

# COUNSELLING, MEDITATION AND YOGA



The New Yoga as  
**Non-Dual Therapy**

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What is 'meditation'? And is there such a thing as a 'yogic' or 'meditational' approach to both counselling and psychotherapy?

The term 'Non-Dual Therapy' has now established itself as a type of umbrella term for approaches to counselling and therapy rooted in yogic philosophy and incorporating both a spiritual or 'trans-personal' dimension and meditational practices of different sorts.

First a word about words and terms. The term 'meditation', though it is of course associated with Eastern spiritual traditions, is not itself an Eastern word but a European one. It derives from the Latin words *mederi* (to give attention or awareness to something or someone) and *meditari* (to reflect, study on or apply oneself to something). It is commonly used to translate the Sanskrit term *Sadhana* – meaning 'to practice'.

The expression 'non-dual' is a direct and literal translation of the Sanskrit term *Advaita*. 'Non-duality' or *Advaita* are terms closely related in meaning with the word 'yoga' itself - which means 'union' and derives from the Indo-European root *ieug* (to join or yoke together).

*Advaita* or 'non-dualism' (*A-dvaita*) is also the name and the basic principle of an important school of Indian 'yogic' philosophy, aimed at distinguishing it from so-called 'dualistic' or *Dvaita* schools. It is this basic principle that I have rethought, refined and redefined - calling it simply 'The Awareness Principle'.

What is the essence of 'non-duality' (*Advaita*) or 'union' (*yoga*)? In my understanding it is not just 'one-ness' as opposed to duality or 'two-ness', 'union' as opposed to separation – for this would constitute a *dualistic* opposition in itself. Instead the essence of both 'union' and 'non-duality' can best be seen as a relation of *inseparable distinction*. An example is the relation between two sides of the same coin or sheet of paper - which are both distinct (and therefore dual) but also absolutely inseparable (and therefore non-dual).

In the development of Advaitic or non-dual philosophy itself, it was acknowledged that to see non-duality and duality as opposing or *dual* concepts would run against the very principle of *non*-duality. Only a new understanding of unity or non-duality as a relation of 'inseparable distinction' can fully clarify what, in the *Advaitic* tradition itself, was called 'the non-duality of duality and non-duality'.

Another example of 'non-duality' as 'inseparable distinction' is the relation of empty space to the objects in it. For space is both inseparable from everything in it and yet at the same time distinct from it.

Yet what have these abstract philosophical terms and concepts to do with counselling? The most important thing to understand is that, unlike yogic practices and the philosophy of non-dualism, no Western *psychology* or form of counselling has any concept of a type of *pure awareness* which - like space - is both inseparable and yet absolutely distinct from everything we experience within it - whether outer perceptions, or inwardly experienced moods and sensations, needs and impulses, thoughts and emotions.

The Western 'psychological' understanding (and experience) of the soul or *psyche* is a sort of internal space of awareness inside our head or bodies and bounded by them. Yet most people neither sense the insideness of their bodies nor the space around them as a space of clear uncluttered awareness. Instead they may either feel 'empty' in a depressed way, or else as brimful of impulses and sensations, thought and emotions, voices and mental images, memories, impulses and other elements of experience to the point of 'overwhelm'. It is such elements of their experiencing which so pre-occupy the *space* of people's inner and outer worlds that they derive their whole sense of *self* from them - whilst at the same time leaving them quite literally with a sense of having no 'space' for themselves or for significant others.

The aim of *Advaitic* philosophy and yogic meditational practice is to find that space and in doing so feel a quite different self to the one that has 'no space' for itself or others.

This is a self that is able to feel *space itself* as a realm of pure awareness distinct and free from anything experienced within it.

This self is not the everyday personal self we are aware of. It is not even a self that can be said to 'have' or 'possess' awareness. Instead it is that Self which *is* awareness. The idea of a Self that is identical with awareness *as such* is not my invention. For one of the important yogic treatise or *tantra* – the 'Shiva Sutras' – declares as its opening statement or sutra that 'Awareness *is* the Self'.

