructions can dissipate, the sense of separation from what is occurring can dissolve, and with these, the feeling that life is a problem to be solved can vanish into the simplicity, groundlessness, and peace of just this moment.

Indeed, the very identity of the separate self can be recognized as a movement of contraction against present experience, layered with stories referencing the past and future. These thoughts, feelings, and behaviors swirl around and feed each other, giving the appearance of there being a real entity which acts and experiences through time. While they are in many ways useful for navigating, organizing, and directing our life, and not something to be treated as enemies, Dzogchen contends that both self and time are essentially constructs which can divide the wholeness of reality if treated as solidly separate and real. In the theme *Letting Go*, I suggest that suffering is the inevitable expression of this argument with what is. Correlatively, suffering diminishes to the degree to which one is able to relax into experience in the moment. In fact, the different

texts suggest that our mind is naturally in an ever-present condition of peace and plenitude, concealed only by the search for it. The search cannot unfold without a seeker, a destination, or a future moment, and this is both the means and end of the pathless path of Dzogchen,

Certainly, the account of our situation described above is nearly diametrically in contrast to the more familiar dualistic point of view. However, as I mentioned in the Results section, while the reality indicated in pointing-out instruction might *seem* fundamentally different from own present experience, this seeming is essentially only imaginary; it is none other than this very experience as it is, freed from the limitations of our conceptual constructions. Again, this is not to disparage conceptualization, but rather to highlight its capacity to organize our experience, giving the appearance of truth while remaining baseless. If, as the analysis suggests, the dualistic perspective of subjects interacting with objects in time is itself theoretical, a biased rendering of a situation which does not inherently possess such entities, then what might the non-dual experience, or nature of experience, offer psychotherapeutic theory and practice? In the next section, I will expand upon the possible implications for some approaches which already explicitly make use of non-reactive, present-moment awareness in the healing process.

Reframing Common Factors

Having described the findings of my analysis, what might this understanding offer psychotherapeutic theory and practice? Specifically, how do the themes that emerged from the texts clarify the relationship between awareness, present-moment experience, suffering and healing? One aim of the project is to suggest that the widely acknowledged capacity of non-reactive, present-moment awareness to facilitate transformation and

healing can be understood non-dualistically. It is as if effective therapists were already making use of non-duality, albeit to an attenuated degree and typically without recognizing it explicitly.

In what follows, I connect the Results with various aspects of different psychotherapeutic approaches, suggesting that their very efficacy points to a different view of the mind than the dualistic one so often presupposed within the field. While this is by no means a comprehensive account, I intend to demonstrate that non-duality, while perhaps unfamiliar as an idea, is already implicit as an experiential reality within the core practices of diverse therapies. With appreciation of the ways in which non-dual awareness operates in effective psychotherapy, the field might move further and more intentionally along the spectrum of healing, towards “the ultimate medicine” of pure awareness, which is already complete and free of suffering (Sogyal, 1992). I will explore potential connections between different proposed mechanisms of change in therapy and each of the four themes - *Immediacy*, *Letting Go*, *Not Knowing*, and *Relating Intimately*.

To orient the discussion, I refer to the work of Tschascher, Junghan and Pfammatter, (2014), a comprehensive review of the psychotherapy research literature that explored 22 common factors found in effective psychotherapy. These break down to three interrelated but distinct domains: ***the therapeutic relationship*** (which includes: a supportive therapeutic alliance, the mitigation of social isolation, provision of an explanatory scheme, instillation of hope, encouragement/persuasion to change, activation of strengths, abilities, and resources of the client, and encouragement to face problematic issues), ***client engagement with experience*** (which includes: active client participation, affective experiencing, affective catharsis, desensitization to aversive stimuli, the

development of a mindful/non-judgmental attitude towards experience, and enhanced perception and regulation of emotions), and *shifts in understanding* (which include: corrective emotional experience(s), insight into the causes and motivations for problematic behaviors, assimilating/learning from problematic experiences, cognitive restructuring, development of the capacity to understand and anticipate the mental states of oneself and others, learning new ways of behaving, gathering experiences of success and mastery, increased self-efficacy expectations, and the development of new narratives about the self).

Tscharcher et al.'s research suggests that a close, supportive, and clarifying relationship supports the client in having a more intimate and lucid relationship to their experience, such that old, limiting understandings of self and world can be replaced with new ones that are less rigid and less problematic. This is already analogous to the general structure of the pointing-out experience, suggesting that the liberation from suffering effected through psychotherapy and through Dzogchen practice might be different (granted, radically different) in degree, but not necessarily in kind. Furthermore, as I suggest below, each of the three domains can be appreciated as an expression of non-reactive, present-moment awareness: the therapist endeavors to meet the client with this awareness, such that the client can in turn meet problematic experiences in this way, allowing patterns of reactivity to diminish and leaving the client more able to be present with experience.

Again, my analysis yielded a view of non-reactive present-moment awareness as the nature of mind. It is my contention that each of the aforementioned domains of effective psychotherapy relies upon the themes I found operative in sharing, recognizing,

and resting in the nature of mind, at least to some degree. As it is the basic context of both psychotherapy and pointing-out instruction, I will begin with a discussion of the healing relationship.

Non-dual Presence and the Therapeutic Relationship

There are, of course, multiple dimensions to the relationship in psychotherapy, and a number of different forms that it can take. Tschascher et al. describe the therapeutic alliance as follows: “a trusting, cooperative relationship; characterized on the therapist side by affirmation and affective warmth towards the patient as a person (interactional variables of Rogers, 1951);” they add that “alliance includes mutual connectedness and consensus about therapeutic goals and tasks (see Bordin’s (1979) concept of ‘working alliance’)” (Tschascher et al., 2014, p. 85).

Thus, a “supportive therapeutic alliance” is not just supportive in a general emotional sense, but rather it supports and encapsulates other factors of effective psychotherapy such as “the mitigation of social isolation, provision of an explanatory scheme, instillation of hope, encouragement/persuasion to change, activation of strengths, abilities, and resources of the client, and encouragement to face problematic issues” (Tschascher et al. 2014). As I will expand upon below, the therapeutic relationship also serves as the basis for the client’s healing engagement with experience and related shifts in understanding. Since it is explicitly mentioned by Tschascher et al., and has stood the test of time as a foundational understanding of the therapeutic relationship, I will briefly describe Rogers’ (1957) notion of the “core conditions” enacted relationally by effective therapists, and then connect them with the themes from my analysis.

In his well-known essay “The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Therapeutic Personality Change” (1957), Carl Rogers asserted that in order for psychological healing and transformation to occur, it is necessary and sufficient that the following six conditions be present:

1. Two persons are in psychological contact.
2. The first, whom we shall term the client, is in a state of incongruence, being vulnerable or anxious.
3. The second person, whom we shall term the therapist, is congruent or integrated in the relationship.
4. The therapist experiences unconditional positive regard for the client.
5. The therapist experiences an empathic understanding of the client’s internal frame of reference and endeavors to communicate this experience to the client.
6. The communication to the client of the therapist’s empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard is to a minimal degree achieved. (p. 95)

Subsequently, Rogers himself and others within the field condensed the six conditions to the three of therapist genuineness or congruence, accurate empathy, and unconditional positive regard towards the client. These facilitative conditions have been the focus of much research, and recent meta-analyses (Elliott et al., 2011) suggest that they act as the very engine of healing and transformation in psychotherapy. The core conditions have been shown to correlate more highly with client outcome than specialized treatment interventions (Ardito, 2011), suggesting, as Rogers argued, that what matters in healing is “a way of being,” more than anything in particular that is said or done by the therapist. This is in keeping with the phenomenon of transmission as

described in *Relating Intimately*, and with the overall coherence of the themes in general, but the connection with the non-dual does not end there.

In a 1975 lecture titled “Empathic: An Unappreciated Way of Being,” Rogers offered a description of empathy which is in accord with the different themes which emerged from my analysis. I have added my own annotations to his definition, highlighting the connection between the themes and Rogers’ view of empathy. In his words, empathy: “means entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it [*Relating Intimately*]. It involves being sensitive, moment to moment, to the changing felt meanings which flow in this other person [*Relating Intimately, Immediacy*] ...It means temporarily living in his/her life, moving about in it delicately without making judgments, sensing meanings of which he/she is scarcely aware, but not trying to uncover feelings [*Relating Intimately, Not Knowing, Letting Go*]...It includes communicating your sensings of his/her world as you look with fresh and unfrightened eyes at elements of which the individual is fearful [*Relating Intimately, Not Knowing*]. It means frequently checking with him/her as to the accuracy of your sensings, and being guided by the responses you receive [*Relating Intimately, Not Knowing*]...for the time being you lay aside the views and values you hold for yourself in order to enter another’s world without prejudice. In some sense it means that you lay aside your self [*Relating Intimately, Not Knowing, Letting Go*]” (Rogers, 1975).

Although he describes it as “entering the private perceptual world of the other,” it is clear that Rogers sees the phenomenon of empathy as bridging or dissolving the separation between self and other, as was described in the theme *Relating Intimately*. What is more, empathy for Rogers involves being with experience (both “therapist’s” and

“client’s,” such that this distinction is no longer fully tenable) in a manner that is immediate in terms of temporality and the subject-object relationship, as well as free from the presumptions of prior knowledge and reactivity. In this light, the cornerstone of Rogers’ therapeutic approach is reminiscent of certain Dzogchen meditation instructions.

Of course, a description of empathic sensitivity might sound much more mundane than the language of primordial awareness, but the connection is there. If empathy, a core feature of psychotherapy, involves laying aside oneself - one’s views, values, and prejudices - to more fully share the moment with another, perhaps the thread can be followed to a fuller recognition of non-duality. In Rogers’ explicit concept of empathy, as in much of psychotherapy, there is still a notion that this sensitivity is an activity of one separate self that links it to another. From the non-dual point of view, however, empathy is the natural way that our shared awareness is touched by whatever occurs within the field, while still remaining spacious and present.

As for unconditional positive regard, Rogers spoke of it in terms that are very much in line with the themes *Relating Intimately*, *Letting Go*, and *Not Knowing*. For Rogers, one experiencing unconditional positive regard holds “no conditions of acceptance... It is at the opposite pole from a selective evaluating attitude...” One offers “warm acceptance” and regards “each aspect of the client’s experience as being part of that client... It means a caring for the client, but not in a possessive way or in such a way as simply to satisfy the therapist’s own needs. It means caring for the client as a separate person, with permission to have his [or her] own feelings, his [or her] own experiences” (Rogers, 1957, p. 98). Again, although Rogers used the word separate in this description, it is clear that he meant this in terms of openness and allowing on the part of the therapist,

the cessation of negative judgments of the other and resultant attempts to manipulate, change them, or understand them. For Rogers, unconditional positive regard involves letting the client be just as they are, without the frame of reference of the past, future, or the therapist's self.