This Self, which I term 'The Awareness Self', was called *Atman*, *Chaitanya* or *Chaitanyatman*. It was understood as 'non-dual' – as inseparable from a universal soul or ultimate and divine awareness (*Anuttara*). Identifying with *this* Self was understood as a way of freeing or liberating ourselves from identification with a much more limited self – that self which is wholly identified or bound up with whatever is currently going on, whatever we are currently doing or saying, whatever we are currently focussing our awareness on - or whatever is preoccupying the inner and outer spaces of our awareness. That is why in another famous treatise or *tantra* – the *Vijnanabhairava Tantra* – identification with the apparent emptiness of space was seen as a key to the ultimate aim of yoga – freedom or *Moksha*. By this was meant freedom from a self-limiting identification with anything we happen to be experiencing or aware *of*.

Now this distinction between a liberated or unbound self and a bound or limited self, between that self which *is* awareness and any self we are aware *of* – has profound significance in the context of counselling and therapy. Why? Because whilst the aim of counselling is to help people get 'clearer' about troubling experiences and emotions, and in this way to also 'free' them from them, the aim is a difficult if not impossible one to achieve if a client's whole *sense of self* is identified and bound up with their suffering - if not wholly dependent on it.

The vital role that yoga has to play in counselling is to show how it is possible to identify and achieve union with the ‘Awareness Self’ – that self which does not ‘have’ but *is* awareness.

Learning to identify with space itself, inner and outer, as pure awareness and thereby uniting with that Self which is awareness - this is ‘yoga’ in the truest sense. At its heart is what I term ‘The Awareness Principle’, which together with the many ‘Practices of Awareness’ that go with it, constitute what I term ‘The New Yoga of Awareness’.

Teaching this New Yoga to counselling clients requires first of all that counsellors themselves learn what is perhaps the most basic Principle and Practice of Awareness. This is the principle and practice of distinguishing between each and every thing we are *aware of* (whether within or around us, positive or negative, painful or pleasurable) from the *pure awareness* of it - from awareness *as such*.

To engage in this Practice of Awareness it is helpful, if not vital, to remind ourselves of the basic relation between pure awareness and ‘empty’ space. A simple way of helping someone to understand this relation is to request that they look around and name any tangible thing they are aware of around them – a painting, computer, chair or desk for example – and then to put to them the following simple questions: “Is *the awareness* of that thing itself a ‘thing’ of any sort?” For example: “Is *the awareness* of a painting, computer, desk or chair *itself* a painting, computer, desk or chair?”

The point that such questions can help to get over is that *awareness* of an object in the space around us is not itself an object ‘in’ space. Instead awareness *is* the very space in which any object is perceived. Your outer awareness of a table for example is not *itself* a table, but the space in which you perceive it. Similarly, the inner awareness of a sensation, thought or emotion is *not itself* a sensation, thought or emotion. Instead it is the inner *space* within which the sensation, thought or emotion is experienced. The same basic Principle of Awareness, in other words, applies to any and all ‘elements’ of our experience, inner and outer – showing that awareness *as such* is distinct from all of them.

Since the awareness of a thought, for example, *is not itself a thought*, awareness as such is something innately *thought-free* - just as it is also innately free of each and every element of our experience.

Consequently – and yet in contrast to how many actual or would-be practitioners of meditation see it - to achieve a meditative state of pure ‘thought-free’ awareness does not require any effort at all; does not require us to ‘clear’ or ‘free’ our minds of thoughts. All that is required is to identify with the already clear and thought-free space of awareness *within which* we experience any thought.

Coming to rest within a space of pure awareness is the essence of *meditation*. That is why ‘meditation’ - as long as it is clearly understood as a practice of *awareness* and not merely a practice of walking or sitting in a certain way - is the central link between counselling and yoga. Yet though the terms ‘meditation’ and ‘yoga’ are commonly used, their meaning is rarely considered or defined in such precise way. Only in this way however, can their value for counsellors and their clients become apparent.

In what I call *The New Yoga – The Yoga of Awareness* – ‘yoga’ does not mean sitting alone or in class with people and effortfully adopting different bodily postures or engaging in stretching exercises. Nor does ‘meditation’ mean effortfully attempting to empty your mind in expectation of some undefined state of ‘enlightenment’. It is not ‘just sitting’ but ‘just being aware’ - sitting with the simple intent to give ourselves *time to be aware*. Giving ourselves *time* to be aware allows us to become much *more* aware than we usually are of all that is going on within and around us. This in turn allows us to do three important things:

Firstly, it allows us to *identify and distinguish* much more clearly all the different elements of our immediate experiencing such as moods, sensations, memories, thoughts emotions etc.

Secondly it allow us to *fully acknowledge, feel and affirm* each and every element of our immediate experiencing – whether pleasurable or painful, mental, emotional or somatic.

Last but not least, it allows us to distinguish each and every element of our current experience from the pure awareness of it, and to feel that very awareness as a clear space in which we can feel independent and free of anything we experience or are aware of.

Sometimes people confuse dis-identification with ‘detaching’ ourselves from our feelings and other elements of our experience. This is a misunderstanding. For meditation begins with freely choosing to *feel* our feelings - and all elements of our experience - more fully and not less. To *feel and affirm* a particular mood, sensation, desire, emotion or thought is by no means the same thing as *identifying* with that element of our experience. Indeed it is the very opposite of doing so. For freely choosing to become more aware of something is itself the very first step to identifying with pure awareness as such. And it is by giving ourselves time to feel and follow any element of our experience that it will transform – revealing itself to *be an awareness* of something beyond it. A sensation, emotion or thought for example, is not only something we are aware *of*. It is itself the expression *of* an awareness, for example in the form of a new insight into a particular situation, possibility or person.

To follow our experiences to this point of transformation, as well as reaching a state of identification with *pure awareness* takes time however, which is why the defining principle and practice of meditation – giving ourselves *time* to be aware – is so important.

For we know also that in today’s globalised Western culture people are driven to occupy their time with everything *but* awareness – to keep themselves permanently preoccupied and busy with different activities. The result of this culture of busy-ness is that people keep their awareness so filled up and preoccupied that they end up feeling no space for themselves – or no self to feel. This in turn makes them more addicted to activities, mental-emotional states, behaviours or experiences which – whether habitual or

compulsive, mundane or 'extreme', pleasurable or painful, normal or pathological – can serve to bestow or restore a sense of self.

It is significant too, that in everyday English – itself a global language - the phrases 'don't have time for' and 'don't have space for...' or 'wish I had more time for..' and 'wish I had more space for...' are used synonymously. This not having space for things or people - not to mention oneself - comes about through not meditating, through not giving ourselves *time* to just be aware. Conversely however, giving ourselves that *time* to be aware is what gives us a sense of having more *space*.

This brings us to another reason why people would rather *not* give themselves time to be aware – and instead see even such things as counselling, meditation and yoga as just other thing to 'do' or 'experience', other ways of 'using' or 'filling' time. The reason I refer to is *fear* - the fear that if they did truly meditate, if they *did* give themselves more time to be aware and *did* feel more space as a result, they might feel that space as totally empty – a black hole, void or vacuum devoid of any self at all, rather than as a space of pure, liberating awareness. For this is a space distinct from all the things that normally preoccupy us and yet expansive enough to embrace them in such a way that we no longer feel stressed or overwhelmed by them. It is a space in which we can feel even our ordinary limited experience of ourselves safely held - yet one that is at the same time big enough to 'make room' for others - and for *new* experiences of ourselves and the world around us. 'Meditation' means entering this expanded SPACE of awareness by giving ourselves more TIME to be aware.

Many people have been introduced to or practiced different forms of 'meditation'. What follows is a description of some basic stages of meditation based on the precise definition of it given above – as a practice of giving ourselves *time to be aware* and in this way expanding the *space* of awareness in which we can dwell – not just whilst meditating but through out our everyday lives.

1. To begin with, take time to look around and become more aware of the different elements of your *outer experiencing* - for example the different features of the people and objects in this room. Now take time to be aware of the clear space surrounding everything and everybody in this room, not just the space you can see in front of you but the space as you can sense it in front of you and behind you, above you and to either side of you. Sense this clear space not just as an empty space surrounding the things and people you are aware of but as a clear space *of* awareness, one without which you could not be aware of anything or anybody within it.