Unconditional positive regard, then, resonates strongly with the attitude of acceptance encouraged in Dzogchen, which allows for experiences of completion and fulfillment through the relaxation of attempts to improve what appears in the moment. This is not a completion that is constructed, but rather the inherent completeness of things as they already are, freed from thoughts of how they could or should be different. It is, in this respect, the intrinsic completeness of the moment beyond the judgments and projects which perpetuate the sense of time, as well as the separate self. Rogers seems to have recognized this dimension, at least as a possibility. He writes: "people are just as wonderful as sunsets if you let them be. When I look at a sunset, I don't find myself saying, 'soften the orange a bit on the right hand corner.' I don't try to control a sunset. I watch with awe as it unfolds" (Rogers, 1980, p. 22). This coheres with Dzogchen's emphasis on naturalness and the easy enjoyment of direct experience, as well as the unique form of connection described in the theme *Relating Intimately*.

This is not to say that acceptance is escapism, since it is an "escape" into things just as they are, without a shred of difference. Neither is it passive resignation to a static state of affairs. Indeed, acceptance is seen in Dzogchen as the very means by which phenomena self-liberate. I will discuss this in greater detail in the discussion of non-dual presence and the client's experiencing, but for now, will offer a well-known quote of Rogers' which is very much in accord with the Dzogchen ethos and the theme of *Letting*

Go: “the curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change” (Rogers, 1995, p. 17). This speaks to the way in which “problems” consist of and are perpetuated by resistance to/separation from what is, dissipating naturally as this resistance is relaxed.

Of course, the operative question in Dzogchen would be “who accepts themselves?” There is then, perhaps, a deeper paradox implicit within the non-duality of acceptance and change described by Rogers; namely: how can “I” accept “myself”? Allow yourself a moment of *Not Knowing* as you consider: are there really two of me, I and myself? Can an eye see itself? Can a hand grasp itself? Can I, in fact, stand apart from myself to accept myself? Can “I” even find this “I”? If not, if the subject-object divide softly collapses into the presence of the moment, then there is just this, just acceptance-change as a single fact: what is here now is already accepted, and is already changed into something else, which is fully accepted as just what is, without a separate knower or acceptor.

This distinct mode of temporality, described earlier as *Freefall Without Motion*, is in keeping with the themes *Immediacy* and *Letting Go*. These themes suggest a vision of acceptance not as the activity of a separate subject who accepts objects, but as the natural condition of non-dual awareness itself. Within the field of awareness, whatever appears is already effortlessly and completely “accepted” just as it is, allowing for the continual revelation of experiencing. Regardless of the apparent resistance to what is on behalf of separate selves, each moment is automatically and fully “accepted” in its very appearance, dissolving into the empty nature of mind and instantaneously replaced by a new appearance “like the flight path of a bird in the sky.” Non-meditation involves tuning

in to this naturally present context of acceptance, allowing it to dissolve identification with efforts to change this moment/arrive at another, and simply being the motionless flow of experiencing.

This clarifies the “paradox” in Rogers’ statement: when “I” accept “myself,” I close the imagined gap between myself and the moment which keeps me stuck in familiar habits of reactivity. I already am what I am, and what is already is, regardless of what I do or think about it. With appreciation of this fact, instead of pursuing and avoiding experiences, I can just experience. What is generally overlooked, though, is that in “just experiencing,” there is *just* experiencing, without separation between “I am” and “what is.” Like the comments on selflessness and empathy, the already acknowledged relationship between acceptance, healing, and transformation is a thread which can be followed to more radical insights.

Following naturally from the other two core conditions is what Rogers called “congruence.” He described congruence as a way of being in which a therapist is “freely and deeply himself, with his actual experience accurately represented by his awareness of himself” (Rogers, 1957, p. 97). Rogers depicted congruence as “the opposite of presenting a facade, either knowingly or unknowingly,” ((Rogers, 1957, p. 98) such that “there is a close matching, or congruence between what is being experienced at the gut level, what is present in awareness, and what is expressed to the client” (Rogers, 1980, p. 116). For Rogers, the congruent therapist “is being the feelings and attitudes which at the moment are flowing within him,” (Rogers et al., 1967, p. 100) and simultaneously meeting the client with “willingness to be and to express, in my words and behavior, the various feelings and attitudes which exist in me” (Rogers, 1961, p. 33).

While still relying upon the language of representation, in Rogers' understanding of congruence there is, intriguingly, not a separation between what we are, what we know, and what we express. This is in keeping with the themes *Immediacy* and *Relating Intimately*. Furthermore, for Rogers, congruence involves *Letting Go* of contrived efforts to be or present ourselves as other than what we are, and *Not Knowing* with respect to judgments and assumptions that might obscure the actuality of the moment. Congruence, then, expresses the way in which being ourselves is also effortlessly expressing ourselves, without a gap between "inside" and "outside." The "transparency" that I described experiencing with Peter was like congruence to the vanishing point, which naturally facilitated the transmission of his state.

Again, a core component of effective psychotherapy can be seen to make use of non-duality, while leaving its deeper implications largely unexplored. In a sense, my analysis found that Dzogchen points to the impossibility of there being anything other than complete congruence. At the conditioned level, we simply cannot be other than how we are at the moment. Right now, we are wherever we are, thinking what we're thinking, feeling what we're feeling, and doing what we're doing. If we think something else, then we are thinking something else. If we're feeling in conflict, then we're feeling in conflict. If we are resisting what is, then we are resisting what is, and even this apparent resistance is already accepted - it need not be resisted, but if it is, this is accepted as well!

At the level of the unconditioned, which we can appreciate when we inquire into the aforementioned "who," mind itself is always in its own unstructured and contentless state. There is nothing in pure awareness to conflict with or contradict itself - it is utter simplicity, open and insubstantial like empty sky. Being inseparable, these "two" are

already completely integrated, completely congruent in/as this self-luminous moment, which is vividly apparent, ungraspable, and just as it is. Innately congruent through and through, the cognizant no-thingness of mind itself is always effortlessly being, knowing, and expressing itself in appearances.

Illustrating the way in which his therapeutic approach, while implicitly non-dualistic, still remained within the framework of potentially endless progression and goal-orientation, Rogers humbly said of congruence that “no one fully achieves this condition” (Rogers, 1961, p. 61). However, at the same time as it highlights the interminable (and exhausting?) nature of the quest for self-improvement and authenticity, this statement could equally be taken as a pointing-out instruction: fully achieving congruence is being no one. Being no one, we are not other than - fully congruent with - whatever is appearing.

The concept of congruence plays a central role in Rogers’ thinking, as he defines the problems that clients bring to therapy in terms of incongruence. I will discuss this in greater detail in the discussion of non-dual presence and the client’s experiencing. At this point, however, it is significant to note that Rogers’ saw the therapist’s own congruence, as well as their expression of the other two core conditions, as helping the client to become more congruent - to know, be, and express present experiencing without reactivity or contrivance. The essence of this process, for Rogers, was akin to the phenomenon of transmission as described in the theme *Relating Intimately*; the therapist simultaneously abides within and models/expresses a way of being which undoes the client’s reactivity and is then internalized by the client.

Ultimately, this is possible because the client and therapist are not separate, self-enclosed entities, but rather facets of a seamless experiential field; they share the moment. As the therapist embodies the qualities of this field, meeting the client with congruence, empathy, and unconditional positive regard, the client's capacity to meet themselves in this way is enhanced, and transformation happens naturally. This echoes the discussion in the Results section of how the guru facilitates a student's own abiding in the nature of mind.

The understanding that the core conditions are expressions of the field of awareness itself, rather than belonging to a person, generally remains implicit within discussions of the therapy process. Indeed, the potential indicated by this project is that therapists and clients might consciously realize, embrace, and more intentionally make use of this experiential reality. Despite remaining largely undiscussed in his writings, as was described in the literature review, later in his career Rogers unified the different core conditions into what he called "*presence*" (Rogers, 1980), which he described in transpersonal terms. He writes: "at those moments it seems that my inner spirit has reached out and touched the inner spirit of the other. Our relationship transcends itself and becomes a part of something larger" (Rogers, 1980, p. 129). In his discussion of presence, Rogers appreciatively quotes a participant in one of his workshops who said: "I felt the power of the 'life force' that infuses each of us - whatever that is. I felt its presence without the usual barricades of 'me-ness' or 'you-ness'... And yet with that extraordinary sense of oneness, the separateness of each person present has never been more clearly preserved" (Rogers, 1980, p. 130). This description would not have been out of place in my own notes!

Thus, an exploration of some of the more radical implications of Rogers' widely researched core conditions points to an understanding of suffering, healing, and present-moment awareness which is in keeping with the themes that emerged from my analysis. It also suggests that there is untapped potential at the very heart of the psychotherapy process, the explication of which may yield a non-dualistic understanding of subjectivity and temporality. Before exploring this further in terms of the client's experiencing, I will speculate as to how the remaining aspects of the therapeutic relationship noted by Tschascher et al. might also connect with the themes.

While perhaps commonsensical, the fact that "mitigation of social isolation" is a healing factor in therapy suggests that suffering is exacerbated with, or even inextricable from, the sense of oneself as an entity fundamentally isolated from others - a cornerstone of the dualistic view. Again, healing arises as we move in the direction of non-duality. Moving on to "the provision of an explanatory scheme": this can be seen as speaking to the issue of "faith," which I described in the theme *Relating Intimately*. The role of the therapist is once more analogous to that of the teacher in pointing-out instruction, able to facilitate the client's transformation with their insight into the workings of the mind. Faith in the therapist and the process of therapy brings with it an openness, a *Letting Go*, which synergizes with and enhances the impact of the core conditions. Ironically, the healing efficacy of receiving an explanation for one's experience can also express the theme *Not Knowing*. Having an explanation can alleviate the client's need to know, thereby shifting their relationship to their experience from one of resistance and seeking to one of greater "congruence" as described above; when offered an answer from a trusted source, they stop struggling to understand, and can experience greater allowing or

acceptance. When we no longer need to know, we are more open to the natural completeness of the moment.

Echoing the counterintuitive way in which receiving answers connects with the liberating possibility of *Not Knowing* and *Not Needing to Know*, the factor described as “instillation of hope” can be seen as interwoven with *Letting Go*. From one point of view, the state of hopelessness is an expression of reification, borne of conviction that our problems (and we who have them) are inherently real, rather than constructions of thought. As described in the Results, this certainty is often a component of self-perpetuating cycles of conceptualization and reactivity. In keeping with its emphasis on moving beyond such loops through abiding in presence, Buddhist psychology generally posits that liberation involves being beyond hope as well as fear. However, if we examine hope in terms of its function in the therapy setting, we might appreciate that if a client has hope that they can heal and transform, they are already on some level aware of the emptiness of their dilemma. If only fleetingly or subtly, they have moved from a position of resigned certitude to one of *Not Knowing*. This is true as well for therapists, who intuitively appreciate that apparent problems are not definitive of the client or reality, but rather a matter of perspective, which can change because it is neither permanent nor absolute. Therapists offer this view in different ways to their clients such that it can be “instilled” in them.