2. The next stage is to close your eyes, turn your gaze inwards with your inner eye and take time to be more aware of the different elements of your inner experiencing. To begin with, just sense the interiority or insiderness of different regions of your body - whether head, chest, belly or abdomen. Sense each of these regions of your body as if it were a hollow space. If you can, feel these hollow spaces of head, chest, belly and abdomen as one singular space or hollow of awareness bounded by your body.

Now take two or three minutes to become *more aware*, one by one, of the different types of thing you can sense yourself experiencing within these spaces - for example the tone and 'colour' of your overall mood, subtle bodily sensations and tensions, thoughts and feelings about your yourself and others etc. Allow yourself also to be aware, in the present, of thoughts and feelings arising from recollections of recent events and experiences or anticipations of future ones. Most importantly, if you are or become aware of any sense of dis-ease, of any discomforting thoughts, feelings or sensations do all of the following three things:

- Firstly give them more awareness - all the awareness they are asking for.
- Secondly, remind yourself that the very awareness of a thought, feeling or sensation is not itself a thought, feeling or sensation.
- Thirdly, whenever you sense yourself identifying with any discomforting thoughts, feelings or sensation, remind yourself to identify instead with the space or spaces of awareness within which you experience them.

3. The third stage of this introductory meditation or introduction to meditation - slowly open your eyes again. Yet as you once again become more aware of the space of this room surrounding your body, stay aware of the inner space or spaces of awareness within your body and of what you are aware of within it. Finally, begin to feel the outer space around your body and the inner spaces within it as non-different or non-dual - as one singular space of pure awareness that extends from an infinite inwardness within your body to the outermost boundaries of the cosmos. Feel this singular space of awareness pervading and vitalising the spaces within every atom and cell of your body.

If, having studied and practiced these stages of meditation, you may find some of the questions below helpful in reviewing your experience of it:

- What sort of things did you become aware of in the space of this room? How did it feel to sense and identify with the space itself and feel it as a field of awareness?
- What sort of things did you become aware of in the felt hollows of your body? How did it feel to give discomforting things more awareness and then identify more with the spaces of awareness in which you felt them?
- What was it like to open your eyes again, be aware of the space around you and yet stay aware of the inner spaces of your body and what you were aware of there?
- What was it like to feel the spaces around and within as one singular, non-dual and unbounded space of pure awareness?

With the new understandings of yoga and meditation presented so far in this essay, let us now return to the question of their relation to counselling. As counsellors or therapists we want our clients to feel safe enough with us to 'open up' - to share things they are aware of. Yet if, like most people, they experience their awareness as a space closed off and bounded by their own bodies - or even just enclosed in their own heads - then surely the first step in counselling and therapy is to help them to open up and expand that very

space. For only in this way can they feel it as a space safe enough to share from - which means big enough to easily embrace all that they experience and go through, and with room left over, room big enough to let in other people, to let in new insights and a whole new sense of self.

As counsellors or therapists we also seek to create in our consulting rooms a 'safe space' - a so-called 'holding space' in which people can freely and honestly share their feelings. But if both counsellor and client experience their awareness as something enclosed by their bodies, neither the smallest nor the biggest counselling or therapy room in the world can be actually felt as a safely holding space of awareness - one in which both client and counsellor can feel 'held', and in which both can come to fully let in and embrace each other.

For an awareness-based or yogic counsellor – a practitioner of awareness or 'yogin' - it just needs a single glance at a person's body to see how physically closed or open, enclosed or 'wrapped up' their consciousness is in themselves - how aware or unaware they are of the field or space of awareness around their bodies and the things and people in it, and how narrow or spacious the 'inner space' of awareness is that they can sense and hold open within their bodies.

That is because yoga is not just about the twin realms of mental and emotional experiencing that counselling and psychotherapy focus on. Instead it recognises a *third realm* – that of the senses and of immediate *sensory* experiencing - as more inclusive and fundamental.

Only by cultivating a direct *sensory* experience of emotions in our bodies and a direct sensory experience of mental states in our heads can we stop our thoughts and emotions just feeding off and reinforcing one another in vicious circles. Yet it is surprising how difficult people can find it to get their heads round the thought that *thoughts themselves* can be directly sensed in awareness - for example as mental images, by hearing them as mental words or speech in our minds, or by sensing in our bodies the way they affect our

emotions - just as emotions can be directly felt as bodily sensations. To be truly aware of our mental-emotional or somatic states rather than getting wrapped up in them, the first step must be to attend to the qualities belonging to our immediate *sensory* experience of them.

The fact that certain clients may be less willing or find it less satisfactory than others to talk 'about' their mental-emotional states (not least those suffering acute stress or showing signs of so-called borderline and psychotic states) has a good reason. My belief is that for such clients (indeed for all clients if not for all people) what they unknowingly want most of all from another is someone who - like a mother - will take time to first of all give full sensory awareness to their *body*. For only in this way can they feel that their own wordless, bodily sense of 'how they are feeling' is being sensed and felt by another - rather than forced into words. For the language, by its very nature, distances our awareness from our immediate sensory experience of our own self, body and state of being.

It is only relatively recently that terms such as 'bodily sensing' and 'somatic resonance' have been coined to refer to this type of direct *sensory* 'empathy' for another person's mental and emotional states. The need to which these terms respond is not just a need to be looked at and listened to in an emotionally sensitive or caring way. Still less is it a need to be drawn out into discussions 'about' one's thoughts and feelings. Instead it is the primordial need to feel one's whole body sensed and embraced by another within the space of an all-round, womb-like space of awareness.

It is the sensory awareness given by the counsellor to the *body* of the client and what it shows, and the all-round spatial *embrace* of this awareness, that helps clients to *feel safer* in their bodies and to get closer to their own sensory experience of themselves - rather than distancing themselves from it through words and talk 'about'. It also helps clients to apply The Awareness Principle themselves, to embrace their own sensory experience of themselves - however stressed or distressing - in a safe and expanded space of awareness.

The emphasis on giving awareness primarily to our immediate sensory experiencing is another important difference, derived from the tantric tradition, between yoga and meditation on the one hand, and psychology and counselling on the other.

A further and most fundamental difference is that yoga and meditation, unlike psychology and counselling, are not merely 'person-centred' - focussed on the personal or inter-personal dimensions of awareness and experience.

For a basic precept of The Awareness Principle is the recognition of the fundamentally *non-individual* or *trans-personal* nature of the awareness within which all personal and inter-personal experiencing occurs. For though people speak casually of 'self-awareness' in connection with 'counselling' and of personal or spiritual 'growth', the deeper truth is that awareness of self cannot - *in principle* - be the private property of any person or self we are *aware of*.

Awareness, in other words, is not essentially 'yours' or 'mine', 'his' or 'hers'. On the contrary, every person's individual sense of 'me-ness' or 'self' is an individualised expression and embodiment of a non-individuated and trans-personal awareness - that ultimate and universal awareness that Indian thought identifies with the Divine, with 'God' or 'God-Consciousness'.

One important reason why Indian religious philosophy is ignored in Western psychology is that it challenges the privatisation of the psyche in Western secular culture - the reduction of awareness to the private property of persons or a mere biological function of their bodies and brains. As a result, psychological problems suffered by individuals are also privatised - seen as 'their' problem rather than as an expression of a culture which denies any higher, trans-personal or divine dimensions to awareness. In this culture people are *indoctrinated* into believing that consciousness is something bounded by their bodies and a product of their brains. Psychiatry is the pseudo-science founded on this crude biologistic doctrine - which serves nothing but the profits of the pharmaceutical corporations - and replaces meditation with damagingly awareness-numbing *medication*.

The idea that this shallowest of modern doctrines is truer or more ‘scientific’ than the profound metaphysical understandings of the soul articulated and preserved in Eastern yogic philosophies and practices for millennia is arrogant to say the least.

All the more pity then, that what passes as ‘yoga’ in the West today has become a mere crass commercialisation and commodification of bodily stretching exercises that have nothing to do with awareness at all, let alone with ‘non-dual’ awareness.

Taking the word ‘yoga’ in its root meaning of ‘union’ - to ‘yoke’ or ‘conjoin’ - we can now understand it as a practice of awareness designed to unite our everyday self, the ‘experienced self’, with another Self, the ‘experiencing self’. This experiencing self is nothing but the Awareness Self, that Self which does not ‘have’ or ‘possess’ awareness but *is* awareness - an awareness inseparable from that an unbounded, absolute, ultimate and universal awareness that Indian thought recognised as the essence of the Divine.