The recognition that the client and situation are open-ended and therefore open to transformation is another established understanding within the field that can be contemplated at deeper and deeper levels. Seeking to break the vicious circle of hopelessness, therapists point out to clients that experience can change, and that our

assumptions about it are not necessarily true; in so doing, it is as though they crack open the door to the groundless openness of Dzogchen, which is predicated upon there, in fact, being no door. As described in each of the themes, but particularly *Immediacy* and *Not Knowing*, pointing-out instruction indicates the unfindability and ungraspability of all phenomena even as they vividly appear. According to the different texts, reality is beyond whatever we think it is - it simply cannot be known, and thereby confounds the prejudices and beliefs that fuel our struggle against it. There is thus a paradoxical thread which can be followed from the hope that things might not be what they seem, to recognition of the nature of mind beyond hope and fear. On the other hand, if problems were actually solid and intractable, there would be no sense in even exploring solutions; in the surrender which follows naturally upon the recognition of true futility, client and therapist might then discover the liberating dimension of “hopelessness,” namely *Letting Go!*

In terms of the moment-to-moment process of therapy, having hope that it is worthwhile to do so can allow the client to relax their resistance to experience and be with it in its *Immediacy*. Again, there is an irony - being offered certainty about the hopefulness of the future, the client can let go of the future. Just as when we receive an answer, we momentarily stop looking for one, when we are given hope, for a moment, we stop trying to escape what is. In this respect, effective therapists can be seen as providing relief from the suffering that comes with imagined lack and reactivity by feeding and thereby temporarily abating the client’s need for knowledge and a path to follow. However, what is typically overlooked in the assumption that the problem and its solution are real at some taken-for-granted level is that the healing follows not from the specificity

of the explanatory scheme or the hopeful future, but from the dissolution of the imagined need and the sense of separation from what is occurring.

This understanding can also be applied to the final factors of the effective therapeutic relationship mentioned by Tschascher et al.: “encouragement to change,” “encouragement to face problematic issues,” and “activation of the client’s strengths.” These can each and all be recognized as means by which the therapist supports the client in being more present with experiencing, diminishing their reactivity against it and challenging their belief that it is fruitless or too dangerous to do so.

When the client’s strengths are activated (again, through appreciation that they are not the hopeless character they imagine themselves to be), they inevitably feel more capable of meeting life and relying less upon their strategies of avoidance. While identification with a personal strength is, from a non-dual point of view, not essentially different from identification with a personal weakness, it can be seen as a step in the direction beyond hope and fear described above. Awareness itself, according to the results of my analysis, is not inherently personal, good, or bad; however, in contacting our “good” qualities - notwithstanding the way that such qualities are ultimately relative - it is possible that to let go of the conviction that there is something wrong with us, and give up the struggle to change ourselves. Indeed, as I described in the Results, lovely qualities such as kindness, discernment, and equanimity, as well as many others that are often considered virtuous, can naturally blossom as we move beyond self-centeredness and reactivity.

Again, it is my suggestion that the healing effectiveness of these factors has less to do with the exact strength that is activated, the particular means of encouragement

offered, or the specific content of the issue to be faced, than with the way that these function to collapse the duality between the client and present experiencing. Thus, these three components can be construed as further examples of how the presence of the therapist bolsters the presence of the client, such that their suffering is relieved. It is to the matter of the “client’s” presence that I now turn.

Non-dual Presence and the Client’s Experiencing

In the discussion up to this point, I have explored how the different themes to emerge from the analysis can be seen as operating within the therapeutic relationship. I have suggested that in various, often counterintuitive ways, effective therapists tap the liberating wellspring of non-duality. I have recurrently drawn upon the notion, explored in detail in the theme *Relating Intimately*, that as aware presence cannot be found to possess boundaries, the presence of the therapist is not fundamentally separate from that of the client. Therefore, as we have seen in pointing-out instruction as well as Rogers’ core conditions, the teacher or therapist’s own way of being with experience can catalyze a shift in how the student or client relates to experience. In this section, I will consider the client’s engagement with experience in greater detail, with an eye towards how the different components of effective therapy listed by Tschascher et al. might be unified and connect with a non-dualistic understanding of the mind.

To reiterate, Tschascher et al.’s review of the psychotherapy literature suggested that effective therapy includes the following common factors: active client participation, affective experiencing, affective catharsis, desensitization to aversive stimuli, the development of a mindful/non-judgmental attitude towards experience, and enhanced perception and regulation of emotions (2014). While these were listed as distinct in

Tschascher's study, I suggest that they can be understood as coherent, cohesive aspects of a single phenomenon that has already been widely researched by psychotherapy outcome studies: namely, "high experiencing level" (Hendricks, 2001).

The notion of experiencing level as a therapeutic variable was discussed in the Literature Review. In that section, I described how in the mid-1950's, under the direction of Carl Rogers, Eugene Gendlin and colleagues at the University of Chicago conducted a series of studies whose results suggested that the crucial factor in the psychotherapy process was the manner in which the client related to experience. While Rogers had recognized the healing impact of the therapist's warm, accepting, and empathic way of being with the client, Gendlin explored how this relationship healed through a study of what, precisely, was facilitated within this atmosphere.

He discovered that Rogers' core conditions support clients in "freshly referring to ongoing felt experiencing" during the therapy process. Gendlin's research indicated that clients who demonstrate this manner of experiencing, in contrast to those who remain "distant" from experience, are more likely to have positive therapy outcomes (Gendlin, 1961). This notion was subsequently codified in the form of an observer-rated scale called the Experiencing or EXP Scale (Gendlin, 1961; Klein et al., 1969, 1986), which measures the level of experiencing in terms of seven distinct stages ranging from low, to medium, to high. In an effort to support clients in raising their level of experiencing, Gendlin developed a practice known as Focusing, which evolved into a branch of therapy known as Focusing-Oriented or Experiential Psychotherapy. Gendlin's original findings have held up over the course of five decades of research (Greenberg, Elliott, & Lietaer, 1994; Hendricks, 2007); more than 100 such studies are summarized in an article by

Hendricks (2001) on the Research Basis of Focusing-Oriented/Experiential Psychotherapy.

The experiencing scale is based upon the verbal communications of clients, which Gendlin and his colleagues noted can range from externalized, abstract content at low levels, through intermediate stages where narratives are fleshed out in terms of subjective responses and bodily feelings, to more advanced stages in which such experiences are directly explored, with emergent levels of “fresh experiencing” serving as the lived resolution of previously problematic situations (Klein et al., 1969). In Gendlin’s studies (Klein et al., 1969), it became apparent that successful psychotherapy clients pay attention to their experience in a specific way: allowing and intimately sensing the bodily felt sense of some problem or situation, they pause, searching for words or images that “fit.” When they land upon a symbol that “gets it exactly,” there is a natural, visceral relief and sense of movement. Contrary to the received view of psychotherapy at the time, success correlated not with the particular content being discussed, but with the manner in which the client discussed these contents (Hendricks, 2007).

The construct of experiencing level unified understandings of exposure, catharsis, insight, and corrective emotional experiences as curative; the higher one moves along the experiencing scale, they simultaneously become more intimate, perceptive, and expressive with respect to their previously avoided and “frozen” experiencing. For Gendlin, the issue of central import was how therapists and clients together allow for the further flow of such “blocked” experiencing (Hendricks, 2001). Along the lines of Rogers’ idea of congruence, which saw healing as a matter of being “able to live more fully and acceptingly in the process of experiencing...symboliz[ing] the meanings which

are implicitly in the immediate moment” (Rogers 1959), Gendlin posited that effective psychotherapy has to do with “allow[ing] exact words, or images or gestures or new action steps to arise from the felt sense” (Hendricks, 2001). These expressions, in their exactness, both convey and facilitate insight, exposure, and corrective emotional experience.

Gendlin developed a unique and complex theoretical account of the interaction between symbolic expression, direct experience, and the organism-environment relationship (Gendlin, 1997), which is intriguing but beyond the scope of the current discussion. At this point, it will suffice to say that the factor of experiencing level bridges the domains of experience and expression. It thereby connects the different components of client activity found to be healing by Tschascher et al. (2014), as well as implicitly moving in the direction of non-duality, in which expression is understood as effortlessly co-emergent with experiencing and being.

The main claim of this section is that the crux of high experiencing lies in *Immediacy*, *Not Knowing*, and *Letting Go*, which cohere in the form of a client *Relating Intimately* to the moment’s felt experience. These integral aspects of psychological healing in general and the Focusing process in particular have often remained implicit in the discussions of theoreticians and clinicians, who, despite the appreciation of the process dimension in psychotherapy, tend to emphasize the specific experiential contents that transform or emerge through Focusing rather than the challenge it poses to dualistic models of subjectivity and temporality. I aim to show that the “the felt shift” that comes with transformative Focusing sessions can be understood as an instance of the natural

self-liberation that occurs with the collapse of the separation between subject, object, and time.

According to the Dzogchen contemplatives whose instructions Peter and I worked with, the very nature of awareness is without this conceptual construction. Therefore, with respect to the mind itself, there is actually no such thing as “higher” or “lower” stages of experiencing. Each moment is complete just as it is, regardless of what appears. Like a mirror and its reflections, awareness itself is not affected by appearances, even while being inseparable from them, abiding in a condition of inherent peace and contentment. Nevertheless, the nature of mind can apparently be veiled by reactivity and reification, which perpetuate the play of subject, object, and time and give rise to various experiences of lack and suffering. Insofar as higher levels of experiencing, which have already been correlated with healing and transformation, can be shown to correspond to the dissolution of separation, reification, and reactivity, the notion might serve as a bridge between psychotherapy and non-dual contemplative practice. In this way it might offer a step beyond the dualistic understanding of present-moment awareness predominant within the field.

I will consider the first several stages of the experiencing scale in terms of the findings of my analysis, and then interweave the latter stages with descriptions of the Focusing process, exploring how the fact of transformation in higher levels of experiencing/Focusing suggests a non-dual view of present-moment awareness, which has typically remained unarticulated in the literature. The following are excerpts from the EXP Scale Training Manual (Klein et al. 1969) with my comments relative to the Results.

In Stage One, Klein et al. (1969) write that “the content is not about the speaker. The speaker tells a story, describes other people or events in which he or she is not involved or presents a generalized or detached account of ideas” (p. 57); this is in keeping with the sense of the world and other people as separate, objective, and inherently existent. The lowest level of experiencing is therefore considered to be “reality” from the dualistic, materialist point of view that is challenged by Dzogchen. It is often described in neutral terms, in the past tense, and as a simple fact, with little to no acknowledgment of the speaker’s existence.