Such metaphysical and spiritual dimensions of awareness cannot be confined to the realm of Eastern spiritual philosophies and traditions however. For they are profoundly relevant to both everyday life and to the theory and practice of counselling. This is because they offer answers to basic questions concerning the essential nature of the self. Yet both the answers and the questions are of a sort which Western psychology and psychiatry continue to ignore, deny or marginalise - blinded as they are by the delusion that awareness is the private property of persons, bounded by the body and a product of the brain. As a result, an individual’s mental, emotional or behavioural ‘symptoms’ are seen merely as diagnostic signs of different categories of ‘mental illness’ – rather than as *invitations and opportunities* for the sufferer to give themselves more *awareness*.

One final remark is necessary in this context. The Buddhist term ‘mindfulness’ has now been co-opted into the language of Western psychology and counselling, both in the form ‘Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy’ and as part of what is called ‘Dialectical Behaviour Therapy’. The term ‘mindfulness’ however (actually a mis-translation of the Sanskrit word for ‘memory’) is a wholly *imprecise and inappropriate substitute* for the

word ‘awareness’, implying as it does that the ‘mind’ can in some way be aware of or monitor itself, and that awareness itself is a mere mental state or some form of mental activity. It is not. For whilst pure awareness *embraces* all mental states and activities, it is not itself a mental state or activity - or indeed any activity at all - let alone a function of ‘mind’ (Sanskrit *Buddhi*). Pure awareness is, quite simply, ‘God-Consciousness’ – that universal and divine consciousness which ‘God’ does not ‘have’ but instead most essentially *is*. Yet to recognise the nature and importance of pure awareness in its sacred and religious dimension - as ‘God-Consciousness’ – is extremely difficult for most secularly or scientifically trained counsellors and therapists, challenging them as it does to both recognise and overcome those countless intellectual and institutional taboos which serve to prevent them crossing and transgressing a hidden boundary or threshold - one that leads from the realm of *secular psychology* to that of a yogic, meditational or ‘non-dual’ approach to therapy rooted in *sacred philosophy*. It also means finding a new and sacred place – a place for the divine - within themselves, one from which they can engage in their work as counselling psychologists from within a far larger spiritual perspective - and as a mode of ‘spiritual therapeutics’. This is something of importance not just *for* themselves but also and above all for their clients – who also need new forms of help in transcending the limiting boundaries or ‘mindset’ set by a secular culture characterised by what Martin Buber called ‘The Eclipse of God’. It is precisely this secular culture that reinforces the identification of ‘religion’ with the Abrahamic faiths and their worship of a *divine being* - rather than with the recognition of that *divine awareness* which is the essential self of every *human being* – the ‘awareness self’ or *Chaitanyatman*. ‘Yoga’ in its root meaning as ‘union’ *is* ‘religion’ in this other sense – being that which ‘relinks’ us (*religere*) with this *divine-human* self - and with the innately healing and therapeutic *awareness* that *it* most essentially is.

It is awareness and not ‘mind’ or ‘mindfulness’ that is the key to the relation between Counselling, Meditation and Yoga. For those interested in learning more about what I call ‘The New Yoga of Awareness’ - in all its dimensions and applications - I suggest a look at the books and many essays listed on the Archive page of the New Yoga website. [www.thenewyoga.org/e-books.htm](http://www.thenewyoga.org/e-books.htm) These essays include further introductions to ‘The

Awareness Principle’ and ‘The Practice of Awareness’, as well as an introduction to what I call *Awareness Based Cognitive Therapy* – in contrast to ‘Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy’. If, after considering the thoughts in this essay and reading some more, you would like to explore further with me personally the relation of ‘counselling, meditation and yoga’ - specifically *The New Yoga of Awareness* - you can contact me through the ‘Ask and Learn More’ button of the New Yoga homepage: [www.thenewyoga.org](http://www.thenewyoga.org) For further reading specifically on counselling and therapy see [www.thenewtherapy.org](http://www.thenewtherapy.org)