In Stage Two, according to Klein et al. (1969), “either the speaker is the central character in the narrative or his or her interest is clear. Comments and reactions serve to get the story across but do not refer to the speaker’s feelings” (p. 58). Moving up the experiencing scale, there is now slightly more *Immediacy*, with the inclusion of the speaker as part of the story. However, the subject-object split and the objectivity of the world remain taken for granted; comments are made as descriptions of how things are, without acknowledgment that such appearances are open-ended and relative to the speaker’s thoughts and feelings. In this way, comments at this level are expressions of unquestioned “knowing,” which supports yet conceals the speaker’s reactions.

In Stage Three, “the content is a narrative about the speaker in external or behavioral terms with added comments on feelings or private experiences. These remarks are limited to the situations described, giving the narrative a personal touch without describing the speaker more generally” (Klein et al., 1969, p. 58). Again, there is an increased degree of *Immediacy* in the narrative, with the inclusion of feelings or “private experiences.” With the explicit description of phenomena usually considered to be

subjective, the account has shifted towards a more even balance of “subjective” and “objective,” though the two are still seen/expressed as distinct. Much of ordinary, non-therapeutic conversation occurs at this level. Despite the description of experience as “private,” such accounts are closer to the realm of *Relating Intimately*, as feelings are being shared between speakers. There is still a considerable degree of “knowing,” which now no longer conceals, but reveals the speaker’s reactivity, in terms of their feeling states.

At Stage Four, “feelings or the experience of events, rather than the events themselves, are the subject of the discourse. The client tries to attend to and hold onto the direct inner reference of experiencing and make it the basic datum of communications” (Klein et al., 1969, p. 59). This is the level at which the Focusing process tends to begin, and at which much of psychotherapy unfolds. The world is no longer spoken of as a separate object, but rather is articulated in terms of its relationship to the client’s feelings and other experiences. There is a greater movement into the present and into subjectivity, which can be seen as an increased degree of *Immediacy*. With it, there is greater intimacy between members of the conversation. There is a subtle increase in *Not Knowing* as the comments shift from preconceived ideas to present experiencing, and a degree of *Letting Go* with respect to efforts to conceal or control one’s experience. However, the subject-object duality is still firmly intact, and feelings or situations are experienced as problems or assets for the self.

Stage Five is when Focusing begins in earnest. Regarding comments at this stage, Klein et al. say that “the content is a purposeful exploration of the speaker’s feelings and experiencing. The speaker must pose or define a problem or proposition about self

explicitly in terms of feelings, and must explore or work with the problem in a personal way. The client now can focus on the vague, implicitly meaningful aspects of experiencing and struggle to elaborate it” (Klein et al., 1969, p. 59). The shift to this stage corresponds to a greater degree of *Not Knowing*, *Immediacy*, and *Letting Go*. The speaker has transitioned from relating to feelings as inert objects to treating them as dynamic processes relative to themselves as experiencer. Furthermore, they have explicitly brought a degree of questioning as to their nature.

Klein et al. state that at this stage, the speaker’s “manner may be conditional, tentative, hesitant, or searching...The speaker may wonder whether or to what extent he or she has a specific feeling. The speaker is exploring or testing a hypothesis about his or her experiencing.” From the point of view of my analysis, this could be the beginning of an “unfindability inquiry” (Klein et al., 1969, p. 59), a release of the reified idea about a phenomenon into its vivid yet mysterious actuality as direct experience. The client drops the label or story about what they are feeling, meeting it freshly and opening to it without analysis; this meeting and opening is a step towards the self-liberation that occurs with the momentary cessation of the story that there is a “them” separate from “a feeling.”

Something to notice here is that the seeming reality of an experience has dissolved through a shift into greater *Immediacy* and *Not Knowing*. At one point, one label appeared to fit, and to accurately refer to a phenomenon, but with this different way of relating to experience, it no longer does; it has become an open question. This is akin to the process of deconstruction described in the Results, in which things that had seemed obviously real turn out to have been ideas and assumptions upon direct investigation. Of course, this is not fully abiding in/as *Not Knowing*, as there is still seeking for an answer

or a future experience. However, such searching is less of a doing than it is an allowing of experiencing to unfold; in this allowing, the gulf between subject and object lessens, because the subject has, so to speak, taken a step back, emptying itself of ideas and activity and allowing the “object” of experiencing to manifest without interference. Conceptual labels are tried on, but held lightly and seen through as they are disconfirmed by direct experience. The client moves further into *Immediacy*, *Not Knowing*, and *Letting Go*; their questioning is simultaneously an easing of reification, reactivity, and separation.

At this stage, if the speaker is in a conversation with someone, it has likely moved further in the direction of *Relating Intimately*, as the other follows closely along with the speaker’s process in a mutually allowing and non-interfering manner, waiting for them to try on words, but not investing in one or another, so as not to prematurely bring the conversation back to the level of the known. Thus, as we move up the experiencing scale, there is a correlative dissolution of duality into (shared) presence.

From this point onwards, I will interweave description of the different levels of experiencing with the steps in the Focusing process, as they are inextricable. Indeed, as mentioned, Gendlin developed the Focusing technique as an attempt to teach the way of being characterized by higher experiencing stages, which clients with better psychotherapy outcomes seemed to operate from naturally (Hendricks, 2001). I will continue to emphasize the deconstructive elements of the Focusing process, which are generally left implicit in the literature.

Anne Weiser Cornell, an influential theorist within the Focusing community, offers the following phrases as guiding suggestions for the Focusing process, which is

typically initiated at this level of experiencing. She suggests beginning by thinking to oneself: “I’m sensing into my body” and asking: “how am I feeling about that issue?” (Weiser Cornell, 2013, p. 76). This sensing is a collapse of the usual distance maintained between mind and body, which is closely connected to that between subject and object. The phrase “sensing into” suggests that awareness intimately touches and permeates experiencing from moment-to-moment, letting go of past, future, and resistance, remaining open with the questioning attitude Weiser Cornell encourages, such that it receives the flow of experience.

It is crucial to acknowledge that the actual process of Focusing, like knowing/experiencing itself, is not a noun. It is an activity of sensing, which is direct, beyond subject, object, and time. This may sound arcane, but it is readily recognizable in ordinary experience. Seeing, for instance, is a unitary process that is only conceptually separated into a seer, a seen, and an act linking the two. Even to call seeing a process is not quite accurate, as it is instantaneously, already present - here it is. This is pointing towards the notion of *Immediacy* which emerged from the Results. The act of Focusing itself is therefore outside the mindset of “now I am doing something called Focusing.” If we are thinking about Focusing, for however long we do, we have stopped Focusing. In general, the commentary of thought upon what is occurring can seem to separate out a subject from the non-dual happening of experience. In this respect, the different steps offered in Focusing instruction, even while facilitating the process, are essentially steps “out” of the non-dual and back into the subject-object split; they are like buoys floating on the surface of a body of water, which the apparently separate self hangs on to in between dips “in” to felt sensing.

However, my analysis suggests that even this is a sort of illusion, as we can never actually leave the immediacy of the moment. We cannot surface from the ocean of non-duality. We cannot in fact be more or less intimate with experiencing. If we are feeling ourselves to be a separate seer looking out at the world from behind the eyes, for example, or thinking about the past, then that itself is occurring in absolute immediacy, just as seeing was in the description above. As I mentioned, if we are thinking about Focusing, then we are simply thinking about Focusing, nothing more, and nothing less - that itself is complete. According to Dzogchen contemplatives, experience is by nature non-dual. So then, what is it about Focusing and non-dual contemplation that is distinct and allows for self-liberation to occur? I suggest that this has to do with a shift in (or rather, out of) identification.

Just as in the earlier example of the character and the screen, Focusing entails shifting the locus of our identity from a particular limited content, to the imperturbable context within which it appears, and then to the lack of separation between the two, such that the content has space and support to unfold just as it is. This journey out of and into identification is possible because the content and context were never in fact separate - something we could not have recognized had we simply remained unconsciously identified with the limited character.

Indeed, much of the time we are caught up in identification with our thoughts, feelings, and reactions - we simply “are” angry, or sad, or frightened. Often, we do not even recognize that this is the case, instead seeing and treating the world as inherently infuriating, depressing, or frightening, along the lines of the lower levels of experiencing. Moving into the medium levels of experiencing, we shift from “being” angry or sad, to

“feeling” anger or sadness. As we do so, the quality of the feeling becomes more nuanced, as though we stepped back so that we could see it more clearly - when the reification and the urge to act upon it becomes less intense, we have some distance from the feeling and can appreciate that it is connected with an array of different reactions and ideas.

This complexity is what Gendlin calls the “felt sense” of a situation. He writes that the felt sense “contains many details, just as a piece of music contains many notes. A symphony, for instance, may last an hour or more and contain thousands of separate musical tones, sounded by many diverse instruments, in a multitude of combinations and progressions. But you don’t need to know all these details of its structure in order to feel it. If it is a symphony you know well, you only need hear its name mentioned and feel the aura of it instantly. That symphony: the feel of it comes to you whole, without details” (Gendlin 1978). The felt sense is thus different from an emotion, in being the context of meanings, values, and activities from which the emotion arises. When we are identified with an emotion, this context is, for the most part, implicit. As Gendlin acknowledges, for any phenomenon there is always “more” than we can say or contact knowingly; nevertheless, in Focusing this “more” becomes more available and workable (Gendlin, 2004).

The many facets of a felt sense can be seen as knowings and doings which cohere in a dynamically unfolding entity, motivated by attraction and aversion, rooted in a past, and oriented towards a future. It is what we often refer to as “a part” of ourselves. Thus, through dis-identification, the focuser has moved from “you’re infuriating!” to “I am furious” to “I feel furious,” to “a part of me is furious,” the “part” being the felt sense. A

felt sense, then, has a subjectivity of sorts, which is not essentially different from a personal identity; indeed, Focusing entails relating to the felt sense as a living process with its own perspective. For this reason, Gendlin called the felt sense “the client’s client” (Gendlin 1978). He says that “Focusing is this very deliberate thing where an ‘I’ is attending to an ‘it’...keeping it company” (Gendlin 1990, p. 216).

In dis-identifying from the feeling, there is less reactivity (*Letting Go*) and more of an emphasis on exploration through direct sensing (*Immediacy, Not Knowing*); this simultaneity of spaciousness and intimacy (*Relating Intimately*) is an expression of non-duality between the client and themselves, a dissolution of the subject-object split in which transformation happens naturally. Much of the time, we can experience a felt sense as having desires, preferences, fears, and struggles; just as a non-dual teacher, when abiding within the nature of mind, generates a resonant field that effortlessly dismantles the reactive, lack-based identity of a student, I suggest that Focusing entails essentially the same process occurring “intrapsychically.”

Again, this process began in Stage Five of the EXP scale, and was guided by Weiser Cornell’s suggestions to sense into the body. In Stage Six, the Focusing process unfolds and “the subject matter concerns the speaker’s present, emergent experience. A sense of active, immediate involvement in an experientially anchored issue is conveyed with evidence of its resolution or acceptance. The feelings themselves change or shift.” (Klein et al. 1970). Weiser Cornell offers the following guidelines: “I’m saying hello to what’s here,” “I’m sitting with it, with interested curiosity,” “I’m sensing how it, feels from its point of view,” “I’m asking...what gets it so ___?” and “I’m letting it know I hear it.” (Weiser Cornell, 2013, p. 92). There are nuanced moves being made here, which

individually and together facilitate the felt shift. Gendlin described the felt shift as “a physical sensation of something moving in the way the problem is experienced...accompanied by physical relief, even a slight bit of ‘give’ that subtly changes the whole” (Gendlin, 1999, p. 233) The crux of the current discussion is how the movements described above allow for a healing, relieving transformation to occur, and what this implies about self, time, and suffering.

If we explore what the client in Stage Six is doing with respect to the felt sense, their “inner client,” we can appreciate that the increased *Immediacy*, *Not Knowing*, and *Letting Go* cohere in such a way that they are *Relating Intimately* with “a part” of “themselves,” thereby collapsing the subject-object duality. In the theme *Immediacy*, I described how awareness, being formless, could not be separated from the field of appearances; in the same way, in Focusing, the client dis-identifies with their ideas about and reactivity towards the felt sense, to the point where they become the space for the felt sense to be just as it is. Emptied of its own content, the “self” of the Focuser remains only as awareness, which is not separate from the appearance of the felt sense. Being no-thing, the focuser is not other than the felt sense, which is then, as it were, self-luminous. Thus, through following dis-identification to its end, “we” “unite” with “ourselves,” closing the gap that is required for lack and suffering. Being “in” the moment, we also short-circuit the process of attraction and aversion which maintains separation. Again, from the point of view of Dzogchen, we cannot actually separate from what we are; however, insofar as we feel a sense of lack or suffering, there is a possibility to be with the moment more intimately.

In non-dual experiencing, in a sense, we disappear for the unfolding of the “other” (who is no longer other); the same occurs for the felt sense. By acknowledging and greeting the felt sense, we are honoring its otherness in the moment, and *Letting Go* of our reactions against it. Meeting it with the *Not Knowing* that Weiser Cornell describes as “interested curiosity,” we dis-identify further, into the state that Weiser Cornell describes as Self-In-Presence. Gendlin (1996) expressly stated that the “self is not this ‘part’ nor any other part of content. Rather, [the self] is the one who senses it, can speak for it, understands it...the self is not any specific content” (Gendlin, 1996, p. 35). With no content of its own, the self cannot resist the part any more than space resists objects within it - any resistance to the part is itself another part that is accepted within the context of the contentless self.

Without any form or structure, how can the Focusing self actually be other than the part? Furthermore, when the Focuser is “speaking for” the part, or, in Weiser Cornell’s words, “sensing how it feels from its point of view,” is this not an expression of what Peter described as “talking to myself with a different voice”? When we listen to ourselves in Focusing, who is talking, and who is listening? As the focuser gives voice to the felt sense, there is a merging of the “I” of the focuser and the “I” of the felt sense, the “it” that is focused upon - raising the question of whether these have ever been two separate I’s to begin with.

Indeed, it is this imagined separation that brings a client to therapy in the first place; they are troubled by a conflict with themselves: they either want to experience something or stop experiencing something, but “something in them” prevents this. The therapy is considered effective when the client either gets what they initially wanted,

decide to “own” the doing/feeling of the “oppositional part,” or, probably most often, some integration of the two. In any of these cases, the split is resolved. Through exploring the moment-to-moment process of Focusing, we can see that this occurs through closing the gap between subject and object and becoming undivided from oneself.

This coheres with Rogers’ notion of incongruence as underlying suffering, and congruence as both means and end of healing. In “being the feelings and attitudes which at the moment are flowing within him,” the client has moved from unrecognized identification, through dis-identification, and into greater intimacy with themselves, such that feelings can flow, rather than keep one another in place. Through relaxing reactivity and reification, releasing preoccupation with past, present, and future, and sensing deeply into the immediacy of direct experiencing, the separate “subject” dissolves into the “object,” which is then no longer an object, but rather a dynamic expression of aware presence - a verb-like flow of feeling instead of a static noun.

In addition to closing the subject-object gap, it seems that the felt shift is also facilitated through what Peter called “pure listening.” To review, our arguments with what is are intensified to the degree that they are met with agreement or disagreement. Both “positive listening” and “negative listening” tend to energize a construction and its sense of reality, by taking for granted its inherent existence in the first place; resistance or approval follow from the foundational solidification of an appearance as something real and objective. Since the felt sense, like any separate self, *is* an activity of resistance and seeking, or at least judgment/evaluation, when it is allowed to be fully and completely as it is in the moment, it naturally moves in the direction of relaxation and silence. It is as

though it was crying out to be heard, and now that it was heard it simply stops, if only for a moment. This stopping manifests as a transformation and the emergence of some new quality; as Rogers said, “when I accept myself fully, then I can change” (Rogers, 1954). This healing transformation speaks to the way in which experiential-avoidance perpetuates suffering, which dissipates with acceptance (Hayes et al., 1996; Chawla and Ostafin, 2007). However, the fact that it has been arrived at through *Letting Go* suggests that acceptance is not something done by a self, but rather is the nature of ever-present awareness itself

The felt sense is ultimately motivated by a construction of lack, need, or investment in some position, which are alleviated with each “dip” into sensing what it wants and letting it be as it is; my analysis of the texts would suggest that this is because what the felt sense is essentially searching for, like any other separate self, is the simple wholeness of its own being - which is not other than the being of the Focuser. The felt sense’s fear or desire is essentially a struggle with the focuser and the moment, but in the non-reactive, present-moment awareness of Focusing, this struggle cannot be maintained. In non-dual transmission, the teacher rests in pure awareness, intimately meeting the student without resistance and expressing the completion of the moment such that they can together relax into the shared nature of mind. Likewise, in non-meditation, the field of awareness which is effortlessly already present allows the (non-)meditator to let go of effort and reactivity and settle in to what is. In just the same way, in Focusing, the awareness “of” the focuser - Self-In-Presence - serves as the field in which the felt sense is held, until it releases from within into the cognizance shared between speaker and listener.

Thus, the relationship between therapist, client, and client's client is something like that between Russian nesting dolls. The therapist holds space for the client to hold space for the felt sense; however, it's all the same space, which actually holds itself! The shift comes as the felt sense can relax into the spacious, aware presence of the client - the client relaxes into themselves - supported by the spacious, aware presence of the therapist. In the dissolution of the resistance that had kept the felt sense "frozen," and the cessation of the effort to be other than where and how we are, relief and transformation follow naturally.

With the felt shift that emerges from the Focusing done at Stage Six comes a new way of experiencing the previously "stuck" situation. This is often ushered in with an insight or cluster of insights into some facets of the self that had previously been implicit. Klein et al. (1970) describe experiencing at Stage Seven as:

....expansive, unfolding. The speaker readily uses a fresh way of knowing the self to expand experiencing further. The experiential perspective is now a trusted and reliable source of self-awareness and is steadily carried forward and employed as the primary referent for thought and action. ...[The speaker] moves from one inner reference to another, altering and modifying [their] conceptions of [themselves], [their] feelings, [their] private reactions to [their] thoughts or actions in terms of their immediately felt nuances as they occur in the present experiential moment, so that each new level of self-awareness functions as a springboard for further exploration. Manner at this stage is often euphoric, buoyant, or confident; the speaker conveys a sense of things falling quickly and meaningfully into place. (p. 60)

This sense of being carried along on a flow of insights became familiar during my sessions with Peter, my notes often taking the form of exclamations about different aspects of experience that I had not previously noticed, finding them liberating and exciting. Peter, however, continuing to facilitate the deconstruction of subject, object, and time, and resting as the changeless imperturbability of pure awareness, pointed out that the key insight into emptiness was thoroughgoing; it applies even to itself, such that realization cannot actually be found.

In his words: “if we try to look for, if we just say ‘okay, that’s an example of a realization,’ we can then look for the realization and, like in the Heart Sutra, see that the realization is not a realization. [We can see that] ‘I described it then as though it was something, like an event that happened, but that was just a construction in thought’.” He explicitly connected this point with the atemporality of pure awareness, adding “it’s interesting because that’s something that happens in time, an event. A change seems to be happening. But we know from the result level, from the level of the source itself, there are no events that take place. So the idea that that’s an event is an idea.” Insofar as awareness is no-thing, recognizing awareness is recognizing no-thing. There is no-thing to recognize. Again the path dissolves and we might fall silent, or fall into the silence of “the moment.” We fall into our own silence, which need not and cannot be thought about.

Nevertheless, even though neither realization nor change can be found within the nature of mind itself, we may grow in our ability to rest in this silence. The Dzogchen tradition recognizes a process of familiarization that follows from realizing the empty nature of mind, in which we do change, at least in terms of our ability to abide within *Immediacy*, *Letting go*, and *Not Knowing*. Thus, pointing-out instruction can be

reconciled with the notion that higher experiencing leads to insight, “a fresh way of knowing the self” that can “expand experiencing further;” according with Peter’s notion of “developing a homing instinct” is the way in which direct experiencing increasingly serves as “a trusted and reliable source of self-awareness... steadily carried forward and employed as the primary referent for thought and action.”

Weiser Cornell (2013) offers guidelines for once Focusing has brought one to this stage. These mostly serve as respectful, grateful ways of consolidating the insights that emerged, further healing the rift between self and experience, and planting seeds for the continued unfolding of understanding. She suggests the following: “I’m taking some time to sense any changes,” “I’m letting It [the felt sense and/or experiencing process] know I’m willing to come back,” and “I’m thanking my body and all that came.” In the case of pointing-out instruction as well as in psychotherapy, a different way of being with experience yields different experiences which yield new understandings of experience that further support this different way of being. I will next discuss non-dual presence in terms of therapeutic shifts in understanding.

Non-dual Presence and Shifts in Understanding

Thus, through *Relating Intimately* to the felt sense, meeting “it” with *Immediacy*, *Letting Go*, and *Not Knowing*, comes healing, transformation, and insight. This speaks to the relationship between healing and transformation, understanding, and non-duality.

Again, according to the findings of my analysis, we remain caught or “stuck” in suffering to the extent to which we continue to react against our experience on the basis of belief in the conceptual separation between subject, object, and time; the aforementioned discussion of the client’s experiencing suggests that this is the case not

only for individual clients, but also for “the client’s client,” the “part of them” that is worked with in the Focusing process. We have seen that when a client and/or felt sense is related to in terms of Rogers’ core conditions, which are implicitly non-dualistic, they experience healing and transformation through closing the gap between subject, object, and time; experience in the moment is accepted just as it is, at least relatively freed from the assumptions of prior knowledge, and not held at a distance from the awareness that is the nature of mind. Thus, self-liberation in the form of a felt shift naturally follows.

In addition to visceral relief, this shift also brings some new and often liberating understanding of self, world, or the relationship between these. This is in keeping with the view of Dzogchen and Buddhist Psychology in general, which claims that our concepts about reality organize experience in ways that are often limiting, self-perpetuating, and suffering-inducing. In seeing through or otherwise moving beyond such limiting concepts, we experience freedom from suffering. The “ordinary” dualistic mode described in the Results is, in this understanding, itself a limiting construction that serves as the core and foundation of many others.

In this section, I suggest that the healing shifts in understanding that occur in effective psychotherapy heal because they are distinct, at least implicitly, from those presumed in dualistic experiencing. From this perspective, the suffering of the felt sense, or the client identified with a nascent felt sense, is a product of a certain belief about reality, which has at its core the belief in separation and lack. Thus, the different factors listed by Tschascher et al. (2014) which cohere as shifts in understanding can be appreciated in terms of the themes described in the Results, as was the case with the therapeutic relationship and the client’s experiencing.

To review, Tscascher et al. found that effective psychotherapy includes at least some of the following, which can be considered in terms of shifts in understanding: corrective emotional experience(s), insight into the causes and motivations for problematic behaviors, assimilating/learning from problematic experiences, cognitive restructuring, development of the capacity to understand and anticipate the mental states of oneself and others, learning new ways of behaving, gathering experiences of success and mastery, increased self-efficacy expectations, and the development of new narratives about the self (2014). These shifts in understanding can themselves be grouped into three main areas: educative/corrective experiences, the cognitive restructuring that follows from such experiences, and the changes in behavior that follow from and further support this new learning.

I will explore the ways that each of these make use of themes and processes common to pointing-out instruction. However, the texts explored in my analysis suggest that deeper and more comprehensive healing can result from applying these processes to the fundamental pathogenic belief: namely, the idea that we are in essence a separate, limited self who must seek fulfillment in time through pursuing and avoiding experiences. Dzogchen is predicated upon and facilitates a radically different view of subjectivity, temporality, and human fulfillment, and accomplished contemplatives in the tradition suggest that what is typically taken to be real and obvious is a sort of cognitive distortion much more basic than, although not entirely unlike, those challenged by cognitive therapists.

As an example, let us consider a hypothetical client – a composite of various different clients with whom I have worked - who comes to therapy struggling with

pervasive feelings of sadness, anxiety, and despair. It soon becomes clear that these mostly revolve around their unfulfilling social life, in which they feel that they have had only one or two close friendships over their lifetime, and that few, if any, people, have ever truly understood them or loved them. This is a source of deep suffering for them, from which they distract themselves with computer games and fantasy novels. They share that they shun most social gatherings, and indeed, despite being rather amiable and pleasant, they have a somewhat awkward manner about them, as though they have not developed some of the social skills that others might take for granted and which maintain an easy flow of conversation. Whenever this awkwardness manifests in conversation, they seem painfully aware of its presence, only heightening its impact. Over the course of therapy, it emerges that the client lives with an underlying belief that they are unlovable and that there is something fundamentally wrong with them, such that nobody could both know them and care for them, let alone enjoy their presence. In articulating this belief, they recall early incidences of being bullied in school, and before that, often being teased by their siblings, who seem to share a closer bond with their parents, for being “weird” and “a loser.” Through tears, the client remembers their parents laughing despite themselves as their siblings made fun of them.

It is clear in this situation that there is a link between feelings, behaviors, and cognitions, such that the three tend to perpetuate each other and themselves. At least in the narrative developed in therapy, associated with their early experiences of being treated as inferior to their siblings, which were neither acknowledged nor repaired by their parents, the client developed the belief that they are unlovable and flawed; living in terms of this belief, they avoid social gatherings, and thereby miss many opportunities to

challenge this learning about self and world. Remaining isolated and estranged from others, they not only experience considerable suffering, but also do not develop the social skills, relationships, and experiences that might help them inhabit a new and different reality. Furthermore, they avoid their own suffering through distraction, so that it remains “stuck,” their unlovability simply a given fact of life. The client’s unfortunate (imaginary) situation is, in a sense, a case study in reification and avoidance.

What might a successful therapy look like for this client? Perhaps, through the presence of a therapist who meets them with unconditional positive regard, empathy, and congruence, *Relating Intimately* to their process from moment-to-moment, the idea that they are inherently unlovable already begins to soften and give way to a different possibility. This climate of accepting intimacy supports them in relating differently to their experience, settling in to *Immediacy*, *Letting Go*, and *Not Knowing*. With the therapist’s guidance and curiosity, they might dis-identify from “I’m unlovable” and shift into sensing “a part of me that feels unlovable.” In addition to nonverbally modeling spaciousness, openness, and acceptance, the therapist could also inquire into the nature and texture of the client’s experience, highlighting both its (ultimately conceptual) distinction from them as the experiencer, as well as its intimate, lively presence. Examples of such inquiry can be found in the above discussion of the Focusing process. The difference between “you feel unlovable” and “you’re sensing something in you that feels unlovable...” may seem subtle, yet it at once extricates the client’s essential being from the unlovability, and opens up the experience that is being called “feeling unlovable” for transformative exploration.

Giving this “part” space, continuing to sensitively explore it as Self-In-Presence - as non-reactive, present-moment awareness – the client might touch into how much pain and suffering it carries, and recognize how it feels younger than their current age. Hearing/expressing this part of themselves freshly, they spontaneously feel compassion for “it” and tearfully recognize its innocence as well as how often they treat it/themselves harshly and with unnecessary criticism. They realize that they habitually call themselves “weird” and “a loser” just like their siblings did, but that this was never true. This is a felt shift, bringing relief, insight, and a resolve to be kinder to themselves from then onwards. They spontaneously recall moments in their life that they felt appreciated by others, and notice with gratitude the warm and present gaze of the therapist.

Having been “in” this moment with them, their therapist shares that they were moved to witness this healing shift. This further consolidates the client’s different view of themselves. The moment subsequently serves as a reference point in the therapy as well as in a new narrative for the client, fostering many more such moments over the course of the therapy. The client is over time “more present” and less reactive with themselves. They spent more time in Self-In-Presence, and become more intimate and accepting of their inner world. As they do so, they appreciate that they are okay as they are, regardless of how they spend their time, and their sadness, despair, and anxiety begin to be replaced by greater contentment and appreciation. They find themselves less averse to social gatherings, and less dependent upon computer games for escape from their suffering. They begin taking tentative steps out into the social realm, where they make a couple of

friendships that further support them in developing a different understanding of themselves, so that the downward spiral shifts into an upward one.

Of course, this is a greatly oversimplified account of what is typically a much more complex, non-linear, and open-ended process. Nevertheless, it sketches Tscascher et al.'s (2014) listing of educative/corrective experiences, the cognitive restructuring that follows from such experiences, and the changes in behavior that follow from and further support this new learning. We can see that the therapist has facilitated a corrective emotional experience that begins to challenge the client's suffering-laden belief that they are unlovable; in this context, they can then have a corrective emotional experience with themselves, in the form of Self-In-Presence. As I have already explored in the sections above on the therapeutic relationship and client experiencing, these entail *Relating Intimately*, meeting experience with *Immediacy*, *Letting Go*, and *Not Knowing*.

Tscascher et al. (2014) suggest that the cognitive restructuring that follows from therapeutic experiences includes "insight into the causes and motivations for problematic behaviors, assimilating/learning from problematic experiences, cognitive restructuring, gathering experiences of success and mastery, increased self-efficacy expectations, and the development of new narratives about the self;" we can see that all of these are present in the example above. As I wrote above, these can be parsimoniously understood as "tip of the iceberg" examples of processes that occur in pointing-out instruction: in order to have insight into the cause and motivation of a problematic behavior such that it transforms, there must also be *Not Knowing* and *Letting Go*.

I described in the Results how, although we often speak of it in terms of knowing the nature of mind, pointing-out instruction is more a matter of recognizing, seeing

through, and dissolving the beliefs that limit our appreciation of and ability to be with experiencing as it is; therapeutic insight is similar. There is a tendency to speak of insight in terms of what was realized, when in fact its healing significance often lies in this “knowing” being unlearned or seen as untrue, its associated doings thereby being relaxed. Multiple theorists have discussed this phenomenon as central to therapeutic transformation, describing it as “disconfirmation of pathogenic beliefs” (Sampson & Weiss, 1986) and “dissolving the underlying emotional learning” (Ecker et al. 2012), among other names.

In the case of the client above, their insight entailed realizing how they treat themselves harshly despite their innocence, just as their siblings did, and that this is the cause of unnecessary suffering that need not continue unabated. They could let go of their inner criticism, and let themselves be as they are, closing the gap between themselves, their experience, and some other moment referenced against wherever they are. As this unfolded into greater well-being and a sense of satisfaction with life, the client felt emboldened to continue to challenge the belief that they are unlovable, thereby encountering more experiences which served to contradict this concept.

The client thereby moved into the changes in behavior described by Tscascher et al. (2014), including development of a greater capacity to understand “their own” experience and that of others, which itself is related to *Immediacy* and *Relating Intimately*. Freed of their limiting construction of self and world, they naturally move into opportunities to expand their repertoire of social skills and behaviors, which will likely entail letting go of reactions to feeling awkward, and letting themselves and the situation be with greater ease and openness. These further support the development of a new

narrative about themselves, unlearning the old one and its efforts to manage experience. Thus, through being met with the openness, intimacy, and inherent contentment (or, at least, lack of discontentment) of awareness itself, the suffering-generating construction and its accordant reactive activities dissipated, transformation effortlessly following in its wake. This transformation is only possible because of the emptiness of the original construction - the fact that it was never true, but only an interpretation of experience which *seemed* true as long as it was energized and acted upon.

From the point of view of Dzogchen, this emptiness of the mind's constructions is fundamental. While healing in its own right, the liberation experienced by the client upon realizing the falsity of their belief that they were unlovable is only a taste of the freedom and release that comes with recognizing the nature of mind, to which no thought applies, and which is, in fact, thought free.

Again, a core premise of the current project is that effective psychotherapy is already implicitly non-dualistic - indeed, the example above details what already tends to happen in transformative, experience-near, and depth-oriented psychotherapy. A second contention, however, is that the thread of non-reactive, present-moment awareness can be followed to the deeper healing, transformation, and liberation from suffering that comes with recognizing and resting in the nature of mind. This deeper liberation was described in the Results section, particularly in the theme *Letting Go*, which detailed the relief, bliss, and contentment that naturally arise when we rest in the nature of mind, but also in the freedom from limiting conceptual constructions detailed in *Not Knowing*. The question of what therapy might look like were it to be predicated upon non-dual awareness is beyond the scope of the current project, although I do sketch it in broad

strokes in the Conclusion. With respect to the example above, however, we might begin by simply wondering – if such healing followed from the client relinquishing a deficient sense of self, how much more profound might be the realization that their essential nature is effortlessly boundless, imperturbable, and complete? This is, in a sense, the ultimate cognitive restructuring – shifting the very basis of operations for our experience of life.

In my sessions with Peter, I would often find myself quickly moving through the taken-for-granted flurry of judgments and ideas that comprise my “ordinary” mind, passing beyond them like a cloud bank into the vast, calm expanse of the awareness that is always present. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that experientially, it neither comes nor goes, but is simply already “here”... yet nowhere. Regardless, despite all of the many words used in this dissertation, not a single one applies to this awareness. It is like space - ideas and feelings fly through without actually touching it, yet without being separate from it. Thus, it is beyond any notion, including those of identity. It is beyond “pathogenic beliefs,” and equally beyond “new narratives about the self” that replace them; these words are gesturing at a silence that cannot be known or captured in any idea. Similarly, neither “my” behavior, nor the seamless perceptual field of which it is a part, can affect or effect this awareness. Nothing that is done or experienced can actually impact the nature of mind. At the same time, neither activity nor experience can be removed even a hair’s breadth from this ever-present expanse of skylike openness; they are like a rainbow and space, transparent yet vividly apparent. Whatever is seen, touched, heard, rings with the same silence beyond good or bad, because it is not other than this luminous quiet. Abiding in this recognition, it is clear that “this moment” neither comes nor goes, can neither lack anything nor be improved, and is not separate from what I am

or what simply is. There is just this, and it is more than enough, to the point of eclipsing the very idea of “enough.” This is just this, as it is.

Appreciating, then, the possibility for release not just from limiting ideas about ourselves, but from the very idea of ourselves (and from ideas at all!), it seems once again that effective psychotherapy, while healing and transformative, tends to work at the “surface,” at the level of the ordinary dualistic mind. Psychotherapy in general assumes the mind to be that which thinks, feels, and perceives, overlooking the atemporal, boundless awareness that is beyond yet intimately one with experiencing. However, even as it takes for granted the conceptual construction of subject, object, and time, I have suggested that the healing and transformation associated with non-reactive present-moment awareness point towards the non-dual nature of direct experiencing; it is implied in their very efficacy.

And yet, from the point of view of the non-dual, this awareness is not *implied* in effective therapy, because there is nothing to imply, and nothing that can be implied, within awareness itself. Taking another step into the paradox of being here now, we could equally say that awareness is fully revealed in therapy, “effective” as well as “ineffective,” as nothing can truly obstruct awareness, and nothing is separate from it. There are, in actuality, no distinctions between surface and depth with respect to the nature of mind; in this moment, there is nowhere further to go. This appearance is complete, as is this one. Nevertheless, in the interest of challenging limiting beliefs, including those that seem undeniably true, we might consider how the theory and practice of psychotherapy can move beyond changing one cloud for another, and what might

facilitate the liberating recognition that client and therapist alike are, ultimately, the one sky.

Pointing-out the nature of mind, then, can be seen as facilitating transformative insight in a profound sense, along with being a radical version of therapeutic relating and emotionally corrective experiencing; if much of psychotherapy entails helping people work through their problems, pointing-out follows from the appreciation that neither people nor problems can be found within the awareness that abides as the here and now. This open dimension has, for the most part, not been explicitly acknowledged within the contemporary focus on mindfulness and acceptance, or with the integration of Buddhist Psychology into psychotherapy. My research, however, suggests that this openness is itself the gift of the present.

Conclusion

From the Present Moment to Presence

This project has explored the healing capacity of non-reactive, present-moment awareness, often called mindfulness, and its diverse manifestations in effective psychotherapy. Historically as well as within the current discourse around mindfulness-based psychotherapy, awareness is often presented in explicitly dualistic terms as the possession of an entity that can fail or succeed in its attempts at directing it towards momentary and separate objects across time. I have suggested that this view, while useful to a certain extent, ultimately neglects or contradicts more nuanced understandings of subjectivity, temporality, and liberation that have been developed by Buddhist contemplatives over millennia. These understandings, emerging from as well as serving to support deep contemplative practice, are generally non-dualistic, which is to say that they do not adhere to the boundaries delineated in the more common aforementioned conception of mindfulness. Indeed, Buddhist soteriology generally claims that the distinction between these two ways of experiencing lies at the heart of whether we suffer or find freedom from suffering.

As Buddhist psychology recognizes the inherent limitations of deliberate, goal-oriented, dualistic mindfulness, I sought to consider what a non-dualistic perspective on present-moment awareness might suggest about subjectivity, temporality, and liberation from suffering. I also wished to highlight its potential points of contact with psychotherapeutic theory and practice. A guiding hypothesis throughout this project was that much effective psychotherapy already implicitly makes use of non-duality without recognizing it as such. Insofar as this is the case, the non-dual perspective might serve to

enrich current understandings of the psychotherapy process, and also to deepen its efficacy in healing and transformation.

In order to clarify the non-dual view and its possible connections to psychotherapy, I worked with Peter Fenner, Ph.D., a non-dual teacher and former Buddhist monk, exploring contemplative instructions from a Tibetan Buddhist tradition known as Dzogchen. These texts are called pointing-out instructions, as they involve a teacher “pointing-out” to their student “the nature of mind,” the non-dual reality which is held to be already present but habitually unrecognized in their experience.

The mind, according to Dzogchen, is not essentially an entity that possesses awareness; rather, it is more accurately described as awareness itself, the knowing element in all experiencing. This awareness is pointed out as distinct from the mind’s cognitive capacity to produce, label, and react to thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. The mind itself is considered to be simply and intrinsically aware, yet without any form, substance, or location; thus, it is not essentially personal or limited. Neither is this boundless awareness separate from the vivid and intricate play of appearances, which is thus seamless and, in a sense, self-luminous. Rather than being the intentional activity of a separate self, acceptance is the natural condition of experience - whatever is occurring is already utterly accepted in its very appearance as an expression of awareness.

Of crucial significance for Dzogchen practice as well as this project’s inquiry into present-moment awareness, the tradition contends that awareness itself is not time-bound, but rather innately “present” beyond past, present, or future - it has neither beginning nor end, and abides without these as the timelessness of presence. This presence, in being wholly intimate, inescapable, and without structure, is beyond the subject-object

distinction; the ever-present simplicity of what is obviates both knower and known. In so doing, it dissolves the structure of being a subject reacting to objects in time, which Dzogchen and Buddhism in general holds is necessary for suffering. Rather than attending to fleeting present moments with awareness, then, attempting to accept them as they are, Dzogchen practice entails recognizing and resting as the awareness that does not come or go, effortlessly abiding in a state free from lack or conflict.

While the view and practice of Dzogchen is far richer than what could be discussed in the current project, I sought to unpack some of the implications of this alternative understanding of present-moment awareness for psychotherapy. Specifically, I wished to phenomenologically explore pointing-out instruction as a relational and experiential technology, and also to consider how and why recognizing and resting in the nature of mind could allow troubling experiences to “self-liberate,” naturally transforming or dissolving on their own.

To this end, over the course of 11 meetings, I worked with Peter as he abided within the recognition of non-dual awareness, reading and commenting on five different pointing-out instructions from masters in the Dzogchen lineage and spontaneously engaging me in conversation regarding my own understandings. During and after these meetings, I wrote phenomenological descriptions of what it was like to work with Peter and the instructions in a pointing-out capacity, attempting to articulate in my own words the lived experience of sharing non-dual awareness. I then analyzed these three sets of texts- the original pointing-out instructions, Peter’s commentary, and my experiential write-ups- with an eye towards what they might suggest about subjectivity, temporality, suffering and healing.

From this analysis emerged four themes, which, while distinct, cohere as a single way of being. They were presented in the Results section as *Immediacy*, *Letting go*, *Not Knowing*, and *Relating Intimately*. Each theme articulates a different facet of sharing and presencing non-dual awareness. In various ways, the themes describe how non-duality radically diverges from the ordinary view of subjectivity, temporality, suffering, and healing, yet without existing anywhere other than right here and now. In this way, they hopefully evoke for the reader some recognition of non-dual presence, while highlighting and perhaps challenging the network of concepts which, when believed, apparently obscures the peace and fulfillment of the non-dual.

In my Discussion section, I explored how the different themes which emerged from the analysis might apply to psychotherapy, with an eye towards how effective psychotherapy could be seen as already implicitly drawing upon non-duality. Through a consideration of psychotherapy in terms of the relational context, the client's experiencing, and shifts in understanding, I suggested in a variety of ways that the healing and transformation that comes with effective psychotherapy can be regarded as an attenuated expression of the wholeness, openness, and liberation found through resting in the nature of mind. It is as though in transformative psychotherapy, therapists and clients take brief dips out of the subject-object, past-present-future divide, or otherwise hint at and beyond its conceptually constructed nature.

Although its transformative potential is generally framed dualistically, the recognition of non-dual presence sheds light upon why and how non-reactive present-moment awareness allows for healing change to occur; namely, because it closes the imaginary gap between ourselves, our experience, and time, which perpetuates the

reactivity that underlies suffering. Insofar as we realize that this gap is, in fact, imagined, and we can never truly be separate from “this moment,” we might discover novel possibilities for psychotherapeutic theory and practice.

Potentials and Next Steps

In the Discussion, I attempted to show that the understanding of subjectivity, temporality, and healing that emerged from my analysis, while apparently radical, is in fact implicit in psychotherapy as currently practiced. The term implicit in this context itself implies the possibility of clearer, fuller, and more comprehensive expressions of non-duality in psychotherapy. While the potential forms that an explicitly non-dualistic psychotherapy could take are manifold, I would like to conclude the project by suggesting four main arenas for unfolding this understanding within psychotherapy: relational transmission, psycho-education regarding the nature of mind and the functioning of the conceptual mind, supporting relaxation into/familiarization with non-dual presence, and deconstruction of core pathogenic beliefs.

In an important sense, each of these four facets of a possible non-dual psychotherapy are already present within the Dzogchen tradition. Thus, one major suggestion of the project - that much of psychotherapy is already implicitly non-dualistic, potentially goes both ways: non-dual sharing can also be seen as implicitly psychotherapeutic. Indeed, one way of viewing Dzogchen is as a discursive method, which utilizes a rhetorical framing (of immediacy, apophasis, and paradox) as well as suggestion, modeling, and experiential inquiries and exercises in order to facilitate liberating transformation. In this respect, it is not fundamentally different from a psychotherapeutic orientation such as psychoanalysis, gestalt, or cognitive behavioral

therapy. Just as each of these has – or is - a view of the human condition, a framework for understanding suffering and healing, and a set of conversational strategies and/or tools for effecting therapeutic change, contemplatives within the Dzogchen tradition have also made skillful use of concepts, language, and nonverbal modes of communication in order to reframe situations so as to alleviate suffering.

However, it again bears repeating that the view of Dzogchen is a radical reframing indeed with respect to our ordinary view of reality. Non-dual contemplative practice takes as the root of the problem an assumption that is seldom even recognized, let alone questioned, in therapy or everyday life, namely the subject-object dichotomy. More generally, Dzogchen holds as problematic the reifying tendency of the mind, which is often taken for granted as synonymous with the mind itself. If it is to be approached as a psychotherapy, Dzogchen can thus be seen as a profoundly deep treatment of an affliction that is so widespread as to be considered normal. Its healing agent, which is also its vision of health – pure awareness - is equally unfamiliar to many. Nevertheless, this fundamentality is the source of its power to liberate and transform.

As with the themes from my analysis, each of the aforementioned four components of a possible non-dual psychotherapy is complex and interwoven with the others, with the latter three cohering within and brought to life through relational transmission. This crucial relational dimension, described in the theme *Relating Intimately*, is among the most significant points of contact between non-dual contemplative practice and psychotherapy. While highly distinct in many ways, both Dzogchen and psychotherapy entail a close, ongoing relationship between two individuals in which one supports the other in shifting the way they relate to their

experience. While remaining relatively open-ended and sensitive to the particulars of the student or client, the aim in both is to facilitate less reactivity towards experience, greater insight into its workings, and enhanced capacity to “be present” beyond the limited and supposedly separate self-world construct; this shift is facilitated in either case through the teacher/therapist’s present, accepting moment-to-moment attunement with the student/client, non-verbal modeling of more wholesome ways of being, experiential inquiry, dialogue, and psycho/spiritual education which serves to reframe different specific experiences and experience in general in freer and less threatening ways. Relationship is the medium for both pointing-out instruction and psychotherapy.

In a non-dual psychotherapy the therapist would, at least to some extent, need to be conceptually and experientially familiar with non-dual presence themselves, such that they could foster the client’s recognition of and abidance within it. This is not fundamentally dissimilar from the notion of psychoanalysts ideally having gone through analysis themselves, or the need for gestalt therapists to have had some hands-on participation in such work; resting in the nature of mind can be appreciated as a particular experience that the therapist must be familiar with in order to catalyze and support it for their clients. This was discussed in greater detail in the theme *Relating intimately*, and also in the Discussion section’s exploration of the therapeutic relationship.

Within the context of this close relationship can unfold another point of contact between Dzogchen and psychotherapy, namely, education regarding the workings of the mind in terms of both suffering and well-being. Just as psycho-education can provide information about the causes, symptoms, and treatments of a psychological condition, it could also apply to the basic mechanism of suffering described particularly in the themes

Letting go and *Not Knowing*, namely, reactivity and reification, respectively. A version of this is already being implemented in mindfulness-based forms of therapy such as ACT and DBT, in which clients are educated about different ways of being with their experience through experiential exercises and metaphors. However, the present study suggests that it can be taken further with the goal of helping clients gain liberating insight into how they create and perpetuate their own suffering, as well as the unstructured reality beyond.

There were a number of moments in working with Peter and the instructions when I recognized that the grasping, seeking, and reactive manner in which I was relating to thought and experience generated unnecessary suffering, and naturally shifted out of such habits. It was impactful as well to recognize the “sticky” nature of beliefs, which purport to be reality while remaining baseless, and to appreciate the way in which I continually reacted to my interpretations of reality, without any real need to do so, and while somehow missing their nature as interpretations. A non-dual psychotherapist could offer clients a general understanding of what in Dzogchen is called *sems*, the dualistic mind that inhabits and often becomes stuck within a conceptual matrix of its own creation; its seeming reality is part of the illusion, and in being informed as to how we live in the feeling of our own belief structures, clients can begin to diminish the energy which they feed into this process.

Additionally, and crucially, a non-dual psychotherapy could also offer experiential psycho-education regarding the nature of mind, awareness itself, which is intrinsically imperturbable, complete, and free from suffering. This ever-present freedom from lack and struggle could serve as a baseline of innate mental health and a reference

point of sorts for psychotherapists and clients. The mere suggestion that our minds are inherently free of the suffering that clients bring to therapy is possibly relieving as well as a catalyst for inquiry. In being introduced to this possibility by a trusted professional, clients might be more willing to open to their experience, reduce their painful struggle to arrive elsewhere, and thereby validate the claim.

Thus, in the context of non-dual psychotherapy, psycho-education into the workings of suffering and the already whole nature of mind could lead naturally into relaxation into and familiarization with non-dual presence. This is in keeping with the relationship between pointing-out instruction and non-meditation which was discussed in the theme *Letting Go*. Through highlighting the way in which the “result” of peace and wholeness is already present but obscured by our very attempts to reach it, we can relax such attempts, naturally easing the struggle to change experience or use thought to secure some future moment of fulfillment. In this way, the path naturally dissolves, and we find ourselves here and now at its end.

Through non-verbally modeling and also verbally introducing the profoundly settled ease of things as they are, the non-dual psychotherapist can support the client in relaxing out of the habitual struggle with experience and into the intimacy and peace of the moment. Becoming more familiar with this way of being, the client can gradually and with the support of the therapist develop a greater capacity to presence non-dual awareness in challenging situations beyond formal meditation and/or the psychotherapy office, thereby bringing freedom from suffering into the very core of their confusion and pain. This burgeoning ability to find oneself complete and at peace, even in the midst of emotional turbulence, can perhaps be likened to various learning and emotion regulation

processes which occur within psychotherapy, as well as notions of “resourcing” and “titrating” traumatic states (Levine, 2010).

In addition to offering a spacious, accepting field within which clients can taste the openness and fulfillment of simply being, non-dual therapists could also support their clients in relaxing into the wholeness of presence through guided contemplations and experiential exercises. While these could to a certain extent be manualized, it would be important to allow them to spontaneously fit the specifics of the client and situation. The general thrust of these, however, would be demonstration of the natural presence of pure awareness and its unstructured freedom from lack and limitation. Such exercises could also be designed to viscerally highlight the functioning of the conceptual mind and its generation of suffering, such that clients intuitively shift out of one mode of being into the other, gaining non-conceptual understanding of this possibility.

Another fundamental component of a non-dual psychotherapy could be the deconstruction of core pathogenic beliefs, as was discussed throughout the Results section but especially in the themes *Not Knowing* and *Relating Intimately*. Such beliefs would include the subject-object dichotomy, various forms of separation such as past-present-future, self-world, mind-body, etc., as well as related notions of lack, intrinsic value or identity, and the need for various strategies of manipulating experience. These can be seen as akin to the numerous cognitive distortions or maladaptive schemas which have been identified within the field, but operating at a deeper, organizing level- from this point of view, the supposedly separate self is, itself, a maladaptive schema. As with most such maladaptive schemas, believing and investing in separation energizes the felt sense of being a limited and separate self, which in turn reinforces the belief that one is

separate. Through dialogue and inquiry, such beliefs can be articulated, challenged, and seen through, facilitating liberation from the viscerally sensed yet ultimately conceptual realities that they perpetuate.

Such work would empathically explore the client's sense of their situation, "the problem," and themselves, with an eye towards how different concepts hang together to give these a sense of permanent, substantial, independent, and intrinsically valued reality. Abiding within the non-conceptual nature of mind, such constructions are recognized as constructions, their building blocks unfindable- vanishing upon examination. The non-dual therapist could facilitate such examination, supporting and also supported by the aforementioned domains of relaxation, psycho-education, and relational transmission. Non-dual psychotherapy could thus be a natural extension of cognitive therapy, taken all the way through to no-mind- to the nature of mind beyond its function of thinking.

En route to this distanceless destination, the therapist would likely work less with the particular contents of thinking than with its frequency and tone, specifically, if these express need, reactivity, and reification. One significant aspect of thinking which has often been overlooked in cognitive therapies is that of "feelings of knowing" (Burton, 2008), the mental sensations of certainty, truth, and rightness that tend to suffuse and also fuel our process of conceptualization. I described the way that non-dual contemplation dissolves such certainty in the theme *Not Knowing*; the solvent of mind itself could be profoundly healing in its capacity to drain the certainty from suffering-laden constructions of fear, self-hatred, and despair. Additionally, in tasting states of acausal fulfillment through the aforementioned transmission and relaxation into non-dual

awareness, clients can be further supported in seeing through the “truth” of lack and struggle, having a fundamentally “corrective emotional experience.”

In sketching an explicitly non-dual psychotherapy, we can thus appreciate that it is not disconnected from or ultimately dissimilar from various forms of therapy which are perhaps more familiar. Indeed, it might be seen to follow naturally from such approaches, taking their liberating insights and skillful means a step further. While the details remain to be developed and implemented, the overall movement of a non-dual psychotherapy could be described as one of introducing the nature of mind, clarifying its essential qualities of openness, cognizance, and intimacy, and supporting the client in developing their capacity to recognize and rest as non-dual presence in different situations.

Such an approach would take as its starting point the client’s wholeness, health, and profound capacity to benefit others; without dismissing the suffering that brings them to therapy in the first place, it could introduce them to the possibility that it is an artifact of how they had innocently been using their minds and relating to experience. Furthermore, a non-dual therapist could share with the client a different way of being that, while unfamiliar and seemingly radical, is accessible, liberating, and profoundly nourishing. My findings suggest not only that this way of being is our birthright as aware beings, but also that it can serve as a step forward for the field. As therapists have always known, a different understanding of “the present-moment” can change everything.

In the Tibetan Vajrayana tradition of which Dzogchen is a part, mindfulness - non-reactive, present-moment awareness - is sometimes likened to a river which inevitably leads to the liberated ocean of awareness itself, the nature of mind. This is ultimately because the two are not separate; indeed, the latter is the home and deepest

potential of the former. As it becomes increasingly integrated with mindfulness in particular and Buddhist psychology in general, contemporary psychotherapy is, perhaps, being borne along towards the same destination. One of the main aims of this project was to acknowledge and map this natural flow of healing towards its source, to speculate as to what might be up around the bend, and possibly to add one more oar to the waters. While the routes that the field of psychotherapy may take along the way to a non-dual paradigm are, for the most part, yet to be discovered, they are undoubtedly numerous and varied; much remains to be explored regarding theory and practice, the intricate network of branching streams. Nevertheless, regardless of how the voyage unfolds, the paradoxical yet jubilatory message of non-dual contemplatives is that the end of the journey, the ocean of presence, is ever available here and now as this very moment.

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